

# Traditional Shrines and Artefacts in Oroko Land: The Judicial, Ethical and Social Significance

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## Abstract

Prior to the introduction of Christianity and modernism in Oroko land, many traditional shrines and artefacts existed in the land with far reaching influences on the culture of the people. A study was conducted to find out the judicial, ethical, and social significance of traditional shrines and artefacts in Oroko land. Six prominent shrines and artefacts were studied: *luwa la mboka*, *bole bwa ngomo*, *ekili*, *etana*, *nya lioh*, and *isimbi*. The Oroko believe that these traditional shrines and artefacts are important to them in many ways: protection of their communities from harm, either from internal or external forces and sources, communication with the living and the dead (ancestors), maintenance of order and discipline in the villages, moral behaviour in homes, respect for one another, but especially for the elderly, and above all culture continuity.

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**Keywords:** Shrines, Artefacts, Ethical, Judicial, Oroko Land.

## 1. Introduction

*The greatest danger in African religion is that the old should disappear, without some new religious force to take its place. Unchecked individualism, self-seeking, corruption and materialism are the great enemies of modern Africa. Yet the past has been so thoroughly impregnated with religion and its ethics that it is difficult to see how an ordered society can be established without them.*

(E. G. Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion: 146*)

When Parrinder talks of religion and its ethics that filled the African past, we think of the social order that existed within the African traditional belief systems and religion. These belief systems and religion are exhibited in the many traditional shrines and artefacts that are found in Africa and used by Africans for specific purposes. Shrines and artefacts are sacred relics in a traditional religious formation with idols, trees, stones, images, and statues often erected over them as immemorial objects of worship and activity. The

traditional artefacts, which are non-verbal symbols of communication and authority are held in high esteem by the people of the community in which they are found. Thus, Parrinder's concluding words in his book *African Traditional Religion* (1962) that 'the dead are felt to be ever near, and no people have a greater consciousness than Africans of the reality of the watching "cloud of witnesses"' (3) describe Africans' belief systems about the dead through these shrines and artefacts. This is because the Africans believe that the dead (ancestors) have a role to play in the lives of the living and that they have to be revered through the shrines and artefacts ordained for them. Christopher I. Ejizu in "*African Traditional Religion and the Promotion of Community Living in Africa*" attests that every social group evolves its distinct ethical code. Every society has its norms of acceptable behaviour, taboos and prohibitions. Many traditional African groups have, in addition, motivational features and incentives through which compliance to the norms of approved behaviour and social ideas are encouraged. There are equally rituals of purification, as well as punitive measures that try to deter and curb the tendency to deviate (6). All of this is true to the judicial, social and ethical significance of traditional shrines and artefacts in Oroko land. The fact that the ancestors have been enshrined in these various shrines indicates that their spirits have to be summoned to assist at important crises in life. These shrines and artefacts are put in places to serve frontality, and the figures are composed to give them permanence and durability. Sacred shrines, like artefacts, are among the noblest activities of Oroko peoples' genuine art and manifestations. These arts are directed towards expressing the infinite beauty of creation in works made by human hands in Oroko. Shrines in religious cultures are human relation to divinity, to reverence, worship, obedience and submission to mandates, precepts of supernatural beings and they perform the duties for which they are made. The Oroko people, whether converted to other religions or not, are a people who respect their traditional shrines and artefacts because of the role they play in shaping their lives as a people.

In this paper, we shall describe six prominent traditional shrines and artefacts in Oroko land; namely, *luwa la mboka*, *bole bwa ngomo*, *ekili*, *etana*, *nya lioh*, and *isimbi* and discuss their judicial, ethical, and social significance in the culture of the Oroko people.

## **2. The Oroko Ethnic Group**

The ethnic group which is today known as Oroko was formerly and, in fact, is still known by some as the Balondo. The Oroko are made up of ten clans: Bamusso, Bakoko, Batanga, Bima, Bakundu, Balondo, Ngolo, Mbonge, Ekombe and Balue. It is fallacious, therefore, to refer to the Oroko as Balondo as is common place. To make this clearer, it is important to note that the Oroko are found in both Meme and Ndian Divisions of the South West Region of

Cameroon with more than half of the surface area of Meme being occupied by three of the Oroko clans: Bakundu, Mbonge, and part of the Ekombe. The other seven clans are found in Ndian Division. The Oroko are so hospitable, honest, trustworthy, and peace loving that their history has no substantial traces of tribal wars, be they inter-or intra-tribal (1). Basically the Oroko are farmers.

