Abstract
This study focuses on ọfọ as a symbol of justice among the Igbo extracts of Eastern Nigeria. In the ancient days, ọfọ was held in high esteem as a symbol of justice compared to the present time. The natural urge for justice resides in humans. This instinct was also noticed among the Igbo people, as the holders of ọfọ were very cautious in matters relating to justice. However, most researchers have not paid an exclusive attention to ọfọ as regards to justice. Most people focus their interest on the meaning, nature and functions while some people perceived ọfọ as a sacred object of ritual service. Some scholars see ọfọ as a god of justice. It is also assumed that recently the use of ọfọ is perverted. The evidence is seen by so much injustice prevalent in the society. The study seeks to reposition ọfọ as a symbol of justice. It also explores its role in maintaining and preserving justice in Igbo land. The study adopts the descriptive research method. The study obtains its data through the use of oral interview and a review of literature. The findings reveal that ọfọ performs the role of justice among other roles. ọfọ is seen to be synonymous with truth, for justice resides with truth. In a way of significance, this study is expected to sway some Igbo people to the main purpose which ọfọ serves culturally in Igbo land. Furthermore, it is expected to generate the tendency for many Igbo people to strive for justice and cordial relationship.

1.0 Introduction
Man, by nature, desires equity. Treating all parties, rivals and disputants equally is of the most interest to humanity. This requires honest, just, adequate and reasonable judgment; that should be devoid of partiality, bias or favouritism in dealing with any dispute. According to Ifediuba (2009) “Unethical behaviour has pan cosmic effect on one’s children.” Igbo people are aware of the consequences of immoral act, and so try to be principled. They believe that an evil could be generational, ‘nwanwa tota o tokwudo’, that is, children grow up to suffer the evils done by their parents. Every Igbo man, therefore, tries to leave an upright life. Based on this, they ensure that their actions are justified. Among the Igbo, ọfọ symbolizes uprightness and justice. To live a just life is not a matter of enforcement; it is in their nature to be fair in any dealings with their fellow human beings.

Igbo people have different levels by which cases are judged. When these levels make decisions and pronounce verdicts, they are irrevocable. Any judgment agreed upon, holding the ọfọ, or, in order words striking the ọfọ on the ground, cannot be revisited. It is final. The ọfọ is the seal and so a symbol of justice. The underlying factor here is what the ọfọ and the holder signify. According to Nzomiwu (1999:100-101) “Through this tree the supreme being transmits his blessing to his creatures. The holder of the
earthly *ọfo* is believed to receive communications spiritually from the creator and has obligation to be just as the creator”.

*Ọfo* is not ordinary; it is sacred. The holder is the mediator between the people and the spirit world. Ogugua and Ogugua (2013:201) assert that “It is a sacred duty to hold *ọfo*, because it means holding the soul of a people; the being of the people, the future and the aspirations of the people.” Certainly, if the holders of *ọfo* try to thwart issues, the community or the people concerned will suffer greatly.

It is pertinent therefore to examine the role of *ọfo* in ensuring peaceful cohabitation among the Igbo for a more unified society. And in doing that, the research method to guide the study is the descriptive type. The review of related literature will take its turn. Thereafter, the analysis of the role of *ọfo* in Igbo Land will be done prior to the conclusion.

### 2.0 Literature Review

#### 2.1 The Different Perception of the *ọfo* Symbol

*Ofo* is a widely known symbol in Igbo community. It stands for various things some of which many scholars have viewed from different perspectives. The first group is the western scholars. Among them are M. D. W. Jeffreys, P. A. Talbot, C. K. Meek, A. G. Leonard etc. According to Leonard (1968:106) “*ọfo* is one of the trees available in every Ibo community... *ọfo*, the god of justice and truth on the Niger... is appealed to by those, who, having a grievance, consider that, right is on their side.” Leonard recognizes that *ọfo* represents justice and truth, but fails to realize that *ọfo* is not a god and so not an object of worship among the Igbo. In view of this, Arazu (2005:132) acknowledges that “*ọfo* is not a god. It is used to make contact with the ancestors and other benevolent spirits. It is used to speak authoritatively and without fear, to the living, the dead and the gods.” Talbot (1969: 138) states that *ọfo* is a god of justice and truth. He believes that the god of justice lives in *ọfo* tree. To him, *ọfo* represents a male strength which is used when cases are tried for utmost delivering of the right judgement. Talbot also describes *ọfo* as a god, as clarified above. Even at that, although *ọfo* represents justice, Talbot’s view does not express entirely the place of *ọfo* among the Igbo since *ọfo* means a lot of things to Igbo people. Ezenweke and Ogada (2012:159) are aware of this as they gave this instance: “*ọfo*, the ritual symbol of the Igbo people of Nigeria, symbolizes, at the same time, ancestral presence, authority, uprightness, truth, agent of punishment and gerontocratic leadership”.

