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# SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATIONS OF MONEY AMONG IGBO TRADERS IN LADIPO INTERNATIONAL MARKET, LAGOS

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## *Abstract*

*This article is a product of an ethnographic study of Ladipo International Market, Lagos Nigeria, focusing on symbolic representations of money among the Igbo traders in the space. Interactions amongst the traders, and with their clients have led to the development of form of relationships with shared interests and meanings. These, coupled with the organisational culture of the market, contribute to its peculiarity, and are critical to successful business transactions. This article identifies the practices, ideas and objects the traders symbolically construct as money, and how the constructs mediate intra- and inter- group relations, and finally identifies the patterns in the traders' behaviours and social relationships when money mediates exchanges, and how symbolic meanings further reshape social relationships. The focus is not only to understand the observable phenomenon, but also to unveil the meanings that underlay the practice. The study adopted ethnographic approach, using such methods as in-depth interviews, participant observation and life history. Relevant documents were also consulted. Collected data were analysed qualitatively. The study establishes that 'importation', 'imara anya ahia' (knowledge of trading skills), 'containers' and exotic cars are symbols of money. Relationships are structured along the social categories engendered by these symbols on the one hand, and 'Master' and 'nvaboy' (apprentice) line on the other hand, with each further invoking relational patterns and meanings.*

*Key words: Money, symbol, Igbo people, cultural values, Ladipo International Market, Lagos*

## INTRODUCTION

Money is one element of human culture that is often taken for granted largely because it has become a part of our everyday existence. Undoubtedly, most scholars conceptualise money only in economic terms, in its basic exchange functions. However, Allen Dyer notes that few cultural

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anthropologists and sociologists have given some considerations to the social and cultural meanings of money, including how culture and environment influence the idea of money.<sup>1</sup> Money can be symbolised in diverse ways across cultures, and takes on different meanings even within the same culture. Meanings of money are therefore contextually defined across space and time, and also constantly renegotiated.

For some people, money is the whole essence of life, since most of our waking hours are spent making money or getting skills that will help us make money, such as trading or schooling. Without money it is difficult for one to acquire food to sustain life or have shelter and clothing, which are basic necessities of life. On money, people pin their hopes for survival, acceptance, achievement, success, fulfilment, and self-esteem. Little wonder that money has become a powerful instrument of manipulation and influence in social relations. Consequently, Dominguez and Robin contend that "[m]oney is something we choose to trade our life energy for, therefore, money is equal to our entire life."<sup>2</sup> An individual's life, they argue, is said to be worth the cumulative sum of his life earnings since he spends most days on earth earning money.<sup>3</sup> The strength of a nation, productive capacity of its people and their cultural experience may be symbolically expressed and embedded in their money. Thus, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) posits that Human Development Index (HDI) is a measure of how prosperous a country is, so that a nation may be rated poor or rich based on the strength of money, and how much individuals within the country earn, among other things. Citizens of a country may also feel intelligent, poor or rich, secure or insecure, based on what they believe their money is worth. The point is that, different relationships are struck with money in different societies based on the kind of knowledge and meanings individuals and collectives share about money in relation to other commodities. The knowledge and meanings shared are embedded and expressed in symbolised forms and acted out in behaviours. The challenge for anthropologists is to identify meanings embedded in monetised cultural expressions. This challenge is more pertinent where most things, including life, are monetised and priced. It is, however, evidently clear that in Nigeria monetization has permeated our national culture, because there are, in fact, shared ideas, feelings, and knowledge that are communicated and understood easily through pecuniary accounts. For instance, when a Nigerian says, 'settle him' meaning 'induce him with money' or 'What's for us now?' meaning, 'What are you giving us?' which is usually in monetary terms, are all expressions of the meanings the people hold of money. For a group to be able to communicate effectively, there must be mutual intelligibility, and the basis is shared cultural understanding, which is based on social consensus and shared experiences over-time.



Within the Igbo society specifically, social relations, cultural values and worldview are also communicated in monetary terms. In their worldview as V.C. Uchendu rightly notes, "the world is a marketplace and is subject to bargain."<sup>4</sup> He went further to observe that "the description of Igbo life in the idiom of market exchange is not a mere theoretical formulation...; it is the Igbo way and manifests in their everyday behaviour."<sup>5</sup> Life is fundamentally about exchange, whether services, goods, emotions *et cetera*. Values are symbolically represented in monetary terms and terminology. For the Igbo, Chinyere Ukpokolo hints, the market is not just a place of exchange literally but also symbolically, and more importantly, it is a place of spiritual transactions, between the physical and the spiritual.<sup>6</sup> Little wonder that most markets in traditional Igbo societies are located near one deity or the other. Evil can be exchanged for good, sickness for health, with the priest as the mediator of the spiritual transactions.

This article is a product of an ethnographic study of Ladipo International Motor Spare Parts Market, Lagos, Nigeria, (hereafter called Ladipo Market) focusing on symbolic representations of money in the market. Ladipo market has, overtime, developed a unique market culture tinted with Igbo cultural values, and peculiar to the site. Interactions amongst the traders and their clients have led to the development of form of relationships imbued with a sense of community, with shared interests and meanings. These, coupled with the organisational culture of the market, contribute to its peculiarity, and are critical to successful business transactions. This article identifies the practices, ideas and objects the traders symbolically construct as money, and how the constructs mediate intra- and inter- group relations, and finally identifies the patterns in the traders' behaviours and social relationships when money mediates exchanges, and how symbolic meanings further reshape social relationships. The focus is not only to understand the observable phenomenon, but also to unveil the values that underlie the practice, or what Kessing and Kessing term "the realm of ideas."<sup>7</sup>

#### LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMING

What money means in a particular culture is a function of the interplay of the environment and the ideas generated in that society. Some of these ideas are particularistic while others are universalistic. Often, the primary role assigned to money in most cultures is to meet the need of exchange. Thus, G.O. Nwankwo reasons:

What economics call money in the conventional sense is those groups of assets which discharge completely the primary exchange functions

of money as well as its asset functions...The money quality of any asset is something imposed by the business habits of the people...Money is something which people in a given community call money.<sup>8</sup>

For James Peoples and Garrick Bailey money is perceived as “consisting of objects that serve as media of exchange in a wide range of transactions of goods.”<sup>9</sup>

