

OMU ARO SYMBOL: INTERSECTION OF IGBO ART, SPIRITUALITY AND ECOLOGICAL HERITAGE

Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, PhD

Department of Philosophy, Veritas University, Abuja

&

Emmanuel Uchenna Kanu, PhD

Department of Industrial Design,

Modibbo Adama University, Yola

Abstract

The Omu-Aro is the emblem and insignia of the Arochukwu people, also known as the Aro-Okigbo. They are an Igbo subgroup, and the third largest city in Abia State, comprising 19 villages, led by Eze Aro. Arochukwu has a long history of slave trade relations with the West and is one of the last towns in the Southern protectorate to be overrun by the British colonial government. While the Arochukwu people have a retinue of symbols, none is as remarkable as the Omu-Aro. It is Arochukwu's means of rallying together the Aro people scattered in various settlements in South Eastern Nigeria and the Diaspora. Even though the Omu-Aro is a Coat of Arms, seal, crest, symbols of unity, integrity, identity, etc., it is also an art that reveals the spirituality of the people of Aro. While the art is created using diverse elements like the knotted palm, eagle, hands, shield, sword, and gun, the spirituality of the Aro is conveyed by these elements. The Omu-Aro manifests the sacred and has become sacred, thus blurring the boundary between Aro art and spirituality; the aspects of knotted palm, eagle, gun, etc., further point to the Aro ecological, slave trade, and colonial experiences. While there are several studies on the elements of Aro spirituality, the present work distinguishes itself by its commitment towards establishing intersections between art, spirituality, colonialism, and ecology. Given the presence of these dimensions, the Igwebuiké complementary theoretical framework and the multidimensional approach are employed to achieve the aim and objectives of this paper. The work discovers that beyond the arts in the Omu-Aro, there are echoes of spirituality, colonialism, and ecological experiences.

Keywords: *Omu-Aro, Arochukwu, Arts, Spirituality, Igbo, Colonialism, Ecology*

Introduction

Spencer (2025) defines spirituality as “the recognition of a feeling or sense or belief that there is something greater than myself, something more to being human than sensory experience, and that the greater whole of which we are part is cosmic or divine in nature” (p. 1). Spirituality, therefore, involves knowing that our lives have significance in a context beyond a mundane everyday existence, and that we are a significant part of a purposeful unfolding of Life in our universe (Astrow, Pulchalski and Sulmasy 2001; Brown and Williams 1993, Coles 1990, Wolf 2008; Speck 1998; Murray and Zentner 1989; Mohr 2006; Kaiser 2000; Dabies et al 2002).

A significant concept within the context of this study is ‘art’. It is related to the Latin word “ars”, meaning, art, skill, or craft. A variety of definitions of art have emerged over the centuries: in the view of Plato (1955), it is an imitation or representation; for Tolstoy (1995), it is a medium for the transmission of feelings, in the perspective of Croce (1920) it is an intuitive expression, and for Bell (1914), it is a significant form. Even though it has no universally accepted definition, Marder (2024) attempts at a more comprehensive definition of arts, as “the conscious creation of something beautiful or meaningful using skill and imagination.”

The realms of spirituality and art have long been intertwined, with each informing and enriching the other, and creating a tapestry of meaning and inspiration (Paintner 2006; Kandinsky 2006; Hardiman and Nicola 2017; Murray 2021; Castor 2021; Ravi 2023; Roberts 2023; Usman 2023; Bonisch 2023; Hoff 2024; Colomnino 2025; RTISTIQ 2025). Across cultures and centuries, artistic expression has been a powerful means of conveying spiritual experiences, emotions, and ideas, inviting viewers on a quest and drawing them into the realm of the unknown. In this realm, Breidenkamp (2024) avers that everything is open to interpretation and driven by a shared desire to understand the unseen. Blackwell (2024) adds that at this level, art becomes a symbolic road map to possibilities of transcendence. Thus, from the intricate mandalas of Buddhist art to the haunting melodies of sacred music, the arts have provided a universal language not only for expressing the human quest for meaning, connection but also for transcendence.

