The Import of Symbolism in African Religious Experience

Agama Christian Sunday[1]

Obasi Samuel Ugochukwu[1]

Obiagwu Obinna Victor[1]

Onyeakazi Jude Chukwuma[1]

Ozoigbo Bonaventure Ikechukwu[1]

[1]Directorate of General Studies, Federal University of Technology, Owerri Imo State, Nigeria
Email: christian.agama@futo.edu.ng

Abstract

The foundation of all religious rituals worldwide is the concept of symbolism. This is because most belief systems are abstract and depend on symbols to teach their followers the truth different religions teach. It acts as intermediaries between humanity and the divine giving form to the viable elements of the greater powers. There are symbols in many other faiths. Symbols could be concrete, verbal, or expressive actions. It refers to something; it does not point to itself as a thing. While the problem is not just that most symbols have complicated meanings, but that their functions and understanding of the nature of this symbols varies in unique in different religions. This paper explores the need to enhance meanings that are vaguely discerned in daily life and to clarify these nuances of the impact of symbols in African religious practice. Hence, it is the opinion of this paper that symbolism is an important source of the affective power of African religious experience. It restores valuable meanings through which a code of conduct is created within the African religious practice. It helps to bring African religion down to earth by using different things that are physical to symbolize the tradition of African religion. The activities of African religion can only be effectively facilitated and complemented by symbolism. This research adopted hermeneutic and analytic methods in exposing the roles and importance of symbols in the African religious experience. Data collected were based on library research method.

Keywords: Symbolism, Africa, Religion, symbol.

Introduction

The history of symbolism is as old as the history of African religion because symbolism is part of African religion. One can say that African religion cannot be practical without symbols. In Africa, most of these experiences and religious consciousness are represented in symbolism. Behind the symbols are, however, deep meanings. Thus, the unseen realities and all that pertains to them are depicted in concrete and abstract symbolism with epistemic implications. Symbols in African religion are not just 'dasein' as Heidegger implies; neither are spiritual realities one in the African context. An African is significantly 'being with.' He not only sees divine forces in cosmic truths, but he expresses his religious experiences in symbolism, such as folklore, dances, songs, proverbs, parables, rites, etc., which is significant that the African participates in the event, which he expresses in symbolism. (Rich and Anyanwu: 1981, 106).

An African is, therefore, aware of the spiritual realm, its hierarchy, and its meddling with cosmic realities and events—consequently, an African reveres each Deity through meaningful symbols based on its capacities. Thus, symbolism, which stems from his religious experience, is part and parcel of his being. With them, the Africans feel like unseen entities and revere their existence. The presence of symbolism in the African religious experience has indeed made an African worldview overwhelming a relief one (Isichei 1973, 80). It has created a deep spiritual sense geared towards an understanding of the sacred, respect for human life, and reverence for spirits. These spirits, as experienced in African religion and depicted in symbolism, are in descending order: Supreme God, Divinities, Deities, Ancestors, and Masquerades.

The symbolism of supra sensible realities, at times, is not always empirically the same as what they represent. Yet they are taken to embody the original. Because they embody spiritual entities, exact reference, sacrifice, and worship meant for these real beings are offered to them on the symbols. By implication, the religious reverence for these symbols rests on the sensible being they represent. This is so since Deities in the African context are beyond the bounds of space and time (Basden 1966, 36). Understanding epistemic meanings behind symbols and symbolism in African religious experience, however, calls for a hermeneutical inquiry. This is because most epistemic understandings they convey are not always empirical. Yet behind these symbols lie many hidden meanings that, when given comprehensive interpretation, form a whole block of knowledge.

Meanwhile, the interest of this research is embedded on the following questions: How has symbolism influenced the modern African religious experience? Does symbolism actually inject new life in the practice of African religion? In what way does symbolism unveil deeper meanings in the most mundane experiences of the African religious practices?

ISSN 2411-958X (Print)
ISSN 2411-4138 (Online)

European Journal of
Interdisciplinary Studies

July - December 2024
Volume 10, Issue 2

Literature Review

Many scholars have had diverse studies about symbolism as well as it affects human life. There remains a lack of consensus regarding the definition, functionality, meaning (interpretation), and the significance of symbolism in various aspect of humanity. Dukor (2009, 86) has substantiated to be the epistemology of digital consciousness or information technology, and argued further that the "theistic panpsychism as the metaphysical superstructure of the Black African philosophy is characterized by symbolism". Umeogu (2013) discussed how symbolism became a criterion for communication in African philosophy. For him, symbols are the alternative means for communication especially where there is a failure of words. Ngangah (2013) on the other hand examined how the African traditional medical practitioners employed the epistemology of symbols in treating their patients, and maintained that African traditional medicine has connection in offering healthcare to people. Accordingly, the African culture has advocated that symbols were an integral part of the sense knowledge and behavioral life of Africans (Kanu, 2014). In this regard, he argued that African symbols can go a long way to in contributing for the nation building especially as it enhances economic development and tourism among others.