Simon Smelt, citing Polanyi, pointed out that goods and services are allocated in all societies according to three different modes of distribution: reciprocity, redistribution, and market exchange.<sup>10</sup> Market exchange involves a situation in which products are sold for money, which in turn is used to purchase other products, with the ultimate goal of acquiring more money and/or accumulating more products.<sup>11</sup> Trade evolved from exchange market system, and barter was the first medium of exchange. However, the inability of barter to cope with changing complex economic reality of the modern society necessitated the invention of money to deal with the increasing demands in a modern economy. Indeed, ethnographic evidence abound that point to the origin of money in magical forms. According to Simon Smelt, “while a commodity is used as an early money form, it is generally found to be one of singular importance to the community and hence at the core of the community’s structure of beliefs”.<sup>12</sup> Marcel Mauss also suggests that “money originated in sacred objects which, surviving over time, become involved in exchange.”<sup>13</sup> An example was Trobriand Island’s *vayguala* (a form of necklace) first described by Bronislaw Malinowski in his work *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*.<sup>14</sup> Invariably, hundreds of objects have been used as money. In fact, cowrie shells, bronze, iron rods, copper and manila have been used as currency in Nigeria several centuries before the colonial period.<sup>15</sup> The great variety of these means of payments shows that money can be whatever people in diverse societies generally accept in exchange for other things. At present, most monies are not made of any concrete material as they are nothing more than entries in (bank) accounts.

Focusing on the social context of money, Viviana Zelizer writes:

Money used for rational instrumental exchanges is not ‘free’ from social constraints but is another type of socially created currency, subject to particular networks of social relations and its own set of values and norms.<sup>16</sup>

In an earlier publication titled “The Social Meaning of Money: Special Monies”, Viviana Zelizer contends that money “corrupts values and converts social ties into numbers”, and also that “values and social relations

reciprocally transmute money by investing it with meaning and social patterns."<sup>17</sup> Surprisingly, anthropologists and sociologists have not given adequate attention to the social meanings of money. Consequently, more often than not, the ideas of money in economics permeate discourse on money. Money is a symbolic object and as such carries cultural meanings, and anthropologists are well placed to interpret the symbolic meanings embedded in money.

Anatol Rappaport advocates that humankind be called 'a symbol-user' and to make the study of the symbolic process central to the study of humans.<sup>18</sup> It is important to differentiate symbols from signals. Signals, according to Rappaport, are nothing more than a stimulus to which a response has been conditioned. Symbols in contrast evoke response only in a relation to other symbols. Symbols have cultural contexts, and the meaning ascribed to any symbol is a product of social consensus. Thus, the same object in different context can elicit essentially different response, or to put it in another way, a given symbol cannot be properly defined outside of a context. The study and use of symbols, semiotics, have become important because it generates a greater understanding of culture, which is conceived as being a constructed system of shared symbols and meanings. It is the use of symbols, as significant form of discourse permeating all human societies that has led to semiotics becoming an important sphere of inquiry in anthropology, sociology, economics and other social science disciplines. The human being lives by symbols. Humans, according to Hebert Applebaum "communicate meaning and create shared experiences by using signs and symbols in many different realms of existence, for example, through art, music, architecture, gestures, clothing, space arrangements, and material possession."<sup>19</sup> In fact, we are capable of attributing meaning to any event, action, or object which can evoke thoughts, ideas, and emotions. Indeed, symbols have multiple meanings.

Money is value-laden. What constitutes value, in any human society, Haralambos hints, "is a belief that something is good and desirable. It defines what is important, worthwhile and worth struggling for."<sup>20</sup> When held by a group of people, values constitute ideas learnt and passed through succeeding generations of people. Values motivate individual and group behaviour. Shared values are crucial for the operation of human society, and as Haralambos states succinctly:

Without shared values, members of society would be unlikely to cooperate and work together. With differing or conflicting values, they would often be pursuing incompatible goals. Disorder and disruption may well result.<sup>21</sup>

The Igbo, like other ethnic groups in Nigeria, have values, which define their lives and behaviour wherever they are. For instance, in the people's worldview, nobody is destined to be a failure in life as the individual can always change the course of his own life if he is faced with consistent failures. He achieves this either through shifting alliance or by invoking the aid of a more powerful force.<sup>22</sup> People who fail to make success of their lives have no honourable place in the people's world. So, lazy people, debtors, beggars and other non-achievers may not have high status and honourable place as symbolised by titles in the world of the Igbo.<sup>23</sup> Uchendu hints that the world for the Igbo is also based on an equalitarian principle, and that equality or near equality amongst the Igbo ensures that no one person or group of persons acquires too much control over the life of others. Equalitarian society, according to the Igbo, means that society ought to give all its citizens an equal opportunity to achieve success.

This article adopts an approach rooted on the framework of symbolic anthropology as advocated by interpretative anthropological position of Clifford Geertz.<sup>24</sup> Symbolic anthropology focuses on the interpretation of symbols or symbolic aspect of existence. It studies the way people understand their surroundings as well as the actions of the other members of their society. 'Interpretations' entail explaining the relationship between forms of action and the consciousness they are taken to express.<sup>25</sup> These interpretations form a shared cultural system of meaning, that is, understandings shared among members of the same society.<sup>26</sup> There are two major premises governing symbolic anthropology. The first is that "beliefs, however unintelligible, become comprehensible when understood as part of a cultural system of meaning." The second major premise is that actions are guided by interpretations, allowing symbolism to aid in interpreting ideals as well as material activities. It is the first premise championed in interpretative or cultural anthropologists that Clifford Geertz represents. Anthropologists such as Victor Turner and Mary Douglas represent the second.<sup>27</sup> According to Geertz:

A symbol is any object, act, events, quality, or relation which serves as a vehicle for a conception—the conception is the symbol's meaning...symbols are tangible formulations of notions, abstractions from experience fixed in perceptible forms, concrete embodiments of ideas, attitudes, judgments, longings, or beliefs.<sup>28</sup>

He argued that cultural meaning is not deep in peoples head but is public, communicated, and expressed in symbols, and can be adequately interpreted by outsiders. Hence, he emphasised the need for "thick description" in the study of culture. By 'thick description' Geertz meant that the



meaning of cultural phenomena can be revealed only after careful analysis of intricate coating of meanings. According to him,

