

## **Sacrilege as Commerce: Materialism, Modernity and the Changing Igbo Metaphysics in Okey Ndibe's *Foreign Gods, Inc.***

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**Abstract:** *In traditional African thought, the concepts of sacredness and sacrilege are associated with metaphysical objects, spaces and personalities. These objects, spaces and personalities receive reverence and paranormal value from their association with forces and beings that are thought of as supernatural. Emmanuel Edeh (1985), posits, particularly concerning Igbo metaphysical thought, that “for all beings in the material universe, existence is a dual and interrelated phenomenon” (17). J. O. J. Nwachukwu-Agbada (2000) adds that even when the “physical is often taken for granted by the people, the intangible, comprising the spiritual and the abstract, is given an even greater focus” (158). This explains why totems, carvings, stools, and the generality of objects found in the shrine of the gods are considered sacred. However, the advent of European colonialism, and by corollary, the presence of Christianity, and the heightened taste for materialism in the modern era has brought into question long-held views of the value of religious and cultural objects and artifacts, hitherto, thought to hold metaphysical essence. In this paper, I focus on Okey Ndibe’s novel, *Foreign Gods, Inc.* to conceptualize the relationship between materialism, modernity and the recent changes in African metaphysical thought about what constitutes the sacred. I point to the quest to acquire material wealth as the main cause of the main character’s loss of appreciation of the metaphysical significance of the objects in Ngene’s shrine in the novel. I conclude by drawing on contemporary incidences of the stealing of objects in some African societies to show that the conceptual changes Ndibe presents in his novel project the current depletion and decay of the moral, cultural and religious sense of the African in the modern era.*

**Keywords:** sacred, duality, African metaphysics, sacrilege, *Foreign Gods, Inc.*

### **Introduction**

In his memoir, *You Must Set Forth at Dawn* (2007), Wole Soyinka tells an intriguing story about the extreme extents he and three of his lecturer-friends at the University of Ibadan go in their failed attempt to recover the original bronze head of the Ori Olokun, the Yoruba goddess of the sea. This bronze

head holds much spiritual and cultural significance to the Yoruba people and their traditional heritage. Since its exhumation by the German archaeologist, Leo Frobenius, in 1912, the whereabouts of the bronze head of the Ori Olokun had never been a thing of public knowledge. It was simply thought to have vanished. When Soyinka and his friends get wind of information that the head is tucked away in the private collection of an art collector in Brazil, they transform themselves from university dons into iron-willed “thieves” united by what was expected to be the clandestine heist of destiny. With grudging assistance from the Nigerian government under Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo, Soyinka and one of his “accomplices” make the journey to Bahia via Rio de Janeiro and Brasilia, their cover story: Nigerian officials looking for an architect to redesign the Nigerian Embassy in Brazil. This easily catches on because the supposed private owner of the original Ori Olokun, Carybe, is an architect. Carybe hosts the two teachers-turned-thieves at dinner and shows them the coveted prize inside his private gallery. By the time dinner is over and they are on their way back to their hotel, the sculpture of the Ori Olokun is safely located in Soyinka’s big camera bag, even to the amazement of his colleague. However, when they arrive in Senegal’s leading ethnological laboratory in Dakar, Cheikh Anta Diop discovers that the head they stole from the Brazilian art collector in Bahia is nothing but a master copy of the original bronze head of the Ori Olokun, which they later find, is locked up in the British Museum in London.

The foregoing anecdote highlights the metaphysical essence of sacred objects in the African thought and tradition, and connotatively, stresses the nobility of sacrificing to recover, retain and preserve lost sacred matter. However, Okey Ndibe’s *Foreign Gods, Inc.* tells a heist story which is diametrically opposite to that of Soyinka and his friends. The reversed scenario in *Foreign Gods, Inc.* points to the significant changes one observes in the way Africans approach sacred objects and spaces in the twenty-first century. This study aims at analyzing the principal roles modernity and materialism play in the changing course of how Africans relate to objects of metaphysical essence. In the twenty-first century, modernity and technology appear to be on a marauding march against cultural and traditional values. In the views of Baudrillard (1987) and Giddens (1991), modernity has an inevitable tendency of influencing tradition and culture in any society. The significance of this study lies in the exigency of safeguarding indigenous cultures in the face of the rapid influence of modernity and the taste for materialism.

