



AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION AND GENERAL FUNCTIONS OF BISENI SHRINES

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Abstract

In Africa, the role of shrines and sacred places for social control, conflict resolution and moral development remains an indisputable fact. However, the pride of place exercised by the shrines started dwindling with the advent of Christianity, western civilization and globalization. Many people now see shrines and sacred places as homes of demons, evil dwelling and archaic, and those who still practice the traditional religion are termed as pagans and heathens. Because of these new perceptions about shrines and sacred places by the Christians, most shrines and sacred places were destroyed and used for the erection of schools and hospitals to mention but a few. Today, the ones left are neglected and abandoned. This to a very large extent, have disintegrated African cultural and social life. Thus, religious values and social practices seem to have fast degenerated and this has hitherto, poses a serious enigma to the once enjoyed and reverend practices in African. Accordingly, shrines which have been an integral part of various cultures and faiths for centuries in Africa has been eroded and conversely enhanced the rate of alien customs and practices in many African societies. The main thrust of this paper is therefore; to highlight the great functions of the religious shrines of Biseni people. It underscores the relevance of revitalizing the functions as mechanisms for promoting justice, particularly in addressing social issues such as crime, dispute resolution, and community well-being. The paper suggests that rather than allowing Christianity and the worship of shrines to continue to be antagonistic, they can co-exist, each enriching the lives of individuals in unique ways, the focus should be on mutual respect and the preservation of heritage.

Keywords: African, Traditional Religion, Functions, Shrines, Biseni

Introduction

Religion plays a significant role in the lives of people all over the world. The African society is overtly religious. In African societies, traditional religion is an integral part of the lives of individuals, families and communities as a whole. African traditional religion is best described by (Thompson, 1994) when he states, indigenous religion and the family are closely connected in Africa. In fact, African religion can be seen as a system of rites, rules, and practices that aims at preserving and strengthening the fellowship of the people, the tribe and the family, and at increasing power.

However, the African shrine, intrinsic to practitioners of African Traditional Religion, exhibits inherent diversity across societies, communities, and clans due to its indigenous nature. These shrines fulfil specific purposes. Shrines and sacred places serve many purposes, they are the trusted avenue for conflict resolution, social control, cultural education and moral development. Historical accounts show that before 1910 and even up to 1936, the Biseni people were known for magnificent worship of shrines and spirituality. This distinctiveness was not just aesthetic; it was a profound expression of religious identity and philosophy. Religion, as conceived by early human societies, was a response to the mysteries of nature; thunder, the sun, birth, and death. Biseni, like other African communities, believed in a superpower that governed the universe, manifesting this belief through shrines, sacred rituals, symbols, and festivals. However, the encroachment of Western religion did not only introduce new spiritual ideas against the existing practices; it also altered language, education, governance, and moral codes. Over time, this shift began to distort the value system of the people. As generations grew under the weight of Eurocentric systems, the native tongue became less spoken, ancestral practices were forgotten, and the vibrant festivals that once unified the people through the shrines became relics of the past. The danger is not merely in losing dances or dressing styles, but in erasing collective memory and identity. This calls for a timely review by renegotiating the roles of traditional shrines in preserving the cultural significance in order to strike a balance between cultural authenticity and modern requirements.

The methodology employed for the investigation is historical method. The study was limited to Biseni clan, Ijaw land in particular while Africa remains the population of the study.

The rest of this paper was discussed under the following sub-headings;

- i. African Traditional Religion (Conceptual Review)
- ii. Definition and Historical Context of Shrines
- iii. Typologies of Shrines
- iv. Functions of Biseni Shrines
- v. Conclusion
- vi. References

African Traditional Religion

Africa is vast and diverse, with a rich and varied geography and culture. There are 54 modern countries within the continent, each with its own history. The many varied ethnic groups in Africa result in a wide array of languages and customs. This diversity is reflected in all aspects of African life, including religion. African traditional religion refers to the indigenous or autochthonous religions of the African people. It deals with their cosmology, ritual practices, symbols, arts, society, and so on. Because religion is a way of life, it relates to culture and society as they affect the worldview of the African people.

The term "African traditional religion" is used in two complementary senses. Loosely, it encompasses all African beliefs and practices that are considered religious but neither Christian nor Islamic. The expression is also used almost as a technical term for a particular reading of such beliefs and practices, one that purports to show that they constitute a systematic whole - a religion comparable to Christianity or any other "world religion." In that sense the concept was new and radical when it was introduced by G. Parrinder in 1954 and later developed by Bolaji Idowu and John Mbiti -Proponents of African traditional religion. The intention of these scholars was to protest against a long history of derogatory evaluations of Africans and their culture by outsiders and to replace words such as "heathenism" and "paganism."