African culture is renowned for its vibrant artistic traditions and rich spiritual heritage (Kanu 2013). Across the African continent, arts and spirituality intersect in complex, multifaceted ways (Henshilwood et al, 2011; Nevadomsky, 2005; Mark, 1999; Vogel, 1997; Kanu, 2014). From the intricate wood carvings of the Dogon people, which represent the Dogon’s complex spiritual cosmology to the majestic rituals, ceremonies, and divination practices of the Zulu Sangoma, which connect the living with ancestors and the divine, African arts have long been a powerful means of expressing spiritual

themes, connecting with the divine, and honoring ancestors. At the heart of African culture lies a profound understanding of the interconnectedness of the physical and spiritual worlds (Kanu 2013). This holistic worldview is reflected in the diverse artistic traditions permeating every aspect of African life, from birth to death (Kanu 2012).

The complex relationships between arts and spirituality in African culture provide insights into the deeper connections between the physical and spiritual worlds and how artistic expression can reflect and shape spiritual experiences; this intersection of arts and spirituality in African culture reflects the continent's rich spiritual heritage and vibrant artistic traditions (Kanu 2014). While there are several works around African art and its intersections with spirituality, there has not been a profound study of the Omu Aro as an artistic symbol that serves as a road map to the possibilities of transcendence, or as a totality totalizing the major dimensions of Aro religion or spirituality. This paper, therefore, focuses on the study of Omu Aro as a space for the intersection of Aro art and spirituality.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of studying the Intersection of Arts and Spirituality in Omu-Aro includes:

1. To explore the artistic and aesthetic dimensions of the design elements in the Omu-Aro.
2. To investigate the spiritual nuances of the varied design elements of the Omu-Aro.
3. To understand how the design elements of the Omu-Aro and their spiritual significances echo the colonial experience of the Igbo-African people.
4. To explore how the design elements of the Omu-Aro express the Igbo-African eco-spirituality and environmentalism.

Methodology

Given its suitability, the qualitative approach of investigation was employed. The multidimensional approach will be used, given the different dimensions of knowledge, ranging from the arts, spirituality, culture, sociology, history, to philosophy that echo within the work. To review written texts on this topic and use their critical conclusions to build the current piece, the document study or document analysis approach will be used. As a result, both primary and secondary sources will be consulted throughout this study. The Omu-Aro will be examined in order to provide a tangible example of how spirituality and arts intersect in Arochukwu cosmology. Omu-Aro is a significant cultural artifact in Arochukwu, Igbo-land, where the study will mostly focus. While studying the Aro coat of

arms, questionnaires was used to get feedback from the indigenous people. These perspectives will be presented and studied alongside other findings.

Igwebuiké Theoretical Framework

The Igwebuiké theoretical framework will be used to develop this study. According to this theory, reality is related, interconnected, and complementary. Igwebuiké is a common Igbo name and proverb. It combines three words: *ike*, which means strength or power; *bu*, which means is; and *igwe*, which means number; it, therefore, literally means “there is strength in numbers” or “number is power” (Kanu 2023). At the philosophical level, Igwebuiké depicts being as possessing a relational character, which characterizes the fundamental or operating state of African reality (Kanu 2021). This is based on the thermodynamics of the Igbo worldhood: a world that interacts with itself. The sky, the spirits, the earth, the physical world, the living, and the deceased all act, interact, and react in consort (Tempels, 1969; Stayne, 1990; Turaki, 2000; Mbiti, 1970; Adibe, 2008; Enekwe, 1987).

The Igwebuiké theoretical framework is very significant for this study because it is multidimensional and intersectional, with the capacity to draw from several levels of being and manners of being, and, therefore, a lens for the understanding of the intersection of arts and spirituality. The Igwebuiké intersectional model reveals the possibility of interaction between arts and spirituality at the levels of transcendence, embodiment, imagination, ritual, and liminality.