Historical evidence has it that the Oroko are a people of the Bantu Negro race like the Duala, Bakweri, Balong, Bakossi etc. who originally settled in the Congo Basin. According to oral sources, there were two waves of migration that brought the Oroko to Cameroon and to their present settlements in the Ndian and Meme Divisions. This oral information is corroborated by Godwin Penda Itoe in “The Ngolo: A Cultural History”, quoted by Ekole Chabanga Michael in “The Form and Content of Oroko Birth Songs” who intimated that the Bantu group that moved from the East African Region:

*[...]migrated southwards to Angola through Southern Rhodesia. From there, it migrated along the Atlantic coast to the coastal region of Cameroon [...]. Those who settled around the Rio-Del-Rey region are said to be the ancestors of the Oroko people. (1994:10)*

This explains why the Batanga found around the coast of Kribi and the Batanga in Oroko have the same tradition. This is also why the language spoken in some parts of the D.R. Congo (Lingala) is similar to some of the dialects spoken by some clans in Oroko.

### 3. Description Of The Shrines And Artefacts And Their Significance

**A) *Luwa la Mboka* (Fig 1).** At the entrance into every Oroko village, there is supposed to be a “*luwa la mboka*”, some sort of a door that leads to the village. It is important to mention here that not all Oroko villages still have this because of the intrusion of the new religion and modernism. The *luwa la mboka* is made up of so many things. First, there is some sort of a door curtain made of the young raffia palm leaves that beautify the entrance to the village. On this, one can perceive the things hung on the leaves. These are fresh fruits of alligator pepper harvested from the forest. The alligator pepper acts as protective amulets that x-ray each person entering the village. In case a visitor carries any destructive objects, the fruits are believed to transmit information to the elders of the village of the impending danger. Second, there is a plant on which the raffia palm leaves hang. The plant never gets dry no matter the season. The plant, which often grows into a tree, is significant too, as it is medicinal. This plant is used during the circumcision of all the male children born in the village. During circumcision, the leaves of the plant are harvested, squeezed and applied on the circumcised penis of the baby. This helps the

wound to heal fast. On both sides of the *luwa la mboka* are two small fences. Inside each little fence is a wooden dish called *eboki*. In the two dishes there is cooked food, most often boiled plantains and meat steeped in palm oil. This food is offered to the village ancestors and gods for having provided for the village throughout the year with the aim of establishing a covenant between the people and their ancestors and gods. The ancestors are believed to share in the food which they have aided in producing so that the village can be self-sufficient in food and, therefore, experience no famine.

The ropes used on the *luwa la mboka*, whether on the curtain or on the fences are all significant. One of them is called *bwendende*, a large forest rope that holds the sticks of the little fences together. This rope is significant in that it acts as a binding force among the villagers because as it binds the sticks of the fence together, it is believed to symbolically bind the people together, so that the village can never fall apart and keeps the village intact. Another forest rope called *epinya* is used at the *luwa la mboka*. It is also medicinal. The *epinya* is sometimes used on a woman who gives birth to a set of twins to stop it from recurring, because it was, and in fact still believed that to have a set of twins was or is an ill omen and some punishment to the parents. The *epinya* is tied on the woman's waist at the time of birth and she can stay with it as long as she breast feeds the babies. These ropes also act as deterrent to witches and wizards.

Another artefact found at the *luwa la mboka* is the *ngombo*. This is a bundle set below the curtain of the *luwa la mboka*, held by two forked sticks. At times it is a stone with four stripes of chalk on it (see fig.1). Under the stone or inside the *ngombo* are medicinal leaves and other components. These elements help to bring order and discipline in the village. The elements set underneath the stone also sooth the hearts of the villagers to the extent that it is difficult for villagers to use dangerous weapons like a gun, machete etc. to harm another villager or even think evil against the entire village. The *luwa la mboka* in itself adds beauty to the village. This beauty helps to attract attention to the means of worship. The *luwa la mboka* is used by the village elders during traditional ceremonies to get to the spirit world and in the life forces that come from the life of the spirit through incantations and certain rituals.

