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An Appraisal of Religious Art and Symbolic Beliefs in the Traditional African Context

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Abstract

African arts stem from their themes of symbolism, functionalism and utilitarianism, which describe African art as quite multi-functional. This however does not say that some African art does not have its underlying aesthetic import. In Africa, by virtue of their belief system, their spiritual practices have led to the creation of new artistic imageries. This is in the sense that their various artistic traditions are drawn upon as sources of inspiration. Significantly, indigenous African religion have had a greater influence on art objects-in statues, masks or other forms for use in rituals and worship. The Masquerade out at seasons could have an array of display in headdress, dance steps, colourful costumes etc. But beyond, some of these art forms and objects may be ritually charged. As sonorous as the songs may sound, they carry messages beyond the rhythm. Essentially, figures, statues and shrine arts, and verbal and non-verbal arts in most African cultures are largely functional. These images have religio-metaphysical themes, which serve as the focal point of power, which links the African's physical world to

his beliefs on his essence and existence. Indeed the African art reflect images of ancestral spirits, and pantheons of indigenous gods and goddesses.

Introduction

Man's search for truth and the individual's personal concern about God's existence, usually forms the bedrock of his relationship with God. For such humans, the most remarkable experiences stems from religious beliefs and dispositions. Like religious beliefs, appreciation of art involves man's emotions with implications for his value system, notably, his moral conduct. It is this emotional dimension in religion that may have inspired some of the greatest works of arts today. For instance, Michaelangelo's painting in the (ceiling of the) Sistine Chapel; Leonardo Da Vinci's work of the 'Last Supper'; Giotto's painting of the 'Ascension'. Even though the Moslems tradition forbids representation of the human figure, Islamic art is quite magnificent. Using geometric and natural forms as motifs, Muslims build mosques as houses of worship. One of the best-known examples of Islamic architecture is the Taj Mahal in Agra, India.

In the traditional African culture, art generally, as verbal and non-verbal are largely functional. Sculptures, songs, dance, myths, incantations, etc are oftentimes expressions of African beliefs and practices. They are also artistic portrayals of traditional African religion. Most African cultures believe that ancestors and spirits act as intermediaries between the human community, the gods and the Creator. Art objects oftentimes by way of wooden and clay figures are used to make the contacts with these spirits. In other words, most African art forms have religion – metaphysical, historical, moral and cultural themes. Such art forms serve as the centre of power, which links man's beliefs, his essence and existence to the physical world. Also, in the expression of the indigenous African religious faith, prominence is given to rituals, worship and the offering of sacrifices. Oftentimes, these are done through gods, deities and spirits. These gods are seen as intermediaries between the Supreme Being (God) and humans. Such intermediaries are usually represented symbolically in figures and other worship objects. According to Arthur and Rowe (2001) citing the case of the Akan culture, cultural symbols are used to portray the people's beliefs about God, their attitude towards God and His Creation, and the Akan belief in the Supreme Being or the Creator, whom they refer to by various names such as 'Oboadee' (Creator) 'Nyame' (God) etc. Below are some of such symbolic representations of the Omnipotent and Omnipresent God.



Fig 1: 'Gye Nyame' – Except God
Cited in Arthur and Rowe, (2001)

Source: Arthur & Rowe (2001) 'Akan Cultural Symbols Projects'

www.mogabay.com/indigenous



Fig 2: Abode Santanaa-Totality of the Universe.

Source: Arthur & Rowe (2001) 'Akan Cultural Symbols Projects'

The above are symbolic representations of God as the Ultimate Creator of the Universe. Arthur and Rowe (2001) express the symbols as one which incorporates the eye, the rays of the sun, the double crescent moon and the popular Akan stool. An interpretation of the symbol reveals the sun, the moon, and the eyes as depicting the natural creation by a Supreme Being. While the stool depicts the socially created institutions and the creativity of human beings, who are yet creatures of the Ultimate Creator. Today in most Churches in Ghana the Akan religious cultural symbols are found as designs on the altar of churches. This simply articulates the Akan religious belief.



