



ETHICAL ANALYSIS OF SYMBOLS AND SYMBOLISM IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION AND CHRISTIANITY

Abraham Olutoye Odeleye (Ph.D.)

The Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomoso, Nigeria.

Email: olutoyeodeleye@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT: *Symbolism is pertinent to every religion, and no religion is without its symbols. It is one of the ways of expressing religious faith and beliefs. Both Christianity and African traditional religions have symbols that remind the adherents of their religious values. Symbols are outcomes of man's creative power to preserve religious heritage. The paper is analytical in nature, and the author employs a qualitative research approach that involves a combination of literature review and a phenomenological approach to address the subject of discussion. An in-depth examination of symbols within Christianity and African traditional religions reveals not only their unique meanings but also their common roles, which significantly enrich spiritual experiences, strengthen cultural identities, and promote moral values. Symbolism is paramount to both African Traditional Religion and Christianity, and both religions employ numerous symbols. Some symbols are common to both religions, while others are unique to each. Symbols are religious expressions that sensitize the adherents of one religion to their religious values and practices. It is a means of religious communication through which religious values are passed across to the audience and the next generation. The study submits that adherents of both religions should appreciate each other's religious symbols. This will ensure peaceful coexistence among the Christians and adherents of African Traditional Religion.*

KEYWORDS: African traditional religion, Christianity, Ethical analysis, Symbols, Symbolism.



INTRODUCTION

Symbolism is pertinent to every religion, and no religion is without its symbols. It is one of the ways of expressing religious faith and beliefs. Both Christianity and African traditional religions have symbols that remind the adherents of their religious values. Symbols are outcomes of man's creative power to preserve religious heritage. Humans provide symbols for both religious and communicative purposes, which are richly cherished in the African context. An in-depth examination of symbols within Christianity and African Traditional Religions reveal not only their unique meanings but also their common roles, which significantly enrich spiritual experiences, strengthen cultural identities, and promote moral values.

Uyovvirume (2013:392) defines symbols 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 experiences in symbols. Words, myths, proverbs, parables, icons, and masks are powerful and enduring symbols for conveying religious truth. A symbol is something (an idea, a sign, a ritual, art, or a behavioral pattern) that stands as a means of communicating an inner essence. Hence, symbols are a creative power that connects humans to God, and they represent a continuity of human expression in various religions. These symbols serve as significant ways of expressing beliefs and connecting individuals to their religious faith.

Symbols and symbolism foster a bond that goes beyond personal experiences. For instance, elements such as the cross in Christianity and various natural symbols in African traditions communicate deep theological meanings that resonate with adherents. These symbols provide a common language and identity that help the adherents to demonstrate their religious values and heritage. The paper is analytical in nature, and the author employs a qualitative research approach that involves a combination of literature review and a phenomenological approach to address the subject of discussion. It investigates African Traditional Religion in the context of Yoruba Indigenous Religion; both words are used interchangeably. The paper explains some symbols and their profound connection with personal belief and community identity in the context of Christianity and African Traditional Religion, and draws areas of convergence and divergence.

Concept of Symbols and Symbolism

Symbols could be defined as "objects, acts, relationships, or linguistic formations that stand for a multiplicity of meanings" (Andah, 1988:23). 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, intelligence (23), and spiritual alertness. Thus, what a particular object symbolizes for a certain group of people may be different from what it symbolizes for other people.

Symbols and symbolism are integral parts of religions that connect the adherents to their faith. Humans have the creative power in their minds to create and reproduce themselves through symbols. Thus, they have the power to artificially create symbols. According to Orhioghene (2013:19-20), this creative power is part of the divine consciousness within every human being, and it is this element of divine consciousness that 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. Reflecting on the above positions, the paper submits that symbols and symbolism originate from human imagination of religious experiences related to God.

Importance of Symbols and Symbolism in Christianity and Traditional Religious Contexts

Symbols and symbolism have significant importance in the context of both religions. The importance is categorized into eight, and they are discussed below:

Understanding Spiritual Realities

Symbols and symbolism help adherents gain a clear understanding of spiritual realities that may not be expressed through human language. It helps to bridge the gap in communication. Githiri (2025:73) explains that some beliefs regarding powers or forces are linked to spirits and to physical objects or symbols, which people either acquire or preserve through visible signs or rituals. Based on the submission, symbols help people to understand the spiritual realities of their religion. There are occasions when adherents of both religions display certain symbols to convey the spiritual realities of their faith, such as crosses, cowries, and palm fronds. One of the essential aspects of symbols in a religious context is to help adherents understand the spiritual realities embedded in their faith.