### **Brief Synopsis of Ndibe’s *Foreign Gods, Inc.***

*Foreign Gods, Inc.* tells the story of Ikechukwu Uzundu (regularly called Ike), a Nigerian who migrates to the United States of America to acquire higher education in Economics with the hope of getting a high-paying job which befits his degree. After graduating top of his class, he is unable to secure a job because

his strong African accent stands in the way. When Ike realizes that he is unable to get a job that corresponds with his degree, he settles for taxi driving as a business until his friend, Jonathan Falla, tells him about, Foreign Gods Inc., a gallery that deals in the buying and selling of the statues of ancient gods. He sees the selling of the carvings of gods as an opportunity to prove to his family and friends back home that he has attained financial and material success.

With a meagre loan from friends, Ike travels back to his home village with the aim of stealing the revered statue of the riverine family god, Ngene, with the hope of selling it at a very high price to Foreign Gods Inc. in New York. He succeeds in his heist, but as it turns out, Foreign Gods Inc. is not willing to pay him the high amount he had imagined before making the journey. The offer they make him is not able to defray up to half of his travel costs to Africa. Left in a quandary, Ike takes the offer of one thousand five hundred dollars from Foreign Gods, Inc. Even though they top-up their payment with an additional thousand dollars, it is not enough to placate Ike. After the sale of Ngene to a curator, Ike returns to Foreign Gods Inc. and demands to retrieve the ancient carving back. In the end his hallucinations about the continual presence of Ngene in his room appears to be a mystical consequence of his stealing, sale and desecration of the ancient family god.

The three most important concepts that are foregrounded in this study are metaphysics, materialism and modernity. Dating back to the Egyptian and Greek civilizations, the concept of metaphysics differs from culture to culture. In the Igbo conception of things, metaphysics and sacredness are closely related.

### **An African Conception of Metaphysics and the Sacred**

The African's conception of the sacred has at its base, a reverence for the metaphysical. For the African, the vertical and horizontal relations with God and man, respectively, can be ensured to take place in an atmosphere of peace and tranquility, largely because of the notion that human beings are not alone on earth. The knowledge of the presence of supernormal reality on earth helps to foster a good sense of social harmony and justice. Thus, knowing that there is a metaphysical presence behind living and non-living matter in the universe puts Africans in a position where they recognize that their actions, whether for or against their fellow human beings or nature, are superintended by beings other than themselves who wield punitive and rewarding powers. Reality, therefore, for the African, is not merely based on that which is tangible. As Nwoga (1984) notes, "reality," for the Igbo people of Nigeria for instance, "consists of the physical, the spiritual, and the abstract" (17). In the view of Nwachukwu-Agbada (2000), even though the "physical is often taken for granted by the people, the intangible, comprising the spiritual and the abstract, is given an even greater focus" (158).

In Igbo metaphysics and the spiritual hierarchy of creation, Chikwu/Chukwu, which is, Great Chi or God, stands as the Creator or Originator of the universe, followed by Ani, the Earth Goddess. According to Okafor (2016), Igbo “ancestors believed that God can be worshipped through the created natural things like trees, water bodies, and animals among others. This supposition characterizes some of the various religious rituals in traditional Igbo society in an attempt to attain spiritual growth” (147). From the foregoing, one realizes that the sacredness of beings in Igbo metaphysics owes largely to their connection to the Supreme Being, Chukwu. The spreading of metaphysical essence to all things, living and non-living, among Africans differs sharply from the Western worldview. Tempels observes, “[h]erein is to be seen the fundamental difference between Western thought and that of Bantu (African) and other primitive people [...] we hold a static conception of ‘being,’ they, a dynamic” (51).