Fig 3: Abode Santanaa – Totality of the Universe. Source: Arthur & Rowe (2001) 'Akan Cultural Symbols Projects' www.mogabay.com/indigenous

Essentially, in the African conception, sculptures as worship objects, figures and figurines stand firm on personal altars. These are symbolic impressions

with deeper meanings. They help to articulate the African religious beliefs and disposition. In essence, the worship objects, the guttural sound of the masquerade, the tensioning of the chords of the gong, the frenzy dance of the worshippers and the symbolic rhythmic sounds of the drums, in some ways functionally, yet artistically expresses the peoples' religious faith. 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. This is in consonance with Belton's (1998) argument, which asserts that one can best appreciate African art if regarded as generally intuitive and symbolic. Specifically in this article, the argument portrayed is that Africans make some arts functional, so as to establish and secure a relationship between them and unknown forces, one hinged on religiosity. This is also suggestive of the view that the religious and ritual needs of the traditional African society may have also dictated their conception and forms of art at recognisable periods in their life. It is also in this regard that one may want to say that the appreciation accorded to the "decorative" images, crucifix, statues, pictures and even the style of worship in the temple of God or Churches, ought to be same for the traditional African shrines, shrine objects and worship style. However, this conclusion may only be reached if a critical insight into the concept and practice of traditional African religious belief system is appraised.

The Concept and Practice of African Traditional Religion

Generally though, the conception of God in most religious belief system is oftentimes the premise from virtually where most discourse of religions begins, across cultures. Even at that, the concept of God in most religious philosophies, no matter how personal, tends to share some commonalities. Most religious inclinations have identified the general belief in God as an Independent being, and the creator of the Universe, and quite distinct from the Universe He created. This has therefore evolved a consensus on the conception of God, as the all powerful (Omnipotent), all-knowing (Omniscient) and therefore an Omnipresent God. In effect, God is perceived as every-where, tending to the needs of creatures. It is also in this vein God is seen as the supremely rational, moral being, who has great concern for human justice and suffering.

It is against the foregoing background that Parrinder (1971) may have defined the concept of religion in the African context as a belief system, “in which all life is seen to have a purpose and to give to men under the rule of the Supreme Being”. It is also in the same vein that Pobee (1976) in a careful and specific analysis of the conception of African traditional religion asserts that it is that religion which includes beliefs and practices of Native African peoples with regard to the Supernatural. He also emphasizes that such beliefs and practices were supposedly handed down by the ancestors, and which people hold on to as their link with both the past and eternity. In essence too, such traditional religious beliefs that can be said to be typical of pre-colonial Africa, yet remains an identifying aspect of present day African culture, even with modern religions. Thus, it may be quite myopic to perceive African religious beliefs and practices from the (usual) eyes of Christians or modern day religious context as typically, worship of idols, fetish, primitive, savage etc. Especially when cognisance is taken of the fact that African traditional religion also has at its core, belief in God as the Supernatural Being, the Great Ancestor and Creator of the Universe. Among the Xhosa this High God is called Dali or Qamatha, for the Zulu it is Nkunkulu; To the Venda, He is Ralurhima, and to the Sotho, Modimo (Hammond-Tooke, 1993). It is this Mosaic assertion of God as the Omnipotent Creator that the argument in this article also takes its source.