Expression and Identity of the Adherents

Symbols and symbolism are useful in expressing and identifying adherents of both religions. Adebolu (2019:54) and others argue that the use of symbols brings humans to consciousness, prompting them to think about beauty, reason, and goodness. This illustrates the magnitude of the adherents' consciousness in emphasizing their religious experience through symbols. Reflecting on the above submission, the paper argues that symbols are used for expression and identity among adherents of various religions. An examination of some symbols reveals the identity of the person using them. Sometimes, symbols are also used to designate not only the identity but also the ranks of those who possess the symbols.

Ritual and Referent Participation in Worship

Symbols are significant to rituals because they encourage the adherents to participate in the religious activity. Religion is part of an average African, and Idowu (1971:1) observes that

Religion is always present in humans' innermost being. Thus, religion as part of the innermost being of humans is expressed in worship, and symbols and symbolism are indispensable in worship. Rappaport (1999) adds that symbols promote effective participation and reference in worship, and the contents of some symbols are full of mystery (31). Symbols serve to connect and unify the ideologies, experiences, and focuses of a religious group. Within a religious context, symbols energize the group, the speaker, and their audience. In this way, the process of symbolism reawakens individuals' actions, guided by their personal religious experiences, perceptions, and patterns (Ekeke, 2012:12). Thus, the paper submits that there are mysteries that are attached to some symbols. The symbols represent beliefs and values that motivate some people to actively participate in worship. For instance, in both religions, symbols like the cross, bread, and wine in Holy Communion, and white cloth, cowries, and others, bring seriousness and reference in worship. The presence of certain symbols in worship creates awareness and



connects adherents to transcendence, which in turn influences their physical, emotional, moral, and spiritual lives. They can embody themes of life, death, fertility, or healing and play a crucial role in rites of passage, celebrations, and initiations.

Theological Reflection

Symbols in religions are a means of articulating and expressing one's understanding of faith. The theology of some people is reflected in their symbols. Rappaport (1999) submits that using certain symbols forbids the adherent from restraining or committing to some practices (31). Symbols reveal theological messages of the religion, and analysis of the symbols unveils the meaning, understanding, and practices of some doctrinal values.

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 formal or interpersonal communication, which is a crucial factor in the emergence of symbols. This is because people not only communicate their thoughts, feelings, and experiences to others but also to themselves, and this is usually done through symbols (Ekeke, 2012:12). Symbols help maintain order and unity through communication, mainly by using art objects. This can be a strong tool for influencing beliefs and teaching religious tenets to followers, and making it easier for leaders to organize their group effectively. In African Traditional Religion, symbols can be used as a means of communication to convey messages to people. The Yoruba people refer to it as "*aroko*," meaning "*coded*" or "*symbolic language*."

Symbols as Means of Preserving Knowledge of Religious Values

Symbols of both religions can be used as a means of preserving knowledge of historical and religious values. Adebolu, Kola, and Taiwo (2019) state that symbols are one of the ways to recognize, connect, and preserve the mental, physical, psychological, and spiritual values of religion (52). Symbols, especially those connected with cultural festivals and historical events are useful instruments for communicating to the younger generations about the sect they belong to, and this is another means of preserving culture.

Symbols as Signs of Religious Functions

There are religious functions in African Traditional Religion and Christianity that require priests, diviners, kings, and prophets, among others, to use specific symbols to indicate their status or rank and describe the types of religious functions they are performing. Religious functionaries are known and identified through the symbols they use. Symbols during religious functions reveal specific events that come to bear.

Sustainability of Moral and Spiritual Values: Symbols are utilized in both religions to promote the sustainability of moral and spiritual values. For instance, in Christianity, participation in Holy Communion requires consecration and sober reflection from the participants. This practice extended beyond the church into society, promoting societal uprightness.



Types of Religious Symbols in Africa

There are various types of religious symbols in Africa, but this paper will focus on four specific categories: natural symbols, communicative symbols, ritualistic symbols, and artificial symbols.

