# The Use of Symbols and its Misconception in African Traditional Religion

By

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**Abstract**

The misinterpretation of symbols in African traditional religion resulting in the use of derogatory words such as idolatry and idol worshippers to describe the religion and its devotees in this 21st century. However, form the bases of this essay to correct the misinterpretation of the use of symbols in African traditional religion. The paper argues that in traditional religion the Africans even in their blindness do not bow down to wood. stones, images, sticks, rather, they symbolize spiritual entities or beings which for the Africans are real and make sense to the people. The paper also argues that in African traditional religion worship is not directed to these symbols rather they spiritual forces or beings operating behind these symbols. The study adopts secondary sources of data (published materials) as its main sources of data collection. Findings from the study reveal that in African traditional religion symbols are regarded as channels of approaching the spiritual entities or beings.

**Keywords:** African Traditional Religion, Symbols and Misconception.

## Introduction

Generally, symbols represent an important element across religions. This means that there is no known religion that can fulfill its religious rites without symbols. Though, symbols may differ and vary from one religion to another. Despite this, they communicate religious ideals, and for expression of beliefs and by extension to commune and interact with what every religion consider as element of sacred.

Two factors motivated the researcher's interest in pursuing this research. The first was to examine the use of symbols in African traditional religion and the second was to correct the misconceptions about the uses of these symbols.

**Statement of the Problem**

The use of symbols or cult objects in African traditional religion over the years cannot be overemphasized. These symbols or cult objects for the Africans never received worship but rather serve as means of approaching the spiritual entities or beings to which they represent. This study relied majorly on secondary sources (published materials) for its data gathering.

**Conceptual Clarification**

**African Traditional Religion**

Ekwunife (1990) defines African traditional religion as:

> Those institutionalized beliefs and practices of indigenous religion of Africans which are rooted in the past African religious culture transmitted to the present votaries by successive African forebears mainly through oral traditions such as myths, songs and dances, liturgies, rituals, proverbs, pity-sayings and names/sacred specialist and persons, sacred space and objects and religious work of art, a religion which is slowly but constantly updated by each generation in the light of new experiences through dialectical process of continuities and discontinuities (p. 1).

Furthermore, it is the religion that has been handed down from generation to generation by the forebears of the present generation of Africans (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979, p.26).

**Why We Label African Religion, Traditional**

The religion is traditional in the sense that it originated from the peoples' environment and on their soil. It is neither preached to them nor imported from outside to them. Africans are not converted into it; they are born into it. It serves the purpose of distinguishing African Religion from any other religion that has been brought to Africa through missionary and Islam propagation. It is based on oral tradition for its transmissions. It has no written literature, sacred scriptures or

creedal forms. It has no reformers, preachers or missionaries that bring about a change in the religion from time to time as we have in other world religions (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979, p. 22).

**Structure of African Traditional Religion**

**Belief in God** (Supreme Being)

For the Africans, the belief in God is unshaken. The people's idea or the concepts of God are derivable from His relation or disclosure of Himself through the created order as perceived by each society in Africa. That is why people call Him by different names in African societies depending on what they think He does. Among the Igbo He is Chineke (The God that creates) (Peters, 2009, p. 36). Among the Yoruba, He is Olodumare (The King or Chief Unique who holds the scepter, wields authority and has the quality which is superlative in worth and he is at the same time permanently unchanging and reliable). Among the Edo, He is Osanobua or Osanobwa (the one who sustains, under pines and supports, the universe), among the Nupe, He is Soko (immense, great or the highest Deity that resides in heaven (Tasie and Ofuru, 2013, pp. 21-22). Among the Akans of Ghana, He is Nyame (The bright, majestic, splendid God who rules the universe). For the Africans, God is not only real but He is also believed to be known and worshipped (Metuh, 1987, pp. 77-82).