The dynamism in Igbo conception of being is particularly evident in what Edeh (1985) calls “the duality of being” in Igbo metaphysics. Edeh holds that, “for all beings in the material universe, existence is a dual and interrelated phenomenon” (17). For him, the Igbo classifies all things in the universe into two groups: *Uwa*, the world of the visible and *Ani muo*, the world of the unseen (77). The duality of being in Igbo thought, in the view of Edeh, is not restricted to the human being. Even though the human being possesses duality stemming from the Igbo concept of the *chi* or personal or guiding god, duality is also extended to non-human or material things. To buttress his point about the duality of non-human objects, Edeh cites the case of the Igbo farmer who speaks to his broken yams. The Igbo farmer has an intention which goes far beyond a mere address to a broken piece of yam when he says:

“Eze ji, amaro mumakwuliagi” (Igbo)

“King of yams, I did not wilfully break you” (English translation).

As Edeh explains, the farmer’s words are uttered as a way of “showing his respect for the invisible element contained in the visible. This invisible element is regarded by the farmer as having its existence in the land of the unseen” (78). On an even higher scale of metaphysical significance dwells the material objects which are found to be directly or indirectly related to the intermediary spirits of Chukwu. The sacred spaces they occupy, invariably bestow on them reverence and honour. However, the heavy onslaught of European colonialism and Euro-modernity on the many different African conceptions of the metaphysical, cannot be over-emphasized. It exposed Africans to alternative concepts and belief systems which gave them the impetus to break away from the African notions of metaphysics.

### **Modernity and the Erosion of African Metaphysical Conceptions**

As Amusa (2019, 165) notes in his discussion of the impact of modernity on the management of the Osun sacred groves in Osogbo, Nigeria: “the impact of modernity on traditions and cultures of the African peoples is profound. Since the end of colonialism in the 1960s and beyond, Westernization, globalization, and modernization have altered, modified, and influenced African cultural practices, values and norms.” The concept of modernity, as Kwateng-Yeboah (2021, 54) observes, “is a complicated category that resists coherence, homogeneity, and a measurable criterion for definition.” Modernity has been associated with the occurrence of different European historical events such as the Enlightenment (Chakrabarty 2002), the Scientific Revolution (Stephen Gaukroger 2005) and the Industrial Revolution (Peter Wagner 2012) (quoted in Kwateng-Yeboah 2021, 54). The British sociologist, Steve Bruce, refers to the Protestant Reformation as “the origins of modern rationality, the rise of individualism, the foundations of modern science, and the collapse of a unitary Christendom” (quoted in Kwateng-Yeboah 2021, 54). In relation to the erosion of Igbo traditional notions of metaphysics, modernity, as used in this study, refers to Westernization as well as post-independence local and global technological and knowledge-based advancements which tend to affect the primal forms of the traditions and cultures of different African peoples. This definition of modernity takes cognizance of the “conditions wherein structural differentiation and growth of institutions such as modern nation-states, liberal democracy, capitalism, and bureaucratization intersect, in complex ways, with cosmologies about the relation between spirits and the physical world” (Kwateng-Yeboah 2021, 56). Even though the adherence to the traditions and cultures of Africans, in some respects, continues in the twenty-first century, the impact of modernity and the inordinate quest for material wealth continue to chip away at the metaphysical conceptions which were hitherto strongly adhered to.