#### 2.2 The *Ọfo* Symbol and the First Son

According to tradition *ọfo* is handed over to the first son during the burial of the father. It is always in the custody of the eldest son. It is, therefore, used to ensure justice and for the identification of the first son. Certainly, among many communities in Igbo land, *ọfo* is used to associate with the elders, ancestors and with justice. It has a great power in effecting justice in Igbo land. For instance, in testifying the truth of a matter, *ọfo* is used for oath taking. Here the accused swears with *ọfo*, beckoning on the ancestors to be his witnesses. On this ground, Nzomiwu (1999:106) has this to say:

> Just as *ọfo* symbolizes the real but unseen power of the ancestors, so does it symbolize their more perfect justice. Perfect justice is
thus thought of as having its abode in the spirit world and ultimately in God. As ọfọ makes real the presence and the influence of the ancestors in every family and community in the same way does it make real, the necessity of justice for each community.

Actually, ọfọ is a sacred tree believed to have been planted by God; and is looked upon as a symbol of justice, authority, and a medium of communication to God and the ancestors.

2.3 Different Definitions By Different People

Many Igbo scholars have also defined ọfọ in different ways. Mbonu (1947: 28) states that “ọfọ represents truth, righteousness, law and authority among the Igbo.” Definitely, ọfọ stick is not ordinary because of what it stands for; the power embodied in ọfọ gives way for right judgement and life of uprightness. Odunukwe (2015) expresses that “ọfọ is one among the several cultic symbols, which the traditional Igbo people employ in performing functions of religious, political, ethical and social importance. It is a symbol of authority, honesty and righteousness.”

In fact, ọfọ touches every aspect of an Igbo man’s life. Apart from the physical ọfọ stick, every action of the Igbo revolves in ọfọ. Once an Igbo person feels that his actions are justified, the person has every assurance that he is upright. Within this state of mind, he fears no harm. The assertion, “eji m nke onye?” clearly states that once a person has not hurt anyone, that person has nothing to fear. This state assures him that he is in good relationship with man and with God. Here, ọfọ stands for right judgement, truthfulness, decent life, fairness, straightforwardness among others. It is assumed that the people’s moral code was based on it, and therefore communicates to the living and the dead. On this note, Njaka (1974: 28) opines that:

Ọfọ is the central symbol of the Igbo religion. In addition to being a staff of authority, it is an emblem symbolizing the link between chukwu and man, the dead and the living, the living and the unborn. The ọfọ also symbolizes justice, righteousness and truth.

Generally speaking, ọfọ unifies man with the visible and the invisible. It makes way for progress, strength, peace and harmony. It is therefore certain that the person with ọfọ is the one who is in good relationship with God, and actually ventures without mishap. O ji ọfọ ga-ala, meaning that one with ọfọ, will always be victorious.

2.4 Ọfọ as Guiltlessness

In support of the above, Igbo (2012:171) declares that “O ji ọfọ ga-ana” meaning; he who possesses the sacred ọfọ will always prosper in his adventures.” It is a general
belief among the Igbo that ọfo is a traditional staff of authority, symbol of justice, truth and right living. Therefore ọfo means that you are doing the right thing; whether or not one is holding the sacred ọfo sick physically. However, in most cases every one claims that he or she holds ọfo; as in this assertion- onye elu ji ọfo, onye ala ji ọfo, so ọfo ma onye ji ya. Igbo proverb also states that ngwele niile makpu amakpu a maghizì nke afo na-alu. In this situation, it is only God who knows the person that is on the right part. As Ejizu (1986:122) asserts that “It was Chukwu himself who gave “ọfo” to mankind to serve as a medium, and to signify God’s truth among men.” It is expected therefore, that every Igbo person should hold ọfo in everything the person does; otherwise the person distorts the cosmic order. However a consequence follows afterwards. It is also worthy to note that the “holding” here could be physical or non physical as earlier stated, therefore whoever stands by the truth in relations with his fellow human being is actually holding ọfo and will not be harmed in any way. For instance, two persons might have misunderstanding; one may say Ejiri m gi ọfo. – I hold ọfo against you on this matter. In view of this, Okodo (2009: 163) states that the real meaning of “I am holding a piece of the deuterium sticks” (ọfo) is that “My actions are just and upright.” Ndubueze (2013) in support of this assertion states that “onye o bula ga-eji ọfo ga na-eji oziokwu.” This means that whoever that will hold the ọfo must be a truthful person. Igbo (2012:166) declares that “ọfo is a symbol of right conduct.” For an Igbo man ọfo represents justice and the idea of justice is integrity, equality, kindness and above all, reliability. These are the things that ensure societal harmony and progress.