Highly complex animistic beliefs build the core concept of traditional African religions. This includes the worship of tutelary deities, nature worship, ancestor worship and the belief in an afterlife, comparable to other traditional religions around the world. While some religions have a pantheistic worldview with a supreme creator god next to other gods and spirits, others follow a purely polytheistic system with various gods, spirits and other supernatural beings. Traditional African religions also have elements of totemism, shamanism and veneration of relics. Like most other ancient traditions around the world, traditional African religion was based on oral traditions. These traditions are not religious principles, but cultural identity that is passed on through stories, myths and tales, from one generation to the next. Traditional African religions believe that ancestors maintain a spiritual connection with their living relatives. Most ancestral spirits are generally good and kind. Negative



actions taken by ancestral spirits are to cause minor illnesses to warn people that they have gotten onto the wrong path. Olupona summarizes that traditional African religions are not only religions, but a worldview, a way of life in the order.

Definition and Historical Context of Shrines

Shrines have been an integral part of various cultures and faiths for centuries, serving as sacred spaces where devotees can connect with the divine. A shrine is typically defined as a structure or site considered sacred or revered, often housing relics, icons, or other objects of spiritual significance. (Balzac, 2020) defines a shrine as a sacred place where a specific deity or power is believed to be present. Similarly, (Xygalatas, 2020) defines a shrine as a special place in the landscape that is considered sacred due to its association with a deity or power. (Orsi, 2005) defines a shrine as a place marked by a sense of presence of the numinous, a power or powers that seem to be there and to work there. Orsi's definition highlights the experience of the numinous, or a sense of the sacred, as a key feature of shrines. Hence 'shrine' has been variously defined in the African context. Van Binsbergen, (1979) defines shrine as an 'observable object or part of the natural world, clearly localized and normally immobile', and 'a material focusses of religious activities. Most recently Dawson, (2009) has referred to shrines as 'vessels' – containers for spirits or entities and as symbolic vessels. Jordan (2009) defines shrine as a place that is recognized or set apart by believers for divine encounters through ritual or meditation, either for themselves, or for others. Jordan's definition highlights the importance of ritual and meditation in creating and maintaining the sacredness of shrines.

The history of shrines dates back to ancient times, with evidence of shrine-like structures found in archaeological sites across the world. The concept of shrines has evolved over time, influenced by the cultural, social, and religious contexts of different civilizations. In ancient Greece and Rome, for example, shrines were dedicated to various gods and goddesses, while in medieval Europe, shrines were often built to house relics of saints and martyrs. In other words, the word "shrine" is derived ultimately from the Latin word "scrinium" – meaning "box" or "receptacle", as in "containers of sacred meaning and power" (Courtright, 1987, p, 299). Shrines are found in different cultures, religions and in various settings. Examples are: Igbo societies in Nigeria, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Chinese folk religion, Shinto, indigenous Philippine folk religions, African Traditional Religion and Germanic paganism, cemeteries, household shrines etc. Portable shrines are also found in some cultures. Many shrines are located within buildings and in the temples designed specifically for worship, such as a church in Christianity, or a mandir in Hinduism.

Religious shrines are found in most religious places. According to Nwankwo and Agboeze, (2014), shrine, from the secular point of view, can be categorized into typologies according to their ownership and functions. This includes family shrines, community shrines, religious shrine, individual shrines, village shrines, state or national shrines, festival shrines, etc. They serve many purposes for traditional Africans, specifically, for religious worship. Bruce (2011), identified different types of shrines located within buildings and in the temples designed specifically for worship. Dawson, (2009). Identified various types of shrines in African society. They include; Nature spirit shrines, Ancestor shrines, Clan shrines, Community shrines, Household shrines Chiefly shrines and Personal shrines. Colson (1997) distinguishes between two kinds of shrines or foci of ritual activity among the Tonga of Zimbabwe.