Essentially, in the African context, the elimination of God from the Universal scheme would create a vacuum in the African ontology. As Mbiti (1990) succinctly expressed it, for the Africans, religion is an ontological phenomenon, which pertains to the question of existence of being. In essence, in the African thought, the principle of causation would be meaningless, if the supernatural were excluded. That is why the Zulu word for the Most High God is “Nkunkulu” which actually means “The first to Emerge”, a reflection of the High God as the first cause. God as the Supreme Deity is conceived by most Africans as the Ultimate and the Unmoved Mover. This may be one reason why most African thinkers, Lambo (1975), Mbiti (1990) and Nduka (1974) have argued that the African by nature is quite religious in his orientation. Implicitly too, Africans hold the cosmological argument that everything has a reason for its existence, either in the necessity of its own nature, or in the casual efficacy of some being. In essence, the African society has the potentials within the traditional cosmology for a Supreme Being to cater for the macrocosm. This is reflected in the Akan saying that God will hear my cry – ‘Onyame betse me sufre’.

Also in the African modes of thought, the casual efficacy of other beings would be attributed to a range of beings such as gods, spirits and deities, ancestors, people, animals or plants. Even at this, God, the Supreme Being stands first in the hierarchy in the Spirit-world. All other spirits and gods are delegated powers to act by the Ultimate God.

In the African philosophical-theology, God's relationship with the smaller divinities and spirits are only a manifestation of the attributes of the Supreme God. In this vein, religious symbolist would argue that African spirits and deities are symbolic representatives of reality. On the other hand, the intellectualist will rather regard spirits and lesser gods and the whole cosmology, as a theoretical framework. Essentially though, the argument in this article stems from the viewpoint that the Africans "created" his gods to suit his religious disposition bearing in mind too, that one's religion is a product of his consciousness; this therefore makes the African act an intelligible one. In other words, the African religious posture was evolved as a result of man's need to shape his world. It is against this background that this article will give a further clarification to the place of gods, spirits and deities in the African indigenous religious worship. While highlighting the uniqueness of this religion, the artistic import in its myths and beliefs will also be fully expressed.

African Traditional Religious and Mythological Themes in Artistic Forms

In the new dispensation, with the introduction of modern religion, it is often argued that God came down to be the under-pinner of morality in society. But in the African traditional belief and cosmology, the lesser gods play that role; thereby serve as a mediating force between God and man. Maybe it is as a way of seeking God's justice and mercies that Africans turned to such quasi-human gods, who could stand as intermediaries to plead their cases. It was such that even when man's language fails him, his worship, reverence and sacrifices to these gods may speak the words right and help to re-write the destiny of such an offender. The implication too, is to bring to the fore, the African religion as a way of life of the Africans. Significantly, African religion as a way of life can also be celebrated in stages of man's life, for instance, birth, marriage, circumcision and initiations, annual festivals, burial and death.

Evidently, the ethical undertone in the African indigenous theology asserts that man proposes the gods enforce. Thus, while appraising the ethical

perspective in the African religious belief, the question as to how the gods and deities enforce moral laws or play mediatory roles becomes imperative. Specifically, how do the Africans appraise the roles of the gods as a manifestation of their beliefs and symbolic thoughts. Essentially the aim here is to articulate the inherent artistic creativity in the symbolism of these gods, deities and spirits, the manner of worship, and offering of sacrifices. Indeed, the focus is a portrayal of art as a catalyst in the African expression of his religious beliefs.

In most African cultures, sculptures are largely functional. These figures are quite representative of the African traditional religious beliefs and practices. Essentially, these images have religio-metaphysical, historical, moral and cultural themes. Most of these art forms serve as the centre of power, linking the physical world to man's beliefs, his essence and existence. Through these figures as forms of man's beliefs, the African tries to express and explain pertinent issues as reproduction, fertility, continuity of power, authority, sickness and the general African way of life.

Basically, sculptural art can be said to have a universal appeal. It is an art quite appreciated in the Western world mostly because of its aesthetic display. But in the conception of the Africans, natural sounds and forces are discernable in most African traditional sculptures and carvings. It is the perceived natural status of the sculptures that serve as basis of expression. In essence, sculptural forms in figures, statuettes, found on shrines or as altar figures all have ontological undercurrent in the African traditional endeavours. Importantly, these figures are the core value of the African traditional religious belief systems.