2.5 Types of Ọfo
Among the Igbo different types of ọfo exist, they range from family, kindred, village, towns ọfo, among others. Ogugua and Ogugua (2013:202) on different types of ọfo state that “For Green although the deities have ọfo, the one usually borne in mind by the people is ọfo - umunna- the family ọfo which reflects or mirrors the moral code of the people.” It is not everyone that has the power to hold ọfo in Igbo land. It is, therefore, clear that it is the heads of these various segments that hold ọfo among the people. It is obvious, therefore, that, in Igbo land ọfo is closely associated with justice. It is expected that the holders of ọfo in various units such as family, kindred, and so on should exercise their authority with truthfulness and justice. Isidienu (2013) referring to the holders of ọfo, avers that “All discussions, decisions and judicial matters are in their hands. These leaders should be upright and impartial. Each should hold his ọfo in matters of decision; none is expected to hide evil in order to avoid the punishment of the gods”. As a matter of fact, it is believed that the ọfo does not only punish anyone who swears by it spuriously but also punishes the holder who gives an unjustified verdict.

According to Uwalaka (1996: 7-8) “ọfo is the chief dispenser of justice and consequently the chief coercive power which ensures that the rules’ and customs of the village are observed.” She continued, “ọfo has a right not only to administer but also the right of life and death.”

3.1 The Role of Ọfo in Administrating Justice
The function of ọfo is to ensure love, peace and harmony among the people in the community. ọfo na-egosiputa eziokwu. Ọfo signifies the truth. It is to have faith, that is, if one is not liable of the crime being accused, he or she will have faith that nothing
will happen to him or her. It means that one’s conscience is very clear, therefore whatever evil planned against that person cannot harm him or her. It was gathered that, *Mmadu bu ofo. Onu aka nri bu aka mnagha*. Ofo among the Igbo is regarded as the symbol of peace like National Assembly’s mace. The use of ofo ensures that true justice takes place and also helps for the truth to prevail and in the same way stands for fairness and righteousness. Mbonu (1947:28) states that “ofo represents truth, righteousness, law and authority among the Igbo.” Ofo is a wooden object believed to be so powerful in punishing those who commit atrocities against the land. It was gathered that ofo actually stands for justice and also gives real justice, but nowadays there is perversion. It was also observed that, ofo is used these days with mixed feelings because of Christianity and secondly deception and long throat, also, in the past, law breakers cannot hold ofo because it will kill them.

*Ofo* is used during serious issues. It is involved in more serious cases between families and kindred. According to Ilogu (1974: 18) “ofo is used for swearing in all grave cases; it is used by an ozo to attest solemnly to the gravity or truthfulness of what he say.” In actual fact ofo is used to exonerate the righteous, used by the people when nothing but only the truth is required; used to swear in order to ensure justice. Ofo can be referred to as live and let others live, *egbe belu ugo belu, nke si ibe ya ebena nku kwaa ya*. It was also gathered that ofo is used in taking oath before a shrine. Uwulaka (1996: 11-12) asserts that

“In the event of a recalcitrant offender refusing to accept the verdict of the lot, a more solemn procedure is resorted to. This involves the taking of a solemn oath in which each party affirms his innocence before the ofo shrine. This is accompanied by a very dramatic ritual during which the ofo elders knock the ground in unison with their sacred sticks while chanting a chorus of curses.

Actually ofo is used to demonstrate cleanliness of hand. It was gathered that those who hold ofo is the most elderly man in the family, kindred, village and community. They use it to bless or otherwise in serious cases that are difficult to resolve. But the eldest persons must stand on the side of the truth for it to be effective. It should be noted that ofo is used when people are speaking the truth. *Ha na-aku ofo na- ana mgbe o buna e kwubili okwu*. In support of this assertion, Ejizu (1986: 63) affirms that “ofo is used to seal all important decisions or family, kindred and lineage members which are aimed at fostering the peace and harmony of the community.”

It was also gathered that ofo is a piece of wood recognised by the community to have the power of justice (eziokwu). It stands for justice, equity and fairness in any deliberation. It was accrued that ofo ensure that the truth must be spoken. *Ka e kwuo eziokwu*. It is believed to be a symbol of truth and justice’ and so used to enshrine justice. *Ka eziokwu wee puta*. The ofo which is a sacred symbol is also used to determine innocence. *E ji ofo ama onye aka ya di ocha*, and was a symbol of authority and righteousness. Ofo functions as a staff of office for peace and justice. It is the strength of a leader and strength of the community. According to Uwalaka (1996: 11)
“Each ọfo stick is the permanent possession of each ọfo holder and symbolises his empowerment.” The person holding the ọfo in the community is highly honoured and any pronouncement made by him is binding or irrevocable.