The advent of European colonialists in Africa and the corollary presence of European missionaries on the continent stand as the strongest initial attempts to question the inviolability of African conceptions of what is thought of as sacred. Asamoah-Gyadu (2010, 46) describes this period of European colonialism in Africa as the time when “Western missionary religion had in several senses become an extension of colonialism.” The European colonialists and missionaries’ sheer disregard for African customs and traditions regarding sacred groves, objects and observances emboldened the native Africans to brazenly disrespect the concept of the sacred in their respective areas. The building of the Elmina Castle in the Gold Coast on the sacred rock of a Fante god, the looting of the Benin Bronzes from the palace of the Oba of Benin and the construction of a road through the revered Osun grove in Osogbo, Nigeria, are all critical cases in point. The Christian missionaries interpreted the traditional religions of Africans as “fetish” and their gods as nothing because

They have mouths, but they speak not: eyes have they, but they see not: They have ears, but they hear not: noses have they, but they smell not: They have hands, but they handle not: feet have they, but they walk not: neither speak they through their throat. (*King James Version*, Psalm 115: 5 – 7)

Such interpretations of the Bible (*King James Bible Online* n.d.) also led to the gradual disregard for what was hitherto thought of amongst Africans as sacred and inviolable.

The role of European colonialists and Christianity in eroding the strength of traditional conceptions regarding the sacred is showcased in Ndibe's *Foreign Gods, Inc.* In typical Achebean style, Ndibe captures the coming of European missionaries to Utonki, the village of the riverine Igbo god of war, thus:

Reverend Walter Stanton appeared in Utonki on a day the sun had cast its evil eye on the world, leaving every living thing in a state of stupor, groaning. He came with a retinue of soldiers whose guns spoke from two mouths at once, two missionary underlings the people of Utonki described as his shadows, an interpreter whose skin was as black as the blackest person in Utonki [...] the first few days, he stood in the shade of an *ukpaka* tree to declaim his message. [...] He harangued them, "Abandon your wooden phantom and embrace the living God."

One day, Stanton led his men deep into a mangrove sacred to Ngene to cut down tree limbs for use in building a shrine for his deity. The warriors of Utonki gathered together at the shrine of Ngene, armed with machetes and guns, determined to chase off the impertinent band of missionaries. Instead, Reverend Stanton and his soldiers handed the warriors of Utonki their most crushing defeat in living memory, felling their head warrior in the first moments of battle.

The next day, Stanton got one convert. Then, in the days that followed, a few others joined. The converts began to chant the name of the pale man's deity. (Ndibe 2014, 97, 98)

The violent arrival of Reverend Stanton and his men in Utonki marks their victory over Ngene, and by extension its people. This leads to a gradual but invariable transfer of the people's allegiances to the new religion. The victory of the white man's army over the warriors of Utonki is not merely seen by the people as one which owes to superior military technology but as one which points to the warring faction with the superior spirit or God. This is partly the reason why the people of Utonki stream, albeit slowly but massively, to the new religion. Stanton and his men's successful incursion into Ngene's mangrove also bursts the people's bubble concerning the inviolability of the sacred mangrove. Acts such as those of Reverend Stanton and his men mark the incipient stage of the encouragement of Africans to go against the traditional tenets concerning the sacred. The motivational factor for the African convert is that, if the leader of his or her new religion can violate the sacredness of Ngene with proud impunity and without the expected dreadful repercussions, so can he or she.



The case of European colonialism and Christianity as the starting point in the effort to disregard the sacred in Ndibe's *Foreign Gods, Inc.* is similar to what pertains in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Like Rev. Stanton, Rev. Smith arrives in Umuofia fully inspired by 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries' Euro-modern ideas of the Enlightenment, the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions. What Bruce (1996, 9) calls "modern rationality," which is at the heart of the Protestant Reformation, becomes the yardstick for accepting or bastardizing different aspects of African religious beliefs and cultures. Emboldened by Rev. Smith's brashness, converts like Enoch commit sacrilegious acts such as the killing and eating of the sacred python and the unmasking of the Egwugwu. Achebe's characters commit sacrilege as a way of showing that they have totally broken away from the indigenous religion and are proud adherents of the new religion. However, Ike commits sacrilege with the aim of achieving his personal materialistic ends. The allurements of materialism provides enough motivation for Ike to go against the historical tenets of the Igbo life which hitherto was treated as sacrosanct.

