

African Shrines as Channels of Religious Communication in Traditional Religion

By

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Abstract

African shrines are basically channels of religious communication between the living and the spiritual world. In Africa, shrines may be purely in natural form, such as confluence of two rivers, forests, grooves, caves, rocks, mountains and trees, where it is believed that gods and spirits dwell therein. In African landscape, sacred places of this kind are the spiritual focal point of ritual activity. Man-made shrines vary in form; and whatever its form, shape or design, the shrine demonstrates its symbolic function as ritual crossroads or interlinks between two worlds. Also, they act as instruments of social unification. This paper examines how these shrines have become indigenous sacred temples of mortality that bind the Igbo communities in ritual symbology of brotherhood and serve as visible reminders of the covenant between the villagers and their gods in the belief that the deities will respond by sending down breeze of blessings upon them.

Keywords: African, ancestors, gods, shrines, sacred

Introduction

In the true sense of it, shrines are man-made creative art works filled with ritualistic objects. They are considered sacred because they were “carved from a log of wood and regarded as a symbol of the community” (Okafor, 1994:183). Nabofa (1994:12) states that African shrines perform dual functions that include religiously communicative and artistic functions, and a typical example of this is the *Mbari* cult, which is currently neglected in Igbo tradition and hegemony in spite of its being an embodiment of religious communication and artistic symbols. According to Nabofa (1994:12), “artistic symbols are those which are used in art form for aesthetic purposes”. Buttressing this further with respect to *Mbari*, Nabofa notes:

Every *Mbari* cult is usually erected in a conspicuous place and near the shrine of the particular divinity in whose honour and gratification it is being established. It attracts a lot of audience from neighbouring towns and villages when the job is completed. It acts as the people's information centre. When it is newly completed it acts as the community's newsroom for several days and months. After a while it would remain as the people's archives where they go to consult and obtain inspirations, ideas and information about many aspects of their religious thinking and practices. As Christians and Muslims obtain inspiration from their Holy Books: the Bible and the Quran respectively, likewise the traditional Igbo person receives inspiration and knowledge from the myriads of symbols that are replete in the *Mbari* cult (Nabofa, 1994:49-50).

Nabofa (1994:12) regrets that although shrines of African traditional religion are replete with artistic symbols, it is a pity that most of these are being neglected, pilfered out and smuggled into Europe and America. The observation of Chinua Achebe in this respect may be worthy of note:

The purposeful neglect of the painstakingly and devoutly accomplished *Mbari* house with all the art objects in them as soon as the primary mandate of their creation has been served, provides a significant insight into the Igbo aesthetic value as process rather than product. Process is motion while product is rest. When the product is preserved or venerated, the impulse to repeat the process is compromised. Therefore the Igbo choose to eliminate the product and retain the process so that every occasion and every generation will receive its own impulse and experience of creation. Interestingly this aesthetic disposition receives powerful endorsement from the tropical climate which provides an abundance of materials for making art, such as wood, as well as formidable agencies of dissolution, such as humidity and the termite. Visitors to Igboland are shocked to see that artifacts are rarely accorded any particular value on the basis of age alone (1984:ix).

Buttressing this kind of non-challant attitude towards such significant and symbolic African shrine [*Mbari* cult], Geoffery Parrinder observes:

The panorama of life is well illustrated in the *Mbari* 'decorated' houses which Igbo people of Nigeria have traditionally erected at special times. These were temporary temples, built at the specific command of a god, but never repaired after construction and soon falling into disrepair. The central figure of such temples is *Ala*, the

great Mother Goddess, the spirit of fertility, and guardian of the dead which as they are buried in the earth are said to be in her pocket. Some of the statues of *Ala* with a child in her arms have been compared to Italian Madonnas or the Egyptian Isis with her son Horus (1987:128).