There are two socio-judicial rituals associated with the *luwa la mboka*; namely, *etonga mboka* and *bwiane*. The *etonga mboka* is a traditional ritual during which the village is cleansed of all impurities such as killings, adulteries, theft, etc., such that the village prepares itself for better harvest, more births, and less death. The *luwa la mboka* ritual called *etonga mboka* is done annually and only in the dry season, often in the months of November and December. This is done to take the village to a more prosperous level for the coming year. During the *etonga mboka* (usually four days) considered the days of peace, no one is allowed to break firewood, saw timber of any sort

with any instrument that produces unbearable noise. Quarrels during this period are not entertained by village authorities, nor is beating up someone taken lightly. These are considered acts of spiritual infirmity and call for cleansing rites. The four days of peace are believed to be the period when the spirits are supposed to be enjoying peace and tranquillity so that they can work effectively to effect positive change in the lives of the villagers. It is believed that during this period, the village elders who perform the *etonga mboka* ritual communicate the problems of the village to the ancestors and spirits. The supplications are made to the gods in request for more money, food, meat, children, etc. Oroko's communication with their ancestors is in line with Parrinder's words that "To the Africans, the spirit world is so real; near, its forces intertwining and inspiring the visible world that, whether pagan or Christian, man has to reckon with things invisible to mortal sight (3). A case in point of the atonement of crime is when a person commits a sacrilege during the four days of peace. Purification rites are performed immediately to appease the gods of the land and the person concerned pays a fine depending on the gravity of the crime, with part of the fine given to the ancestors.

The *bwiande* is a ritual with a social, entertaining and judicial role. It is a singing masquerade that comes out from 10pm-4am during the four days of peace (*etonga mboka*). Its melodious voice entertains the population while they are relaxing in their beds after their daily chores at home and in their farms. The *bwiande* creates fun while exposing all the wrong doings of the villagers, whether individually or collectively done in the land. Though it creates fun, the *bwiande* is endowed with the mystical power to know even those things done in hiding like stealing, adultery or fornication etc. The *bwiande* denounces all these ills and puts individuals to shame in song. It debunks lazy people and it acts as the village police that caution the villagers of all their misdeeds. After doing so, the villagers are left to do a self-judgement and often the guilty ones do not go back to commit these crimes. It is worthy of note that the *etonga mboka* and all the activities that take place at the *luwa la mboka* are exclusively a male affair and women are exempted for several reasons. First, women are generally known to be the non-custodians of peace especially because of their talkative nature and because men want to keep the secrets of the village and tradition from invading modern values. Secondly, because women can marry out of the tribes there is the fear that they may reveal the village and tribe secrets to outsiders.



**Fig1. Luwa la mboka** (Source: Researcher's Photography)

**B) Ancestral Stone (*Bole bwa Ngomo* or *Mabando ma Mboka*) (Fig 2).**

The ancestral stone (*bole bwa ngomo*), otherwise known as *mabando ma mboka*, is another important place of worship that is found in all Oroko villages. This is a stone usually planted in the middle of the village around which all public traditional ceremonies or activities take place. It is also referred to as the ancestral stone. It is at the ancestral stone that all traditional oaths are taken. Once here, the accused person is obliged to tell the truth and nothing but the truth, failing which devastating consequences may befall the person. Such consequences may include an incurable disease like epilepsy, insanity, etc. If someone takes the oath and pleads not guilty, whereas he committed the crime, the person mysteriously dies after a few days. The Oroko believe that the *bole bwa ngomo* has supernatural powers. When one is accused of witchcraft, adultery, theft, or other crimes, one is called upon to prove his/her innocence by sitting on the stone and a ritual performed on him/her. If the person is innocent, he is exonerated by the simple fact that nothing befalls him or her after the oath taking process. Also, if a person is thought to have been bewitched, he/she is taken to the *bole bwa ngomo* and a ritual called *ebune* is performed on him/her to stop the wizard or witch from killing the person. This is the judicial significance of the *bole bwa ngomo*.