### **Violation of African Metaphysical and Cultural Values in Pursuit of Materialistic Goals**

The Nigerian society of the twenty-first century is one which has been modernized. In this modern Nigeria, the percentage of people in the middle-income bracket continues to increase. Some people in public service and private businesses who have attained wealth have developed a taste for flaunting their wealth. In his article, "Development and Governmental Corruption - Materialism and Political Fragmentation in Nigeria," Brownsberger (1983) points to "materialism and political fragmentation" as, "at least in the case of Nigeria, the roots of corruption" (215). The materialistic tendency to openly demonstrate one's wealth and power leads to inordinate competition and quest to acquire wealth by any means possible. This kind of rat-race has led to further corruption and misrule as whoever gets the chance to rule seeks to amass as much wealth as possible in order to maintain his or her position of power and influence in the society. The ripple effect of this materialistic impulse among the ruling elite is that it builds a materialistic sub-culture in which everyone seeks to out-do others in flaunting their wealth and power.

One would not be too far from the truth if one intimates that the misrule and bad governance people experience in Nigeria is to a large extent the result of corruption fueled by a materialistic impulse. Materialism therefore becomes a symbol of status enhancement. When Ike returns to Nigeria to carry out his clandestine heist, he encounters Donatus Adi, an old classmate of his, who had come to the airport in Enugu to welcome back his wife who had travelled to give birth to their daughter in the United States. Ordinarily, Donatus could not afford the luxury of having his child born in the US but as the narrator reveals,

he “had made a fortune after an uncle of his was elected governor” (Ndibe 2014, 83). This hints at how materialism fuels corruption. Again, an additional picture of the relationship between corruption and materialism is presented by Tony Curtis, another classmate of Ike’s who has built a mansion in their common village of Utonki. According to an email that Nkiru sends Ike announcing Tony’s newfound riches, “Tony had struck it rich – nobody knew how” (Ndibe 2014, 234). In spite of the fact that “nobody knew how” Tony made it big, he becomes “Utonki’s political colossus, a man called (with an odd mixture of aspersion and affection) *onu na eliliora*, ‘the mouth that eats for the community’” (Ndibe 2014, 234-235). Tony’s newfound riches put him on a pedestal of endearment in the community. The acceptance of materialism as a sub-culture pushes young people to make it “big” whether home or abroad. If “nobody knew how Tony had struck it rich” and his parents, relatives and the elders of the community refuse to verify the legitimacy of the source of his wealth, it opens the floodgate for people, both young and old, to do whatever they will to achieve wealth. Communal recognition and praise for unexplainable wealth in the case of Donatus Adi and Tony Curtis in *Foreign Gods, Inc.* is a mark of the decaying morality which puts the metaphysical and sacred conceptions and values within the reach of contamination and attack.

When Ike travels to America, he finds it difficult to achieve his American dreams because of his African accent which appears not to have a good place in the American corporate world. After failing to secure a well-paying job which befits his educational achievements, Ike finds himself a job as a taxi driver and seeks different strategies of keeping his American dreams alive. When all strategies for achieving his American dreams fail, he hatches and executes a plan to return home ostensibly to see his family with the covert intention to steal the wood carving of the ancestral god of the riverine town of Utonki, Ngene, and bring it for sale to Gruels, the owner of Foreign Gods, Inc. in New York. Ike goes to this extreme because he believes that by selling Ngene’s wood carving, he can make “far more money than he ever made in any two or even three years he worked as a cabdriver, first in Springfield, Massachusetts, then Philadelphia, Atlanta, Baltimore, and now New York” (Ndibe 2014, 14). However, stealing and selling the wood carving of Ngene amounts to the violation of the metaphysical and cultural value of the ancient artefact. It is sacrilege, which in African traditional thought, is seen as unthinkable and abominable.