The picture of total negligence and complete ruin Achebe and Parrinder are painting here calls for urgent reorganization and revitalization of all the indigenous African shrines and their associated artistic symbols; in Igboland, in particular, some communal shrines could serve the purpose of cultural integration and transmission of indigenous knowledge to posterity, irrespective of modern civilization, because such “exotic objects have been given value as art and culture” (Clifford, 1988:12). On this, Idigo (2001:180) warns: “Let me remind the Igbo nation that like the Christian religion, the Igbo traditional religion believes that life is a continuum. Our dead ancestors are not dead and gone. Their souls are living. Our pioneer fore-fathers are still living. We must overcome our shortcomings in order to attract their blessings. If we do not, the likelihood is that we shall continue to be haunted and disunited”. Affirming this assertion, Hakan Rydving (2004:101) exhorted the Igbo nation by advising them “to stand firm in their beliefs and not desert the customs of their ancestors”. Buttressing this further, Idigo (2001:178-179) argues that “the neglect of the historical knowledge is to a nation what the loss of memory is to human beings. The Igbos should therefore be prodded to take a renewed interest in their history in order to understand why they are in this current state”. This is because according to Achebe (1958:143) “our dead fathers are weeping because of the shameful sacrilege they are suffering and the abomination we have all seen with our eyes”. On a general note, in traditional religion of the Igbo people artistic symbols are invaluable resources encoded with learned pattern of behaviour, ideas, and beliefs shared among a people and socially transmitted from one generation to another (Sofola, 1973:ix). Put in another way:

Most African sculptures appear to have been associated with religion, which pervades most aspects of African life. The religious genres included, votive figures, which adorned shrines, reliquary figures, charms, figures, stools, used in initiation to the cults, the apparatus for divination, dance staff, musical instruments and a variety of other ritual paraphernalia (Bascom,1973:11).

Shrines as Ritualistic Centres

These shrines are the ones that have to do with where items or materials are kept and used to perform certain rituals or ceremonies especially for religious instruction and initiations. In that sense, Nabofa (1994:14) states that such shrines do not only serve communicative functions but are equally means of preserving knowledge as well as religious and historical occurrences; it is in this vein that ritualistic shrines are the most valuable means for passing on the tradition and culture of a people from generation to generation. Here, it is very imperative to remind ourselves of Carl Jung's (1979:93) observation that shrines as cultural ritualistic centres are "those that have been used to express eternal truths" and that are still used in many religions today. According to Nabofa (1994:12) "ritualistic centres" like African shrines "are sometimes used to instruct the devotee in certain principles... [sic]. Ritualistic symbol are those that are used either in a ritual itself or to evoke a ritual in the mind of the initiate".

Such shrines basically have gone through series of metamorphosis or transformations and even a long process of more or less conscious development, and have thus become collective images accepted by Western societies (Clifford, 1988:12). However, ritualistic African shrines, no matter how old and transformed or modified they may be, still retain much of their time honoured or original symbolic sacredness and numinosity or spell which can ultimately still evoke a deep emotional response in some of those who had acknowledged them (Nabofa, 1994:14). We often say that African traditional religion is primarily written everywhere (Metuh, 1987:12) and this is true because every traditional African community, like Aguleri, is replete with the shrines of "their religion and those who have eyes to see and ears to hear can symbolically experience and notice them in their cultural context" (Nabofa, 1994:14). According to Nabofa (1994:14) again, man's creative activities, actions, emotions and self-expressions are basically symbolic in themselves, but somehow they are based on symbols which are used to preserve trado-religious knowledge and the mythical history behind them. Nabofa (1994:14) further maintains that the physical images found in indigenous shrines and verbal expressions are also used to convey a religion's theology; other cultic elements basically portray or stand for something which has resulted from the creative activity of a particular geographical and cultural setting, like Aguleri community. More so, they not only communicate, but are equally significant tools or meduim for man to satisfy his quest and need to express himself

and actually preserve and transmit the experience of the past to posterity (Nabofa, 1994:14).