Furthermore, ọfo among the Igbo is used to settle secret cases and punish offenders and was highly reverenced. Igbo people respect ọfo and they bring it out during serious deliberations so that the parties involved can tell the truth and will not tell lie. They use it whenever an issue that requires high level of sincerity is to be judged. It was gathered that the deviant person is called upon to hold ọfo, it was believed that if he or she is innocent, nothing will happen to him or her; if not there will be repercussion. The person will be given the ọfo to swear by it. It was observed that Igbo people also make incantations with the ọfo stick. According to Ejizu (1986:64) “In many parts of Igbo land, ikpo ọfo is the greatest form of oath.” He continued “all the ọfo are piled together for the person taking the oath to carry. When this is done certain rituals and incantations are rendered.” By carrying the ọfo, the carrier has no option than to say the truth because he or she knows the implication of telling lies.

On the other hand ndi Igbo na-eweta ọfo oge ikpe iji choputa eziokwu. A na-eti ya n’ana mgbe e kwusilu okwu. The eldest man is the custodian; he therefore uses ọfo in his hand in making pronouncements, prayers, blessings and curses. It was gathered that ọfo is a sign of finality in judgement, and that irrevocable decisions are actualized with it. The use of ọfoenhances the people to say the truth. It ensures that justice has been done to any case, to avoid bringing it up as untreated or a case not treated well. Therefore, when saying the truth before God and man, that is where ọfo works in particular. ọfo ka e ji ekpe ikpe kwu oto. ọfo e tiri n’ana eziokwu di ya. (eziokwubundu). In view of this Uwalaka (1996) affirms that the elders after pouring curses on the culprits clinches with the statement onu mmadu bu onu chukwu and also justifies the curses by affirming that onye eziokwu nwendu. ọfo is therefore presented in times of dispute resolution. Uwalaka (1996: 8-9) states that

Before ọfo undertakes to act as arbiter in a case, it usually makes its demands on the parties seeking mediations. The parties involved usually consult the leader of the ọfo men who announces to them the demands which the ọfo has imposed on them and which must be fulfilled before ọfo lends ear to their complaints. Usually, for the settlement of a land case, each of the disputing parties is expected by ọfo to produce a cock, a male dog, four kola nuts, four alligator pepper, four jars of palm wine and a bottle of homemade gin, eight dishes of fufu.

It is worthy of note that the demands of ọfo is usually in fours or four doubled, four as the Igbo ritual number depict the four Igbo minor market days or four doubled which explains the Igbo major market days. These are Eke ukwu, eke nta, Afo nta, Afo ukwu, dgz. Ọfo is therefore a confirmatory instrument. It is also used in settling family
ouarrels, marriage misconducts among others. If one is given the ọfọ, then one has the right to do what one should do. It is an indication of justice, peace, unity, and that, one is also calling the ancestors to witness, therefore used as the greatest sign of authority and justice.

It was further observed that ọfọ is a symbol of authority and evidence of justice. It is the dignity and prestige of the community, so it rules the community. ọfọ is an authority of truth. It stands as the final say. ọfọ is for transparency, it stands as a symbol of justice and a powerful instrument. For instance, according to Uwalaka (1996) if a case is to be tried through ọfọ lot system, a cock will be strangled and left to dance between the disputing parties, until guided by ọfọ, it falls at the feet of the offender. Since ọfọ is held to be infallible, it therefore gives a valid verdict. In actual fact the role of ọfọ shows that final declaration has been taken and it is irrevocable.

On the other hand ọfọ is used against the guilty. Whenever the chief priest raises it, it means that all cases have been ruled. It is used to ensure that truth is prevailed; that is the reason for its use for oath taking. ọfọ is used for last orders, after resolving cases. It is therefore an emblem used in fighting for justice.

4.0 Conclusion
This study observed that ọfọ is symbol of justice among the Igbo extracts of Eastern Nigeria. In the ancient days, ọfọ was held in high esteem as a symbol of justice compared to this present time. The natural urge for justice resides in humans. This gives rise to the use of ọfọ in giving judgement and determining the truth. It was discovered that the Igbo people, as the holders of ọfọ are very cautious in matters relating to justice. Recently, the use of ọfọ is perverted. The evidence is seen by so much injustice prevalent in the society. The study therefore justified ọfọ as a sign of justice and not a god as many authors wrongly postulated. The paper also explores the role of ọfọ in maintaining and preserving justice in Igbo land.

References