The dynamic nature and functionality of symbolism are though not limited to Africa alone but the rate of continuity manifests in different aspect of humanity as it represents a multiplicity of activities, objective and relationships. This is the issue as this paper presents the import of symbolism in African religious experience differing from all other literatures.

Symbolism and African Religious Experience

Symbols and symbolism are two different things. While the symbol is that which makes known another reality, symbolism appears to be esoteric and supernatural. It is an underlying meaning of symbols. "Symbolism involves using symbols to represent ideas and ensure attraction towards a particular cause, action, idea, socialization, culture, religion, nation or other forms of identity. It is the use of symbols to signify ideas and qualities by giving them symbolic meanings that are different from their literal sense" (Agama 2020, 20).

It plays a crucial role in the search or revelation of truth. There is a universal criterion of truth in symbolism. It is in this universal criterion of reality that people were able to express their ideas and beliefs in language and systems of symbols, making it possible to have religious knowledge through symbolic systems. Symbolism remains the aboriginal of African religion. The method of thought of African religion is symbolistic.

Symbolism in African religion and its mediating function represent aspects of epistemology and ontology. As a means of knowledge, it operates according to a typical dialectical process of concealing and revealing truths in African religious

consciousness. It fulfills an interpretive function in our adequate comprehension of spiritual experience. In doing so, symbols, with their meanings, their contextual uses, their relationships to other types of religious expression, and their interpretive connections to other symbolic, figurative forms. Various images, gestures, and sounds are essential in cognitive and symbolic processes. The relationship of African religion is characterized by symbols and symbolism in active and epistemological interactions.

Although symbolism as an idea, an essence or experience of the unconscious, and as a means of communication brings a connection with the world of the transcendent-not only an interpretative knowledge of the world and a conferral or comparison of meaning to life but also a means of access to the sacred reality.

On the other hand, the question of symbolism revolves around ontological order. This ontological cosmic order opens an endless horizon of African religious experience. It is this element of order in symbolism that directs and fashions all religiosity. The powerful influence of God/gods remains the most symbolic in connectionist networks of subjective, spiritual, and neural objective symbolisms. In African religion, ontological knowledge is not only possible but also reality, and it is in this sense that the concept of God exists.

These symbols are signs of religious consciousness, creating knowledge of what they represent. Using the Igbo tribe of Nigeria as an instance, Leonard (1968, 429) asserts that African spiritual experience permeates every aspect of an African.

They (Igbo) are …. indeed, a religious people of whom it can be said, as it has been told of the Hindus, that they are religious, drink religiously, dress religiously, sin religiously … religion of the natives is their existence, and their existence is their religion.

Africans believe that the cosmos is teeming with malevolent and benevolent spirits. They recognize the capacities of these spirits to bring misfortune, such as illness, diseases, poor harvest, infant mortality, epidemics, premature deaths etc., or fortune, such as bounteous harvest, good health, victory in war, security, etc.

Consequently, they decode the minds of these spirits before embarking on any activity after chaotic and fortunate events. In all these religious experiences, symbolism forms a focal and unavoidable point. It becomes, for the Africans, a way of representation as well as the embodiment of divine force. This gives symbolism an animistic essence that makes African religious consciousness alive. Because of its spiritual power, symbolism plays a vital role in the search or revelation of truth. (Dukor 2009,85).

Presentational Symbols in African Religious Experience

As experiential, Africans practice their religion through various symbols. Each of the characters has a significant impact on African man's religion. Before going into the

ISSN 2411-958X (Print)
ISSN 2411-4138 (Online)

European Journal of
Interdisciplinary Studies

July - December 2024
Volume 10, Issue 2

import and functions of symbols in African religious experience, it is pertinent to note that among all the presentational characters in this paper, they shall be discussed in any of the following five categories or more: natural symbols, communicative symbols, cultural symbols, artistic or ritualistic symbols, and artificial symbols.

Natural Symbol

Animal symbolism is under the natural symbol. African people associate a lot when it comes to their religion. The Buffalo and Lion are associated with God by the Langi and Turu, who consider them to symbolize God's manifestation in His immanent aspect. The snake is thought by some people, like the Vugusu and Sidamo, to symbolize immortality—others like Oduma, Idemili, etc. The Igbo-Africans have sacred snakes, especially pythons, which the people may not kill. They are symbolism of ancestral immanence.