The concept of culture I espouse... is essentially a semiotic one. Believing ... that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning.<sup>29</sup>

For Geertz, an anthropologist studying culture needs not waste energy searching for universal laws as classical anthropologists such as E.B. Tylor suggests. What needs to be done is to explain the 'webs of significance,' a form of 'meaningfulness' espoused by humans in order to unveil the meanings that lie under. This is the crux of an interpretive science. Using Ladipo Market, Mushin Lagos, as a case study, this study engages in the search for meaning through the interpretation of phenomena, objects and ideas symbolically representing money within the cultural processes and production at Ladipo Market. This study therefore raises and tries to answer certain salient questions: What phenomena, ideas and/or objects are symbolised as money? What are the patterns in traders' behaviours and social relationships when money mediates exchanges? What cultural values are represented as money, and how do these shape and define intragroup and intergroup relations in the market?

#### STUDY CONTEXT AND METHODS

Ladipo Market is situated at Fatai Atere part of Mushin on the Oworonsoki-Oshodi-Apapa express road in Lagos State, Nigeria. Established in the 1970s as a small retail market, it has grown to international status, having motor spare parts as major articles of trade. There are, of course, other articles sold in this market, especially, used goods brought from foreign countries and exhibited in a number of large warehouses dotting the market. There are, in addition, large stores for used household appliances, computers, phones and accessories, bicycles, used trucks, buses and cars. A number of traders in the market import their articles from foreign countries. But, basically, the market is a major source of foreign used vehicles and motor spare parts imported into Nigeria (see Fig. 3). Traders from other states in Nigeria and neighbouring African countries come to Lagos to source their motor spare parts from this market. The goods are displayed in large number of stores, warehouses and open spaces.

A visitor from Oshodi Bus Station arriving in the morning at Toyota Bus Stop on the Oshodi-Apapa express road in Lagos is greeted with an unusual number of youthful men hurriedly crossing to the left side of the



road, where the Ladipo Market, Mushin, Lagos, is situated, “the largest motor spare parts market in Africa,” as claimed by the traders. The first striking scenery at this bus stop would be two large warehouses - J & F Warehouse and Conference Warehouse - and, often, parked conspicuous trucks laden with 20ft - 40ft containers. Men in their 30s and 40s are seen assembling in trickles, watching as goods are unloaded from the containers. They discuss in groups, sharing gists and repartees. Their voices are loud, and they look happy. But they also discuss business. At times, the discussions are done almost in whispers. Traders trail cart pushers that move ‘discharged’ motor parts from the containers to the warehouses. The warehouses are where motor parts that just arrived from foreign countries are purchased and moved to Ladipo Market units.

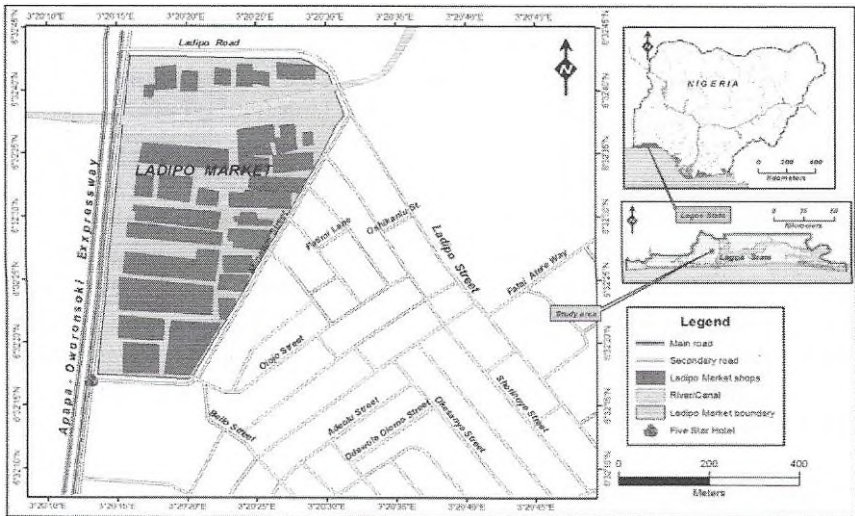


Fig. 1: Map of Mushin showing location of Ladipo Market. Source: (Department of Geography, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria).

Houses here consist of large warehouses, bungalows and one-storey market stalls arranged in rows largely along Ladipo Street. Food vendors also permeate the space. They work in a frenzy to get their early morning foods vended. Around the area where containers are discharged are ‘Importers’ who work with the aid of their relatives or hired assistants or *odibo* (apprentices) who help them guard the imported merchandise, take records and apply identification marks on the goods. Sometimes, women import these goods, but most times importers are men who reside abroad or traders who live in Lagos and trade in Ladipo Market. Ladipo Market is, typically, a beehive of activities. Vehicles, pedestrians and hawkers

struggle for available space on dilapidated streets. Males outnumber females and men under forty years outnumber other age groups in this space. They speak mostly Igbo Language and when the need arises, they speak Pidgin English. On the streets, people walk as though they are permanently in a hurry. Cart pushers with shouts of *Uzo! Uzo! Uzo!* meaning 'Give way!, Give way!, Give way!' move as though they would crush, with their carts laden with heavy metals, anyone that takes up their narrow parts. Whenever the cart pushers approach an exit gate of a warehouse or a market unit with goods, they are charged a fee; most times owners of such goods pay the fee.

