



Uluslararası Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi

The Journal of International Social Research

Cilt: 6 Sayı: 27

Volume: 6 Issue: 27

Yaz 2013

Summer 2013

www.sosyalarastirmalar.com Issn: 1307-9581

ART SYMBOLS AS MEANS OF COMMUNICATING RELIGIOUS CONCEPTS IN URHOBOTRADITIONAL SOCIETY

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Abstract

We examined in this paper that the usefulness of art as symbols in communication of religious thought in Urhobo. He describes human behaviour as symbolic behaviour as symbol is the universe of humanity. Symbols of religious art could help in achieving higher mystical exercise and spiritual velopment, such as divination, medication and education.

Keywords: Art Symbols, Religious Concept.

INTRODUCTION

This essay examines the usefulness of art as symbols in communication of religious thought in Urhobo. It may be misleading and wrong for one to state a definite time and point in history of mankind when and where man started to symbolize; rather it is safer to indicate that symbolization processes of mankind probably started through man's attempt to overtly express his series of inner religious experience in his culture. This is probably the reason why human beings have been described as cultural beings on the ground that they are symbol-using animals. For example, White says that, "all human behaviour consists of, or is dependent upon the use of symbols". He describes human behaviour as symbolic behaviour as symbol is the universe of humanity. It has been established that the non-symbolic behaviour of man such as yawning, stretching, coughing, crying and feeding are not peculiar to man but symbolic behaviour such as communication with articulate speech use of amulets, confession of sins, law-making, dreams, etc, are unique features which only man is capable of because as White puts it, symbolic behaviour is that of man There are varieties of symbols in existence and these are said to take many forms and have functions and meanings at various times and place. In the course of this essay, emphasis will be placed more on symbols that communicate religious concepts with particular reference to Urhobotraditional society. The Urhobo will be identified and some definitions of symbols will be examined to give insight to the problem. Relationship between symbols and religious will be discussed and some classification of symbolic importance of art objects will be attempted.

Political History of the Urhobo People the Urhobo territory lies within latitudes 6° and 51) North of the Equator and longitude 50, 40 and 6° 25 East of the Meridian of Greenwich This is the territory that could be referred to as Urhobo land in this paper. Urhobo territory is bounded on the West by the Itsekni, on the North by the Bini on the south by the Ijo, on the northeast by the Ukwani and on the east by the Isoko.

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The Urhobo people are not among the major language groups in Nigeria. They are therefore not well known as a veritable force to be reckoned with in national politics, as this probably accounts for the general neglect of Urhobo in economic and social distribution. The origin of the Urhobo is an unproven issue which affirms that they regard themselves as descendants from a common ancestor. The customary practice among the Urhobo is of a patrilineal inheritance, age-grade, social stratification, are reasons for one to believe that they are descendants from a common ancestor. Colonial intelligence reports indicate that the bulk of the Urhobo migrated into the Delta largely from Benin Kingdom in 1370 during the reign of Oba Egbeka¹.

What is symbol?

Of all the creatures of both the animals and vegetable kingdoms, man is the only one who possesses the creative powers in mental and psychic forms. It is true that animals and plants of all species, even the smallest of the microscopic creatures, have the powers to reproduce themselves through sexual processes but man possesses, in addition, the power to artificially create symbols. Man is the only creature that has the ability to reflect on his experience and express it with symbols. This creative power is part of the Divine consciousness within every human being and it is this element of divine consciousness which distinguishes man from all other living things.. Therefore memory, imagination and religious experience are the symbolizing functions of the human mind. Moreover, science, art, myths, dreams and rituals are all manifestations of symbols.

Symbols could be defined as “objects, acts, relationship or linguistic formations that stand 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. Thus what a particular object symbolises for people “A” at time “A” m be different from that of people “B” in culture at time “B” and vice versa.

According to Nabofa, a symbol could be defined as “an overt expression of what is behind the veil of direct perception 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 and masks are powerful and enduring symbols for conveying religious truth.

Onigu Otite 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” For example, the axe or the meteorite stones found in most of the cults of God and solar divinities in West Africa convey the meaning and idea about the wrath of God and it also shows the purity of God and His impartial justice. The sign of such artistic object reminds and urges the devotee to lead a pure and honest life of order to avoid the wrath of God.

In one of his contributions on what symbols are, Carl Jung says that “a symbol could be a term, a name or even a picture that we are familiar with in daily life. yet that possesses specific connotation in addition to its conventional and obvious meaning” While Morris Charles describes symbol as a sign that is produced by an interpreter and that acts as a substitute for some other signs for which it is synonymous” For instance, the wearing of a black dress by a widow in some parts of Africa is symbolic of bereavement.

As we can see from the various definitions, a symbol is something, (an idea, a sign a ritual art or a behavioural pattern) that stands as a means of communicating an inner essence.