It's good to know that a symbol isn't the same as the object it represents. It's not like a photo that shows exactly what you want it to look like. A symbol's job is to light up an object. If you want a logo to work well, you need to simplify it and sharpen it to the point where it's like a sketch of the reality you want it to represent. A symbol opens a door into a big world. It transcends what's visible and what's physical. Universally, in Africa, symbolism points to the existence of unseen deities. Onuigbo (2005, 2) affirms that some of these realities are fashioned with stones, and huts are built for many of them. Besides, some have awful shrines built in their honor. These shrines serve as their habitat and place of worship. Apart from these, some are represented with heaps of stones or red earth. The tallest and most enormous trees (Oji and Akpu in Igbo land) are sometimes used to symbolize them, and local trees such as Ogilisi, Ngwu, and Ogbu and thick forests are conventional symbolism of divinities. These deities are seen as embodying these symbols. Perhaps this is seemingly pantheism. This is similar to the Hindu philosophical worldview, a view that possesses animistic traditions and sees souls everywhere in all things.

Crossroads, nasty bush, and evil forest are all symbols that communicate something. Hardly would mention being made of African religious experience without crossroads, nasty bush, and evil forest. This is based on the essential and significant essence of the trio in the African worldview. These are points where sacrifices are often made to the menacing or benevolent spirits. Crossed is a junction where more than one road meets. In some crossroads, two and up to four lanes or more may meet, forming a connection.

Crossroads are viewed in Africa as significant points where spirits meet. Like humans, Africans believe that souls embark on journeys. Important is that a crossroad is the point where nerves must pass as they embark on a trip. This is why diviners (tibia aja in Igbo) often advise their clients to sacrifice at the crossroads. The rationale is to enable the required spirits to notice and consume them quickly. Onuigbo (2001, 16) avers that in most cases, curbing the menace of "Ogbanje" (lousy mood) involves

parents hurling a basket of assorted items: groundnuts, sweets, biscuits, and bananas at the crossroads. Since spirits are known to meet at the crossroads, it is considered dangerous.

As such, humans do not relax on reaching the crossroads. The only significant difference between a nasty bush and an evil forest is humans create that lousy bush. The evil forest, on the other hand, is made so by deities and spirits that inhabit it, as well as the kind of activities that go on there. Unlike nasty bush, evil forest cannot be entered except through the advice of the Diviner. It is seen as the abode of the dreaded spirits and deities. It can only be entered in extreme cases but through the lead of a powerful diviner who must have covered his company with amulets and charms. The evil forest seems to be natural, timeless, and immemorial. It is odd and is rarely approached but with awe and dread. Those considered flawed are burnt or thrown into the evil forest. Such humans include witches, wizards, the exhumed dead, and those who died of dreadful diseases like leprosy, chicken pox, etc.

A nasty bush is a forest where people throw away unwanted charms, amulets, and materials considered taboo. A community chooses a particular brush for this purpose through divination. With time, such a bush becomes sad, awful, and dreadful. In all, nasty scrub and evil forest have no excellent connotation. They are mentioned in connection with corrupt persons, evil deeds, and malevolent spirits.

Communicative Symbol

This refers to the symbol that mediates between the physical (human beings) and the ethereal beings (like God, spirit, ancestors, etc). Symbolism of this kind performs the role of communicating and creating relationships with transcendental realities. Outside the cultural and social importance of communicating symbols, African religion depends on many symbolic actions and gestures to express their relationship with God. Even among other religions like Christianity and Islam, fellows genuflect, bow, or prostrate to show their submission to God. Symbolism in African religion possesses the power to connect us to the thing beyond ourselves- the ultimate realities. Issues that demand spiritual or metaphysical concern can only be expressed symbolically. Thus, symbolism speaks more than words. Agama and Onyeakazi (2021, 142-143), while giving the undeniable essence of communicating symbolically in the Igbo-African world in terms of spirituality, assert that:

This spirituality is the bedrock that unites the Igbo as a shared society. It shapes the object of their beliefs through which the practice of their community, put together, makes them unique from another part of the world. They express their spirituality through their numerous rituals. Such practices showcase how deeply they value anything spirituality.

Therefore, symbolism extends our vision, stimulates our imagination, and deepens our understanding. It helps us get to the truth. The reality cannot be expressed by words alone. The people in the West who are under unconscious materialism often

ISSN 2411-958X (Print)
ISSN 2411-4138 (Online)

European Journal of
Interdisciplinary Studies

July - December 2024
Volume 10, Issue 2

relate fact to physical, quantifiable reality. On the other hand, Africans can see the symbolic significance of things and occurrences because they believe that truth is beyond what we can see and measure. Sometimes, they arcane the symbolic or spiritual meaning of events such as diseases, death, and catastrophes. Symbolism created a long-lasting relationship with mythologies, the sacred stories that define the human state, and man's relationship with the holy or sacred. Mythologies, often composed of symbolic shapes, forms, words, phrases and objects, describe Gods, Demons, Humans, Animals, Plants, and Material things with symbolic meanings and intentions.