In the typical African ancestral worship, prominence is given to religious faith, rituals and its practices through gods, deities, spirits and ancestors. These are oftentimes represented in figures and other worship objects on shrines and worship altars. In other words, these figures, figurines and statuettes reflect images of pantheons of indigenous gods and goddesses, and ancestral spirits and deities. For instance in the Igbo theology, God or Chukwu is not made representative in images or statues but sometimes, symbols are dedicated to God. The "Ikenga" is a powerful symbol of Igbo values. The Ikenga echoes are also found amongst the Isoko people as "Obo" and "Ivri", and in Benin, as "Ikegobo". The Ikenga in the Igbo theology is more or less a personal god or "chi", with the devotional shrines and worship objects as "Ofo". In the explanation of Ogunmor (1993), the Ikenga is an Igbo

figure carved in wood as a two-horned object. The Ikenga is perceived as an emblem of man's physical strength. It is believed to fight against anything opposes the good fortune of the owner. The Ikenga figure is found on individual private altars or shrines of diviners.



Fig 4: A Contemporary representation of Ikenga.

Location: Fine and Applied Arts Department, University of Benin, Benin City. Photographed on 18/06/09 by the Authors

Beyond Nigeria, the Ashante people of Ghana cherish the disk-head Akua 'ba statuette. It has remained one of the most recognisable forms of African figures that are thought to bring fertility to a woman in dire need of the fruit of the womb. The Akua 'ba figure is supposed to induce pregnancy as well as ensure safe delivery of healthy, normal children. Her role could be likened to gods of fertility, Olokun and Umalokun of the Bini and Itsekiri cosmology. Significantly, when an Akan woman has difficulty with conception, she is escorted by an older woman to a local shrine, where Akua 'ba is revered. Such a woman in need is then made to purchase the figure, as expressed below.



Fig 5: Akua 'ba Doll

After being blessed by the shrine priest, who can be compared to contemporary day religious priest, the woman takes home with her the statuette. When the woman delivers of her child successfully, the figure is returned back to the shrine as a form of offering. On the other hand, if the child died, the akua 'ba statuette was kept as a memorial by the woman. The carved akua 'ba figure has rigid and highly stylized features. These are actually intended to complement the idea that the foetus and infant are yet incomplete, so have no identity and personality.

Generally, sculptures as representations of gods or deities are found in shrines or private altars and sometimes carried around. In its most simple terms, a shrine can be described as a building or place associated with something or venerated. In the African traditional religion, one can say shrines and altars are erected in response to the demands of god, deities and ancestors. These shrines are oftentimes quite artistically done, especially when adorned with worship objects according too, to the devotion of the person. As cited in Ben-Amos (1980), when Sir Richard Burton visited Benin City in 1862, he gave a detailed, vivid description of a paternal ancestral altar he saw in a Chief's house. In his description the domestic altar had a mixture of what he termed "idols" which included waterpots, pipkins of Spirits, cowries, chalksticks, ivories, some elaborately and beautifully carved, cocoa – nuts, and huge red clay pipes. Generally the emphasis on creativity and adornment on shrines vary from shrine to shrine. For instance, royal ancestral altars and shrines in Benin religio-culture have been a focus of artistic elaboration (Ben-Amos, 1980). In the Bini cosmology Eziza the god of the whirlwinds has a display in its shrine (as seen in figure) the kind of artistic elaboration expressed by Ben Amos.



Fig 6: Eziza Shrine

Location: Mr. Joseph Omorodion's Shrine at Omorodion Street, Evbotubu Quarters, Benin City.

The shrine of Ogun, the god of war and iron or warrior god and the owner of all iron, in the Yoruba cosmology was aptly described by Pemberton (1997) as the place where the power of the chiefs and kings are brought in opposition. This is a reflection of the shrine objects that adorn the Ogun shrine. Significantly, the figure or statue of Ogun made of iron (its symbolic emblem) in Benin shrines is depicted in war costume, wearing or holding tools and weapons of his varied occupation. In the Fon culture, Republic of Benin, Gu is the god of iron, with the iron sword as his most meaningful symbol, also signifying aggression yet civilization.



