

A CRITIQUE OF SYMBOLISM IN AFRICAN RELIGION AND SOCIO-CULTURAL WORLDVIEW: THE SOUTHWEST NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

African religion is replete with symbolism. This can be observed in the daily usage of both religious and common languages. Notably, symbolism in this context is comprehensive and conveys more than its basic meaning. It encompasses the use of religious language in a highly symbolic manner. This study explores the reality of symbolism and its profound role in the socio-cultural existence of southwestern Nigerians. To achieve factual accuracy, the study delves into the cosmological conception of the Yoruba people. Philosophical critique serves as the research tool, allowing for a rigorous analysis of the reality and application of symbolism within the community. Secondary data were sourced from archival materials, journals, and other scholarly works to reinforce the study's intent. Findings reveal that the African, particularly Yoruba, religious worldview is deeply entrenched in symbolism, which holds significant value for the people's existence. Furthermore, symbolism in Yoruba religious practices and socio-cultural worldviews is well established. The study also addresses critiques from some Western scholars who argue that Africans lack an understanding of religious symbolism. Contrary to these claims, findings highlight that religious language, artistic representations, and communal beliefs function as vital mediums for preserving historical continuity, moral values, and spiritual connectivity. This research contributes to a broader understanding of African religious epistemology and underscores the intellectual depth of Yoruba religious traditions.

Keywords: Symbolism, Religious Language, Social Life And Culture

Introduction

This study examines symbolism and the use in the religion, particularly the religious language of the Yoruba of southwest Nigeria and also in the changing socio-cultural worldview of the people. Hence, the indigenous religion of the Yoruba and their social lives were subjected to critical examination in the context of their use of symbolism. The essence is to evaluate the great value of symbolism to the Yoruba with intent of showcasing it for possible global acceptance. This study further seeks to contribute to the existing study on symbolism. The various use of symbols in religion and in the social lives of the people were interrogated for a vivid conception of their thinking on symbolism. The research method adopted in this study is basically philosophical, hence issues were raised and critically examined. Scholarly materials, mostly journals that are relevant were consulted. The study comes up with the finding that symbolism and its use is germane to socio-cultural existence of the Yoruba. The study further discovers that the use of symbol tends to capsule information – make them vivid and concise, the very reason why the use is rampant among the people.

Background to the Study

One cannot but confess to the fact that the inspiration to research in this area of African scholarship is drawn from Matthew Schoffeleers (1928-2011). His astuteness in decades of scholarly historical presentation of the Malawian and South African religions and cults, especially in a very symbolic panorama, is splendid. The most impressive aspect of Schoffeleers is his orthodox Catholic background, a tradition which he is inclined to, and in spite of which he endeavoured to consistently research into African religion and cults which normally would be considered as sacrilegious to Catholics. As a religious anthropologist, he actually brought to bear, his training on the scientific study of people, their societies, and cultures in the discourse of African religion. The inspiration from Schoffeleers, to a very large extent, eliminates the age-long fear of criticism of a professing clergyman such as the researcher, meandering about African religion. Van Binsbergen, in his 'In memoriam: Matthew Schoffeleers, (2011: 255-258), has it that in the beginning of Schoffeleers's missionary career, he explored, with painful but productive results, the extent to which one could identify with the African form of religion with the attendant symbols and still remain within the Roman Catholic Orthodoxy and Church hierarchy.

This study on Symbolism in African religion, therefore, in following Schoffeleers, endeavours to make a scholarly and historical investigation of perceivable objects of symbolism in African religion, even in an experiential manner, not minding the religious commitment of the scholar. It is important to also note that this endeavour is necessitated by the changing world-view of the Yoruba environment in terms of religious belief and value. In the pre-colonial era, the Yoruba world-view was permeated by purely indigenous ritual practices, worship and the belief in the reality of metaphysical entities. The era of colonialism however came with the emergence of Christianity and the introduction of Pentecostalism in the early 19th century, a period which is adjudged to have a profound impact on the cosmology, religion and the entire socio-cultural world-view of the Yoruba race as attested to by Osun, (2012: 27-38). Christianity actually began to have its root in the Nigerian shore as from the mid-18th century. The Methodist mission was the first to come to Nigeria in the year 1842, through Thomas Birch Freeman. Next was the arrival of the Christian Missionary Society (CMS) in 1943, led by Rev. Henry Townsend and Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther. The year 1846 witnessed the emergence of the Baptist mission in Nigeria, under the leadership of Rev. Bowen. The Presbyterian Church of Scotland also came to Nigeria in 1846 through Rev. Hope Waddel, (cf Alokun, 2010:6-9 and Ademakinwa, 1971: 15-28). The impact of these mission groups on the indigenous religious outlook of the Yoruba society was minimal, because of their cold liturgy and form of worship, until the introduction of Pentecostalism in Nigeria.