Besides the importance of symbolism in the African religious experience, symbolism mirrors social realities. It performs another great import of maintaining social order and coherence for communication and preserving knowledge that lingers from generation to generation. Referring to the Igbo-African society, Agama (2020,26) states how symbolism plays a vital role in maintaining social order and puts it thus:

Symbolism in the Igbo worldview is a potent instrument for indoctrination to maintain social order in Igbo land. In this context, it is simply a medium through which they receive social control, respect, peace, and unity in their social relations. As a medium of social order, symbolism reveals a fundamental feature of Igbo people's relation to social reality. It facilitates the transmission of culture, provides a social sanction to the social ways of behavior, checks cultural maladjustment, secures the preservation of the society, and promotes social harmony and moral certainty, the underlying condition of organized societal life from becoming vague and lifeless abstractions.

Accordingly, the masquerade phenomenon, a social and religious art, falls under this. It is rooted in the African spiritual experience and treated as a mystery. In whatever form they are, they are seen as spirits and symbols of spirits. Masquerades are not merely for fun, and there is nothing like a baby masquerade. According to Onuigbo (2005, 6), the Africans view masquerade as a return of the deceased members of the community in the form of re-embodied spirits to their former surroundings, especially at festivals. Ogugua (2006, 52) supports this view by asserting that "Igbo-Africa symbolism could be said to be properly represented with the shrine or mask. Why? Because they represent spirit force, and force underlies every Igbo-African reality".

On a different note, masquerades are viewed as messengers and servants of the gods. This is among the rationale behind the reverence they receive in African communities. Sacrifices and rituals are at times performed to usher them out from the Spirit World and to acknowledge their return to the metaphysical realm. Because of their spiritual attachment and meaning, most things about Masquerades are esoteric, known only by male initiates. To join a masquerade society, an eligible male undergoes a series of initiations.

ISSN 2411-958X (Print)
ISSN 2411-4138 (Online)

European Journal of
Interdisciplinary Studies

July - December 2024
Volume 10, Issue 2

Religion symbols, particularly those associated with religious or cultural festivals where historical events are recreated, help to preserve the memory of past and significant events and beliefs. In this regard, religious symbols play an essential role in educating and enlightening the younger generation about the sect that they belong to. Religion symbols convey ideas about the relationship between man and the divine, as well as his social and physical world. (Bascom and Melville 1962, 42). Plato's cosmic interpretation unveils each individual as a composite of matter and form. The form is the principle of life, and it exists in the ideal world. The form was interpreted by Aristotle and scholastics in their hylomorphism as the soul. In African intellectual understanding, the soul not only exists after death, but the individual that embodies the soul and body without apparent distinction survives in an immortal form as spirit. Those individuals who live a fulfilled, aged, and good life after necessary funeral rites and rituals are not taken to the abode of their ancestors. Yet they still interact, commune, and embrace the affairs of their family members and community. Dukor (2006, xii) submits that ancestors in the spirit world can participate and share actively in the daily affairs of the living, their wards. This ever-presence is always symbolized. These symbols indicate the finite essence of the mortals who invoke and revere these ancestors for help. It, in turn, points to the supreme and immortal capacities of these Ancestors towards protecting the living and effecting an answer to their prayers from the supreme God in the sky (Arinze 1970, 19). In this sense, their symbols remind the Africans of these ancestors' lobby on their behalf in the spiritual world to ensure their security and progress (Booth 1977, 142).

Symbolism within the African context bonds the living and the dead in a very mysterious way. This metaphysical bond emanates songs, praises, folklore, and dances in honor of the spiritual realities. Extraordinary symbol sacrifices of goats, cows, etc., are also mate to them on cordial paternal-filial relationship exists between these ancestors and the families they left behind.

Some symbols connote mystery and awe. There is among Africans an atmosphere about supreme realities (Basden 1966, 37). They are rated higher and superior to men. This is why the Igbo-Africans identify the supreme being with names such as 'Chukwu' (big, tall, or great God) and 'Obinigwe' (he who lives in the sky). Basden (1966) explains this nomenclature, stressing that the supreme reality of 'Chukwu' among the Igbo-Africans is 'too high' and 'too vague.' The understating of deities is with symbolism created in verbal and concrete terms that imply an epistemic sense of mystery and awe. Significant are most names that evolve from traditional religious experiences since they translate the mystery and wonder surrounding the essence of these divinities. Among such awful and mysterious characters are Aniemeka (the earth goddess has done well), Ngenemelie (Ngene deity has won), Chukwuebuka (God is significant), Nnanna (Ancestor), Chinweike (God is the owner of strength), Onyinyechi (Gift from God), Chukwuma (God knows everything), Chukwuka (God is great and awesome), Chinonso (God is near), etc. Arinze (1970, 21) declares that these traditional names have been taken by our grandparents long before Christianity