It is on the *bole bwa ngomo* that a base drum is played during every ceremony while the smaller drums are played around it. So, all formal traditional ceremonies that involve the village take place here. The *bole bwa ngomo* and its environs act as playground for village and traditional celebrations. It is believed that the ancestors (*melimo*) reside here, and most of the time, it is here that communication with the ancestors and gods is done. The elders in the land of the living commune with the inhabitants of the land of the “living dead” at the *bole bwa ngomo* in a ritual before such ceremonies can hold. This is to ensure that the ancestors have accepted and are at peace

with the occasion. Thus, during such ceremonies, people who assemble at the *bole bwa ngomo* commune here with one heart and spirit as they sing and dance round the stone in harmony. This is another binding force of the village. In *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, the market place serves, not only as a place to sell things to each other in standard trade, but also as a meeting place. All village meetings and judgments hold at the market place. The market place is important to the traditional Igbo community as the *bole bwa ngomo* is important to the Oroko. This is because it is here that traditional ceremonies hold, cases are judged, and crucial decisions concerning the villagers and the clan are taken, thus bringing about its social, ethical and judicial significance. For example, it is at the market place that the men of the clan meet to discuss the murder of a clanswoman in the markets of Mbaino (*Things Fall Apart, 1958.*) Thus, the *bole bwa ngomo* is a symbol of love for one another, respect, reverence, unity, and justice for all.



**Fig 2: The Ancestral Stone (*Bole bwa Ngomo* or *Mabando ma Mboka*)**  
(Source: Researcher's Photography)

**C) *Ekili* (Fig 3):** The *ekili* is a small fence built in the middle of the village. It is another symbol of peace in every Oroko village. It is believed that every villager's heart is represented in the *ekili*. Only one person is allowed to put his hands in the *ekili* for any cause, but not for a cause that can be detrimental to the villagers and the village. This person is the *mowele mboka*. The *mowele mboka* is the traditional authority of the village. He is the keeper of the traditional seal of the village. He is the only one who is allowed to weed off all the unwanted plants in the *ekili*. What is found here is food offered to the ancestors and the gods and this content is put during the four days of peace (*etonga mboka*). It is during this period that the content of the *ekili* is renewed, signifying renewed modes of life of all the villagers wherever they are and that

the villagers have renewed their commitment to the ancestors and the gods. In fact, even the keeper of the village seal, who is the traditional authority (*mowele mboka*) is not allowed to always visit the *ekili*, otherwise he may become suspicious. The *ekili* acts as the village security and women are excluded from the ritual talk, and even from going closer to it for obvious reasons. This little fence also contains certain medicinal plants that are used for the security of the village and also for the cure of certain diseases like epilepsy and those caused by witch hunting.



**Fig 3: Ekili** (Source: Researcher's Photography)

The *ekili*, per excellence, is the heartbeat of the village and this is another important sacred place where ancestral veneration is done. It is revered by the Oroko because of the importance attached to it. To corroborate the fact that Africans revere and respect their sacred places, Philip Musoni, had intimated in his “Contestation of ‘the Holy Places in the Zimbabwean Religious Landscape’: A Study of the Johane Masowe Chishanu yeNyenyedzi Church’s Sacred Places” that the Zimbabwean:

*Chivavarira hill continues to be an icon even after the tribal wars. The hill continues to be given respect due to two important phenomena. First, the indigenes of Chirumhanzu continued to revere the hill for its numerous caves which are now burial shrines for the chiefs...Secondly, the hill continues to be sacred because of the big cave at the centre which is to the indigenes a religious shrine for ancestor veneration.* (<http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v721.3269>)



To Musoni and Zimbabweans, the natural endowment, the Chivavarira hill and the caves therein become a revered place because this is where their chiefs are buried. This shows their respect for authority, whether living or dead. It is in the hill that the ancestors are venerated. Thus, to the African, “authority does not forget a dying king”.