The year 1918 marked the emergence of Pentecostalism with its radical innovation to the practice of Christianity. The emphasis of the advocates of Pentecostalism is the efficacy of the power of prayer to solve diverse problems. This, in the context of a very aggressive attack of the Pentecostal Christians during this era, on the native religion marks the period out as a time of uncomfortable confluence of religious traditions, more so that at a period earlier, Islam, which was also very much unfriendly to the indigenous religion had been introduced to the Yoruba area of Nigeria. The religion and the sociocultural existence of the Yoruba which constitute the data upon which this study is based upon is, therefore, one that has been influenced by the existence of the emerging Pentecostalism and Islamism.

Symbolism in African Religious Language

A thorough examination of language and religion in the context of symbolism remains the focus of study at this stage. One may necessarily call to mind the various theoretical approaches of religious language. In this regard, A. J. Ayer and other scholars of logical positivism posit verification of religious languages – that religious languages could not be sustained under verification theory. Anthony Flew maintains the position that religious languages are false. Ludwig Wittgenstein however, believe in the 'use theory', that the meaning of religious words or language are sustainable in their use. This study follows the theory of Wittgenstein. An instance could be made out of the word 'God'. The word God is a mere symbolic representation. Take for example, the use of the letters G-O-D used to represent the conception of a Supreme Being, and how the meaning of the word 'God' is now subsumed in the usage. To a logical positivist like A. J. Ayer, (Evans, 1985: 141-144), the three lettered word 'G-O-D is meaningless, but by conventional useage, the word has assumed the meaning Supreme Being – the 'Being than which nothing greater can be conceived'; the Being which has come to be known as the Supreme Being. Across the ages, the problem of meaning has been the most outstanding issue in religious language. Ludwig Wittgenstein, in Onimhavo (2006) has it that the meaning of a word subsists in the use of that particular word. Oshitelu (2002: 53) also succinctly subscribes to Wittgenstein's submission. This has been the power behind the use of religious language among the Yoruba. The very crucial question here is, to what extent could it be adjudged that religious languages assumes the dimension of symbolism among the Yoruba? It is, in this context, argued that in a situation wherein a word or group of words that supposedly should be meaningless now assume meaning in the hearth of the majority of the people, the function of symbolism could not be underestimated.

It is interesting to note through this study that religious language, particularly African religious language is replete with verbal or audio symbolic representations. There are a lot of words with exoteric use and which are highly symbolic in the African traditional religion, the meanings of which remain in the circle of the respective religious groups. Take for examples, words such as *awo* and *ògbèrì*. *Awo* means secret in its literary use but it conveys a deeper meaning to insiders of secret societies. Among some metaphysical groups, for example, the *Ògbóni* fraternity, it is used to refer to members of the particular group. Members of the group are called *awo* and outsiders are called *ògbèrì*, meaning ordinary or common people. *Ògbèrì*, to cult members, connotes more than a mere common man. It means people who lack visionary ability; people who could not see beyond the ordinary; people that are beclouded with ignorance. More than being mere ordinary people, the use of the word *ògbèrì* connotes that such people are even powerless and unprotected and are vulnerable to attack by metaphysical entities.

Another word is *èbùré* which literarily means plea. Among the Yoruba of southwest Nigeria, the word is also commonly used within the cultic circle. The common words for plea among the people are *èbè* and *èbùré* but *èbùré* is often reserved for cultic use. They say '*jèbùré awo olùgbebe*'. By interpretation, it means 'we are begging you in the name of the cultic cord that binds us together, please forgive'. Plea in this world-view carries a deeper meaning than the usage of *èbè* which also means plea in the ordinary sense. Here, the image and symbol of the cultic cord of unity are at the fore. It must, however, be mentioned that in some very rare occasions, the plea might not be productive. This is especially so when terrible metaphysical beings such as witches are involved. The foregoing discussion on religious language could be advanced further that religious languages carry certain measure

of supernatural power. This is made sure through the verbal use of words, imagery and symbols, carefully selected and combined together to achieve a particular speech rhythm in a way to invoke a particular reaction. Language in the context of religion is used as a means to control nature. Human language is derived from human experience. When it is, however, used to talk about things or objects that are outside the scope of human experience, there arises the question that 'is religious language still meaningful'? At this point, to a religious man, it is not the meaning of religious language that matters, but its potency and value.