Table 1: Areas of Intersection in Igwebuiké Intersectional Model

S/N	Description	Intersection	Hermeneutic
1.	Transcendence	The experience of going beyond the mundane and connecting with something greater than oneself	The Omu Aro, as a cultural element, is a mundane reality; however, it can also be a powerful instrument for transcendence towards the deep and spiritual realities or meanings among the Aro people
2.	Embodiment	The idea that spiritual experiences are rooted in the body and its sensory perceptions	The Omu Aro, as a material element, has the capacity for the embodiment of the spiritual experiences and realities of the people of Arochukwu
3.	Imagination	The capacity to generate	The Omu Aro, which is a reality that

		mental images and scenarios that facilitate spiritual exploration	can be seen, given the arts it expresses, can conjure the imagination to rise beyond that which presents itself in the arts to that which is physically absent.
4.	Ritual	The use of repetitive, symbolic actions to connect with the sacred	The Omu Aro is an important element when it comes to ritual practices among the people of Aro. This has been employed for several decades and has become part of the culture of the people
5.	Liminality	The state of being on the threshold between different realms, states, or identities	The Omu Aro can express at the same time that which is physical and spiritual. Therefore, expressing different realms, identities, and states of reality

Source: Kanu 2025

The Igwebuiké intersectional theoretical framework recognizes that the arts can facilitate spiritual experiences and expressions, and that spirituality can inform and shape artistic creation. Therefore, cultural contexts influence the intersection of arts and spirituality, and embodiment, imagination, ritual, and liminality play crucial roles in shaping the intersection of arts and spirituality. This framework provides a foundation for exploring the rich, complex relationships between arts and spirituality, understanding spirituality as inspiring the arts, and the arts as conveying and shaping spiritual experiences. It also creates a basis for examining how these intersections shape our understanding of the human experience.

The Emergence of the Arochukwu Kingdom

Arochukwu was founded in the early 16th century, and thus was already positioned before the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and played a huge role in the trade. It is an amalgam of three ethnic groups: the Attah, the Igbo element, and the remnants of Ibibio. Nnawuru was a settler among the Ibibio, who tried to unsettle them to no avail. However, Agwu, his son, decided to achieve his father's desire of unsettling the Ibibios by inviting Eze Nnachi, a medicine man, to drive away the Ibibio. When he deployed his mystical powers, it failed. However, he further decided through his contact to bring in the Attah people to

come with guns to fight the Ibibios. During the war, Akuma Nnaubi (the warrior hired by Okennachi from Attah) carried the omu in their hand, and white dust made from white chalk on their neck to distinguish themselves from others who were not on the side of the Igbo element. After the war, Akuma Nnaubi was made the First Eze Aro, comprising the Igbo element, the Attah, and the Ibibio remnants (Iro 2025). This was done as compensation for his elder brother, who was killed by the Ibibio during the War of Conquest.

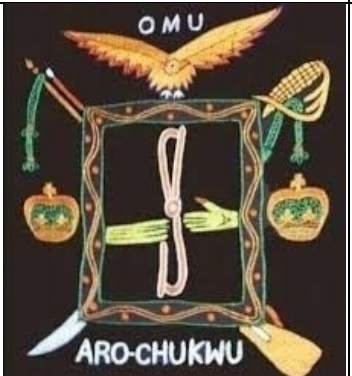
At the end of the war, Akuma Nnaubi adopted the Omu as a symbol of traditional political administration. The Arochukwu became the only political unit in Igbo land that used the Omu as a strong political and administrative power. He issues Omu to people who had probably committed a crime as a sign of summons to the Eze. He also issued omu to people he needed for a meeting at home or in diaspora as an invitation. Those who received the omu trembled and were bound to honor the invitation; all Aro, whether at home or in diaspora, swore an oath to always respect the summons with the omu. If one failed, the person might be killed, or his compound destroyed or burnt down to ashes, or sold into slavery. This was what gave Omu the respect it now has among the Igbo (Iro 2025).

Omu-Aro/Aro-Okigbo: Aro Symbol and Identity

Omu-Aro gets its literal meaning from the two elements: Omu and Aro. Omu is the yellow embryo of the palm tree that emerges first before the leaves turn green. The second word is Aro, which points to that which belongs to the people of Arochukwu. Put together, Omu-Aro means the Omu of the Aro people. Even though the Omu-Aro's initial history is traced to the period after the War of Conquest, the present form was designed in 1925 by the late Aro patriot, Mazi Timothy Kanu Utchay. It was designed as the Aro Coat-of-Arms, seal, and crest. It is a widely revered symbol among the Aro people. The multi-talented Mazi Utchay is from Ujari Arochukwu. He was a school owner, publisher, printer, author, and educationist. As a young philosopher of his day, he devoted a lot of time to learning from a wide range of classical and philosophical texts (Ohia 2018).