**Belief in Divinities**

Divinities, according to Awolalua and Dopamu (1979) are gods with small letter "g", believed to possess divine attributes since they are emanations from the Supreme Deity. They are said to be brought into being by the Supreme Being, hence they have no separate existence, but their existence is as permitted by the Supreme Deity, who cause them into being. As for their position and duties, the divinities were brought into being for a definite purpose, and the purpose of which is to serve the will of God in the theocratic government of the universe. In other words, the divinities serve as intermediaries between God and man. The divinities, therefore, become channels through which sacrifices, prayers, and offerings are presented to the Supreme Being. They have temples, shrines and devotees with priests and priestesses. So they are means to an end and not an end in themselves (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979).

As for their census and names, the divinities are many and their numbers vary from locality to locality. Among the Yoruba, for instance, the number varies between 201, 401, 601 and 1700. With regards to their names, each divinity has a name, sometimes, the names are descriptive in the sense that they describe the true nature, character and functions of the divinities. For instance, in Yoruba, Jakuta, the divinity responsible for wrath, i.e. one who fights with stones is known in Nape as Sokogba, meaning God's axe (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979).

As Imasogie (1981), pointed out, The Supreme Being having created the universe, appointed the divinities to the various departments of nature to carry out its purpose; hence there are, for instance, a divinity in charge of human procreation, a divinity responsible for death, another in charge of food production, yet another charged with the responsibility for bodies of waters, etc. According to him, these divinities have full authority over their respective areas of influence, subject only to the power of the Supreme Being (p. 34):

George Tasie and ChisaOfuru (2013), observe that the divinities are highly personalized. Some as they noted, are conceived in gender terms as male or female. According to Tasie and Ofuru, the Ashanti, for instance, not only consider the earth to be a female divinity and second to God, but also observe Thursday as her day. Also, the Igbo, as they remarked also regard the earth to be God's daughter who protects people and helps with crops. Some of the divinities according to them are further conceived as having spouses as humans do. For Tasie and Ofuru, a telling example among the Yoruba are the goddess Osun and Oya both of whom are believed to be the wives of Sango, the divinity of thunder and lighting. They further noted that there are other divinities that are believed to be androgynous, possessing male and female characteristics. They pointed to the Egba and the Ewe who conceive Buruku in this manner (p. 43).

**Belief in Spirit**

Spirits, as Anyacho (1994) pointed out, are invisible beings which are capable of assuming different shape and form when they want to reveal themselves to man. For him, they are believed to be created by God and as such are subordinate to Him (p. 247). In much the same vein, Omoregbe (1999) notes that spirits are believed to appear sometimes to people in human form (p.66).

As for their nature, spirits are not only abstract (i.e. they can take any form or shape and nature, but also ubiquitous in the sense that there is no area of the earth, any object or creature which cannot be inhabited by a spirit. Spirit possess, complex nature and attributes depending on the order in which it is being spoken of but generally, spirit is said to possess vital influence and force or power. As for their abode, spirits are believed to inhabited natural objects such as (trees, mountains, rivers, forests, etc and they are believed to be sacred, there are good and bad spirits. The good spirits are responsible for giving fortunes to people while the bad spirits include: Ogbanje born to die spirit) and ghost spirits which are spirits of those who died "bad death" and were not properly buried. Their spirit become wanderers and haunts the living (Peters, 2009 pp. 4 1-42).

**Belief in the Ancestors**

**Who are the Ancestors?**

J.S. Mbiti (1969), sees the ancestors as the deceased members of their families who are still remembered and venerated by members of their families. Any wonder, he describes them as the "Living dead" (P. 83). In much the same vein, Tasie (2009) also sees the ancestors as those who lived a very good life while on earth and died "good death" at a ripe old age and were accorded burial rites befitting their status (P. 43). According to Anyacho (1994), "the ancestors are those who are believed to have acquired extra-human powers in the afterlife which enables them to intervene in the lives of the living members of their families" (P. 257). Thus, they are regarded as the benevolent fore fathers; the nearest and closet to man (Ugwu and Uwueye, 2004, P.46). Also the deceased departed are considered to have keen interest in the affairs of their living descendants which is why they are regarded as the watch-dog of their families or lineages (Benjamin, 1976, P.
126).