In this perspective, Mbiti (1969: 179), in his *African Religion and Philosophy* has it that 'there is a mystical power in words, especially, those of a senior to a junior one, in terms of age, socio status, or that of official position'. Mbiti has it further that 'the words of parents, for example, carry power when spoken to children'. Such words, to Mbiti, could cause good fortune, success, peace, sorrow or blessing, especially when spoken in a moment of crisis. It is important to note that religious language is often used among the Yoruba of southwest Nigeria in a manner that evokes potency and efficacy in a way to bring about the desired results. It has to do with the use of words in a special circumstance that man's ego in manipulating nature, or change the course of nature to a desired dimension would be achieved. In this world-view, it is expedient to mention such concepts as *èpè* (curse), *ìre* (blessing), *àyájó* (a kind of curse that traces the antecedents of issues in the distant past to make it effective), *àdàbì* (it literally means 'except'). An instance is the pronouncement of an aggrieved mother to her child that 'the child will only prosper in life except the child did not suck her breast when the child was young).

In the frame-work of the foregoing discussion, Oduyoye (1983: 203) in her 'Potent Speech' quotes Maquet that 'by means of certain words... Man believes that he can acquire a larger share of the power that permeates the universe and can use it for his own end'. Such words are effective because they are charged with power. In this panorama, Oduyoye, in a very symbolic manner, conveys powerfully, the meaning of the Yoruba word *dandan* which literally means it has to be. She made use of three words to drive home the meaning of *dandan*. The words are: *ofo* which connotes authority among the Igbo of Southeast Nigeria, *àse* which also connotes authority among the Yoruba of Southwest of Nigeria and the *edon* with the same connotation of authority among the Yoruba Ogboni/Osugbo secret society groups.

Oduoye has it that the same undertone of 'power of compulsion' dominates the use of the three words – *ofo*, *àse* and *edon*. They essentially imply that the request or prayer, in the context of their use, even if such request is negative, as a matter of compulsion, must be granted. *Ofo*, to an Igbo man, is a symbol of ritual authority and also the emblem of both political and religious authorities. Whoever holds the *ofo* among the Igbo symbolically represents a continuation of the authority of the ancestors and the deities. If the holder, in a moment of crisis, invokes a curse on an erring member of the society or group, it is believed that the curse is potent and will achieve the desired devastating result. Political and headship authority across the grades and hierarchies among the Igbo of Southeast Nigeria are made sure and are accorded the desired obedience and respect through the use of *ofo*. This is because people know that whoever holds the *ofo* holds the judicial and the administrative power in trust as a representative of the ancestors, deities and even *Chukwu* the Supreme Deity.

The same way, it is believed that *àse* which is the power of the spoken word among the Yoruba is highly potent and could produce a very devastating result. To curse among the Yoruba is *sé èpè*. The phrase '*sé èpè*', however, has its root in the word *àse* which is

interpreted as *dandan*. *Edon*, the anthropomorphic brass of the *ògbóni* cult with a symbol of pair of tongs... the handle of which bears a human image is also, essentially the symbol of *dandan* 'compulsion' (Oduoye:1983). In essence, whatever pronouncement made by the group becomes authority. In that regard, the *ogboni* fraternity is a symbol of dread and respect among the Yoruba. In that world-view, the members occupy the exalted position of leadership in the society and they do act as check on the entire leadership of the community.

This study is a model or template for further research work, especially in the areas of spoken words in the context of power. Scholars of African religion such as Mbiti (1969: 97), Idowu (1973: 189-190), and Awolalu and Dopamu (1979: 240-246) admit the belief that there is power in words. The submission of this study is that if the concept of power in the spoken words is a believable notion, then it must be further investigated and implored for the good of mankind. There are many socio-cultural problems besetting a country like Nigeria. Such problems should be tackled even if it has to be by metaphysical means (an effective use of religious language).