The uniqueness of the shrine as a cultural institution lies in its collection of ritualistic objects. Beyond their religious functions, these objects are also creative works of art upon which African civilization has thrived. Notable are the great art works of Biseni shrines. Some of the foremost shrines revered or worshipped in traditional Biseni society include the following: *Sinama-era*, *Isibu*, *Ibazo*, *Biseni Amakiri*, *Okpotu*, *Avọ*, *Akpobrisi*, *Kunuye*, *Esiribi*, *Asebile*, *Okuroafor* and *Tein Amakiri* Isowe (2022). Traditionally, regardless of the varying topologies of shrines, they still serve unique functions and purposes particularly in the traditional African society. They include protection, provision, guidance, reservoir African traditions, etc. These unique functions have attracted much audience and veneration to these shrines.

Functions of Shrines in Biseni Clan

The African shrines perform pluralistic function: primarily, as an abode of the gods, then as a cultural institution without which African culture stands rootless. Biseni traditional shrines constitute very important cultural resources centre. It is a priceless cultural possession which serves the following purpose:

Rules of Conduct and Reservoir African Traditions

The people of Biseni clan are deeply religious people who worshiped their various deities. Some of the people take the worship of these deities very passionately. But generally, the Biseni, like other Niger Delta clans, worship in the shrines that dwell in the community as agents of God to whom God has delegated various roles. The shrines serve as places of worship and sacrifice just as the Mosques and Churches serve the same purpose for the Muslims and the Christians respectively. Worship and sacrifices in the shrines can be described as 'open air' because the shrines do not have big houses. However, the concept of what is right and wrong constitute moral principles. Morality is that sound judgement separating good and evil. The discernment of conducts essential for relations is created in man by God but rarely put to use considering the corrupt nature of man. In view of this, religion immersed with divine sanction appears to be a reliable source of morality. As Idowu (1996: 149) rightly observed "morality is basically the fruit of religion and that to begin with it was dependent upon it." In this way, the shrine serves as a physical repository of morality. Every shrine in Biseni is hedged with rules of conduct expected to regulate human relations. A breach of which attracts severe penalty from the gods. Such laws are referred to as taboos. Idowu's opinion that "tabu took their origin from the fact that people discerned that there were certain things which were morally approved or disapproved by the deity". Generally, the conducts disapproved by the deities include stealing, cheating, murder, incest, lying, covetousness, and so on while approved conducts are not limited to kindness, hospitality, honesty, respect, transparency and truthfulness.

Source of Legal System

Traditional laws usually referred to as customary laws are the traditions guiding human relations and interaction in African communities. Such laws unlike the European laws are unwritten. In view of this, Ibekwe (1975: 297) states that "European laws are written, because the art of writing and reading had long become part and parcel of their civilization." The shrines in Biseni clan performed legal functions from time-to-time and one will not be wrong to describe them as tribunal of justice or adjudication. The shrines performed these roles very effectively before the advent of the Europeans. The people had no legal system or law courts before the coming of the Europeans. It is the shrines and other acknowledged authorities that were the only tribunals of justice in the area, yet justice reigned supreme and the people had a very deep sense of the word. The shrines performed these judicial functions credibly. The types of disputes brought before the shrines for justice to prevail include: family disputes, age grade disputes, disputes between individuals or groups, marriage disputes. Others are disputes between or among communities, land disputes, chieftaincy disputes etc. when they appear irreconcilable. The shrines constantly settled cases that would have led to violence and loss of lives and property. However, it is also important to note that the shrines in Biseni clan performs the role of detecting crimes and criminals and metes out punishment on criminals. This is a fundamental aspect of justice and the rule of law in precolonial African societies. In such cases according to Onunwa and Bassey, (2018) the gods and the ancestors are invited or invoked to punish the unknown culprit who has refused to acknowledge his offence openly.

Another important judicial function performed by the shrines is that of serving as the instrument and supreme witnesses in the sealing and ending of agreements in the presence of the deities. When agreements are sealed in the presence of the traditional shrines and acknowledged by the authorities, everyone ensures to keep to the terms of the agreement. The sealing and making of agreements before the shrines did not start today, it is was a common practice, especially by indigenous people on the one hand and neighbouring communities as well as visitors on the other hand. Similarly, oath taking is another notable rite performed in shrines which gives succour to adherents in cases of dispute. It is one of the reliable methods of dispute resolution of pre-colonial era that is still in practice. The execution of such act involves the use of the *sii* to invoke the presence of the gods needed to seal the oath. The act of oath taking is dreaded especially when taken in the presence of the gods who instantly bequeaths

punishment to an offender. People take oath to maintain sincerity in relationship or any form of interaction. The oath is taken at the shrines by pointing at, touching or holding the emblem of the gods or any of its paraphernalia in the shrines. The use of deity to seal an oath makes it a covenant binding on those involved. This is because any breach is punishable by the deity on whose name the oath was sworn Isowe, (2022).