Ladipo Market is divided into cells and clusters of smaller market units and warehouses. With the exception of Ogbowu, Aguiyi Ironsi Unit, Promised land Unit, and Cortex Units, all other market units issue from a large house or number of houses along the streets that make up the Ladipo Market space. In the market units, people move around freely and more slowly. They sit in groups of twos or more discussing and watching for a potential customer. They spring up to their feet when a suspected buyer approaches. At Aguiyi-Ironsi Unit, 186 Unit (named after the house street number), Promise land and Cortex Units, shops are made of bricks and corrugated iron roofing sheets and arranged in rows. But shops and surfaces at Ogbuewu, Ogbo-iron and Bakkasi Units appear old and oily. Traders sit and discuss in sets according to their ages and shop proximity but jokes and arguments could be shared by everyone. However, *ndi odibo* (apprentices) stay more sober and more detached from *ndi oga* (masters). This is Ladipo International Market, Lagos, where this study was carried out. Ethnographic approach was adopted for this study. As Spindler and Spindler stated:

Ethnographic study requires direct observation; it requires being immersed in the field situation, and it requires constant interviewing in all degrees of formality and casualness. From this interviewing, backed by observation, one is able to collect and elicit the native view(s) and the native ascription of meaning to events, intentions, and consequences.<sup>30</sup>

The major objective of the approach is to capture, understand and interpret the lived life of motor spare parts traders at Ladipo Market, paying specific attention to symbolic representations of money among the traders in the market. The study population consists of traders, mostly male business owners, their male *odibo* (apprentices) and buyers. These buyers are predominantly males, mainly traders from markets elsewhere, mechanics and end users. Our interest is on interpretation of action and the representations of meanings.

Thirty-eight self-governing sections make up Ladipo Market, each section occupies an open space or warehouse or block of stores. Some sections specialise in the sale of a particular product. For instance, Ogbo-ewu Unit is known for the sale of whole engines and engine accessories, but a greater number has no such specialisation. There are mostly male traders in the market. Female traders participate mostly as clerks or food vendors. There are also the Masters (male business owners) and *nwaboy* (apprentice) as well as importers and local retailers. Twenty-five informants comprising of two union leaders of the market, twelve shop owners, seven apprentices, three buyers and two mechanics were randomly selected for interview from the thirty-eight sections of the market.

The methods of data collection employed are in-depth-interviews, participant observation and life history. The criteria for selection of key informants consisted of age, longer years of experience and good knowledge of the prevalent culture in Ladipo Market. Based on the above, seven informants were purposively selected as key informants. Two of them are union leaders - a secretary and a chairman each of two separate unions. Three Informants were men whose ages are fifty years and above and who had spent at least five years in the market, another two were *nwaboy* or *odibo* (apprentices) who are less than twenty years and had spent more than three years in the market. Names of informants in this study are pseudonyms.

Adoption of life history as a method enables the researchers generate data from those whom we believe 'have seen it all.' As noted by Mandelbaum, "Life histories studies...emphasize the experience and requirements of the individual - how the person copes with society than how society copes with the stream of individuals."<sup>31</sup> Anthropologists, sociologists, historians and psychologists have developed strong traditions for use of life histories as research method. While scholars in these disciplines question the validity and reliability of life histories, they have also recognized their immense potential to aid in the ethnographic examination and understanding of a society since the individual's experiences and behavioural pattern tend to be synthesized from society's culture and the reactions of other members of society to cultural expectations. Four life histories were recorded consisting of two masters and two apprentices.

Secondary sources of data were also consulted. Traditionally, inputs of qualitative data are in words; so, the outputs are usually also in words. We adopted the approach which accepts that there exist behaviours, symbols, regulations, meanings, norms and mores that affect everyday life and that it should be the role of qualitative researchers to uncover and explain these regularities.<sup>32</sup> We agree with Adler and Clark that in qualitative field studies, analysis is guided by the data being gathered and the



topics, questions and evaluative criteria that provide focus.<sup>33</sup> Collected data were analysed qualitatively.

## PRACTICES, OBJECTS AND IDEAS AS MONEY IN LADIPO MARKET

At Ladipo International Market, certain practices, objects and ideas are symbolised as money. Ideas are in people's heads and are acted out in what they do. This is the 'realm of ideas,' which informs and underlies the observable phenomenon.<sup>34</sup>

### IMPORTATION PHENOMENON AND CONTAINERS AS SYNONYMOUS WITH MONEY

To traders at Ladipo Market, the word 'importation' or 'importer' conjures in the mind of the hearer a social category, which engenders a form of social interaction necessitated by economic transactions beyond the boundaries of Ladipo market. Each is a buzz word which signals the existence of a social class that is distinguished from the rest by success and achievement in business endeavor. 'Importer' is a symbol of 'being there', and not associated with the novice in motor spare parts business taking place at Ladipo. Availability of adequate funds, experience and the necessary network are prerequisites to becoming an importer. Importation of goods is perceived as high money yielding economic activity. For the Igbo traders, the act of importation is anchored on their belief that greater achievement is gained by venturing farther afield. The people have an adage that states, "*Anaghi ano n'ulo efota ero ukwu,*" which means "nobody stays in the homestead and harvests large wild mushroom." Imported goods may be said to symbolise the "wild mushroom." It is generally believed that people who bring in foreign goods into the country make enormous profits. Besides, generally, Nigerians hold in high esteem goods from foreign lands, including used products.

Since the advent of Europeans and their industrial goods in Nigeria, imported materials are highly prized in Nigeria. In line with this thought, A. O. Omobowale notes:

To native Africans, the transatlantic venture of the Europeans attracted deep admiration; it conveyed symbolic notions of superiority-not only superiority of the Europeans themselves but also of the goods they had to offer for exchange.<sup>35</sup>

In addition to superior value attached to overseas products, fantasy about importation derives from some other central factors unique to Ladipo Market space, namely:

- i. Importation is highly profitable in Ladipo market
- ii. It takes enormous amount of money to embark on importation activities
- iii. Importation is not for the novice in motor parts business
- iv. Most traders come to Ladipo Market as impecunious people and importation is evidence of ascension to the pinnacle of the trading profession.
- v. Importation activity is highly competitive in Ladipo Market.