Symbolism in the Context of Yoruba Religious Practice and Socio-cultural World-view

Religious language is not the only habitat of symbolism among the Yoruba of southwest Nigeria. It appears that many African writers are of the opinion that the whole religious world-view of Africans is replete with symbolism. Nwako's work, in *Traditional Religion in West Africa* (1983: 198), appears to corroborate this assertion. He writes in his 'Art in Traditional African Religion' that 'the tendency to use art and art objects in his worship is not peculiar to the African. It is the natural human urge to give the best to the gods'. He has the opinion further that that is the reason why worked objects in varying forms, including masks are used in public shrines, family and personal shrines and in cults and secret societies.

Based on the fore-going, it is considered right by this study to affirm that a scholarly use of symbolism to dig deep into the history and anthropology of a people, particularly when it has to do with their religious world-view and value is just appropriate. This is because symbolism has the propensity to bridge the gap between two different worlds, in this context, the present contemporary world and the past, ancient world of the Yoruba of Southwest Nigeria. Recent scholarship further explores the symbolic dimensions of African religious practices. Olupona (2014) argues that African religious symbolism is not merely aesthetic but deeply theological and existential, serving as a bridge between the metaphysical and the material worlds. Peel (2016) critiques early Western anthropological interpretations, which often misunderstood African religious expressions as primitive or lacking abstract theological depth. He asserts that Yoruba religious symbolism, particularly in the context of *Egúngún* (masquerade), reflects a sophisticated engagement with ancestral presence and metaphysical reality.

It is pertinent at this point to examine the concept of *egúngún* (masquerade) in the Yoruba anthropological world-view. Masquerades are masked and appear in a kind of special regalia that cover their whole bodies. They constitute dance and entertaining religious cum cultural groups. There is, however, more to the concept of *egúngún* than mere dance and entertainment. The concept of *egúngún* has a very deep religious connotation. *Egúngún* connotes the ancestral veneration. The notion of masquerade is believed by the Yoruba to represent the presence of the departed ancestors. When the masquerades dance about and entertain people, more than a mere entertainment, the Yoruba believes that such masquerades represent the presence of their departed fore-fathers. As a result of that

thinking, the people will make their requests, which they believe that their fore-fathers will attend to.

The discussion above could be supported by the opinion of Adedeji (1983: 117) when he writes that the worship of the ancestors by the Yoruba is based on a firm belief that the spirit of human beings never dies, it will continue to influence the life of the community from another sphere after it has left the physical body. This is the fact that Idowu (1967: 237) states in respect of the 'masquerade', when he writes that by creating the masquerade of his late father and setting him up as an *Òrìsà* to be worshipped, *Alààfin Sàngo* reformed the Yorùbá funeral ceremony with a firm belief that the dead still lives. He thereby introduces a new element into ancestral worship, namely: the concept of reincarnation in a materialized form – a robed figure or masquerade⁵. This same fact has earlier been expressed by Lucas (1948: 378) in his concept of *isèkú* – bringing the spirit of the deceased to the homestead.

A symbolic use of the concept of community in African religion and socio-cultural phenomena is very important to this study. The sense of community and humane living are highly cherished values of traditional African life. For traditional Africans, the community is basically sacred with a deep religious undertone. The community, in its sacred phenomenon, is surrounded by several religious forms and symbols. In modern African urban cities, community loyalty of one's extended family and village continues to exert a solid hold over people who live away from the communities of their home towns.

Mbiti (1969) underscores the importance of the community among traditional Africans. In his words, the individual in Africa does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes existence to other people, including those of the past generations and his contemporaries. Whatever happens to the individual is believed to happen to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am". This, to Mbiti is a cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man as revealed through the symbol of community. Within the concept of community, everyone, male and female, young and old, able body and disabled is relevant. Everyone is sure of love, protection, care and sense of belonging. Whatever happens to one happens to all.

Perhaps, it is relevant within the context of the discussions on the African concept of community to discuss the notion of the Yoruba word called *àkòdì* – a form of African communal living, which symbolizes love, peace, togetherness and peaceful co-existence. *Àkòdì* is a Yoruba word that depicts a people's practical living of total acceptance. The word, in itself, does not seem to be of much value until the concept it stands for is adequately examined and exposed. This is, therefore, an attempt to show the concept embedded by the *àkòdì* system and to recommend the principle of total acceptance that it stands for, as a necessary and possible in-road to peace. The spirit behind the Yoruba system of *àkòdì* is, therefore, that of love, unity, tolerance, acceptability and mutual peace.