The abomination of the sale of ancient artefacts related to the gods derives from the duality of existence that suggests that certain objects have both visible and invisible essences. Osuakwu, the chief priest of Ngene, explains the duality of the wood carving thus:

He pointed at the statue. “That mad man (Pastor Uka) thinks Ngene is this carving from a tree. Ngene is a mystery deeper than what any man can understand. That mystery lives in the river itself that coils around Utonki. It is a river that provided our ancestors with both life and protection. That river is still doing its work today, even



though the Oyibo has come and turned today into yesterday, making a lion into a lamb. Can any man carry off a river in a basket? [...] My son it is not good to have dealings with a god that is not visible. The spirit of Ngene is in the river, but its body is here, in this statue. Why did our ancestors insist that each god must have its wooden body in a shrine? [Brackets mine] (Ndibe 2014, 199, 200).

On one line of reasoning, according to Osuakwu, Ngene is not the statue in the shrine. Rather, Ngene is the “mystery” or spirit that lives in the river. However, on a different trajectory of thought, Ngene is the statue in his shrine. In Igbo traditional belief and thought, both lines of thoughts are valid. Thus, the statue in the shrine is inhabited by the same “mystery” or spirit that dwells in the river. It is because of this mystery of the duality of being that totems, carvings, stools and the generality of objects found in the shrine of the gods are considered sacred. Therefore, the pressure on Ike to live his American dream must have been really extreme for him to deliberately consider returning to Utonki to commit such an act of sacrilege. When one analyses Ike’s reasoning concerning the relevance of Ngene to the twenty-first century Igbo, one realizes that he has no regard for its sacredness. He argues, disdainfully, that:

Ngene was now no more than a retired god, a slumberous deity, in limbo. Its decline began on that day when the white man burst upon Utonki’s warriors and showed his superior hand. [...] In an age when gods must travel or die, he, Ike, would become the instrument to refuel Ngene. It had fallen to him to show the world to Ngene, stuck too long in Utonki, and Ngene to the world. He pictured a party that would be thrown on the marvelous lawns of some swanky home to celebrate the acquisition of Ngene. It would be an extraordinary affair, the biggest debut party, graced by all the big collectors. They’d cast killing eyes of envy at the lucky new owner of Ngene, an African god of war. (Ndibe 2014, 169)

Ike imagines acquiring a fat cheque from his sale of Ngene’s sacred wood carving. He considers Ngene to be no longer useful to Utonki because there are no more wars to be fought for Ngene to lead its people, hence his decision to sell it and use the proceeds to fight his war of survival in the West.

Ike’s stealing of the wood carving for sale to Gruels at Foreign Gods Inc. shows the high sense of materialism that is associated with African life in both the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The fear of failure in the eyes of family and friends tends to put material gain at the zenith of Ike’s expectations, hence the cultural and metaphysical implications of his actions are completely set aside. For instance, Ike views his returning to steal the wood carving of Ngene in commercial terms. Before leaving the United States for Africa, he tells Big Ed that he is getting into “buying and selling” (Ndibe 2014, 49). Later when Usman warns him not to get into drugs, he replies, “my deal is clean” (Ndibe 2014, 56). Ike’s use of “deal” and “buying and selling” hints at the fact that he has little or no regard for the commoditization of ancestral objects that have immense metaphysical and cultural value.

