

The Implications of Symbols and Symbolism In African Traditional Religion; A Phenomenological Review

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Abstract

Africa is a continent blessed with reach religious symbols. However, the problem is that the present generation due to influence of Abrahamic religion considers these symbols as object of heathenism. Thus, to rewrite the wrongs accruing from ignorance and misinformation, it becomes necessary to present the true meaning of some of these symbols. It is on this note that this work, employing the method of phenomenology in the study of African symbols, intends to bracket all prejudices so that the covert meaning of these symbols can emerge. The target is not only to indicate the place of symbols in African Traditional Religion but also to argue that they embody covert religious meaning that need to be appreciated. The article concludes by stating the need to awaken, in the present generation, the consciousness of appreciating African religious symbols for it forms a core part of what makes Africans who they are.

Key words: Contemporary Africa, Religion, Symbol, Abuse, Re-education, etc.

Introduction

African Traditional Religion is a religion of symbolism. This is because African traditional religion uses symbols (objects of religion) like images to represent the supernatural. The images that represent the supernatural are symbols in and by themselves. However, the problem is that with the influence of Abrahamic religions on African continent, these religious artefacts (symbols) are wrongly labelled as not only mere objects but also pagan idols. Therefore, the exact meanings of these objects have been truncated.

The onus of this write up is thus not only to show the place of symbols in African Traditional Religion but also to argue that they embody covert religious meaning that need to be appreciated. What we need to note at the onset is that African symbols are religious in nature. This is because of the continuous interaction between the sacred and the profane in the African cosmology. However, there is need for us to conceptualize the meaning of religion and African religion in particular as it will help in giving our work a focus.

What is meant by African Traditional Religion?

Primarily, when one is on the domain of religion, one is at the stage of acknowledgement of one's limitedness. It is due to the overwhelming and awe-inspiring nature of the phenomena of the world that man accepts the fact that there is a reality beyond him that must be responsible for this perplexing universe. It is this perception that disposes man to hunger and thirst for Cordial relationship with these forces for his own (man's) well-being. This thinking no doubt, permeates humanity and African continent is not an exception. Ugwu and Ugwueye while citing Arinze (1970) opined that there are basically two ways of conceptualizing religion; one is a subjective approach while the other is an objective stance. Thus they

wrote “subjectively religion is the very consciousness of dependence on a transcendent being and the very propensity or inclination to ... worship. Objectively, religion is a complex of truths, laws and rites by which man is subordinated to the transcendence being.”¹ However, this work argues that this distinction is not called for in the first place. The truth is that both the subjective and objective approach are one, in the sense that one may not accept to obey any law, truth or even to practice any religious rite if he does not first and foremost feel the consciousness of a power beyond him. This to a large extent agrees with the understanding of religion as proposed by Ekwunife, who said that religion is “man’s awareness and recognition of his dependent relationship on a Transcendent Being, the Wholly Other, nameable or un-nameable, personalized or impersonalized, expressible in human society through beliefs, worship and ethical or moral behaviour.”² Nevertheless, Kanu in what seemed like a summary of various definitions of religion brought out three elements that qualify something to be called religion. Thus, he wrote:

... three elements have been constant in the definitions of religion: belief, cult/worship and morals. This belief is in a being who is Supreme; in cult/worship, the dependence of subjects on the Supreme Being is expressed, in morals, the rules and regulations to guide the new relationship between the worshipper and the worshipped are drawn up.³

From the foregoing, one will observe that religion is natural to man, which is because it arises from his realization of his *thrown-away* in the world and the need to worship the super power that is in charge of the world. What then is African traditional religion?

Defining African traditional religion is not a simple task. This is because of its peculiarities, although it is in these peculiarities that lays its uniqueness. In the first place, African traditional religion has no founder unlike main line religions of the world. It is also based on oral transmission. In other words, the teachings are handed down from generation to generation through “...myths and legends, stories and folktales, songs and dance, liturgies and rituals, proverbs and pithy-sayings, adages and riddles. Some of these oral traditions appear in works or arts and crafts, symbols and emblems, appellations for God, names of people and places, shrines and sacred places.”⁴ However, despite the above difficulties, some scholars have tried to delimit it. It is in this regard that Awolalu defines it as