With particular reference to traditional Urhobo society, symbolism has found spontaneous expression in several religious and secular processes. These expressions can be seen in religious emblems ideograms, icons, rituals, songs, prayers, myths, incantations, vows, customary behaviour and personifications The understanding of these symbols will help to

justify Mary Douglas's assertion that "Symbols especially those that manifest themselves in ritual context, aid us in selecting experiences for concentration, attention and creativity at the level of performance and can mysteriously help the co-ordination of brain and body" 10

Religious art could also represent a complex set of ideas at different levels which gives room to diverse theological doctrinal, philosophical interpretations Hence those in the field of social anthropology are concerned primarily with the public use of symbols and how to separate symbols and their referents so that they can describe the relationship between them. But those in liberal arts usually attempt to show how symbols are used to manipulate and how they actually influence the minds and behaviours of the believers.

In fact, it was the non-understanding of traditional African religious arts and symbols that partly contributed to the way in which some of the early Western scholars investigating African thought forms looked at the African indigenous beliefs in a derogatory manner. They branded the religious symbols as either objects of heathenism, paganism, idolatry, fetish or juju interpretations, which are couched in racial, and moral prejudice against the Africans

Relationship between Symbols and Religion

Like in every other academic investigation, the relationship between symbols and religion could be derived from the origin of religion. The two most essential elements of the origin of religion are experience and expression . The experience of religion is related to a confrontation with what Rudolf Otto calls the "Numinous or the unnamed something (with a clear overplus of meaning)which is in expressive or ineffable or too great or elusive for words to describe" During revelation, he says, "the numinous combines the attributes of that which causes a sense of awareness, eeriness, daunting self-abasement and inadequacy with that of attractive and often irresistible magnetism". This encounter has been described as divine revelation or mystical experience, which is the direct experience of God.

The expression of such experience which is religion, is what Alfred Whitehead describes as "the outward and visible sign of in inward an spiritual grace. This primary expression mainly clothes itself in the media of action, and words but partly in art"

Symbolic forms and processes are the principal media of expressing inner and emotional feeling resulting from religious experience. Thus symbols arise in the subconscious such as imagination, memory and perception. In this regard, ii Can be safely said that symbols of religious art are an overt expression of religious experience.

From the above explanation, we can say that the experience of religiot i is almost the same all over the world but the ways in which various people respond to their mystical experience may differ according to their level of consciousness, state of mind, physical and mental alertness, moral, geographical and social condition. This could also explain why we have different cultic symbols and processes all over the world.

We should therefore see symbols of Urhobo traditional religion as the overt expression (in the African context) Of the people's divine experience. These symbols result from the people's spiritual and psychic experience. A close study of any symbol of Urhobo traditional religious art will reveal that it is used to express an experience or as a concept associated with the founder. For instance, a man who experiences the purity and holiness of the divine (God) may decide to use a spotless white object to overtly represent that divine qualit he has experienced.

Artistic objects are used to link religious experience with its expression and it is in religious expression that we find most symbols in form of art, theology, myth and rituals of all kinds. In other words, worship and all other cultic activities are symbolic.

Nature of Religious Symbols

Recent anthropological studies among the pre-literate societies have revealed certain common properties or nature of religious symbols, such as the pervasiveness of symbols which

makes them relevant to life and the world in general and their ability to have many referents at once' This implies that the simplest symbols or ceremonies are charged with multiplicity of meanings about the and social relations of the people involved. Victor Turner uses the term "multi-vocality" to describe such symbols.

The history of symbolism, according to Aniela Jaffe, shows that everything can assume symbolic significance. For example, natural objects like stone, plants, animals, mountains and valleys, sun and moon, wind, water or man made things such as boat, cutlass or even numbers, triangle, cross, are all symbolic Jaffe says that man, unconsciously transforms object or forms into symbols, therefore endowing them with great psychological importance and expressing them in both his religion and visual art This is one of the reasons why the history of religion and art are interwoven.

In Urhobo traditional society, symbols can be classified into the following groups, namely, natural, artificial communication, artistic and ritualistic. Natural symbols are mainly the result of some past experiences or consciousness, for example, thunder and lightening are natural occurrences, which in Urhobo tradition symbolize the wrath of God.

Artificial symbols are created by an individual or a group to represent ideas. Such symbols usually relate to a believer's own experience. For example, among the Igbo of Nigeria, the Ofor (a ritual instrument and a staff of office) symbolizes authority and at the same time an earthly representative of the ancestors of the people. Other examples are the sacred spear of the Zulu people and the golden stool of the Ashanti.'

Communicative symbols are those that are used specifically to communicate knowledge and information. We are aware that all symbols communicate, hut this category includes those which are intended purposely to convey concepts, ideas and emotions. For instance, when young palm fronds are placed on the front of a moving vehicle in Urhobo, they invoke in the minds of the perceiver the presence of a corpse which is believed to be a sacred entity.

Ritualistic symbols are used to instruct and indoctrinate the devotees about the article of their faith and it is mostly liturgical. For example, in many parts of Urhobo, young palm fronds symbolize sacredness and when used to cordon off a place, it means that such an area has been declared "holy" and set aside from the profane.