came to Africa. Thus, such terms originate from the African worldview and not from the sense of Christianity. He points out an atmosphere of mystery surrounding divinities in the African context. Their awe and majesty perplex the people because they are entirely transcendent (Molloy 2002, 39). The meaning of such mysteries and wonder is what Africans make alive in human vocabulary and actions. They are essential because they remind man of the awe and mystery surrounding the immortal realities; their overwhelming immanence is beyond imagination.

Africans also carry on the message behind this awe and mystery in every aspect of life. To check the menace of theft, totems, and relics of traditional religious experience are kept in view on economic trees and over all their properties to scare thieves. These totems, icons, and antiques in traditional religion are indeed viewed as possessing healing powers. Hence, despite belief in modern religion (Christianity), most African Christians still hide them around their homes and wear them on the neck and waist to repel diseases and illness, to ward off evil spirits, and to contain their enemies' attacks and hostile machinations.

Cultural Symbol

A cultural symbol represents or expresses the moral principles, ethical standards, virtues, religion, signs, sacrifices, arts, civilization, and similar things that are held by or express the beliefs, identities, traits, moral values, and moral ideals of a people. (Nwaorgu, 2001, 3). For instance, in Igbo symbolism, the socio-political life of the cultural setting is symbolized by a drum from which the elders must beat out the music and the pace at which the young must dance. Old age and gray hair may signify a successful life and frequently confer the right to decency and politeness.

We notice the meaning and importance of symbolism in spirituality, reverence, and worship. Theism is in the essence of the traditional Africans. They also believe in the categories of spirits revere and worship them. These beliefs created a sort of tenacious relationship between them and these deities. Thus, this resulted in the practice of spirituality in order not to offend these deities. Consequently, they despise abominations, taboos, etc, and engage in healthy relationships with their neighbors and these divinities. Human nature often makes them falter, but this is quickly taken care of through expiatory sacrifices.

These and more form African traditional spirituality, which remains an important symbol. It guarantees them access to the cult of ancestors' post-mortem. Before death, it guarantees them the necessary blessings, support, protection from evil spirits, and acceptability in divine convention. Within this, spirituality is symbols replete with words and actions. When an African embarks on characters like libation and sacrifice, symbolism showcases him as a spiritual person; he lives in the spirit as differs from Canal. Such existential actions showcase the deep respect they have for the immortal realities. Such activities also entail worship and the fact that mortals are at the mercy of such eternal beings. When prosperity is desired, traditional religionists employ

existential symbols in sacrifices, libations, rites, etc. Signs of spirituality, reverence, and religious worship are highly outstanding in several shrines, groves, sacred animals, sacred bushes, hills, lakes, streams, and holy rivers that are still existential in our surroundings.

The deities are, therefore, not beings entirely separate from the living. They are still one and in constant communion with the living. Africans, therefore, revere and worship them with symbols that indicate our spiritual ties with them. In this sense, death is not the terminal point of man's life. He lives in daily marks created from religious experience. The definite essence of symbols in the African context makes Maquet (1975, 61) aver that:

All over Africa, rituals evoke and symbolize this truth, an everyday experience. In his gratitude to the ancestor and asking him to watch over his descendants, the African merely transposes a social reality to the level of ideas and attitudes. These concepts are not naïve beliefs but the interpretation of profound truths.

Artistic or Ritualistic Symbols

Rituals are also accompanied by meaningful symbolism. A pattern is a predetermined way to perform a religious act or ceremony. The people's psychic and spiritual experiences influence the ritual symbols. Looking closely, you can see that every ritualistic character used in traditional Africa originates from an emotional experience before being used to convey that experience or a concept that goes along with it. Numerology, or using numbers to express religious truths and beliefs, is still used in some parts of Africa. The number three is frequently used in Ogboni confraternity symbolism. There is an annoying number in typical Yoruba customs. In Yoruba, the number three is referred to as "beta," which means "casting away" or "complete rejection.". Royal symbols are associated with a community or society's ruler, king, or chief.

Regarding the position of the ruler, numerous symbols are used. Some include using scepters as symbols of authority, keeping a sacred fire in the palace, and using animal skins like lion and leopard. For instance, the royal scepter is called "Ofo-Eze" in some Igbo regions, denoting power. In Igbo, "Ofo" is also referred to as an ancestral symbol, whose bearer also serves as the community's earthly ancestors' representative. Because the people think that an elder like this is supported by their spiritual forces, they view him as having power, authority, and a sacred status. This means that the "Ofo" bearer's position and power are constantly raised by both the visible and invisible forces of the community, provided, of course, that he upholds the traditional norms and customs of the people.