... the indigenous religion of Africans. It is the religion that has been handed down from generation to generation by the forebears of the present generation of Africans. It is not a fossil religion (a thing of the past) but a religion that Africans today have made theirs by living it and practicing it. This is a religion that has no written literature, yet, it is “written” everywhere for those who care to see and read.⁵

What is very obvious from this definition is the fact of its pervasiveness. Ifesie while commenting on the pervasive nature of African traditional religion, pointed out that “to be” for the African is “to be religious.” This agrees with the opinion of A.C Leonard when he argues that:

... the religion of these natives [Africans] is their existence and their existence is their religion. It supplies the principle on which their law is dispensed and morality adjudicated. The entire

¹ Ugwu C.O.T and Ugwueye L.E. *African Traditional Religion: a Prolegomenon* (Lagos: Merit International Publication, 2004), p.2

² Ekwunife, A.N.O. *Conservation in Igbo Traditional Religion* (Enugu, SNAAP Press Ltd,1990), p.1

³ Kanu, I.A. *A Hermeneutic approach to African Traditional Religion, Theology and Philosophy* (Jos: Augustinian Publications, 2015), p.3

⁴ Ugwu C.O.T and Ugwueye L.E. *African Traditional Religion: a Prolegomenon*, p.7

⁵ Awolalu, J.O., “Sin and its remission in African Traditional Religion.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. 44/2, p.275

organization of their common life is interwoven with it that they cannot get away from it. Like the Hindus they eat religiously, drink religiously and sing religiously.⁶

Corroborating with Awolalu, Ekwunife defines African traditional religion as;

those institutionalized beliefs and practices of indigenous religion of Africa which are the result of traditional Africans response to their believed revealing superhuman ultimate and which are rooted from time immemorial in the past African religious culture, beliefs and practices that were transmitted to the present votaries by successive African forebears.⁷

From the foregoing, one can conclude that African traditional religion is that religion that is indigenous to Africans, that Africans have been practicing from time immemorial, before encounter with any other religion, and which are still practiced today. It is a religion of the past, present and possibly the future. It is a religion that is understood in and through symbols.

Meaning of symbols

It is arguably a fact that man is the only creature that has the ability to reflect on his experience and expresses it with symbols. This creative power is part of the Divine consciousness within every human being and it is this element of divine consciousness which distinguishes man from all other living things. Therefore, memory, imagination and religious experiences are the symbolizing functions of the human mind.⁸ Consequently, one can argue that the above gives credence to appellation of man as a *homo symbolicus* that is an animal that symbolizes. The word symbol comes from the Greek root “symbolon” meaning to throw together. A symbol is a material object whose nature or by convention is related to the thing it represents. Its meaning could be literal and figurative. No symbol has absolute meaning by nature. It is a medium of communication, a sign with further layers of meaning. It is on this note that M. Dukor sees symbol generally as that which expresses, represents, and stands for, reveals, indicates or makes known another reality. Umeogu B. in what appears like an explanation of the above stance of Dukor, is of the opinion that:

... the symbol is something; but it's something for some-thing; that is, something that stands with something, for something and to something. The symbol begins from something and ends towards something for which it is the symbol. As such, it provides food for thought as well as thought for food. As it signals, signs and flows what it is beyond and to what it shows...⁹

Symbols in most occasions start where words have stopped. In line with this, Nabofa sees symbol as an overt expression of what is behind the veil of direct perception. They are used to delve and signify meanings that defy the constructive use of words. However, we need to note according to Carl Jung that “a symbol could be a term, a name or even a picture that we are familiar with in daily life. Yet that possesses specific connotation in addition to its conventional and obvious meaning.” Nevertheless, the power of symbols is gotten from its ability to represent something that can effectively communicate its meaning to the receiver. African symbols are imbued with deep religious sentiments and meaning.

Nature of religious symbols in Africa

The history of symbolism in Africa, as in other climes, indicates that everything can assume symbolic significance. For instance, natural objects like stone, plants, animals, mountains, and valleys, sun,

⁶Leonard, A. C. *The Lower Niger and Its People*. (London: Frank Cass,1966), p.429

⁷Ekwunife, A.N.O., *Consecration in Igbo Traditional Religion*, (Nigeria: Onitsha Publishers Ltd,1990),p.29

⁸Ofuafo, F.U., “Art symbols as means of communicating religious concepts in Urhobo traditional society”. *The Journal of International Social Research*, vol.6.no.27, 392-397, 2013, p.393

⁹Umeogu, B., “The place of symbol in African philosophy” *Open Journal of Philosophy* vol.3. no.1A. 113-116, 2013, p.114

and moon etc or man-made things such as boat, cutlass or even numbers, can all attain the status of symbols. This is because the African world is a religious world. Man both consciously and unconsciously transforms objects and forms into symbols, endearing them with great psychological importance and expressing them in both his religion and visual arts. This is why the history of religion and visual art are interwoven.