Consequently, Nabofa (1994:14) further argues that shrines, especially those connected with religious and cultural festivals, like the *Obugad* and *Otutunzu* shrines are connected to historical events like the coronation festival of the new elect of *Eze Nri*, are re-enacted and they are used to teach and to call to memory remembrance of historical and significant events and doctrine of the faith. He affirms that in this context such ritualistic and symbolic shrine is very significant in aiding, instructing and shaping the minds of the younger generations about the sect they belong to (Nabofa, 1994:14). Buttressing this further, Nabofa (1994:14) again asserts that in such festivals most cultic activities that feature prominently are sacred ritual activities during which some significant historical events that relate to the people's belief are re-enacted, reconstructed and revitalised. Analytically, to elucidate more on this, a young, palm fronds used during solidarity march for the King during the coronation festival in a traditional community like Aguleri carries so many religious and symbolic undertones; primarily, it symbolises sacredness in its entirety (Nabofa, 1994:54). We should take note of the fact that in Africa, and Nigeria in particular, one major aspect of Nollywood's contribution in all these is in the representation of religio-cultural rituals as a basic aspect of communalism (Uwah, 2010:87). This depicts the capability of film directors and producers to connect familiar symbolic language of these cultures into their film productions, especially to avail the experience of communal liminality (Animalu, 1990:46), cultural integration and nostalgic egalitarianism among the proximate audience – who are mainly Nigerians and Africans (Uwah, 2010:86).

Significance of African Shrines

It is on this note that De Heusch (1994:233) affirms that “there is no doubt that the river marks the border between two cosmic realms”, where the “spiritual power or powers” lay (Nabofa, 1994:15). Parrinder (1969:58) describes “such sacred place as the home of powerful spirits, whom their leader often represented as a great king who lives in an underwater palace with mermaids and mermen as his attendants. From time to time he tries to flood the earth, and in some stories there may be links with Asian tales of a primitive deluge”. As a point of emphasis, it is in this sacred shrine known as *Agbata Ezu na Omanbala* (the confluence of *Ezu* and

Omanbala rivers) that Eri prepared and buried the covenant pot of clay called “*Ududu Eze*” which he handed over to Aguleri as the first son for the identification and coronation of kings among the Igbo speaking tribes in Nigeria (Eyisi, 2010:10). In fact, the coronation ritual ceremony of an Nri king would not be complete if ‘*Ududu Eze*’ is not handed over to the acclaimed king to be by the traditional ruler of Aguleri (Idigo, 2001:42). Nabofa (1994:55) describes such sacred or mythical pot as “the power house of power in the home or community”. This sacred or mythical pot called *Ududu Eze* would be idiomatically compared to a griot which is described as a musical accompaniment/object without which, no celebration or ritual would be complete (Babey, 1976:24).

As a point of emphasis, it is significant to mention here that the claim of Aguleri as the cradle of Igbo civilization (Isichei, 1980:2) and the head of the Igbo people is by virtue of being the first born of Eri, the father of the Igbos who at the death of his father, was given the scepter of authority to rule Eri settlement. Therefore, a centralized authority like Nri had no authority over settlement towns established by his offspring (Idigo, 2001:82). This sacred object which stands for authority, justice and leadership among the Igbo people serves as a binding force among the communities that constitute Eri kingdom to their common ancestor (Idigo, 2001:42).

These types of shrines serve also among the power points of expressing the believer’s sense of the sacred and the orderness of the divine realities (Nabofa, 1994:45). Idowu (1969:128-130) describes such shrines as “primarily the face of the divinity. There the divinity is represented by the emblems which are regarded as sufficient reminders of his attributes”. Mary (2002:121) pragmatically and symbolically describes such sacred shrines as the “place where the heaven comes down to earth”. Nabofa (1988:78) posits that such places are as “they are, as they were spots where the spiritual come down to the earthly, and the earthly is elevated to the spiritual”. Mbiti (1975:144) argues that such places are not for common or careless use, because they are considered to be sacred or holy. Chidester (1992:10) explains that such a place is inhabited by the dead, a domestic space in which the ancestors reside or visit. He argues that in ancestral ritual, death is not a barrier between the living and the living dead who continue to interact and communicate with the descendants (Chidester, 1992:11). Olsen (2004:13) observes that something magical happens at such a sacred place that triggers an unconscious memory and to learn about the world of sacred place is to learn about ourselves. He

affirms that such sacred places and intersections are the locations where humans first erected temples, pyramids, shrines, churches and cities (Olsen, 2004:13).