With one hand on each side (one giving and the other receiving), the Omu Aro is shaped like a rectangular shield with a knotted palm (omu) in the center. An eagle (ugo) with two crowns on either side of the shield and wings spread wide is positioned at the top of the shield. A gun and a sword are positioned across from one another behind the shield as part of the design, with the gun's stock and sword hilt visible on one side and the blade and barrel visible on the other (Ohia 2018).

Table 2: Diverse Images of Omu Aro

Omu Aro	Description	Omu Aro	Description
	Different colours show they are not produced centrally, and sometimes for fashion.		This is a more common colour and design of the Omu Aro.
	Ako Bu Ije points to the wisdom of the Aro, especially in their use of words to avoid revealing secrets that should not be revealed.		This seems to suggest an older image and production of the Omu Aro.

Source: Kanu 2025

This coat of arms was designed to serve as a suitable seal signifying the power and authority of the ancient Aro Empire (Isichei 1976). It also serves as a common symbol for all Aro people in the diaspora that would command the same prestige, honor, and prompt obedience for a common sense of affinity and solidarity. The Aro people are dispersed throughout the South-Eastern Region of Nigeria and the Diaspora (Abia State, Imo State, Anambra State, Enugu State, Ebonyi State, Rivers State, Benue State, and Equatorial Guinea). Mazi W. W. Okereke, an Aro nationalist and trader from Amuvi, Arochukwu, who was then residing in Port Harcourt, received the design from Utchay, and in order to produce usable wrappers, this merchant made connections with his Asian textile sector colleagues (Ohia 2021).

Dimensions of the Omu-Aro

Three dimensions of the OmuAro will be studied in this section of the work: the ecological, colonial, and spiritual dimensions.

a. Ecological dimensions of the Omu Aro

Among the Igbo-African people, there is an interconnectedness of nature, spirituality, and human life, which emphasizes harmony with nature, a sacred relationship with nature, ancestral reverence, and holistic well-being. This also offers valuable insights into sustainable living, environmental stewardship, and community resilience. The presence of palm leaves and an eagle in the Omu Aro points to the closeness of the Aro, and in fact, the Igbo people to the environment. The palm tree and eagle belong to a category of sacred trees and sacred animals in Igbo traditional society and religion (Kanu 2021a). This categorization was an indigenous pattern of protecting the environment from overuse or its occupants from extinction. There were taboos around these sacred realities that protected them from abuse (Kanu 2021b). They were referred to as sacred because it was believed that the sacred was present in them. The idea of sacredness brought in the dimension of responsibility and respect in the relationship between people and the environment. Thus, the environment is not just for profit, but a sacred reality, a part of me and my existence (Kanu 2021c). Apart from being a sacred tree, the omu is used to protect clean water; once placed in it, people avoid playing around the vicinity. Economic trees were protected with the omu to stop passersby from plucking them unripe or exploiting them. It was used as a symbol of peace, given that it is sent to a community at war with the other as a sign of peace (Kanu 2021d).

b. Colonial dimensions of the Omu-Aro

Colonialism significantly impacted the Igbo traditional society, leading to the disruption of traditional systems, suppression of customs and cultural practices, and economic exploitation. This experience was, therefore, marked by significant cultural, economic, and social changes. The legacy of colonialism continues to impact Igbo society today.

A strong symbol of the influence of the slave trade and colonialism on traditional African societies is the gun. Colonialism significantly shaped the connection between guns and African societies, introducing, controlling, and ultimately impacting the proliferation and use of firearms in various ways. The introduction of firearms during the colonial period, initially for trade and then for establishing and maintaining colonial rule, transformed hunting practices, warfare, and even social structures across Africa. Colonial powers also implemented gun control measures, sometimes restricting or prohibiting African gun ownership, while simultaneously profiting from the trade and use of firearms (Brahm 2020).