Fig. 7: Mr. Joseph Omorodion's Ogun Shrine

Location: Omorodion Street, Evbotubu Quarters, Benin City.

Olokun in the Bini cosmology has echoes in Umalokun and Malokun in the Itsekiri and Yoruba communities respectively. Like it is typical of gods in

African traditional religion, these gods also have shrines and altars which they adorn and are worshipped. The Olokun shrine or altar is usually made out of mud, and often White washed. Another regular feature in the Olokun shrine is a special ritual pot which usually contains fresh river water, symbolic of the abode of this god. Significantly, as expressed by Ben-Amos, (1980) these special pots are made by the female members of the urban brass casters guild or by Olokun cult priestesses. These people have been specially chosen by the deity for this special craft activity. In a vivid description of the Olokun shrine Audu (1980) has said that materials found in the shrine include beads, white chalk, orhue; ritual box, *ekpoki*; white kolanuts; sceptre of authority, *eben*; ceremonial sword, *ada*; brass ladder, *egbalaka*; brass staff, *ukhurelomon*; brass royal stools and sanctified white costumes. Also found in the Benin Olokun shrines are sculpted figures. Such figures are oftentimes richly decorated in beaded ceremonial regalia, beaded crowns and strands of coral beads around their necks, which is symbolic of wealth. Ritual pots or *akh-Olokun* are also found in Olokun shrines. Most of the pots bear motifs of the python, a reptile mostly believed to be a favourite playmate of Olokun and runs errands for her.



Fig 8: Mr. Joseph Omorodion's Olokun Shrine.
Location: Omrodion Street, Evbotubu Quarters, Benin City.



Fig 9: A section of Olokun Shrine showing a sculpted Python painted Ochre with Black spots (Olokun's messenger). Location: Mr. Joseph Omorodion's Shrine at Omorodion Street, Evbotubu Quarters, Benin City.



Fig 10: A symbol of Olokun, 'Mami-water' wall Mural. In Omorodion's Ogun Shrine. Location: Mr. Joseph Omorodion's Shrine at Omorodion Street, Evbotubu Quarters, Benin City.

Besides the built elevated forms of altars, Africans also have worship altars formed by some artistic installations. In the typical traditional Urhobo society, in most compounds one finds bamboo sticks planted with white chalk stuck in a mound of sand. Tied to the top of this stick are strips of red and white cloth. This was more of a "direct worship" to Oghene (God). The stick was used as a symbol of remembrance and a medium of worshipping the Almighty God. The belief here is that prayers and offerings to God through this medium (long stick planted facing upwards) reaches God, because, He is high up in the heavens. Till date, in courtyard of compounds of some traditional Binis a shrine "artistically" installed are found. Osagbaye

a shrine to Osanobua has a long pole in a mound of white sand at times with offerings of coconut and white chalk around the mound of sand. Also, the top of the pole carries pieces of white cloth. In the assertion of Ben-Amos, (1980), the shrine actually evokes the Bini creation myth; one of a solitary tree in the sand emerging from the primordial waters. In all of these Osanobua in the Bini mythology and Oghene in Urhobo cosmology are depicted artistically.



Fig 11: 'Osagbeye's Shrine. Location: Oghagbon Street (Evbotubu Quarters, Benin City).

In the same way, in the Akan culture, most compounds have altars dedicated to God. The altar is called Onyame-dua or literally, God's tree. The Onyame-dua is made up of a triple-forked branch which carried an earthenware pot with water. The water is called Nyankonsun or God-water. According to Pobe (1976), the branch served as an altar because occasionally sacrifices of food or palm wine were made there. Again, the nyankonsu or God-water was sprinkled on the household as blessing.