In African traditional religious consciousness symbols can be classified into the following: natural, artificial, communicative, artistic and ritualistic symbols. Natural symbols evolve from supernatural encounters with natural phenomena like thunder and lightning. Artificial symbols are material objects made by man to overtly, represent their innermost religious experience. Communicative symbols on their own are those that are used specifically to communicate knowledge and information. Of course, all symbols are communicative essentially, but this category includes only those which are purposely intended to convey concepts, ideas and emotions. Ritualistic symbols are used to instruct and indoctrinate devotees about their article of faith and it is mostly theological. Artistic symbols are those that are used for aesthetic purposes. This is a common feature in most shrines in Africa.

It is true that in Africa, that almost anything can embody symbolic meaning but, not all things are considered as religious symbols in technical sense of it. It is on this note that Udechukwu, enumerated the things that qualify a thing to be regarded as a symbol, in her work, “the significance and use of cultural symbols in contemporary society: Igbo symbols as a paradigm.” In the light of her explanation this work construes the following as the characteristics of African religious symbols.

1. The meanings of symbols are context dependent: in order to understand the full implication of symbols, it is necessary to appreciate the given situation of the people for whom the symbols are used. For instance, without the history and full knowledge of traditional religion, all the objects of worship such as *ọfọ*, *Ikenga*, White Chalk/Cloth, Kola nut etc. becomes meaningless.
2. Symbols are meaningful only when there is consensus of meaning: symbols do not have meaning in themselves. They rather take up the meaning conferred upon them by the society. And this meaning must be generally accepted and understood in a context. This is because what a particular object may mean for people `A` at time `A` may be different from that of people `B` at time `B` and vice versa.
3. Symbols are mediatory and giver of meaning to things and events: symbols convey to people the full meaning and presence of a given object and calling for the best in us in using the object.

The place of symbol and symbolism in African Traditional Religion

It has been argued that religious symbols derive their meanings from the origin of a given religion. Scholars of religious symbolism, like Ofuafo, have presented valid arguments to substantiate this claim. While making contribution on the idea of symbol as means of communicating religious, concept, Ofuafo explains that (like is obtainable in every other academic investigation) the relationship between symbols and religion could be derived from the origin of religion. This is because the two most essential elements of the religion are experience and expression. The experience of religion is related to a confrontation with what Rudolf Otto calls the “Numinous or the unnamed something (with a clear overplay of meaning) which is inexpressive or ineffable or too great or elusive for words to describe” The numinous combines the attributes of that which causes a sense of awareness, eeriness, daunting self-abasement and inadequacy with that is of attractive and often irresistible magnetism. This encounter has been described as divine revelation or mystical experience, which is the direct experience of God.¹⁰

The expression of such experience which is religion is what Alfred Whitehead describes as the outward and visible sign of an inward or spiritual encounter. This primary expression mostly clothes itself in the media of action and words but partially in arts. Symbolic forms and processes are the principal media

¹⁰ Ofuafo, F.U., “Art symbols as means of communicating religious concepts in Urhobo traditional society”. *The Journal of International Social Research*, p.394

for expressing inner and emotional feeling resulting from religious experience. Thus, symbols arise in the subconscious such as imagination, memory and perception. In this regard, it can be categorically stated that religious symbols are an overt expression of religious experience. From the foregoing, we can say that the experience of religion is almost the same all over the world but the way in which various people respond to their mystical experience may differ according to their level of consciousness, state of mind, physical and mental alertness, moral, geographical and social condition. This also explains why we have different cultic symbols and processes all over the world.