**D) *Etana (Fig 4 and 5).*** The *etana*, also known in local parlance as *palaver house* is a house built in the middle of the village where all meetings of titled and initiated men are held. Cases that are not supposed to be heard by women, children, untitled, and uninitiated men are judged and judgment handed down in the *etana*. Thus, it is a traditional court that handles judicial cases. It is here that vital issues concerning the village are also discussed. Lessons of moral behaviour are taught to young initiates in the *etana*. It is worth noting here that other visiting males from other Oroko villages can be allowed to enter the *etana* only if they can show proof that they had been initiated into the secret cult that allows them to be members back in their villages of origin. Every male of a particular age is supposed to be initiated into this cult which is the lowest of the secret societies, called *itondo* that teaches men how to lead responsible lives in their homes and communities. Any man who does not belong to the lowest secret society (*itondo*) is considered a worthless man whom Chinua Achebe refers to as “*efulefu*” in his *Things Fall Apart*. Suffice here to note that most Oroko villages lost their *etana* with the coming of the Christian religion to Oroko land. Ekoi Peter Myango submits that the missionaries dealt ruthlessly with our culture and with the proliferation of law courts, most of these secret societies and shrines have stopped to perform the judicial role they were well known for and aspects of cultural values were indiscriminately burnt. (4)

The *etana* also serves as a touristic site as far as the Oroko tradition and culture is concerned, being the custodian and museum of all sacred traditional artefacts, values, and masquerades. Mekunda in “*Oroko Oral Poetry as a Didactic Tool in the Education of the Cameroonian Girl Child: The Case of Disongo Songs*” (2006) posits that the missionaries, with their early converts had within 40 years of their existence on our land, wiped our culture when they burnt each *etana* in many Oroko villages (5). However, some Oroko villages like Itoki, Mbu, and Ngolo Bolo stubbornly and intelligently refused to allow theirs burnt. Some of the villages that lost theirs to fire rebuilt them stubbornly after the establishment of the Christian churches in the villages for culture continuity



**Fig 4: The Researcher with the *Etana* and *Ekili* as background of the picture *Researcher's Photography*)**



**Fig.5.The Researcher in front of the *Etana*, nobody enters the *Etana* with shoes. (Source: *Researcher's Photography*)**

Figure 5 is the *etana* of Itoki village that was built between 906-1908. It is worth noting that formerly, the *etana* in Itoki had only one door, not until most Itoki able-bodied men were killed in the war, known in Oroko land as

*Bila ba Nakeli*, (Nakeli's war), while the men were in session. The *etana* was burnt down by soldiers who were fighting for Germany under the pretext that the village was harbouring a criminal called *Nakeli Nw'embeli* of Ikoï in Ngolo, who had caused the Germans so much trouble and resistance to their rule in Ngolo. Nakeli escaped from Ikoï and found refuge in Itoki. When the German soldiers arrived in Itoki, and found the village men in session in the *etana* but could not be allowed to enter because they were not initiated and titled men, they thought *Nakeli Nw'Embele* was hidden in there among them, so they burnt down the *etana*. Itoki lost close to 500 able-bodied men during the war against *Nakeli Nw-Embele* and the Ngolo Resistance to German rule in Cameroon because there was no door at the rear of the *etana* through which they could escape and the men who came in to rescue the others were all killed in the process. This oral source of history is corroborated by Ebune Joseph Betoto when he states:

*The commander of the German patrol asked the interpreter to close the only door leading into the etana with all the men locked inside. The house was set ablaze while the German soldiers made sure that no one escaped. Those who attempted to escape were shot. (Epsa Moto, 2015)*

**E) Nya Lioh (Figs 6 and 7):** The *nya lioh*, otherwise called the evil forest, has as constituents to the entrance, some of the things found at the *luwa la mboka*; namely: the curtain, the stone planted underneath, etc, which serve the same purpose as described before. One cannot access the *nya lioh* from any direction for whatever reason. It is believed that the *bwiande* emerges from the *nya lioh*. The *nya lioh* is a traditional policy of forest conservation that helps in various ways and for certain purposes. The policy of forest conservation is so strong among the Oroko that nothing is ever taken from this forest, even by the village elders, let alone entering it without the permission of the traditional authority. The use of the word "evil forest" helps to keep scoundrels, ordinary villagers, and strangers away from invading the forest. No one is allowed to extract the bark of trees, leaves, timber, stones and everything found in the evil forest. If one is sick, somebody, usually an initiated male of a certain level and class, is sent to look for herbs in the evil forest to treat the person. Usually, if you hear people say *okweli ileya nya lioh* (you have cut the cane of the evil forest), this means that one has committed an abominable crime that requires purification rites and the atonement of the gods. The *nya lioh* is the only forest that is not supposed to be tempered with in every Oroko village because of the medicinal value attached to it and because of the forest conservation policies adopted by the said village.