The dream of every trader in Ladipo, therefore, is to become an importer. Witticisms involving *odibo* (apprentices) who facetiously claim to be importers are prevalent. One young *odibo* was observed boasting when accosted by a food vendor he was indebted to demanding to be paid, saying, "*Bia, o bu maka N50.00 k'iji akpari m? Mbosi ozo gbaa m ugwo N50, 000.00. I ma kwa n'abu m Importer. Ego ka m bu,*" meaning, "Do you insult me because of paltry N50.00? Another day ask me for N50, 000.00 instead. Don't you know that I'm an 'Importer.' I am money."<sup>36</sup>

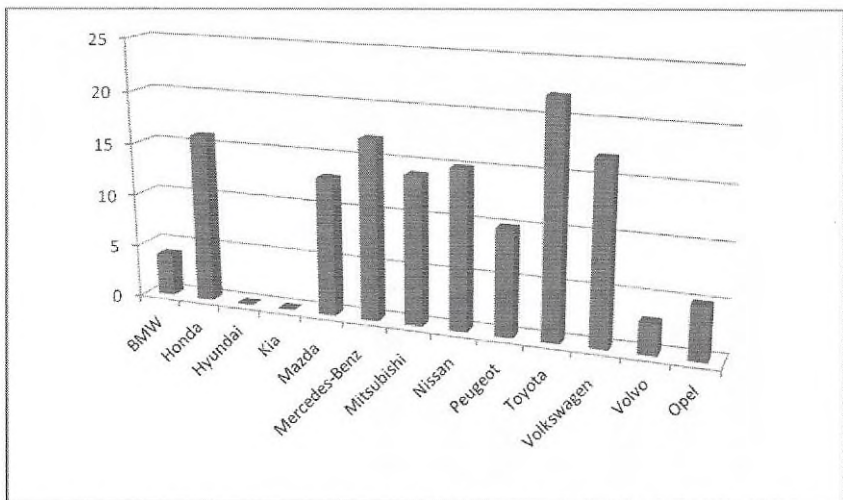


Fig. 2: Types of preferred car models import into Nigeria. Source: Humphrey Ukepebor, *Exporting of Used Automobile Parts from Finland to Nigeria*, 2012, 26.

The concept of 'importation' inspires in the traders an anticipation of success. A successful trader must acquire more of those socially-approved goods and engage in competitive endeavour among peers in the market and beyond. Hence, 'importers' flaunt symbols of their pecuniary success such as speaking regularly in English Language, dressing more glamorously in European attire, a striking deviation from the



prevalent mode of dressing in Ladipo market, which consists typically of combination of greasy jeans, T-shirt and rubber boot. On the pyramid of social ladder, the importer is located at the peak while others are at different points along the pyramid. They move about in expensive cars, most of which came in as their trade products. A youthful informant, on spotting a good-looking lady passing by, commented:

*Ndi Importer n'ebu umu aka nile n'agaghari na-ahia a. 'Importer' nwere ego; nani ha nwere ike ikwu N10, 000.00 maka hotel, nyekwa ha N10, 000.00 n'elu ya. O nweghi ihe ha ji ego eme. Ha n'ekeri umuaka a nile I n'afu n'ime onwe ha.*

Meaning:

Importers take all these young ladies you see in this market. Only Importers could pay N10, 000.00 hotel accommodation charges per day effortlessly and still give them [the girls] N10, 000.00 as gift. They have enormous money to spend. And they share each of these girls among themselves.<sup>37</sup>

Importers are, therefore, believed to acquire a large number of status symbols, including young ladies who, though aware that a particular importer may have a wife at his foreign country of residence (some keep such *oyibo* wives as a means to obtain resident permits) and another wife in Nigeria, would willingly accept the position of "Importer's girlfriend."

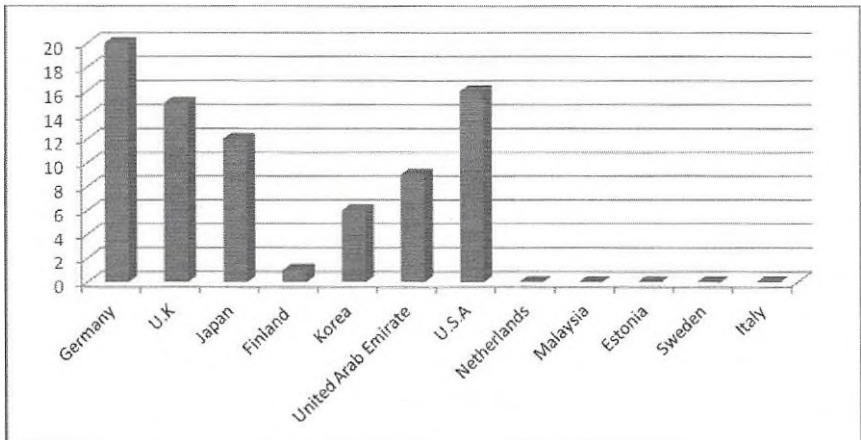


Fig. 3: Countries from where used (*Tokunbo*) automobiles are brought into Nigeria. Source: Humphrey Ukpabor, *Exporting of Used Automobile Parts from Finland to Nigeria*, 2012, 27.

To the concept of 'importation' is also attached the ownership of "containers." Littered around warehouses and market units in Ladipo Market are large number of 20ft and 40ft containers, which arrive on daily basis. Regular scenes each morning is a crowd that gathers around containers discharging their foreign contents. These scenes evoke sense of money. Traders arrive at a container with expectations to run into products that fit into their line of business, which they could hold exclusive monopoly since some vital *tokumbo* parts come in irregularly. Such motor parts that come irregularly, which belong to popular automobiles in Africa, yield lots of profit to the traders. Containers, therefore, represent money and progress in Ladipo Market.



Plate 1: Cars being unloaded from containers at Conference Warehouse, Ladipo Market (Source: Fieldwork 2015).

### SKILLS OF 'IMARA ANYA AHIA'

*Imara anya ahia* (the internalisation of the intricacies of business) is synonymous with the idea of money. '*Anyahia*' literally means 'eye of business', hence *imara anya ahia* literally means 'knowledge of the 'eye' for business', that is, the skills needed for successful business venture. It is generally accepted that a deep understanding of intricacies of business has the capability to generate money for a trader. A young apprentice who learns the business properly does not require money to make money in Ladipo market. With his skills he could start from nothing and soon gets to the position of 'Importer'. Business skill is a symbol of money. It is a skill that a master leaves with a graduate at the end of the agreed training period. Some masters offer their apprentice grants as low as N100, 000.00 as settlement grant after their years of service, which could be as long as seven years. This sum is supposed to pay for shop accommodations and initial products. It is indeed too insufficient to support a novice in motor

parts business. However, a beginner who possesses *anya ahia* in Ladipo will end up wealthy and ascend the social ladder. Business ideas represent money in Ladipo, without it a man may not survive. Physical cash is important, for it helps those who have it grow faster in their business line. More importantly, a man who must grow fast must add to large sums of money a deep grasp of trading skills in his business line. A beginner must understand how to discover the hidden money in discarded motor parts, for instance. Most people, masters and trainees alike, claim that if a beginner has deep business ideas, he does not require money to start business. A popular maxim in Ladipo market is: *Ahia bu onye mara anya ya o zuo*, meaning, "business success belongs to people who understand the intricacies of business."