Ike appears to be at his wits’ end when he accepts the idea of selling Ngene’s wood carving to Gruels. This is why, perhaps, all his sense of morality

erodes to the point that he accepts the suggestion of getting Ngene's emblem for sale in the United States to be able to live his America dream:

He flipped the pages to the catalog's last section, marked "Heavenly Inventory." The lowest price in the section was \$171,455; the highest \$1.13 million. He studied the images of the deities in that section. Carved from soot-black wood, it had two fused figures, one female, the other male. The figures backed each other. The female was big breasted and boasted a swollen belly. The male figure held a hoe in one hand, a gun in the other, its grotesque phallus extending all the way to its feet. They shared the same androgynous head, turned neither left nor right but forward. A pair of deep-set eyes seemed to return Ike's stare. It was listed for \$325,630. Ike read the short italicized description: *A god of the crossroads, originally from Papua New Guinea*

"Wait until they see Ngene," he said under his breath, a flush of excitement washing over him. Surely, a legendary god of war would command a higher price than a two-faced crossroads idler." (Ndibe 2014, 3, 4)

In his estimations, Ike expects to make nothing less than \$325,630 from his sale of Ngene. This, in his view, is substantial enough for him to risk the journey of theft to Africa and back. With such a good amount in his hands, he hopes to be able to afford the luxuries and pleasures that befit his status as one who has travelled to America.

Nonetheless, the hope of a good life after selling Ngene ends in total jeopardy and further disillusionment. The palpable error in all of Ike's engagements with Foreign Gods Inc. is that they never officially reach an agreed amount for which Ngene could be sold. After the emotionally and financially grueling experience of stealing a god from its ancestral place and maneuvering through corrupt Nigerian immigration and customs officials to get it into the United States, Ike could not believe the scanty offer that he gets from Foreign Gods Inc. Gruels, the owner of Foreign Gods Inc., tells him that he would either "pay little for this (Ngene). Or nothing" because "African gods are no longer profitable" (Ndibe 2014, 318). He points Ike to his inventory of African gods and tells him:

That's a Wolof god of fertility. It's been marked down by eighty percent – and it's still here. This one, a Bambara water goddess. Six years ago, it would have fetched half a million – easy. Now take a look at the price tag a mere eight thousand five, yet no buyers." He touched a toothy statue. "This is a Fanti god. Been on the shelf for four years. [...] That's a Ligbi god of revellers – a deity I personally like. But guess what? Nobody's looking at it. This is from Togo, an Ewe guardian of magic [...] I wish they did as well as they used to. I've offered huge discounts, but collectors simply aren't interested. African deities are no longer in vogue." (Ndibe 2014, 320-21)

Gruels does not only deal with objects of antiquity; he also specializes in the sale of strange and exotic gods; "the art of god collection" (Ndibe 2014, 69). However, as he recounts to Ike, people's tastes for African gods appear to have gone down drastically. Therefore, Ike's expectation of receiving three hundred and fifty thousand dollars (\$350,000) for Ngene turns out to be an extremely

high estimation. Gruels pays only one thousand five hundred dollars, which could barely pay for Ike's trip to Nigeria and back. This pushes Ike into further disillusionment because he has bills and debts to pay, and a family back home to please.

Later when Ike begins to hallucinate and appears to be haunted by apparitions of Ngene, his debts and bills become the least of his problems. From the time Ngene arrives in Ike's flat to the time it gets sold to Foreign Gods Inc., Ike seems to have been under a spell cast by Ngene. These spells appear to be the punishment that Ngene metes out to Ike for his desecration of its shrine. At least the mystical occurrences in Ike's flat and also at Foreign Gods Inc. show that Ngene has not lost its powers after all. Gruels asks Ike whether he knew that at the gallery of Foreign Gods Inc. "Ngene farted storms from its rump?" He tells him, "[w]e sprayed perfume on it every day – and it still stank up the store" (Ndibe 2014, 330). The narrator describes Ike's hallucinatory and haunted moments after the sale of Ngene thus:

ONCE AGAIN, THE FLOOD came. This time, there was no heraldry. One moment, he was safe; he luxuriated in a bed of plumes. The next instant, he was immersed in a flood. It churned and tugged and tumbled. Underneath the rage, it was airless. Afraid of asphyxiation, he lifted his head for air. Bobbing along the surface was the statue of Ngene. It gazed at him, seemed amused. Disconcerted, he ducked under. The stream's howl deafened him. The maddening siren belched from a vortex.