The presence of guns altered social hierarchies, with some individuals or groups acquiring firearms to enhance their status or influence. The colonial regime also associated guns with masculinity and European dominance, influencing perceptions of power and authority (Brahm 2020). It was an age that also introduced the era of the exploitation of persons and nature. The colonial trade in firearms and gunpowder became a source of income for colonial authorities. They also used regulations on gun ownership and trade to exert control over the local economy and extract resources (Brahm 2020). The colonial period's impact on firearms continues to influence contemporary Africa, an era we may like to refer to as Neo-colonialism.

c. Spiritual dimensions of the Omu-Aro

African arts have a way of inviting their viewers and drawing them into the realm of the unknown. In this realm, everything is open to interpretation and driven by a shared desire to understand the unseen (Bredenkamp 2024). It is in this sense that African arts can be referred to as a conduit for divine inspiration, a vehicle for sacred rituals, or a means of expressing profound truths about the Aro religion and culture (Hoff 2024). Focusing on the Omu Aro, while celebrating its artistic dimensions, the spiritual elements are not silent. The crown is believed to symbolize divine authority and the connection between the physical and spiritual realms. This is why the Igbo refer to the King as *Okarammadu*, *Okarammuo* (half human, half spirit). The crown, usually with a long history with the ancestors, forms a bridge connecting the people to their ancestors and the divine (Kanu 2015; Kanu 2014). As such, the crown is often understood as a source of power, wisdom, and spiritual energy, emphasizing the importance of leadership, authority, respect for authority, and ancestral guidance.

In Igbo spirituality, the omu is believed to possess spiritual power and connection to the divine, serving as a tool for communication with the gods and ancestors (Kanu 2013; Kanu 2015). They are believed to be the residences of the sacred. This is also related to the Eagle, which is an important element in the Aro Coat of Arms. The eagle is considered a sacred animal because of its relationship with the divine and its service as a messenger to the divine world and provision of guidance on behalf of the ancestors.

The sword in Igbo spirituality is believed to possess spiritual power and thus a tool for communication with the gods and ancestors during rituals and ceremonies. It symbolizes ancestral heritage and the continuation of Igbo traditions. Alongside the sword is the gun. Both the gun and the sword are believed to offer protection and security, not only in the physical sense but also spiritually. These elements point to the duality in the Igbo-African spiritual universe: a world of strife and peace, where sometimes, strife gives birth to peace, and peace to strife. The hand is believed to be a channel for communicating with the divine and the ancestors. It is also associated with healing and protection, reflecting

the importance of spiritual and physical well-being in Igbo culture. It symbolizes destiny (Akaraka).

Conclusion

It has been observed that in Africa, there is widespread belief in a Supreme God, with a profound sense of the sacred and mystery (Kanu and Paul 2011). It is difficult to separate the life of the African from his inclinations to the divine. Thus, he does everything with the consciousness of God (Njoku 2004). Mbiti (1969) puts this succinctly:

Wherever the African is, there is his religion. He carries it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting new crop, he takes it with him to a beer parlour or to attend a funeral ceremony; and if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at school or in the university; if he is a politician, he takes it to the house of parliament. (p. 2)

This religious dimension of African life is a basic element in the discovery of the intersection between arts and spirituality, not only in the Aro traditional setting, but also in virtually all African dimensions of reality.

The intersection of arts and spirituality in the Omu Aro is a testament to the richness and depth of Aro cultural heritage. Through their masterful Omu Aro, the Aro people have been able to convey complex spiritual realities, ancestral narratives, and communal values that have been passed down through generations. This symbiotic relationship between art and spirituality not only reflects the Aro worldview but also underscores the importance of preserving cultural heritage and traditional practices in the face of modernization and globalization. At the exploration of the intersection, we gain a deeper understanding of the Aro people's profound connection to their land, their ancestors, and their community, and are reminded of the enduring power of art to convey spiritual truths, foster cultural identity, and promote cross-cultural understanding. Ultimately, this exploration invites us to appreciate the beauty, wisdom, and resilience of Aro culture and to recognize the significance of preserving our shared cultural heritage for future generations.

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