For Madu, (1964), the ancestors were human beings, who, having lived in this world, experienced the sufferings of humanity and died. By virtue of their death, according to Madu, they were ushered into the land of their forebears by full burial rites accorded to them here on earth, having suffered with humanity on earth, and having entered into the blessedness of the ancestral land, he is in better position to appreciate the suffering of man (P.66).

According to Owete and Iheanacho (2009), ancestors are the departed members of the family who still maintain close relationship with their survivors. Though, no longer physically visible, yet their participation in family and patrilineage matters of the group are practically felt (P. 120). According to them, there are two categories of ancestors in West Africa namely, the living dead and the ghost. The former, according to them, are the group of departed members of the family and kin unit members that can be remembered by their names and survivors. They are normally numerous; yet, they are remembered by their names and physiognomy identity while the latter, according to them, are the departed people, whose identity is in the fast fading memory of the living, or even forgotten. Those who know them have equally died. The names of this category of ancestors as they further noted can be remembered, but their physique cannot be inferred or described (P. 121).

As for their qualities, it is not all who have departed become ancestors rather, there are qualities or attributes that qualify the departed to be an ancestor. To become an ancestor first, one must have children (i.e. parenthoods), for Owete and Iheanacho, this is important because it is the children that perpetuate the 'existence' of the father, grandfather, great-grandfather, etc. According to them, it is not even merely having children, but at least a male child. This is why procreation as they further noted are almost norms for actualizing man's physical essence, union and fulfillment in group life-family, kindred and community. According to them, perpetual bachelorhood is discouraged, abhorred and looked upon with disdain, as a condition that is capable of facilitating the extinction of a kin group and, an ancestral lineage (P. 121).

Following closely is advanced age. For Owete and Iheanacho (2009) the departed man must have lived a long life. Such longevity according to them is believed to be a manifestation of the individual's good relation with the gods of the land. For them, this is against the background of the people's belief, that death does not ordinarily strike, especially with young people as its victim. Death at such stage of live according to them, come as a result of sin committed against supernatural beings, or as a result of sorcery, and evil hands at work. Therefore, for one to live to an advanced age, as they further noted portend that he has not committed

offence (s) against supernatural beings, and by extension is in good terms with his neighbours (pp. 121-122).

In addition to this is performance of burial rites. The funeral rites that precede ancestorhood, according to Owete and Iheanacho (2009), are in two phases; those performed before interment and the post interment rites, popularly called 'second burial.' For them, all are required for ancestorhood status. According to them it is a common belief among West African societies that it is the full performance of the second burial rites that send the departed 'home,' and in dignified peace.

Following this is good life. For them, this is important because a man who lived a bad life is not given not only normal and decent funeral rites, but also not propitiated as such. But in recent time, this factor according to them is somehow being played down on, as result of modem influences as the wealthy is always remembered and propitiated by his children, irrespective of his life. Even at that, it is the good according to them that is more often remembered and propitiated by the entire ancestral lineage, especially in the group and community assembly. In many West African societies, an ancestor as they further noted must not therefore, die of mysterious disease, suicide and many other circumstances that are abhorred by the given community. Above all, a complement to good life as they finally noted is 'good death' (pp. 122-123).

With regard to their relationship with the living, they are believed to be closely related to their families and kindred, retaining their status and responsibilities as heads and parts of the institutions as they were while living as human beings on earth. Here, it follows that death is conceived as a mere extension of live on earth, to the hereafter as spirit. In this new state, communication and communion, with the ancestors are only possible at the spiritual realm; while in the spiritual world, the ancestors still show concern and interest in the affairs of their living members. Equally, the living members still see them as older people from whom their life on earth began and have meaning. Also, the ancestors are not only close to their relations, they are also aware of things that will bring progress to their people and those that could be in the contrary. Here, the new state of being, place the order relatives who have departed, closer to God and other spiritual entities. Here, the

living used them, and they readily act as intermediaries between them (the living), and the spiritual world which embrace all spiritual forces including God.