One afternoon during the fieldwork, a 'worthless-looking' engine was noticed being moved through the market entrance. Out of amazement the following conversation ensued:

**Fieldworker:** Sorry, is this engine still useful?

**Traders 1 and 2:** [Laughing and chorused] Yes!

**Trader 1:** Does it look old to you?

**Trader 2:** It is still in its best condition.

**Trader 1:** If you don't possess good business skills, you wouldn't know it's still very good.

**Trader 3:** That's why Igbo are wonderful; if it's a Hausa man he won't recognise the money in that old-looking engine.

**Trader 1 and 2:** [Laughing, chorused] Big money indeed!<sup>38</sup>



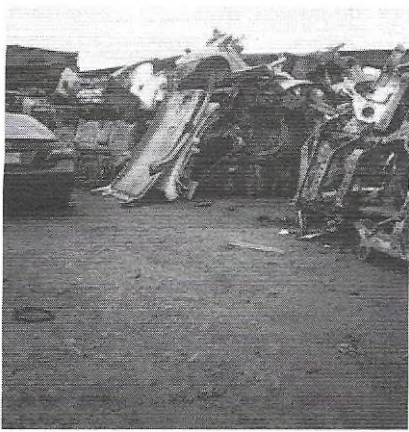


Plate 2: Motor carcass displayed for sale at Ogbo-Iron Unit. (Source: Fieldwork 2015).

Most traders in Ladipo are proud of their knowledge of motor spare parts. They believe it is a fortification against business failure and poverty. They suppose individuals who get cheated in business are those who lack this quality, that is, the quality of *'imara anya ahia'*. Business skills also include the individual's ability to manipulate the market to his favour. It is a game in which only the smartest emerges victorious. Money lies in the ability to outsmart others. It is a game that most Igbo participants in business transactions understand and reflected in the rigorous bargaining activities taking place in the market.

#### LATEST MODELS OF AUTOMOBILES AND THEIR PARTS AS SYMBOLS

Automobiles are status symbols in most parts of Africa, but in Ladipo Market, money is seen in latest models of cars. An average motor parts trader in Ladipo knows all the models and years of production of most vehicles in Nigeria, and their cost. So, they have no adoration for cars as 'laymen' have. Their passion and interest lie often with the latest models. They keep track of names of such latest models as they come to the Nigerian market, so 'End of Discussion' for a Honda 2011, for instance, is followed by 'End of Discussion Continues' (see Fig. 2 for the types of preferred car models imported into the country). Such latest cars evoked sense of money because it gives the public a glimpse into the monetary worth of such an individual and his corresponding level of achievement, connections and knowledge of the direction of motor parts business. They are like 'pathfinders' in the business.

Among the Igbo, symbols of success have progressed from horses to bicycles and then cars. According to Ben Naanen, in the 1920s, "the typical

index of wealth among the Igbo was the pedal bicycle in which a few men were able to invest," and the model of bicycle generally preferred by the 1930s was the "white horse."<sup>39</sup> In the Twenty-first century, for most Igbo traders in Ladipo, exotic cars help marketing endeavours because some highly placed individuals and corporate organisations would be easily convinced that a motor parts dealer is well established in business to handle their vehicle accessories supplies if seen regularly visiting in expensive cars. Furthermore, exotic cars and their newest models yield money to the traders because their parts are highly sort after. Accessories of cars such as Venza, Tundra, Toyota Highlander 2010, Sienna 2008 and Lexus RS 330 at the period of research were regarded as 'money'. Similarly, engines, engine wire and dash board of all 'big cars' represent money to both traders and touts in Ladipo market.

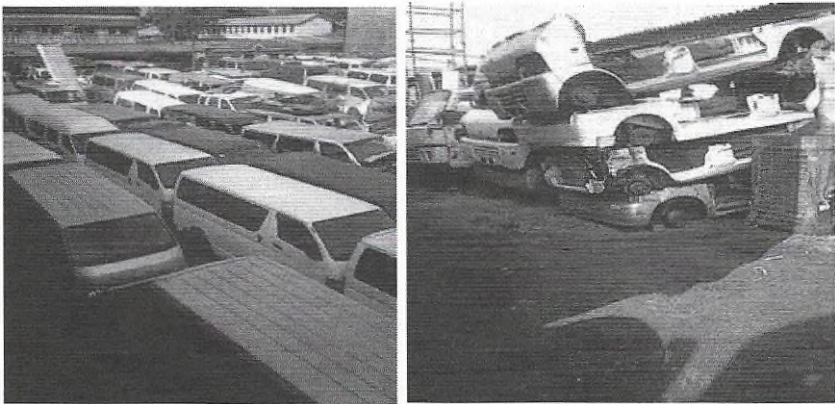


Plate 3: Buses assembled and exhibited for sale, and carcasses of buses awaiting assemblage at Promiseland Unit, Ladipo Market (Source: Fieldwork 2015).

### BUILDINGS, SHOPS AND LANDED PROPERTY

Houses symbolise personal achievement in most parts of Nigeria. For the average Igbo it is desirable for a man to build a house in his hometown. However, for those in cities, sense of achievement comes from having a house in the village and in the city of residence as well. It is common in Ladipo to hear people refer to a young man as 'landlord in Lagos.' An important symbol of money for the Ladipo trader who must show off his achievement is a house both in the city and at one's hometown. Having a personal house in the village and in the city makes a man's achievement complete. This enhances one's social status and signifies higher social mobility. Extract below illustrates the meanings associated with such achievements. The discussion took place among traders:



**Trader 1:** You ought to talk to a Landlord with reverence. Do you realise he is landlord both in Lagos and Asaba?

**Trader 2:** Landlord at Ijegemo! (Ijegemo is one of the poorest and very remote communities in Lagos).

**Trader 1:** Landlord is Landlord, wherever he is located.

**Trader 3:** Soon he will move from Ijegemo to Isolo and gradually get to Victoria Island. He has built a house *n'ebe nna ya* (in his father's place), built this large hostel for students at Asaba and is living in 'his own house' in Lagos.<sup>40</sup>

The location of one's property in Lagos determines the level of admiration one is accorded among the traders.