In African cosmology, therefore, symbols of the traditional religion are overt expressions of the African experience of the Divine. That is symbols play the role of helping the traditional African capture and relive his innermost supernatural encounters. It is on this note that Omatseye B.O.J and Emeriewen K.O wrote: “The very essence of these artistic expressions is to capture the “uncapturable” and say the “unsayable”. In effect, what the worshipper may not be able to put clearly in words to his god (as intermediary), he expresses in his mode of worship, in the presence of representative figures and statuettes.”¹¹ Through symbols, the African is able to commune with the gods he believes in who is untouchable, unseen, and abides in a realm unknown and physically unreachable for the African. These symbols result from the African people’s spiritual and psychic experience. For instance, a man who experiences the purity and holiness of the Divine (God) may decide to use a spotless white object to overtly represent that Divine quality he has experienced. Artistic objects are, therefore, used to link religious experiences with its expression and it is in religious expression that we find most symbols in form of art, theology, myth and rituals of all kinds. In other words, worship and all other cultic activities are symbolic.

Some symbols and their significance in African religious worldview

Cowries: they symbolize prosperity. Cowries are among the cultic items found in the shrine. The importance of this symbol can’t be overemphasized in Africa. Cowries symbolize great things in both marriage and burial rites in Africa. In marriage, it symbolises the bride’s wealth which is paid by the man. In burial, it symbolises the money the departed soul uses to transport itself to the spiritual world. They also symbolise piety and ritual purity.

White chalk (Kaolin): this symbolises the purity and holiness of the object of worship. It also signifies the purity, piety and faithfulness of the devotee. They are kept in lumps in the shrine because it is believed that they attract supernatural powers. It is believed that white chalk is capable of cleansing all ills and impurities including physical sickness.

Palm fronds: traditionally, they depict sacredness and they are used to mark and consecrate entrances to shrines. Whenever a young palm frond is spread, it depicts a place that has been specifically marked, consecrated and set aside for a divine being.

Thunder bolt: an axe and some stones are items that are usually believed to be thunderbolt in the different cults of solar divinities in West Africa. They are common features in most shrines. They symbolise the wrath of God. The belief is that it is with this instrument that God expresses his anger through thunder and lightning.

Iron: symbolises the power of justice, fair-play and war. This symbolism is common among the Yoruba and Urhobo of Nigeria, amongst many other tribes in West Africa. No hunter goes on an expedition in these climes without paying due respect to the divinity represented with Iron. Iron is used to symbolize the condemnation pact between two persons by kissing it. At the law courts, adherents of African Traditional

¹¹Omatseye B.O.J and Emeriewen K.O., “An appraisal of religious art and symbolic beliefs in the traditional African context” *An international multi-disciplinary Journal*, vol.10, no.2, 529-544, 2010, p.532

Religion swear to it instead of the Bible or Quran. It is generally believed that anyone who swears falsely on the iron cannot survive the judgement.

Kola nut: This symbolizes communion with the ancestors and also appreciation and acceptance. It must be noted that Kola nut is presented to a visitor first before any discussion. However, it also serves as a first offer to be presented to a deity before any other offering or request is made.

Ọfọ and Ogu: It is a symbol of justice among the Igbo. This can be seen as a cultural symbol which is widely used among the Igbo. Thus, Ọfọ is seen as a symbol of authority which descends from the ancestors, and guarantee of truth. Hence, at its first perception, it has all the appearances of a charm, but its most important aspect is its symbolism of ancestral authority when it has been handed on to the first son (Ọkpala) for several generations. The Ọfọ becomes more significant when it has been consecrated and duly handed over to one who has been consecrated and has been customarily initiated or to the head of the family; it assumes a special significance and dimension. In furtherance, it is believed in Igbo land that Ọfọ has been set aside by God (Chi-ukwu) as a symbol of truth hence, all the oaths sworn in an Igbo community is ratified with the aid of Ọfọ.

Ogu: is the symbol of prayer, and of invocation for good or evil; and the Igbo believe that when such invocation portrays justice and righteousness, Ọfọ is applied to give it effect. Hence, Ogu is the spiritual force which stirs up the gods and ancestors, in exoneration or condemnation of any deed or situation, and which determines to what degree Ọfọ can launch its force or power in any situation. It is therefore, the prayer to the gods and ancestors, typified by the Ogu, which blesses the Ọfọ and gives it the strength to work.

Ikenga: Ikenga can be understood in Igbo land as “the personification of a man’s strength of arm which has everything to do with his good future. Ikenga is described “as a deity whose role is very similar to that of ‘chi’. It symbolizes the strength of a man’s right hand, so that a man’s right hand is sometimes called “Aka Ikenga”. Ikenga is a carved image with two horns, sitting on a stool, with a drawn sword in his left hand and a human skull in the other. In more details, the two ram horns mean that the owner of the Ikenga must go ahead in his business with the stubbornness of a ram. The knife in his right hand means that he must cut down any obstacle on the way and the skull in the left hand means that he must always take the lead in order to succeed.