Ancestors also feed the living back with information from the unseen supersensible world. The departed are therefore the closet link the living people have to the network of communication at the spiritual level of man's absence. In addition to giving the departed full burial rites, the living relations, try to appease and heed to their instructions. Yet, they are remembered and invited at gatherings, to come, share, and commune with the living, especially when the summon is at the ancestral shrine while the living try to know from them the 'state of things' through divination, the forebears could seized, somebody to prophecy their wish and resolve on family or kindred issues.

They also reveal themselves through other manifestations and signs, like in dreams and totems. Some medicine man claims to have received knowledge of medicine and healing from ancestors through this process (Owete and Iheanacho, 2009, P. 124). As for their names, they are called different names in different African societies. They are called *baba-nla* in Yoruba, they Igbo called them *ndi-iche*, and they are called *samanfo* in Akan (Ghana). Also in Kalabari they are called *duen* and in Ashanti of Ghana, they are known as a samanfo. For the Isoko they are known to be *esemo* (Tasie, 2009, P. 43).

As for whether the ancestors are worshipped or venerated, here, they are not worshipped, rather they are venerated. To the West African people, the reason for this is that death is not the end of one's interaction with his relatives, rather it is a change to "another being" different from the living, yet, maintain, participate and share in the activities of their kins-family and kindred. They have departed, yet, are "practically felt" by their survivors. It is in this light that ancestors are recognized, respected, and venerated. As for the reason for the veneration of ancestors, here, the veneration of ancestors among West African societies encourages and strengthens unity among the living members of their families and patriline kingship group. For instance, one's ancestral lineage, according to Owete and Iheanacho, (2009) is a binding force for them, people born to such kin group are "brothers and sisters". No matter the degree of quarrel between members ofa

kindred, assembly before their ancestral shrine as they further noted can never be affected.

Explaining further, people under one ancestral lineage as they noted share in common-legends and myths; sacred days; totems; agricultural seasons; as well as land and timber (pp.128-129). Apart from this, the annual sacrifice (obligatory sacrifice) to commemorate the beginning of the ancestor festival in many West African communities brings kinsmen and relations together for a re-union. To the living, sharing the flesh of the annual sacrifices together for them is like being fed by one mother with on dish and spoon.

Kinsmen in the diaspora, those at home, and the departed as they noted come together this day, at the ancestral shrine. Having come together, dialogue is possible as the living dialogue amongst themselves on one hand while the living join voice to speak to their departed members on the other hand. This flow of communication is characterized by recall of memorable events, and reference to the life and history of the lineage, in which both the living and the departed are embraced. In addition, the blood of the sacrificial victims poured before ancestral shrines which is a symbol ofbond reaffirms the living's commitment to maintaining the values of the lineage. Thus, it also serves as renewal of covenant-of cordial relationship between the living and the departed (Owete and Iheanacho, 2009, pp. 128-129).

**The Practice of Magic and Medicine**

By definition, magic is an attempt by man to tap and control the supernatural resources of the universe for his own benefit. Medicine on the other hand, is the art of using the available forces of nature to prevent disease, to restore and to preserve health according to African traditional belief, magic and medicine are inseparably related. In other words, they have come features in the sense that: Both are controlled by the same divinity. E.g. among the Yoruba we have Sonyin and Igbos the Agwu as the tutelary divinity of magic and medicine. Both arose out of man's urgent need to conquer his physical environment. Ritual is a common element in both magic and medicine. It is believed by people that magic and medicine can lost their power if certain taboos are broken among other things. Magic and medicine will not keep their powers if taken to the pit toilet, touched

after sex, or by menstruating women, or by an unauthorized persons. Both magic and medicine can be purchased or learnt through apprenticeship. Nearly anything can be used in preparing them: animals and plants, skulls, skins, bones, dried bats, lizards, porcupine quills, these are believed to have occultic powers that can be used to achieve men's ends (Peters, 2009, pp. 45-46).