He clambered awake, his pounding heart reverberating in his ears. [...] His eyes remained drowsy from interrupted sleep. Yet, the moment he shut his eyes the image of Ngene appeared. Reclining against the wall at the very spot where he'd left it for several days, it looked grotesquely emaciated. There was a terrifying indeterminacy about its visage. It seemed to be weeping and laughing all at once. (Ndibe 2014, 327)

In Igbo traditional thought and belief system, the cause of Ike's troubles is not far-fetched. It is believed that a god whose artefact is stolen or desecrated in the manner Ike does Ngene descends with vengeance. Perpetrators of such acts are haunted by the god, sometimes leading to death or madness. As Basden notes, "murder, theft and adultery are esteemed offences against God, as well as against man" (cited in Owosade Awolalu 1976, 276). Arinze adds that "an Igbo man believes that when he sins, he makes the high power frown" (cited in Owosade Awolalu 1976, 276). In the case of Ike, he realizes Ngene's hand in what is happening to him. However, his efforts to recover Ngene's wood carving yield no results as "a Japanese guy snatched it up" (Ndibe 2014, 329) at the gallery of Foreign Gods Inc. only two days after it was put up for sale. Even though Gruels offers an extra thousand dollars to Ike, it is not able to assuage his present financial troubles and what he envisages to be the impending wrath of Ngene. For Gruels, the sale of Ngene is no big deal; it is his usual business to deal in strange and exotic deities and sacred objects so he does not properly comprehend it when Ike says, "it must return to its shrine – or trouble continues" (Ndibe 2014, 329). Thus, after selling the statue of Ngene, Ike fully

realizes that modernity does not delete the African's consciousness of the physical manifestation of the violation of the sacred essences of metaphysical and cosmic spaces and objects. This indicates that the influences of the African culture stick with African people, migration to the United States notwithstanding.

### **Conclusion**

In June, 2020 Chika Okeke-Agulu, an Art History Professor at Princeton, began a campaign against the auction house, Christie's intended sale of Igbo *Alusis* or sacred sculptures clandestinely looted from Igbo land during the Nigerian Civil War of the 1960s. Even though Nigeria's Antiquities Ordinance Law of 1953 and a UNESCO Convention signed in 1970 both prohibit the sale of stolen cultural artifacts, Christie's went ahead and sold the two life-size sacred Igbo sculptures to a bidder at \$238,000. In defense of their questionable sale, Christie's stated that "The auction house believes there is no evidence these statues were removed from their original location by someone who was not local to the area ... Our understanding is that even prior to the conflict, local agents were trading in objects such as these and they were starting to circulate more widely." One may not be wrong to say that Jacques Kerchache and Philippe Guimiot, the principal architects in the sale and transfer of the sacred artworks from Nigeria to France, are callous and insensitive to the cultural injury their purchase would cause to the Igbo people. However, they are not the only people to blame for the commission of the sacrilege of commoditizing sacred sculptures. The regrettable role that local Africans played in perpetuating this cultural violation cannot be glossed over. The Africans' motivations for involving themselves in the robbery of their own heritage has been at the center of this paper. When Africans are moved by the quest to achieve and maintain the financial and material proofs of a successful life, they show little regard for the metaphysical or that which is considered to be culturally sacred. In *Foreign Gods, Inc.*, Ndibe shows that presenting material evidence of a successful migration to family and friends back home is at the heart of the African migrant's frantic efforts to live, survive and make it "big" in the host country. In the case of Ike, for instance, return migration only becomes an option so long as it fits into his strategy of surviving and living his American dreams, that is, achieving financial and material success. It is rather unfortunate for him that his plan of stealing the antique statue of the river god, Ngene, proves to be both physically and metaphysically consequential.

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