Igwe/Amadioha (Sky Deities): Igwe shows in form of thunder and is against undetected criminals. Thus, this can be described as the agent of God against undetected criminals which He expresses his power and anger in thunder bolts and lightening. In other words, thunderbolts and lightening symbolize Amadioha.

Anyanwu (Sun): Anyanwu symbolizes wealth and good fortune. In concert with this, Anyanwu is regarded in a special way as a deity bringing wealth and good fortune. That is why a diviner would recommend a sacrifice to Anyanwu to someone who is in habit of dissipating his wealth?

African Traditional Religion and the abuse of religious symbols:

The abuse of African religious symbols started with the coming of the Westerners to the African continent. When the colonial masters and missionaries first came to Africa, with the intention to make Africans “humans” they condemned every religious symbols because of their inability to understand their meaning. Almost, all religious symbols were labelled objects of heathenism. This is one of the wrong notions of African traditional religion as presented by foreigners. So much has been said about many derogatory remarks against African Traditional Religion in the academic world that we are not going to dwell on in this write up. However, for Westerners, to make Africans “human” and so qualify for salvation they need to eradicate all their religious symbols and artefacts. Thus, it was seen as a mark of courage and

manliness for Africans especially converts to new religion to destroy their *Ikenga* for instance and renounce anything that pertains to it.

Similarly, the colonial masters with their economic intent saw African religious symbols as means of increasing their foreign exchange. It is in this light that they looted most African religious symbols and artefacts and stored them in various museums in Europe. Thus, instead of appreciating them as object of worship, they are seen as just creative artefacts that depict primitive culture.

Even though, these abuses originated with the West, they are being perpetrated today by most Africans. This is as a result of misinformation coming from Abrahamic religions. For instance, most people are wrongly made to think that the architects of their lack of progress both as a community and as individuals are based on the influences of certain deities. At this instance, they are motivated to think that before they can experience progress, the shrines of the said deities must be razed down. Consequently, in order to achieve this goal, religious symbols and emblems in most shrines are attacked and destroyed. This is a common phenomenon in Igbo land of Nigeria.

In addition, due to the influence of misguided Christian religious teachings, some Africans are made to believe that they need to sever the relationship with their deceased forebears. For them to do this there is the need to heal the family root and cleanse the land. In these occasions African religious symbols are always point of attack. They are treated with disdain and some of them carted away and stored in museum domiciled in various cathedrals and churches. The fact is that these symbols are not made for aesthetic purposes. Thus, because the keepers do not know what they stand for, most of them are left to rot away.

On another note, some abuses meted to African Traditional Religion emanates from ignorance. Most people in contemporary African society today are crassly ignorant of the true purpose of most African religious symbols. Consequently, they misuse them. This is rampant in contemporary African society. Most people see them as fashion, thus they appear with it in non-religious related occasions. All these go to affirm the aphorism that when purpose is not known, abuse is inevitable

Concluding Remarks:

This work has shown that every known religion makes use of one symbol or the other, thus, African religion is not an exception. It established that since man is a *homosymbolicus*, he cannot do without symbolizing. No doubt, in Africa, almost every object embodies symbolic meaning; this is because African world is a religious world. However, there are certain qualities that something must possess before it can be regarded as a symbol and African religious symbol for that matter. This work establishes that the challenge facing African religious symbols is the abuse meted to it due to misinformation coming from wrong and misguided teachings of most Abrahamic religions. For this abuse to be eradicated there is need for Africans to understand that symbols are not bad. If they were to be bad why do that other religions that kick against it use one form of symbol or the other? The truth is that Africans need to be proud of their cultural and religious heritage. It is high time Africans jettisoned this idea of inferiority that they always feel in comparison to the West. Government as a matter of urgency should make policy that African Traditional Religion should be taught to students from primary school level. It is at this level that the awareness of the proper use and place of African religious symbols will be cultivated in young Africans. Who said that African traditional religion is not worth to be studied at levels of primary and secondary schools? Finally, Africans should always give pride of place to some of these symbols because it is a core part of African identity.

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