The import of symbolism in African religion is not far-fetched because we encounter symbols or symbolic actions wherever we find ourselves. Sometimes, we are not aware of the characters we see, and sometimes, we are not able to comprehend or interpret certain symbols, and the reason for this is that we are not familiar with their

meaning. For instance, Christians are very familiar with the sign of the cross, but not necessarily for the Hindus or Moslems. They have their symbols. Sometimes, for Christians, the cross may have different meanings. This implies that marks, by nature, are open to various interpretations.

Artificial Symbols

Ancestral totems and icons such as "Ikenga," "Ofo," "Ogilisi," "Ogbuchi," etc. show the immanence of the ancestors and the desire of the living to retain communion with them. These images that adorn private, family, and public shrines reassure the possession of the ever-presence and benevolence of those gone before them. The ancestors, when symbolized, bring good health, bounteous harvest, wealth, and children to their relations. (Molloy 2002, 39). Since they occupy an ontological state, they serve as intermediaries between people and gods, guiding and protecting their family circles against the evil ones. (Mbiti 1982, 27). One can philosophically state that Africans apply symbolism to indicate appreciation. Since they live in symbiotic relationships with their ancestors, they tend to appreciate their services. Onuigbo (2005, 16) lends credence to this argument as he states:

In return for their services, the Igbo accord the ancestors some reverence. Hence, before the meal commences, the elder in the family throws some bits of food and meat outside the house. Again, some wine is poured on the ground before drinking begins. Kola not can never be eaten unless the lobes are extracted from the separated parts and offered to the gods and ancestors. These gestures are meant to remember and revere the ancestors and good spirits.

Ancestral reverence also occurs wherever elders gather, at the market squares, public squares, etc., especially before they eat or drink. The sacrifices and libations are existential symbolism indicating the communion of the living and the dead, which stems from their religious experience. In this communion, the living feels the dead as still present, watching over the household, directly concerned with all the family affairs and property, giving abundant harvest and fertility. Such reverence occurs in the morning when they wake up and late at night before rest. An African always thanks and reveres his ancestors and his god "chi' for a day well made. When the day is chaotic, he approaches and beseeches his ancestors and personal god or guardian spirit 'chi' more than he does for any other spiritual being.

Diviners' tools, invocations, and chants are all symbols. Conventional among Africans is that diviners' tools are not just sacred; they are unavoidable marks accompanied by symbolism of invocation and incantation. Such sacred tools like divination chaplet (afa chain) serve to ascertain the minds of the gods and spirits. When benevolence becomes unusual, an African often consults a diviner. This is to determine the source of the blessing and what he is expected to do in return. The same happens when harm and havoc envelop his life, family, or community. The first step he takes is consultation with a diviner for divination. The diviner, in turn, consults the deities,

beginning with invocations and chants, followed by other prior means such as smearing the forehead and corner of the eyes and that of his client with naive chalk and throwing cowries into the air and on the floor. This means the cause and remedy of the affliction is ascertained, and the necessary divinity and its requests are unraveled. With the aid of the Diviner's tools, the pacification mode of the identified spirit is as well-made known.

Significant contextual is that each of the diviner's tools has something it symbolizes. The epistemic import of those tools is reserved only for the diviners and those initiated into it. The knowledge is, therefore, esoteric and not meant for all. Thus, only individuals with the gift of divination can read the meanings behind each divination tool in particular cases. This goes to imply that a specific Diviner's tool means different things in different circumstances. These meanings are reserved for the initiates only. Thus, the commoner sees cowries before him, but the diviner sees meanings upon connotations surrounding those cowries. Significant here is that how each of the cowries or "AFA" seeds fell on the floor indicates deep meanings available only to the diviner. The meanings surrounding the diviners' tools are, therefore, spiritual and sacred that only he can decipher. He goes forth, translating these meanings into empirical language his client can understand. A clear illustration, as demonstrated by Iroegbu, captures one of these meanings as he explains an existential journey towards recovering lost money in one of Tonimaz's petrol-filling stations.

Thus, Ngozi and others involved in the situation embarked on a long journey to visit a recommended healer/diviner in Ngwa in Abia state of Nigeria. Upon arrival at the diviner's home, the head…the diviner made the necessary preparations, collected the ₦200.00 (roughly US $2.00) consultant fee, and led the session. While saying, "Whoever has taken the fuel money (ego many ugbo ala) be identified!" …the diviner threw the seed objects down on the floor. One quickly ran to the feet of Uchenele, who was the junior brother of the boss… the other sources stayed close to one another, displaying a pattern the significance of which the healer would explain. When this symbolic capture of Uchenele occurred, everybody looked at each other and back to the diviner. The diviner took his Ofo and stamped it on the ground. He then looked up and laughed rollickingly (Iroegbu 2006, 19).