As Lovell (2002:23) has pointed out, “such territory or space is characterized both as a metaphysical domain and as a terrestrial entity. Deities are believed to dwell in another plane, but also need to have their presence manifested and anchored on earth in order for humans to propitiate them properly”. Such sacred space, to use Reg Saner’s phrase, is “capturing” (1987:723). Weightman (1996:59) argues that “as sacred places are created, an inner light outweighs outer darkness, and a spiritual journey commences”. Falola & Essien (2007:xiii) state that divine powers that radiate and exude from this kind of sacred place “creates a broad-based spiritual cesspool that provides other forms of spiritual protection”. Peters (2002:23) asserts that such sacred centres are believed to be where “many deities were understood to meet a variety of human needs and when some needs are met, the status quo is maintained; when other needs are met, there is a transformation of individuals and societies to new states of being”. Brown (2004:164) posits that such places are where traditional religious ties tend to compensate the communities like those ones that make up the Eri kingdom “through mediation for the loss of their contact with their ancestral home and with the built/support in religious rituals and cultural security of their extended brotherhood”. Ilesanmi (1996:2) argues that it cannot be denied that the entire community, including the 82% who are said to be Catholics, hold great ancestors like Eri in high esteem probably not as a deity, but purely as an ancestor of the community, a great grandfather of high dignity whose influence is still currently felt in the town politically, socially and religiously. In Igbo cosmological paradigm Eri’s sacred shrine *Obu-gad* is a symbol of brotherhood and unity among the Igbo communities. Ray (2000: 31) opines that “the shrine stands as a thing of pride both for the town and for the deity.... The shrine is thus a visible reminder of the covenant between the villagers and their gods”.

No wonder then that scholars like Falola (2003:147) posit that “the ruling dynasties in the various states forged relationships with one another by promoting brotherhood relations and the cordial relations among them were sometimes explained in affinal relationships”. No wonder Ray (2000:27) supports the notion that “shrines were, and still are, places of pilgrimage for members of the royal family and for descendants of palace officials”. Idigo (2001:177) regrettably comments that in those days, other Igbo

communities come to Aguleri to offer sacrifices in the sacred temples to request for one favour or the other and that helped the family houses where most members have converted to denominations of Christianity” and to maintain the link with their root but since their massive conversion into Christianity, these activities became extinct, only Nri keeps to this norm.

Peters (2002:25) argues that “many traditional sacred centers are the centers for particular peoples in their particular geographical and historical circumstances...a sacred center today has to be the center of the entire expanding universe as well as the center of our own lives. That is a big stretch for some traditional ideas”. Kaplan (2000:122) asserts that such shrines are maintained today, even in “similar ancestral alters are still maintained in the palace” (Blackmun, 1997:150). Nabofa (1994:45) argues that such “shrines in traditional Africa are connected with the homesteads. These are places where family religious activities are carried out. It is in such places that the traditional beliefs and culture are first transmitted to the notice of the young ones in the family”. Rowlands (1985:208) affirms that “the medicines used at the shrines are produced in the palace (sic); thus in original ritual boundaries which...served to coordinate rites of pollution removal at the palace for the chiefdom as a whole”.

According to Mary (2002:111), “this means giving territorial expression to the battle between the forces of good and the forces of evil, and as it were establishing Heaven on Earth”. She argues that as it is in traditional religion, like the whole Igbo religion, the efficacy of prayers requires the mediation and the annexation of a sacred space or shrine (Mary, 2002:111), which Akintola (1992:38) describes as the “shrine of mortality”. Akintola (1992:38) says that in the esoteric sense, it is simply the depository containing all the basic cult objects of religious veneration; and it is, in fact, the place where worship is offered, and devotions paid to the Deity, the Supreme Being of Creation.