1. Expressive Symbols: These are symbols that are used specifically to express knowledge and information. All symbols are expressive, but this category includes those that are intended to convey concepts, ideas, and emotions (Orhioghene, 2013:25). These symbols are expressed “in language images, sculptures, and artifacts of religion” (Uyovwirume, 2013: 395). They reflect every aspect of an African's life. They are cultural symbols used to express eternal truths as they relate to their religious quest for understanding and interaction. For instance, when young palm fronds are placed on the front of a moving vehicle in Yorubaland, it signifies that the vehicle is carrying a corpse. Whereas palm fronds at the entrance of the church symbolize Palm Sunday. Similarly, car stickers with inscriptions as religious symbols, beads, and sacred texts, among others, are expressive symbols.
2. Ritualistic Symbols: These are symbols used to instruct and indoctrinate devotees about the articles of their faith, and they are primarily liturgical (395). Thus, symbols carry significant meaning in religious and cultural contexts. They strengthen experiences of rituals and connect the adherents to the spiritual realities. For example, red cloth means danger, brown cloth means influence, and white cloth means purity. In African Traditional Religion, when they put a red cloth on a house or a property, it means an embargo. Bread and wine in the church service represent Holy Communion. Additionally, water, masks, cowries, and others are ritualistic symbols.
3. Natural Symbol: In African Traditional Religion and Christianity, natural symbols are objects such as plants, animals, stones, mountains, stars, the moon, rivers, thunder, lightning, and rainbows that are conceived as representative symbols of certain spiritual entities. In African Traditional Religion, certain artificial symbols are offered as sacrifices to maintain a connection with adherents.
4. Artificial Symbols: These symbols are created by individual religious practitioners or groups to represent their own religious experiences and conceptions. Examples of artificial symbols in Christianity and Yoruba indigenous religions are the fish, bird, mask, staff of authority, and bell. These symbols play significant roles in representing beliefs, values, and identities within both religions.

Symbols and Symbolism in African Traditional Religion

African Traditional Religion is a religion of the indigenous people of Africa, based on the belief in the Supreme God. Mbiti (1969:3) asserts that African Traditional Religion is a religion of Africans, and it permeates all areas of Africans in public and private, and Africans take religion to every place they go. Awolalu (1976) corroborates Mbiti and submits that African Traditional Religion originated from sustaining the faith of the forebears of current Africans. This religion is being practiced in various forms, shades, and contexts by Africans (1). African traditional religion attributes important values to symbols, and some symbols are attributed to a certain gender. In African Traditional Religion, symbols hold profound significance, reflecting the



beliefs, values, and practices of the communities. These symbols serve various purposes, and a few examples of symbols in Yoruba Indigenous Religion are identified below.

Gong (*Agogo*): It symbolizes solemnity and remorse (Mahmud 2018:3). It also symbolizes communication, confirmation of an oath, and connection of the adherents to the divinities.

Trees, Rivers, Mountains, Streams, and Rocks: These symbols represent the relationship between humans, ancestors, gods, and the Supreme Being. They help the adherents to have a deeper reflection on spiritual matters.

Mask (*Eku*): It represents the spirits of ancestors or deities, thus connecting the community to its history and cultural heritage. Masks, for instance, are commonly used in rituals and ceremonies, for instance, the *Ololu* Masquerade in Ibadan, among others. They are used in rituals, ceremonies, and performances to invoke the presence of the spiritual beings and to emphasize cultural identity.

Cowrie Shells: They are used as symbols of wealth, fertility, and prosperity. Also, they are used to communicate with ancestors and spirits.

***Odu Ifá*:** They are symbols of wisdom and knowledge. Each *Odu* is a collection of teachings, stories, and proverbs that reflect life lessons and spiritual truth.

Crown (*Ade* or *Aare*): The crown represents leadership and authority within the Yoruba community. It is a symbol of the king's divine right to rule and is often used in rituals to invoke blessings and guidance for the community.

Thunder Axe (*Edun Ara*): The axe represents the *Sango* deity and symbolizes power, strength, and authority.

The Gourd (*Akerengbe*): The gourd symbolizes nourishment and the divine provision on earth. It is also associated with ancestral spirits and the importance of honoring them in everyday life.

Pot (*Ikoko*): The pot symbolizes provision, confidence, and power.