**Attributes of God**

These are words or phrases ascribing traits, qualities or characteristics to the Supreme Being. Considering God's attributes, we are concerned with what people really think God is, what they consider to be His nature and what they believe to be His role and position in relation to the world and supersensible reality (Ugwu and Ugwueye, 2004, p. 34).

**Below are some of these attributes of God:**

**God as Creator**

It is the believe of the African peoples that the universe and all that are in it were created by the Supreme Being (God). But in creation, the Supreme Deity delegated certain divinities to carry out specific tasks. E.g. in Yoruba, Olodumare (God) delegated created function to Orisala Nla. Also, in Igbo, God is known as Chineke (The God that creates, 'Chukwukere (God created), in Yoruba He is Elda (creator), or owner of creation. These expressions, for the Africans really portray God as the creator of the universe.

**God is Unique**

For the Africans, God is one and there is no one close to His Supremacy. Because of His uniqueness there is no vivid image or pictoral painting of Him. He is completely in His own class. The divinities own their existence to Him and they have no absolute power of their own. Which means that He is not of the same rank and file with the divinities.

**God is King**

His Kingship is unique and adorable in majesty. He is known in Yoruba as *Oba-run'* which means the King who dwells in heaven. The Igbo call Him "*Eze-Eluigwe* (King of heaven), as a king, He is also regarded as the Sovereign ruler of the

universe. Since He is all powerful, He is seen as one who rules and controls the universe absolutely in His almightiness.

**God is Judge**

For the Africans God is seen as the impartial Judge who dispenses and punishes sin. The Yoruba see Him as *Oba-AdakeDajo* meaning, The King who dwells above, who executes judgement in silence. While the Igbo normally show that God is judge in these expressions, *ChinweIkpe* "Gods owns judgement or "judgment belongs to God", *Chinwe Obo* meaning vengeance belongs to God.

All these clearly affirm that in African society, God is conceived as the Supreme Judge that has the final order and say over everything (Peters, 2009 pp. 49-50).

**God is Immortal**

The Africans believe that God should live forever to satisfy the human soul. If He ceases to live, nothing else well exist, so He is an ever-living reality. His praise name in Yoruba is *Oyigiyi-Ola-Aiku*, meaning, the Mighty, Immovable Rock that never dies. In Kono, they know Him as *Yataa* implying God's immortal nature and *meketa* meaning the Everlasting One, who remains and does not die. So all this implies that each generation find Him living (PP.49-51).

**God is Transcendent**

God is seen as being far-removed from the world He created, for instance, during sacrifice, the essence of invocation is to call the attention of the far-removed God to the place of sacrifice. That is why the Yoruba call Him "*Oba-Orun*" which means 'King above' or the King of heaven.

**God is Immanent**

In spite of the fact, that God is far-removed from the world He created, yet, He is immanent; His love, providence and power fill and envelope the whole universe as if He is just beside and close by (Ugwu and Ugwueye, 2004, P. 35).

**The Importance of Studying African Traditional Religion**

Reasons why we study African traditional religion are:

- To correct the notions and impressions made about African Traditional Religion by some foreign investigators and armchair researchers who used wrong terminologies to qualify African Religion.
- To make comparison with other religions to show that all religions share some basic elements-belief in God, man's separation from Him and the way back to God. The end, which is the ultimate, also remains the same but the means of attainment are different.
- To make known the worldview of the Africans to the outside world to enable them understand the social and moral behaviours of Africans, which might seem strange.
- The study is essential for academic purpose. It will help enlighten the world on the rich cultural heritage of the people of Africa.
- To fulfil the essence of studying history, which is to known the past in order to get well married with the present so as to foretell the future very well.
- Studying African Traditional Religion will help Africans to reconstruct their past in order to understand the present and to effectively plan for the future in political, social, religious and economic sphere of life. It will help to project the distinctive personality of the African and this will help him in his search for self-assertion and self-determination.