To trace the etymology or root meaning of the word *àkòdì*, the word has to be broken into *ako* and *odi*. *Ako* means 'hard' or 'male' and *odi* means wall or boundary. Thus, the two syllables *ako* and *odi* when joined together becomes *àkòdì* which could literally be interpreted as tough and sturdy, as to be able to stand the strain of weather and the test of time. From the concept representation, the meanings portrayed by *ako* and *odi* are all contained in what *àkòdì* stands for. The physical structure of *àkòdì* and its architectural configuration shows that the concepts represented by the component words, *ako* and *odi* are well grounded in *àkòdì*. The thinking of the Yoruba is evidently portrayed in the meaning

of *àkòdì*. That is, there are strength and enduring abilities in mutual relationship (Jemiriye 2009: 51-59).

Àkòdì, among the Yoruba, is the place of abode for all the members in a family clan. The good, the bad, the ugly, the beautiful, the lazy, the hardworking, the super lazy, and the workaholic all live together in the same *àkòdì*. Even the mad – insane person is accommodated in the *àkòdì*. Thus, in the *àkòdì*, all kinds of people are fully accommodated, known, noted, and accepted for whatever the individual is and is encouraged to fulfil him / herself as best in the common interest of all within the *àkòdì*. The words community and *àkòdì*, as conceived by the Yoruba are highly symbolic and connote the spirit of love and togetherness among the people. More than that, in a deep religious sense, the conception of the words intrinsically invokes sacredness.

It is essential to further see the African community from a much deeper perspective. For traditional Africans, community is much more than simply a social grouping of people bound together by reasons of natural origin and / or deep common interests and values. It is both a society as well as a unity of the visible and invisible worlds; the world of the physically living on the one hand, and the world of the ancestors, divinities and souls of children yet to be born to individual kin groups on the other hand. In a wider sense, African traditional community comprehends the totality of the world of African experience including the physical environment, as well as all spirit beings acknowledged by a given group.

This perception of community among the Africans and the Yoruba in particular is highly symbolic of unity, power, mutual economic force, and in a subtle way, it invigorates the notion of good moral standard. The connotation of moral standard is important here because, in the African religious thought, a sin or *taboo* committed by an individual affects the unity of the whole community structure. It has to be stressed that this notion is all-encompassing and that a breach in that regard affects the unity of both the living and the living dead. It is, therefore, imperative to note that whenever there is a breach of community ethical code, the unity of the cosmological structure which has been hitherto hampered through such a breach must be restored through the appropriate sacrifice. In this world-view, people become extra-cautious in their behavioural attitudes and disposition to issues of life.

Another concept of symbolic value in Africa, particularly among the Yoruba is the position of the crown. The Yoruba are monarchical in their administrative-cum-political structures. This political structure is most often represented or symbolized by the crown. The crowned kings among the Yoruba could be very powerful. They are often considered to be next to Divinity. Hence the expression *aláse èkejì Òrìsà* (roughly meaning the authoritative one) next only to Divinity. The crown is the symbol of both political and divine power incorporated in whoever wears it. In this regards, the king (*Oba*) operates both at the levels of humans and divinity. He is the chief custodian of the religious, ethical and social structures of his community. In that context, he is believed to be relating at will with all the priests of the respective gods and also all the terrestrial powers in his community. Law (1977) has argued that Yoruba kingship blends spiritual and political power, making the *Oba* both a religious figure and a political leader.

This notion makes the Yoruba to see their kings as direct symbol of divinity and derivatively, to them, the king is divine. Further, in the Yoruba cosmological thought, the kings are repositories of ritual powers. To this effect, the kings have to maintain harmony and concord between society and its natural environment by means of natural ritual actions of a regular kind which they (the kings) alone can take. This responsibility is believed to be

inherently deposited in the persons of the kings by the gods and the Supreme Being; as a result, the persons of the kings and the crowns they wear connote the sense of awe.

Perhaps, of equal importance in symbolic value is the idea of succession of Yoruba kings recorded by Johnson (1921: 43-47). A very important ritual in the process of succession in Johnson's account is a sacred meal prepared with the heart of the deceased king which the next, incumbent king must, as a matter of tradition, eat. It is only after eating this meal that the Yoruba will say concerning the new king that '*ó tí joba*', this phrase, literally means he has eaten the king, but by conventional use, the phrase means he has become the king. This ritual, symbolically represents a succession tradition which has a linkage with the first king in that community and the deities and the terrestrial powers within that environment. The new king, in that context, is therefore seen as a representative of the ancestors, the powers that be in that environment and, as a matter of fact, by inclination, a divinity among human beings. This ritual symbolically means that the king has officially ascended the stool of his ancestors and whatever he does henceforth he is acting in the capacity of the powers that be in that community. This, perhaps, is the hallmark of the sense of awe, reverence and obedience which the Yoruba reserves for the crown and whoever wears it. Recent critiques, such as Oluwaseun (2020), argue that such symbolic acts are not merely ritualistic but serve as instruments of political continuity and social cohesion. However, critics like Ranger (1993) caution against romanticizing African kingship traditions, arguing that contemporary political dynamics sometimes manipulate these symbols for legitimacy.