Horsetail or African Fly Whisk (*Irukere*): It is a symbol of royalty, authority, celebration, and promotion.

Red Cloth: The red cloth symbolizes danger or a state of embargo.

White Cloth: The white cloth symbolizes purity, dedication, acceptance, and worship.

Beads: There are different beads, and they symbolize identification, communication, meditation, and consultation with oracles.

Animal Skin: It is a symbol of power and dedication.

White Clay or Kaolin (*Sese Efun*): It symbolizes purity, holiness, faithfulness, and commitment of the adherents to the spirit world.

Kola nut: It symbolizes communion with ancestors, appreciation, and acceptance. It is also used for consultation with deities.



These symbols serve as powerful tools for communication and understanding within Yoruba Indigenous Religion, fostering a deep connection between the adherents and their spiritual beliefs. They help convey complex ideas, values, and the essence of the faith. The writer submits that some symbols in the African context are diabolically empowered to perform certain functions, and certain genders or ages can be restricted from using certain symbols.

Symbols and Symbolism in Christianity

Symbols and symbolism are part of the Christian faith, and they are factors in the relationship with God. There are symbols and their usage in the Bible. There is usage of symbols in Christian traditions, and usage of symbols is still in existence in the Christian faith. Inman (2004:125) states that symbols bring to the consciousness of man the tenets of Christian faith. Effah-Manu, Boaheng, and Samwini (2025:33) submit that Christians' relationship with God is mediated by symbols. Reflecting on the above submission, the paper affirms that the usage of symbols is eminent in Christian faith, and it connects Christians to God and Christian traditions.

Christian symbols invest objects or actions with an inner meaning expressing Christian ideas. Christianity has some peculiar symbols that are used to communicate. These symbols are widely used by the Church. Water has specific symbolic significance for Christians. Outside of baptism, water may represent cleansing or purity. The sources of these symbols are derived from the Bible. For instance, the tongue of fire symbolizes the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, as well as Jesus' description of his followers as the light of the world. God is a consuming fire, as mentioned in Hebrews 12, which is another example. There are many symbols associated with Christianity, but this paper identifies a few symbols that are common in the church today, and they are discussed below:

The Holy Bible: This symbolizes the word of God and the power inherent in it for salvation, transformation, and the holistic well-being of humans, enabling them to serve God and be ready for the rapture.

Cross: This is a universal symbol of the Christian faith, symbolizing faith and referring to Christ's death and resurrection. The cross is a symbol of regeneration; hence, its association with baptism.

Peter's Cross: When Peter was to be martyred, he chose to be crucified upside-down out of respect for Christ, and this symbolizes the perseverance of the saints.

Bell: This symbolizes proclamation and deepens the connection between the community and the divine in worship.

The Chi Rho: This is one of the earliest cruciform symbols used by Christians.

The Latin Cross: It is a symbol of Christianity, although it was used as a pagan symbol for millennia before the establishment of the Christian Church.

Lamb: It is a symbol of Christ as the Paschal Lamb and also a symbol for Christians (as Christ is the Shepherd and Peter was told to feed his sheep). It also means Jesus Christ.



Dove: It is a symbol of the Holy Spirit used in representations of the Lord's Baptism and Pentecost. The dove, when carrying an olive branch, symbolizes the Holy Spirit.

Rose: Five roses grouped together symbolize the five wounds of Christ. This symbolizes love, beauty, and healing to Christians (Orhioghene, 2013:19).

Fire: Fire, especially in the form of a candle flame, represents both the Holy Spirit and light. Light also represents direction and guidance from God.

The Christian Cross: This is seen as a representation of the instrument of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, and it is the best-known religious symbol of Christianity. It is related to the crucifix (a cross that typically includes a three-dimensional representation of Jesus' body) and to the broader family of cross symbols (Panych, 2025).

Crucifix: A cross with a representation of Jesus' body hanging from it.

Patriarchal Cross: A double cross, with the two crossbars near the top. The upper one is shorter, representing the plaque nailed to Jesus' cross.

The Borromean Rings: They are three interlocking circles that symbolize the Christian Trinity. The word "trinity" comes from the Latin noun "trinitas," meaning "three are one." The trinity represents the belief that God revealed Himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Star of David: The Star of David is a six-pointed star formed by two interlocking triangles, one pointing up and one pointing down.