There is no doubt that the definition and symbols of success and achievement among the Igbo have changed over time. As Raphael Njoku notes, it has progressed from the use of family compound, number of wives, children, farmlands, European luxury goods and slaves as signs of wealth and the yardstick for measuring success, social status and power to the current reality.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Chima Korieh hints that in the agrarian Igboland, "men who distinguished themselves as yam farmers were also recognised and rewarded by their communities with the title of *Ezeji* or 'yam king.'"<sup>42</sup> To Ladipo Market traders, houses both at home town and in Lagos, the number of shops the individual has and the skills needed to make money determine one's respectability within the community. Ability to rent a shop is desirable, but possession of one's own shop is more desirable. In this regard, a teenage apprentice at Aguiyi Ironsi International Trade Centre, Ladipo, suddenly pointed excitedly at a man standing a short distance away and proudly announced to one of the researchers: "That man standing there is the chairman of this Aguiyi Ironsi unit. See him looking clean. He has a shop this side and another that side. He has his own building in this market. Too much money!"<sup>43</sup> Sentiments such as this derive from the prohibitive cost of properties in the part of Lagos State where Ladipo Market is located. Apart from building or buying personal shops, traders also acquire lease rights from landowners, which include Mushin Local Government, for a period ranging from five to ten years. Such traders are referred to as 'Landlords' in Ladipo Market. They have their "Landlords' Association" which holds meetings periodically.

Symbolic object gives meaning to a people's existence, shapes their interactions with their environment and the choices they make in their day to day lives. To the Igbo traders at Ladipo market, money is located in the

phenomena associated with their trade, their objects of trade and skills needed to make money. Money is symbolised in material objects, such as their articles of trade and the social status symbolised by these objects. Thus, 'importation' symbolises higher social status, and hence symbol of money needed to make more money. For the importer, his social status amongst his people further gives him access to society's desirable goods. Social interactions and exchanges in Ladipo Market suggest how cultural production and interpretations given by a group of people within a social and cultural context further lead to a form of 'webs of significance' espoused by them.<sup>44</sup>

### MEANINGS AND PATTERNS OF INTRAGROUP RELATIONSHIP IN LADIPO MARKET

Ideologies, symbolically constructed around 'importation' phenomenon, '*imara anya ahia*', latest models of automobiles and their parts, possession of buildings and shops, generate systems of meanings shared among traders in Ladipo Market. An individual, who has gone through the tutelage of learning the intricacies of his chosen business line and has acquired knowledge, including the jargons of business transactions in Ladipo Market, is deemed to always be in possession of money. It is assumed that if he adds to his knowledge, hard work, he has escaped the trap of poverty. An importer can use his identity for business transaction and have access to more money. It is a social capital. In some instances, the 'importer' identity may function as collateral for access to some financial assistance among the group members. Of course, an importer may not possess cash, but he is treated as 'rich' and he endeavours to act as though he has money and, in the process, accorded reverence only reserved for 'moneyed' men among the group. They are termed 'dons' in business because importers would most likely have landed properties and business ideas, hence they are the smartest and richest. Knowledge of business ideas and ideals are money yielding, and representative of money. They situate those in possession of them in a particular social class and that enhances the level of popularity such individuals can enjoy. Money in this form is not considered only from the limited perspective of economists, which limits money traits to commercial utilitarianism with functions such as medium of exchange, unit of account, store of value and liquid asset. Rather, in this instance, money's most elemental function, as Allen Dyer rightly reasons, is "the creation of a shared experience, within which capitalism may function."<sup>45</sup> The author further notes: "[M]oney creates the conceptual milieu in which our imagination and behaviour are shaped, leading to the commodification of nature and human life - both of which are quintessentially not commodities."<sup>46</sup> The value and meaning accorded to money in Ladipo



Market is embedded in the ideas and processes critical to successful exchange of motor accessories given that real money means that which a particular people call money.

A teenage trader must start his money-making existence by spending years learning the ideas peculiar to his chosen trading line under an established older trader who would have to 'settle' him at the end of his tenure by providing him with initial 'money grant' which could come in a form of cash liquidity, ideas, goodwill, prayers, wares, shop and highly-valued business network. Importantly, if a master does not offer much cash during settlement but is able to provide other prerequisites of successful business life, the *nwaboy* can still succeed. This assistance from the master when happily awarded, is essential constituents of the 'settlement money' touted among Igbo traders as central to success in business. A master who offers the commercial money component of the settlement package but withholds other elements like ideas, goodwill and prayers stands the chance of being accused of being responsible, through diabolical agencies, on the event of his *nwaboy's* early failure in business. Commercial money offered grudgingly, without goodwill and prayers, are often presumed to be *ogwu ego* (ritual money), which is often believed to mysteriously return to the master or giver. The volume of settlement package and the mood of the master at the point of its transmission to the *nwaboy* reflect the nature of the relationship between the Master and the *nwaboy* prior to the period of settlement and gives clues to the future of their relationship over the course of their lives. The Master's attitude from the onset is determined by his assessment of the *nwaboy's* level of honesty and dedication to duty. A master would most often grumble at the end of his *nwaboy's* tenure if there are sufficient grounds for doubt of his (*nwaboy's*) honesty and loyalty. Some masters would deliberately fail to offer any form of grant if they feel their *nwaboy* have plundered their shops. Often such *nwaboy*, if discovered earlier, is most likely returned to his parents early in his apprenticeship years without any settlement.

There is a small number of female motor spare parts traders in Ladipo, most of them importers. They operate mostly at the warehouses, but a few also have shops in the markets. Female traders also acquire male *odibo* who serve the normal five to seven-year term and receive grants. Most times the apprentice is a relative of the female importer. The common practice is for a female trader who aspires to trade in motor spare parts to acquire an apprentice, who is in turn sent to a male trader for *imu ahia*. The male trader is paid to train the young *Odibo* between six months and one year. They learn it through their boys because as Agozino and Anyadike observe, "it is rare to find a girl who is apprenticed to a man, unless working as a store clerk/sales girl who is usually salaried."<sup>47</sup> Most female traders noticed at Ladipo were older women, those who are above child-

bearing age. The young apprentice lives with his Madam throughout his apprenticeship period. At the end of the *imu ahia*, the female trader opens a shop which the apprentice runs as shop manager until the end of his apprenticeship. She also goes to import goods which the *Odibo* manages at the warehouse. The apprentice also aids in enlightening the mistress on the intricacies of the trade. Female traders seldom know the 'mysteries' of the business.