Iroegbu further states that the diviner advised the culprit to identify himself. He warned that a divination shrine is a sacred place for finding evidence, a symbol of proof of reality.

After divination, in some cases, the client is expected to offer some sacrifice in thanksgiving or pacification of the concerned spirits. Such sacrifices may be animals, food items, edibles like biscuits, bananas, beauty materials, etc. Gibbs (1965, 30) confirms that Africans believe that when it is divined that an evil spirit pursues a person, such a fellow offers sacrifice to that spirit in the wrong bush. If it is a dead person that gives trouble, a goat, cock, or fowl is killed at his graveside in sacrifice to

calm his spirit. If it is the menace of Ogbanje, the parents of the child make a bowel of sacrifice containing assorted items like biscuit, bananas, beauty materials, etc., and places them at the crossroad where the fellow "Ogbanje" (lousy spirit) members will see and take them in place of troubling them. Onuigbo (2005, 16) holds that the souls of the ancestors, as well as the deities, are appealed to help appease the deceased to abandon his pursuit of the living. Whatever forms the sacrifice takes, it signifies that the source of misfortune or fortune has been alleviated or thanked respectively.

When these fell, and the deceased is still a menace, a symbolic action is taken. Gibbs (1965) confirms that often, through the advice of a diviner, the dead are exhumed and burnt in the evil forest or lousy bush. This action is symbolic as it indicates the punishment of the deceased and casts him into nothingness, which the Africans dread most. The "Ogbanje" can also meet the same fate. But sometimes, she is only given an indelible mark so the fellows would not recognize her again. Consequently, they would delete her name from the club.

Critique of Symbolism in African Religious Experience

Symbolism in African religious experience has a direct link to belief. It is more of a belief system. As such, no rational substantiation is proffered in most symbolism. These gratuitous assumptions are apparent, for instance, in the equation of animals with divine beings. Moreover, the Africans worship most of these animals as if they are real beings. This seems irrational, especially as the Africans have no rational explanation for these actions.

Symbols are subjective attributes. Particular people or persons attach specific meanings to something. It cannot be universal and objective. What beholds for one may not hold for the other.

Symbols can be deceptive because characters are not identical to the objects they symbolize. This makes it difficult to be interpreted by someone not in that particular culture where that symbol is around.

Since most argument within African ontology is based on belief, knowledge through such experience is absurd, especially as it cannot be subjected to test or scientific investigation. Such existent beings are unseen. As such, some of the actions attributed to them are unfounded.

The rituals that form parts and parcel of the African religious experience are incoherent. They are a series of religious actions and ceremonies that lack order and sequence, and at times, they lock \content and meaning. Analysis of symbolism in the African spiritual experience would reveal its lack of connection. It is, therefore, always a confused state which has no place for a rational mind.

Like the Hindu philosophical worldview, the Africans see soul and force in cosmic existent realities. Hence, he handles every being with utmost sacredness. This action tends towards animals and pantheism. An African can thus be considered

ISSN 2411-958X (Print)
ISSN 2411-4138 (Online)

European Journal of
Interdisciplinary Studies

July - December 2024
Volume 10, Issue 2

contextually as someone who cannot distinguish between the ordinary and extraordinary.

On the other hand, life is very complex. These complexities are often not synthesized scientifically because the essences do not require scientific investigation. Attempts to synthesize them rationally by thinkers and scientists have also failed. However, the symbolism in African religious experience has put these human complexities in their proper perspectives and thus fosters a happy human existence. In this sense, the Africans have brought in symbolism to create answers to human ontological questions.

Though the rituals within African religious experience may be incoherent, they proffer psychological solutions to the client. Most of the problems within the African context are psychological. Hence, such actions and ceremonies are therapeutic.

Man, inevitably needs symbolism to understand existential realities. Most beings, even within the cosmos, are challenging to understand. But with symbolism, the meanings behind them are unveiled.

On a more critical note, religious experiences are crucial to human existence. It enkindles morality and cordial relationships between men and unseen realities as well as among men. Through it, the spirit of communalism has subsisted within African societies in a manner that cannot be seen elsewhere.

Indeed, symbolism in African religious experience is not out of context. It has several advantages not just for Africa but for the world at large.

Based on these, we stand to declare that symbolism in the African religious experience is essential to human existence. It avails man of metaphysical and empirical knowledge. It also guarantees man the epistemic understanding of the universe in which we live. The African, by this philosophical exercise, acquires knowledge that enables him to establish a keen relationship with other individuals in society.