Bread and Wine: The bread and wine represent the body and blood of Christ.

Pelican: The pelican is an exclusive Christian symbol that denotes the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and is representative of atonement and redemption. The pelican is said to pierce its breast to feed its young ones with its blood and save them from starvation.

Palm Branch: The Christian symbol of Palm fronds symbolizes victory and also represents a martyr who sacrifices his/her life for the sake of faith in God (Christian).

Water: It is a symbol of baptism and new life in Jesus Christ. In Baptism, Christians die to sin and rise to new life in Christ.

Butterfly: This symbolizes new life and the transformation of life in Jesus Christ.

Fleur-De-Lis: This is a symbol for the lily, and it symbolizes resurrection. In Catholic tradition, it represents Mary, the mother of Jesus. The three petals of the symbol represent the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Fish: The fish was a symbol of the Christian faith for early believers in Jesus Christ who met in secret for fear of Roman persecution.

Alpha and Omega: These are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet and symbolize God as first and last, the beginning and the end.

Anchor: It symbolizes hope, and for Christians, Jesus Christ is the unwavering hope for all believers.



Vine: This symbolizes abundance.

Sun: This symbolizes hope, and it is also a symbol of the resurrection of Jesus.

Crown: This represents reward in heaven for Christians who endure trial.

Peacock: This symbol represents immortality and is also used as a symbol of a Christian believer partaking in the water of eternal life.

Rainbow: This symbolizes God's faithfulness and God's promise to never again destroy the earth by flood.

Star of David: Symbol of Christianity associated with the birth of Jesus Christ.

Trumpet: This is a symbol of the last judgment (Joel 2:15 and Matthew 24:30).

Scroll: It is presumed to contain the name of the elect; it is a symbol of the day of Judgment and eternal life (Revelation 5:6).

White Cloth:

Scepter: It is a symbol of authority and, together with the crown, is a symbol of Christ's triumphant reign over all creation (Hebrews 1:8b).

Areas of Convergence and Divergence

Symbols and symbolism have common characteristics in Christianity and African traditional religion. Areas of convergence are spelled below.

Both Christianity and African Traditional Religion have symbols as one of the ways of preserving religious practices. African Traditional Religion and Christianity have certain symbols that preserve their theological tenets and moral values.

Both religions have some symbols in common, such as white cloth, palm fronds, fire, birds, and water.

Both religions have symbols to express their knowledge and emotions towards God, and they incorporate some of these symbols into their liturgy.

Both religions have natural and artificial symbols as objects of worship and reference for God.

In both religions, symbols and symbolism serve as tangible representations for religious followers, illustrating the mental images formed by their beliefs and abstract concepts, which can be challenging to express.

In both religions, symbols and symbolism serve as a means of maintaining order and unity among members of the same faith. It stimulates the leaders in the worship and the audience. This means that it provokes emotional responses and stimulates appropriate religious activities, actions, and inactions.



Symbols and their meanings in both religions can represent various themes such as life, death, fertility, and healing. They play essential roles in significant events, such as rites of passage, celebrations, and initiations.

In both religions, there are symbols that are not accessible to a certain gender.

Areas of divergence include the following.

No symbols in Christianity serve as an embargo, unlike in African Traditional Religion, where placing a red cloth on a house or property means an embargo, and violation is considered a taboo with attached consequences.

In African Traditional Religion, certain symbols are offered sacrifices to keep them active and connected, such as masks, mountains, and streams. In contrast, Christianity does not require the offering of sacrifices to any symbols.

CONCLUSION

The paper examined symbols and symbolism in African Traditional Religion and Christianity and drew areas of convergence and divergence. The paper argues that symbolism is paramount to both African Traditional Religion and Christianity, and both religions employ numerous symbols. Some symbols are common to both religions, while others are different. Symbols are religious expressions that sensitize the adherents of one religion to their religious values and practices. It is a means of religious communication through which religious values are passed across to the audience and the next generation. The study submits that adherents of both religions should appreciate each other's religious symbols. This will ensure peaceful coexistence among the Christians and adherents of African Traditional Religion. The paper submits that Christians are not to put their belief in symbols and idolize symbols. On no moral account should any Christians abuse the symbols and give priority to symbols over and above faith in the living God.

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