Centre for Religious and Cultural Knowledge

The tradition of visiting sacred places to attain religious merit, washing off the sins and accomplishment of desires has been a common practice across the world (Frembgen, 2012). African shrines primarily served as a medium through which worshippers' commune with the gods through rituals and sacrifice. These rituals provide structure and meaning to the life equitable to that of the church to the Christians and Mosque to the Muslims. As Levin, (2008) observes from his study of Sufi shrines, people come to Sufi shrines to manage their social and psychological problems. The Biseni people use the shrines to offer thanksgiving to the deities whenever they receive any good thing from them like massive harvest, wealth, success in their endeavours and after recovering from illness and accidents. However, the shrines are very important to the people because they are the dwelling place for the different spirits. It is these spiritual beings that dwell in the traditional shrines that are the true objects of worship. They include the ancestral spirits, divinatory spirits, the marine spirits, the nature spirits that inhabit hills, groves and trees etc.

The cultural function of the shrines is not limited to the display and transmission of traditional rites. The shrines serve both as an arena and an actor in traditional education and upbringing processes. There are many taboos that ensure correct behaviour in these places of power. Children have to start memorizing taboos connected with special places, actions and words. The memorization of the location of sacred places requires a deep attention to the environment and to the distinguishing features of the landscape along with plant composition, which will ultimately be conducive to a respect towards life forms in their great diversity Khamaganova, (2006: 254). In this way, the shrines projects and protects the cultural identity of the communities. Shrines are an embodiment of cultural norms. Through the many activities that take place in the shrines, cultural ties are strengthened. For instance, during the *Bou Amafunu* (Flood Festival), elaborated ceremonies were held in honour of the gods and deities which were believed to have power over fishing activities. Other traditional festivals and notable events like title taking and traditional marriage are notable examples.



Biseni Amuaru (War Boat). Source: Yamah Emmanuel, President Biseni Kani 05/07/2024

Symbol of Cultural Identity and Preservers of Religious Artefacts

The shrine came into existence as the physical mark of human expression of religious belief yet serves other purposes. Considering its numerous functions Soedjito, (2006) states that they also project cultural identity. In other words, shrines are the nucleus of cultural identity following its collection of both

tangible and intangible materials. Amongst the tangible heritage include traditional paraphernalia. These creative works of arts of particular style and design are associated with certain communities which can be used to identify them bearing in mind that African traditions are preserved and expressed in ritual objects. Since time immemorial, shrines served as traditional museums preserving traditional paraphernalia. This includes all kinds of objects ranging from carved wooden objects and figures to cast iron and bronze objects. In Biseni clan for instance, the special '*Ta-Ezein* (Talking Drum) and '*Angire*' which are some of the biggest and oldest wooden musical instruments as seen below out-dates any living person in the area today. These objects gave identity to the people. The beauty of these objects dumbfounded the Europeans that they enviously attributed the work to other western civilization. All these objects were produced because they were greatly patronized and appreciated by the community traditions. Today, the destruction of shrines led to decline in the production of ritual objects. The study of these cultural objects preserved in the shrines and its attendant activities has been used to reconstruct the history of past human activities.



Biseni Musical Instrument. Angire. Source: Researcher

Conclusion

A retrospect of the functions of the traditional shrines in Biseni clan showcases its role as vital cultural institution in the service of the community. The existence of this great institution is under threat by the vestiges of western civilization: western education, culture and religion. Consequently, the shrines and their activities are gradually fading away. However, the resilient nature of traditional shrines closely tied to the Africans religiosity preserved this institution to date. As most people have continued to participate in traditional religions either in practice or in belief. In Biseni, the introduction of Christianity by European missionaries brought profound changes to the religious practices. While some communities fully embraced Christianity, others blended Christian teachings with their traditional beliefs, leading to syncretic practices.

Suggestions

It is suggested that Christianity and the worship of shrines need not be antagonistic forces. Rather than opposing one another, they can co-exist, each enriching the lives of individuals in unique ways. The focus should be on mutual respect and the preservation of heritage. If Christianity is truly a religion of love and redemption, it must not be used as a tool of religion or cultural erasure. Again, if tradition is the soul of the people, then it must evolve without losing its essence.



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