However, artistic symbols are those that are used for aesthetic purpose. This is a common feature in most shrines in Africa. In Urhobo, religion permeates all segments of life, and all artistic symbols are involved in ritualistic activities.

Some art objects with religious symbols

In Urhobo tradition, symbolic art objects and processes are used in expressing religious ideas and beliefs. Objects which are used to communicate religious truth include:

A) Cowries: They symbolize prosperity. Cowries are among the cultic items found in the shrine. It is the belief of Urhobo people that the water divinity releases such wealth from the sea for those who believe. The importance of cowries cannot be underestimated in African traditional society. In fact, among Urhobo, no traditional marriage and burial rites is complete without the use of cownes. Cowries symbolize the brides wealth which the man pays during marriage rites; they also symbolize the money the departed soul will use to transport itself to the spiritual world. Moreover, they symbolize piety and ritual purity.

B) White chalk (Kaolin)

This symbolizes the purity, and holiness of the object of worship. It also depicts the purity, piety, and faithfulness required of the devotee. In view of its purity, lumps of it kept in a shrine for a considerable length to time, are believed to attract sacred power from the divine

being in the shrine. It is believed in Urhobo that each time a divinity or an ancestor visits the shrine set up for it, its spiritual power would infuse the whole place and purify all the materials that are kept in the place, especially those that are in the "holy of holies" and this includes the white chalk. Hence, it is believed that the white chalk is capable of cleansing all ills and impurities from the believers. It also protects them from all forms of negative forces and influences. For these reasons, chalk is always used to anoint devotees, given to them to lick and keep to protect them from impending danger.

Thus, to the believer the white chalk is not ordinary white clay but a sacred spiritual force

C) Palm fronds: Traditionally, they symbolize sacredness and they are used to mark and consecrate entrances to shrines. Whenever a young palm frond is spread, it depicts a place that has been specifically marked, consecrated and set aside for a divine being. The marking serves as a warning to non-initiates to keep away from the place. It is also believed that the young palm fronds are garment of some divinities. In some parts of Urhobo, whenever *ipliri* is worshipped, palm fronds are freely used.

Modernity has led to the use of textile material instead of palm fronds in most shrines colour chosen depends on the divine being. Among the Urhobo, white, red, scarlet and green are commonly used. Black which is a favourite colour of the disgruntled spirits employed by sorcerers to perpetrate wicked acts is seldom used.

D) Thunder Bolt: An axe and some stones are the items that are usually believed to be thunderbolt in the different cults of solar divinities in West Africa. They are common features in most shrines of divinities of the Aghweran ran among the Urhobo. These emblems symbolize the wrath of God. The belief is that it is with these instruments that God expresses His wrath through lightening and thunder on the wicked. These symbols also overtly express the ethical aspects of the solar divinity.

E) Iron: It symbolizes the power of justice, fair-play and war. It is associated with Ogun the tutelary divinity of hunters, blacksmiths, goldsmiths, drivers and all workers of iron and steel. No hunter goes on an expedition in Africa without paying due regard to the divinity; no driver in Yoruba, for example, considers himself safe until offering is made to Ogun. The symbolic importance of iron in African society cannot be underestimated; it is used to witness a condemnation pact between two persons by kissing it. At the law-court, adherents of African religion swear to it instead of the Bible or Quran. It is generally believed that anybody who swears falsely on the iron cannot survive judgments.

Significance of Symbols as means of Communication

Communication is simply the sharing of meaningful ideas, thoughts and feelings (information) through a channel between persons' This could be applied in form or inter-personal communication which is the most important factor that generated the emergence of symbol. This is so because people do not only communicate their thoughts and feelings or experience to others but also to themselves, and this is usually done through symbols.

Through communication, symbols could help to maintain order and coherence and this is achieved largely by the use of art objects. This in turn could be as a powerful instrument for indoctrination or as a tool for impressing religious dogma in the minds of the devotees, thereby making it easy for the leaders to organize their followers in an orderly manner.

Symbols also serve as agents of identification. For example, different individuals who profess the same faith who had not known each other before wearing an emblem that belongs to particular cult or sect can easily identify each other belonging to the same faith. In other words, members are identified welded together by religious symbols.

Symbols of religious art can also be used as means of preserving knowledge of historical and religious occurrence. So, when we say that Urhobo traditional religion is written

everywhere it is because every traditional Urhobo community is replete with symbols of the religion and those who have ears to hear and eyes to see can notice them in cultural context.

Symbols, especially those connected with cultural festivals, which reenact historical events, are useful instruments for communication to the younger generations about the sect they belong. This is another means of preserving culture.

Finally, symbols of religious art could help in achieving higher mystical exercise and spiritual development, such as divination, medication and education. For example, a diviner who uses water, mirror, lobes of kola nut or cowries during divination, usually develops higher spiritual intellectual ability to solve human problem which a normal man, cosmologies and cosmogonies context.

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