The African in his traditional beliefs expresses his faith artistically in songs, music and dance. In other words, there is some creativity in the way the worshippers express their deep emotions and feelings in the religion they profess. In a non-visual artistic expression, and with the imitation of natural sounds and divine inspiration, worshippers evolve a body of rhythm that is unique. Generally, in reverence to his god(s), the traditional worshipper expresses his spiritual inclination in dance steps, songs, music, incantations etc. in so doing, aesthetic values in every form of creative expressions are celebrated. Significantly, in the African traditional worship, the performance arts and verbal modes of creativity are employed. They manifest as praise

worship, offering of thanksgiving, confession of sins, proclamation of faith, and the priest's pronouncement of blessing. To further articulate these, songs, poetic rendition, dancing and clapping accompanied with musical objects like drums, gongs etc are employed to express the greatness of God and his divinities.

Specifically, dance plays a crucial role in African traditional ritual. According to Drewal (1997), dance transmits a people's philosophy and values. It is more of a people's thought embodied in human action. She goes on to argue that dance is a primary vehicle for communication with the phenomenal world. It is on this score that ritual dance may be best perceived as unspoken essay on the nature and quality of metaphysical power. Some of these dances are graceful, others ecstatic and frenzic. For some others quick and aggressive like that of devotees of Ogun or some masquerades who are representatives of gods and deities. One with a picture of thunder and lightning, and creates a mental imagination of the power and character of this god. This, in the opinion of Drewal (1997) connotes the Yoruba thought of a direct correlation between the dynamic qualities of both dance and oral performance and power of the god, Sango. On the other hand, devotees of Olokun who are mostly beautiful women, dance gracefully in sweet songs in praise of this god of fertility, protection and wealth. Similarly, amongst the Itsekiris, in beautiful masks and headdress, representative of the god, Umalokun, dance gracefully to reverence this special god.

In like manner in the worship of Malokun, the Ilaje and Ikale Yoruba Communities of Nigeria celebrate the 'Ijengen' ceremonial dance. This dance is accompanied by the rhythmic sound, from the (special) 'agba-Malokun' drum, alongside other special drums like Okri or Iya Ilu (prime drum), Ojobata and gedebu (Sheba, 2003). Among the Binis, the Ema-Olokun or the drums of Olokun is a significant feature in the worship or dance ritual of this god. There is also the Agban-Ema-Ogun (god of iron drum) used by Ogun worshippers. Another symbolic item in the ritual regalia of water gods are bells and bell-shaped gongs. The sound that come from them are said to permeate the world of water gods and spirits.

Conclusion

So far, the argument has centred on the African values as one in consonant with their cosmological and religious worldview. In other words, reflections of the traditional African society can be said to encompass their way of life and living environment. This is also expressed in their forms of art, culture,

language, verbal and non-verbal communicative arts. Specifically, in traditional African society the culture offers myriads of artistic phenomena and experiences. A reflection of this is found in their religious orientation which sees the community as transcending the realms of living and non-living things. In other words, they hinge their spiritual beliefs on the Ultimate God, as well as ancestral spirits, deities and gods, who play intermediary roles. This is also artistically expressed in the African culture where created artworks tend to secure a relationship between themselves and the unknown forces. In effect, their arts springs form a thought peculiar to them, borne out of their thoughts, beliefs and values. In this context therefore, one may want to reject, as it is perceived in some quarters the negative status of African arts in traditional religion, as idolatry.

In a more logical sense therefore, the Africans as a people have a philosophic system which may not necessarily be same with that of other peoples. Invariably, the argument that the African art must be subsumed under prescribed structured codes is quite impositional. That being the case, the issue as to whether there is any connection between the socio-religious life of a people and their conception and usage (function) of art becomes imperative. Indeed, the traditional African concept of figures, statuettes, shrine arts and all other artistic expressions may be perceived as functional in their own rights. These serve symbolically, as catalyst for traditional African religious beliefs and symbolic thoughts.

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