It is important also to mention here that the king's staff of office is highly symbolic of the presence of the king. Any function that the king cannot attend personally, he can send his chiefs with the staff of office to such a place. In such circumstance the same respect which is usually accorded the king will be given even in his absence. The staff of office is a symbol of the presence of the king. It represents the authority of the king. It further symbolises the truth that the people do not merely do obeisance to the human representative of the stool of office, but more than that, they have a high reverence for the tradition and office of kingship which symbolically represents the presence of the great progenitors of the community.

It will be inappropriate to conclude this aspect of the study without a vivid discussion of the 'earth' in the world-view of symbolism. The earth means much to the Africans, particularly the Yoruba. The Yoruba calls it *ilẹ̀*. To the people, earth symbolizes life and total existence. They call it the Mother Earth. This is because it gives succour in terms of agricultural products to man. Most of the things they need for existence come from the earth. The water they drink and use for other domestic purposes is from the earth. The bricks and planks they use for the construction of their houses come from the earth. When they die, the earth receives their corpses. To the Yoruba, the earth is not ordinary earth, it is divine and as a result, it is being venerated. This notion is supported by Mbiti (1975), who asserts that African cosmology integrates the natural and spiritual realms, making the earth both a material and a metaphysical entity. However, Western critiques, such as Evans-Pritchard (1965), often interpret such veneration as animistic rather than theological. More recent studies, such as Olupona (2011), challenge this view, arguing that African religious thought possesses a complex and coherent theological structure that integrates nature and divinity. The earth, to the Yoruba, is a figure of a divine modality that owns every living thing. It is in this perspective that the Yoruba say that '*bíorobárújúká bí ilẹ̀lẹ̀rè*'. (When there is confusion on any issue, the earth should be consulted). This is to say that the earth serves the purpose of an oracle to the Yoruba.

Conclusion

This study affirms that African religious thought, particularly Yoruba religious symbolism, is deeply sophisticated and reflective. Contrary to early Western anthropological critiques that dismissed African religious expressions as simplistic, contemporary scholarship has demonstrated their theological and philosophical depth. Yoruba religious symbolism bridges the past and present, the physical and metaphysical, and the individual and the community. Going by this study, it could be deduced that African religion is replete with symbolism. Emphasis is laid on three specific areas of religion and social life of the Yoruba of Southwest Nigeria in particular. The areas, as it has been earlier discussed under introduction, are religious language, religious thought of the people and their socio-cultural existence. The study has attempted to show that these areas as reiterated above are deeply replete with symbolism.

Findings

A very critical question that one may necessarily ask is that 'does the religious language not serve the purpose of economy of words'? Many words in Africa have symbolic use. A mere mention of such a word would convey a lot of meaning which ordinarily will take pages to express to the hearer. Take for example, the word *jèbùré* as used in this study conveys more than the connotation of *èbè* which also mean plea. A compendium of such words, if developed, will go a long way to enhance the literary prowess of African languages. It could be affirmed that symbolism in African religion, especially as demonstrated in this study has the assumption that images and symbols respond to human needs and fulfil a function – that of bringing to light the most hidden modalities of being – the inner self, in his or her divine capability which may hitherto lie in obscurity. The value of this inner potentials of man cannot be overemphasized.

In the context of the aforementioned, the study on the use of symbolism enable one to reach a better understanding of man – man as he is in his mode of being, especially before he comes to terms with the prevailing circumstance of his formation as revealed by history, knowing fully that he carries within himself a great deal of prehistoric humanity. His thinking in his innermost being, his notions and his ideas which length of words may not suffice to lay bare are brought out by his use of symbolic representations and images. symbolism in Yoruba religious thought is an essential tool for understanding identity, continuity, and the human-divine relationship. Contemporary African scholars continue to challenge outdated perspectives, asserting that African religious traditions possess deep intellectual and philosophical foundations.

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