Also observed at Ladipo Market is that there are lots of university graduates trading in the market. They come through their relatives who are already established in the trade. This category of graduates enrolls in the short-term training programme of '*imu ahia*.' In the words of an informant, Okwuchukwu, "As graduates, their business styles and methods are different. They apply their academic knowledge to business here."<sup>48</sup>

Every aspect of social interaction in Ladipo Market seems monetised. Thought patterns are designed and measured in standards prescribed by money. Friendship, kinship or brotherliness within the market, for instance, are expressed and understood in the language of money. A brother who withholds from his brother a business deal or information leading to particular money yielding business deal is regarded as an enemy. In fact, most brothers in Ladipo market end up as foes owing to disagreements in money transactions or regarding 'settlement package,' especially when the Master and *nwaboy* relationship are between two brothers. Yet, two strangers may also become indissoluble 'brothers' due to a thriving business relationship. So, money may have caused renegotiation of kinship ties in Ladipo Market. This constructivist model of kinship relationship makes kinship affiliation more negotiable than earlier stipulated. Most traders also conduct business with others based on their perceived shared origin. It is common for traders from the same town or state to regard themselves as related and offer themselves mutually beneficial assistance. But generally, traders, especially individuals in a particular trading line or union have formed a new kinship system different from what obtains in Igbo culture based on new standards created by money. 'Kin' members contribute burial money, child dedication money, court/police money, marriage money and other funds that cater for the welfare of members. There are also contributory funds from which individuals draw money to fund special gaiety, especially the annual festivities, like Christmas or Easter, which members need to observe in Igbo villages and towns.

## CONCLUSION

The subject of this article has been to give insights into the symbolic representations of money among the Igbo traders in Ladipo Market. Money has become the most important social phenomenon around which are built

other cultural elements of human society. Across time and space, the primary function of money as means of exchange and business transactions remains. Groups and individuals live their lives working to make money or learning in order to make money. Money is an aspect of culture but at the same time evolves particular kinds of cultures. Individuals evaluate their life-worth by the amount of money they make. Values, privileges and social statuses are also attached to individuals by their societies assessing their possession of cultural goods, which the society imbues with significance.

Undoubtedly objects, ideas and practices are represented as symbolic of money. At Ladipo Market, the dynamic of intra-group relations as mediated by money has led to a reconstruction of kinship ties. One's kin are not only those that are affiliated to the individual consanguineously or by marriage, but as constructed through friendship in shared business ideals that are economically rewarding to those involved. The reconstructed cultural values reflect an attempt to survive in a highly competitive and individualistic urban society. Shared symbols of money and monetised goods are exemplified in the lifeways of traders in Ladipo market where symbolisation of money is built around the phenomenon of importation, importer, *imara anya ahia*, landed properties, shops, and latest models of automobiles and their accessories.

Monetised values, habits and behaviours existing in Ladipo Market throw light on how individuals and their interactions with their environment can engender cultural meanings. These 'webs of significance' the traders have spun can only be understood through interpretation and a critical search for meanings. The significance of trade in foreign-used goods, and in this case motor parts and their accessories, in the life of present-day Nigerians reflects how cultural change has shaped 'significances.' Change in technology brings about a change in cultural practices and meanings. 'Importation', 'importer', *anya ahia*, latest automobiles and their accessories and their names, and houses both at home and in the city are imbued with cultural meanings mediated by money. These symbols of money are marks of an individual's achievement, success, and a sign of distinction between and amongst people.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Allen Dyer, "Making Semiotic Sense of Money as a Medium of Exchange, *Journal of Economics* (1989), 23: 503-510

<sup>2</sup> Joe Dominguez and Vicky Robin, *Your Money or Your Life*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 24.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>4</sup> V. C. Uchendu, *The Igbo of South East Nigeria*, (New York: Thompson International Publishing, 1965), 15.



<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ukpokolo, Chinyere, Endogenous Peace Processes and the Resolution of *Afu-Afughi* Religio-Cultural Conflict in Nanka, Southeastern Nigeria, *Orita Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies* Vol. XLIII/2 No. 2 (2011): 177-200.

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<sup>9</sup> James Peoples, and Garrick Bailey, *Humanity: An Introduction to Cultural Anthropology*, (Belmont: Thomson Wordsworth, 2003), 156.

<sup>10</sup> Simon Smelt, "Money's Place in Society," *The British Journal of Sociology*, 31 (2) (1980): 210.

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<sup>18</sup> Anatol Rappaport, "The Role of Symbols in Human Behaviour," *Review of General Semantics* 12 (3) (1955): 180.

<sup>19</sup> Herbert Applebaum, *Symbolic and Humanistic Anthropology in Perspective*, *Cultural Anthropology*, (Albany: State University of New York, 1987), 477.

<sup>20</sup> M. Haralambos and H. Robin, *Sociology: Themes and Perspective* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980), 5.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>22</sup> See Uchendu, *The Igbo of South East Nigeria*, 15.

<sup>23</sup> See Uchendu, *The Igbo of South East Nigeria*; Chinyere Ukpokolo, "Self Identity and Chieftaincy Titles among the Igbo of South-eastern Nigeria," *LUMINA: Interdisciplinary and Research Journal of Holy Name University*, Vol. 20. (2009): 1-23.

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<sup>25</sup> James Peacock, "Symbolic and Psychological Anthropology: The Case of Pentecostal Faith Healing," *Society for Psychological Anthropology* 20 (1) (1984): 38.

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<sup>27</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, (Chicago: Aldine Publications Co., 1969); Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 5.

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<sup>38</sup> Jude, Ifeanyi and Chinedu, Fieldwork, 29 November, 2015.

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<sup>44</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 505.

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<sup>48</sup> Okwuchukwu, Personal communication, 21 November, 2015.



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