Continuing with the argument, Akintola (1992:40) again stresses that “the shrine of mortality accordingly, in this process of spiritualization, that is, of moving man away from his sensuous nature into his bliss and eternity of spirit, is fitted into place as a continual reminder to the initiate that the spiritual nature he desires to acquire or rouse in himself, can be roused fully and effectively only after the philosophical death of his sensuous or carnal personality”. Reaffirming the spiritual value of this kind of sacred place, Ray (1993:268) asserts that prayers, offerings, and sacrifices

therefore require the construction of sacred space, where the forces of the invisible 'other' world can be brought into this world and effectively controlled. Wosien (1992:23) affirms that such "sacred structure space, facilitates orientation; provides the framework for worship, and transform chaos into cosmos, thus making human life possible". Nabofa (1994:45) comments that

such sacred places of worship provide geographical points of reference to religious beliefs and practices. They indicate the physical points of contact between the beings in the supra-sensible realm and those in the physical plane. Most of the shrines and sacred places in Africa are etiological. They teach theological, historical and moral lessons. In most cases, the myth, legends and stories that are told around them have little or no historical foundations. Nevertheless, they are valuable resources for transmitting and concretizing religious concepts and lessons, in both time and space.

Insofar as this invisible energy web also correlates with known areas of anomalies in gravity and space-time, it has been postulated that different dimensions exist simultaneously and that an electromagnetic web of energy interlocks all things on this planet (Olsen, 2004:13). Jett (1995:41) affirms that

because of this power, which is dangerous or beneficent according to those property of one's approach, non initiates avoid sacred places, while those with the proper ritual knowledge – especially medicine men – may make pilgrimages to pray, to renew their ritual equipment and the efficacy of their prayers, to obtain medicinal plants, and to collect sanctified soil and water.

Traditional festivals overlap irrespective of their nature; every festival is preceded by ritualistic ceremonies and some festivals that are seemingly social have ritual underpinnings/sections in them and similarly, ritual festivals that are seemingly solemn and serious have social dimension too (Nti, 1990:3). But unlike the other sacred places in Aguleri which are strictly used for rituals and other festivals, the sacred place of *Obu-gad* is for "social and religious occasions". This is because the excavation of *Ududueze* alongside the rituals involved in the coronation of Igbo kings are performed around the tomb of Eri the progenitor of Igbo race and the co-joined three mystical trees that symbolise the affinity of three brothers which comprised of (Aguleri, Nri and Arodi) situated at the shrine of *Obu-gad*. No wonder Igwah et al (2014) echoes that "*Obuga* is a place for spiritual re-dedication and the evocation of

the proud ancestry of Eri descendants and *Ndi-Igbo* in general. It is a sacred place for royal empowerment and self-purification”.

These are the types of sacred places that are believed to be imbued with natural powers and they carry a potent aura of sacredness and religiosity in the minds of the people that recognize them to be the embodiment and epitome of their spiritual guardians simply because of the mythological and ritualistic embellishment that have surrounded them from time immemorial (Ejizu, 1986:2).

Conclusion

From the understanding of African shrines in Igbo cosmology, basically shrines are ancient ritual centres for keeping and binding the brotherhood of Igbo communities together because Eri is believed to be their great ancestor. In this wise, through the mediation of its symbolism and cultural ethos the ancient spiritual centre is so revered that it portrays Aguleri as the spiritual epicenter for the ritual convocation and reunification of other Igbo communities that make up the Igbo race through her ritualistic endeavours. Summarily, it has been observed that shrines like the *Mbari* Cult, *Obu-gad*, the confluence of *Ezu* and *Omanbala* [*Agbata Ezu na Omanbala*] symbolically are places for spiritual re-dedication and the evocation of the proud ancestry of Eri descendants and *Ndi-Igbo* in general. It is a sacred place for royal empowerment, self purification and a touristic site for Africans in the diaspora. In summary, a shrine, whether it is a building, an object, a feature of nature, or the ritual community itself, is the necessary material foundation for the religious communication with spiritual reality in Igbo cosmology.

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