It is important to study African Religion in order to let the world know that to the Africans, the spiritual world is so real and near that its-forces do inspire their visible world (Ugwu and Ugwueye, 2004, pp. 29-30).

**Symbols**

R. Schimidt (1913) opined that there has not been a generally accepted definition of what a symbol is. Scholars, theologians, and leaders of thought in various spheres of life, according to him, offer and articulate their own theories about what they consider as a definition of symbol, and what each and everyone of them offers in most cases in coloured by his religious experience and philosophical leaning (p. 121). A Cohen (1974) defines symbols as objects, acts, relationships and linguistic formations that stand ambiguously for a multiplicity of meaning. This definition indicates that there are different symbolic forms and that it is possible for one symbolic form to be given several interpretations and these interpretations could

be given at different levels, depending on the level of the interpreter's consciousness and intelligence. According to him, what a particular object symbolizes for people "A" at time "A" may be different from that of people "B" in culture at time "B" and vice versa.

Benjamin Ray (1976) as cited in *"Ofo"*, Igbo Ritual Symbols, says that African traditional religious symbol are potent store house of information, and crucial factors in the activity field, the total of these ritual symbols, whether they be gods, ancestors, sacred actions or objects which make up the traditional universe, provide a network of symbolic forms uniting social, ecological and conceptual elements into locally bounded systems; to re-enact the deeds of the gods to become possessed by divinities to manipulate sacred worlds, is to conform experience to normative patterns of meaning, and thereby to control, and renew the shape and destiny of the world. For Kemdirim (1997) it means ritual symbol or sacred objects which are used for religious worship. According to him, as religious or sacred objects, symbols direct attention, awaken response and guide behaviour in dealing with realities too complex, intimate or otherwise in accessible to precise definition (p. 125). Similarly, symbol for Tasie (2013) is a word which has come to mean different things to different people and which for him is used in a wide variety of contexts. In the physical sciences, symbols according to Tasie are mere representations of ideas by the use of signs. In literature and art symbols are artistic inventions to express sensually ideas, emotions, attractions in place of realism (p.37), According to Webster's Dictionary (2007) defines symbol as something concrete that represents or suggest another thing that cannot in itself be pictured (p.276). Thus, symbols are therefore, something presented to the senses which stand for something else. They are not the actual things but have the character of making people have full conceptualization of the reality through a conscious association. That is why Anyacho (1994) in valency (1988) defines symbols as "something associated with something else that signifies or represents (p.21). They not only serve as a uniting factor among members of a religious group but also it helps the members of a religious group to identify themselves easily and fight for their faith (pp. 22 – 23).

According to Ejizu, C.I. (1986), religious symbols have aroused the greatest interest on account of their unique ability to manifest the sacred, to encompass a multitude of structurally coherent meaning, and to reveal the continuity of human existence and cosmic structure Nabofa, (1994), defines symbols as "an over expression of what is behind the veil of direct perception" According to him, it is quite usual for a perceiver to express his inner experience, sight or visions and mystical or religious experience in symbols. Words, myths, proverbs, parables, icons-masks as he further noted are powerful and enduring symbols for conveying religious truth (p. 4). Onigu (1979) sees symbol as "agents which are impregnated with messages and with invitation to conform and to act when decoded in their social and cultural context, they are found to have both cognitive and emotional meaning" (p.33). Symbol can be defined as a mark or character used as a conventional representation of an object, function or process, thing that represents or stands for something else, a material object representing abstract. A symbol is a mark, sign or word that indicates, signifies or represents an idea, object or relationship. Here, symbols allow people to go beyond what is known or seen by creating linkages between otherwise different concepts and experiences. Communication as a matter fact is achieved through the use of symbols. For instance, on maps, blue lines often represent rivers, while red rose often symbolizes love and compassion; numerals are symbols for numbers, as letters of an alphabet may be symbols for certain phonemes (en.wikipedia.wikis symbol Retrieved 9th March, 2025).