The *nya lioh* is preserved for several reasons: a) for the effective use of traditional rites performance like the *etonga mboka*, b) for natural vegetation and medicinal plants, c) for forest conservation policy, and d) for cultural education and moral development.



**The Entrance to the Evil Forest**

**Fig 6. The Entrance to the Evil Forest (*nya lioh*) (Source: Researcher's Photography)**



**Fig7. Picture of the sign post in the *nya lioh* with the inscription “No hunting, No Fishing, No Cutting”, note that “D” has been used in “dioh” on the sign post of instead “l” for convenience in pronunciation (Source: Researcher's Photography)**

As the song goes *olaka osa mekele, elaka nwana nyongong' a uwaka mokol' o mbenge* (eat but do not exhaust, one of yours is on the way) that there usually should be reservation for everything we do, so too is with forest conservation because future generations will always need it. It is worthy of note that the security of the evil forest is carried out by *bwiande* (the singing masquerade) and the most dreaded masquerades in Oroko land because of its importance. The evil forest (*nya lioh*) showcases the love for nature of the villagers and the Oroko. Death sentences are implemented in the *nya lioh*, to the extent that if a relative is taken there, his family members know the fate

that awaits him. This, however, happens only when a hideous or unpardonable crime has been committed that requires nothing less than execution. The *nya lioh* activities are exclusively male affairs.

Like the Oroko in Cameroon, the Igbo in Nigeria hold their shrines and sacred places in high esteem because they “serve many purposes that aid sustainable development. They are the trusted avenues for conflict resolution, social control, cultural education and moral development, thus, they are instrumental to sustainable development [... that] desacralizing of African shrines has conversely enhanced the rate of corrupt practises at all levels in many African societies” (Onyedinma and Nwachukwu, 46). Thus, sacred shrines and traditional artefacts in Oroko do not have to be desecrated and destroyed for many reasons.

**F) *Isimbi* (Figs 8 and 9):** The *isimbi*, a type of a talking drum and one of the numerous talking drums found in Oroko land, is a traditional non-verbal symbol of communication used to transmit messages in Oroko and used in Oroko folklore; therefore, it is an artefact. It is usually played alongside other drums during a traditional festival. Exceptionally, the *isimbi* is played alone when there is an impending danger in the village to alert the villagers of the new development. It is also played when an intruder invades the village, during wars and during attacks by alien forces. In the case of the death of an important traditional authority, the *isimbi* is taken to the highest points of all the forests around the village and played there to send the news to neighbouring villages about the death. It is also used to summon all initiated men into the *etana* for emergency purposes. The *isimbi* has different rhythms for different messages and occasions and everybody knows the different sounds and their purposes. It is a dominant symbol because of its tremendous potential as an effective means of communication in the oral cultural background. It is a prominent traditional artefact in the socio-cultural and religious dynamics of the people’s life. Other than the above significance, the *isimbi* is also a force-pulling and a rallying instrument in the village. Thus, in every traditional Oroko village, no one gets its sound without immediate response and without inquiring what the matter is.



*Isimbi*

***Fig. 8 Picture of the Isimbi in front of the Etana (Source: Researcher's Photography)***



*Isimbi in use*

***Fig.9. A Village Notable Playing the Isimbi, there is an Occasion (Source: Researcher's Photography)***

### **Conclusion**

The study revealed that though Christianity and modernism have been a threat to the existence of traditional shrines and artefacts in Oroko land, the Oroko still believe in the importance of traditional shrines and artefacts in their culture. In their belief system, traditional shrines and artefacts serve a multi-purpose function, including protection of Oroko communities from external evil forces, communication with the living and the dead (ancestors), maintenance of order and discipline in the villages, moral behaviour in homes,

respect for one another, and especially respect for the elderly, and above all culture continuity.

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