Conclusion

This study has exposed the meaning and import of symbolism in the African religious experience via hermeneutic method, and this was our primary mission in this research. African religion is not only a series of rituals and ceremonies; it is significant in experienced reality. An African himself is a living part and parcel of this experience, evidenced in his religious symbolism. He views the universe as that in which divine power manifests itself in everyone and everything (Ruch and Anyanwu 1981, 106). Investigation into the author of this religious experience leads him to believe in the existence of God, divinities, ancestors, deities, spirits, magic, and witchcraft. This experience he expresses with symbolism and symbolic signs replete with valuable meanings. Through this expression, a code of conduct is created within the African culture. This conduct embraces morality, interpersonal relationships, divine-human

relationships, political creed, and good manners. The African, in adopting the physical and metaphysical, goes beyond the visible to an invisible world of the spirit to unravel the cosmic causes and effects. He not only projects his belief; he also states the 'how' of such opinion, as well as how a series of events leads to the other.

From all of the above, we make bold to say that symbols are indispensable in the practice and understanding of African religion, helping to bring African religion down to earth by using different things that are physical to symbolize the tradition of African religion, which is traditional. This portrays what Whitehead (1974, 7) describes as "the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace." Hence, humankind cannot express inner religious experiences and feelings without symbols; in other words, worship and all other cultic activities can only be effectively facilitated and complemented by symbolism.

References

[1] Agama, C.S. (2020). Symbolism and Social Order among the Igbo. Filosofia Theoretical: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religions. Vol 9. No.2

[2] Agama, C.S. & Onyeakazi, J. C. (2021). "The Concept of Taboo in Igbo Spirituality: A Philosophical Examination", in African Eco-Philosophy: Cosmology, Consciousness and the Environment Edited by Ikechukwu Anthony KANU, the Association for the Promotion of African Studies, USA: Trebleclef Lane Silver Spring

[3] Arinze, F.A. (1970). Sacrifice in Igbo Religion. Nigeria: Ibadan University Press.

[4] Basden, G.T. (1966). Niger Ibos. London: Frank Cass & Co.

[5] Bascom, W.R & Melville, J.H (eds) (1962). Continuity and Change in African Culture. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press

[6] Booth, S.N. (ed). (1977). African Religious: A Symposium. London: NOK Pub Ltd.

[7] Dukor, M. (2006). Theistic Pan Psychic Animism of African Medicine. Essence: Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy, Vol. 3.

[8] Dukor, M. (2009). Symbol and Symbolism in Info-Tech Epistemology. Nnamdi Azikiwe Journal of Philosophy, Vol. 2. No. 1.

[9] Gibbs, J.L. (1965). Peoples of Africa. New York: Holt Rinehart & Winston Inc.

[10] Iroegbu, P. (2006). Igan' Ajuju: Three Igbo Modes of Mobilizing Extra Huan Forces to Heal Illness in African Societies. Essence: Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy, Vol. 3.

[11] Isichei, E. (1973). The Igbo People and the Europeans. New York: St. Martin's Press.

[12] Kanu, I.A. (2014). Symbols in African Philosophy and the Issue of Nation Building. International Journal of Scientific Research, Vol. 3, Issue 9.

[13] Leonard, A.G. (1968). The Lower Niger and its Tribes. London: Frank Cass and Co. Ltd.

[14] Maquet, J. (1975). Africanity. London: Oxford University Press.

[15] Mbiti, J.S. (1982). African Religion and Philosophy. London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd.

[16] Molloy, M. (2002). Experiencing the World Religions: Tradition, Challenges and Change. California: Mayfield Pub. Co.

[17] Nganga, I. (2013). The Epistemology of Symbols in African Medicine. Open Journal of Philosophy, 3, 117 – 121. Doi: 10.4236/0jpp.201.31Ao19.

[18] Nwaorgu, A.e. (2001). Cultural Symbols: The Christian Perspective. Owerri: T' Afrique International Association.

[19] Ogugua, P. (2006). Understanding Igbo-African Medicine. Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy, Vol. 3.

[20] Onuigbo, N.S. (2005). Ontology in Igbo Religion. A Bigard Memorial Seminary Enugu, 3rd Convocation Lecture. Enugu Snaap Press Ltd.

[21] Ruch, E. A. & Anyanwu, K.C. (1981). African Philosophy: An Introduction to the main Philosophical Trends in Contemporary Africa. Rome: Catholic Book Agency.

[22] Umeogu, B. (2013). The Place of Symbolism in African Philosophy. Open Journal of Philosophy, 3, 113- 116. Doi: 10.4236/ojpp.2013.

[23] Whitehead, A. n. (1974). Religion in the Making. New York: American Library.