Thus, symbol may be further defined as something that stands for or suggests something else by reason of relationship, association, convention or accidental resemblance especially a visible sign of something invisible, an arbitrary or conventional sign used in writing or printing relating to a particular field to represent operations, quantities, elements, relations or qualities, an object or act representing something in the unconscious mind that has been represented; an act, sound or object having cultural significance and the capacity to excite or objectify a response (www.merrian-webster.com Extracted 9th March, 2025).

According to Sam Onyeidu, (2001), symbols could be defined as something that represents something else. As for Ngozi (2005), symbols are representative

concepts, objects, ideas or images which express and signify something else other than that which is perceived or observed in reality mediums or channels which act on behalf of other things. As for its characteristics, symbol has a multiplicity of meaning in the sense that most symbols do not resemble the objects they are intended to symbolize, while some of them could express more than one idea at a time. While some symbols are visible and concrete and can be seen and handled, others are less visible. This explains why symbols are often difficult to decode and interpret whereas only those who make and use such symbols could know their value and meaning. The use of symbols is extensive in religion. This is mainly because religious experience deals with two worlds at the same time, the world of space and time where we live and move, and the unseen world which cannot be easily located. Here, religious symbols serve as illustrations, pointers and bridges through which religious people participate simultaneously in both words. Also, religious beliefs and practices involve numerous no-concrete elements that cannot be empirically demonstrated. Such elements include God, gods, ancestors, angels, heaven and hell, ghosts, and so on. These elements are not visible and tangible, and so they are represented in religious symbols in order to create the avenue by which worshipers enter into a relationship with the supersensible world.

Symbolism varies from the religion to another. This also explains why important symbols in one religion could be meaningless to the adherents of another religion. For instance, in Christianity, the most significant symbols include the cross, baptisms, confirmation and the Lord's Super. To non-Christians, all these do not mean much; but for Christians they mean a lot. Similarly, Muslims regard the Kaaba, the Crescent, and the performance of ritual ablutions before prayers as sacred symbols. In African Traditional Religion, symbolism is more pronounced because the religion is replete with symbols of numerous deities, the ancestors, and cults objects. These symbols range from sticks and stones to real works of art. They include images and irons of different descriptions, carved sticks, and drawings of walls, horns and bones of animals, feathers of rare birds, and leaves of some sacred trees. These forms (i.e. symbols) whether they are human, animal, vegetable, or mineral are not regarded as God; they are symbols to make the presence of God and the ancestors felt in the place of worship (Onyeidu, 2005).

Consequently, symbols, whether they are religious or not have the same basic characteristics and functions. They are like hub which connect and link up religious ideologies, experiences and focus of the group (Ngozi, 2005). Without the use of symbols, it would have been impossible for human beings to have a religion, to understand, or comprehend their beliefs (p. 102). According to Beven. (1940), religion cannot dispense without symbols for its apprehension and expression (p. 15). Take away the symbols and there would be no religion worthy of the name. Indeed, the whole process of comprehension and description of religion is possible because we employ religious symbols.

**Misconception**

African traditional religion, as earlier noted, makes extensive use of symbols or cult-objects such as feathers and bones of sacred animals, leaves of sacred trees, irons, carved images, etc. For the Africans, these symbols represent spiritual entities or beings believed to be real and make sense to the people. In the real sense, worship is not directed to these symbols. Rather, the spiritual beings or entities behind these symbols. In other words, they are not the final recipients of the worship and sacrifice rather the vehicles for approaching the spiritual beings the symbolize.

**Conclusion**

African traditional religion as earlier noted, makes extensive use of symbols. These symbols whether carved images, irons, sticks, bones and feathers of animals, leaves of sacred trees, etc. for the Africans represent spiritual entities or beings. But in the sense, worship is not directed to these symbols rather they are channels or vehicles of approaching the spiritual entities or beings they represent.

Therefore, to say that the Africans bows down to these cult objects is to misinterpret religious symbols for what they are intended to symbolize.

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