

Symbolic Feathers: A Catalyst for Protectivism; Ritualism and Spirituality in Traditional Religion

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Abstract: The proper underpinning of feathers as a traditional symbol of royalty and the prestige of the indigenous people of Africa will go a long way in the full integration of the African people's life and their immediate cultural ecology with messages it disseminate. It must be noted also that despite the significance of this integration, it must be informed that some symbolic feathers to many adherents of African Traditional Religion are seen as a symbol of royalty and the prestige is evidently not limited in its transmission of reality thereby making it to serve as an outward and inward purity and holiness that are required of the initiates towards improving human spiritual conditions and dignity. This paper investigates how feathers basically play significant roles in mediating and facilitating religious communication in Traditional Religion, giving rise to thought, interpretation, and symbolic meanings. In Traditional Religion, feathers of some selected birds like the eagle, fowl and parrot encapsulate so many things which are very distinctive thereby representing so many things and ideologies.

Key words: Cosmology, Evoke, Ideology, Symbols & Symbology.

I. INTRODUCTION

Feathers of symbolic animals feature most prominently in many rituals basically in every part of Africa. They basically symbolize different dispositions and conditions depending upon how their sources and usage. Hence, a result feathers of birds actually have characterizes and attributes. The depict parts and aspects symbolize different ritualistic ideas, innuendos depending on the conditions. Different birds and their feathers are used in different ritual forms or formations in cultic endeavours. We shall try to explain some religious and ritualistic ideas Africans have about some birds and their feathers like fowl, Eagle and Parrot in other to bring out their symbolism in Traditional Religion so to say.

African Notion of Symbolism and Symbologies

Apparently, in behavioural of human psychology, it is a known fact that ideas simply emanates from experience or revelation (Nabofa, 1994:3). Man being what he is, is always eager or inquisitive to ascribe meanings to each of its experiences and it is this kind of attitude that actually stimulates man's instinct of curiosity from the known to an unknown, especially as it has to do with his religious awareness (Nabofa, 1994:3). In other words, he uses such religious ideas to elaborate rituals that inculcate decrees and doctrines "concerning the Nature of God, the Universal Being, Fatherhood and Beneficence of God, Eternity and Immortality of the Soul" (Akintola, 1992:2). Nonetheless, among all the

things God created, it is only man that possesses that natural tendency or proclivity for creative powers in mental and psychic forms to reflect on his experience and express it with symbols, upon the fact that animals and plants have that power to reproduce themselves through natural methods or otherwise (Nabofa, 1994:4). Nabofa again asserts that:

Man is not only a symbolizing and conceptualizing animal. He is also "meaning-seeking", but meaning can only be stored in symbols. Hence symbols constitute power resources liable to use and misuse. A society and its religion can only be understood through an analysis of the symbols by which its members communicate, worship, express their faith, evangelise, and manipulate relationships especially those involving religious beliefs (1994:21).

Nonetheless, Nabofa (1994:21) went further again to argue that by studying and learning about symbols in their religious contexts, we can find a kind of back-door approach to a deeper theological understanding of what the Africans actually believe, actually practice and actually say about their faith. The symbols makes you think says Paul Ricoeur (1971:404f). According to the book of Genesis:

God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; man and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth (Gen,1:27-28).

From the psychological point of view, Nabofa notes that:

Psychologists have often asserted that the only difference between man and the other animals, plants and minerals is that whereas man can engage in abstract thinking and attain to self-consciousness as well as engage in metaphysical analysis, animals follow their instincts and have not yet attained to that self-consciousness that gives rise to various forms of symbolization (1994:4).

Buttressing this further, Edwin Smith argues that:

Neglecting this fact, some writers make the mistake of supposing that the untutored Africa is incapable of abstract thinking. By changing mu-ntu, 'human being', into bu-ntu he expresses the ideas of 'manliness, virtue, humanity'. Yet, while well able to

think abstractly, he prefers to put his thought and feeling into vivid concrete terms (Smith, 1966:10-11).

Nonetheless, Nabofa (1994:3) in recognizing the significance of concrete terms as symbols of religions asserts that “the metaphysics of any religion cannot be fully and adequately studied, grasped and appreciated without a fair knowledge of its symbolic forms and processes which normally emerged out of the illumination”. Omijeh (1983:195) laments that “nowhere did early missionaries and Western writer’s misunderstand African cultures and societies as in the rituals and symbolism”. Sundermeier (1998:39) asserts that symbols relate to actual world and always have a material side; they can be heard, felt and imagined. He argues that because of their sensory character, they can speak to the emotional nature of human beings. They are satisfying; that is why it is in their nature to be accepted. They have to resonate with the feelings and value of the group and individual (Sundermeier, 1998:38-39). Nabofa (1994:77) argues that every scholar in the study of religion in Africa is aware of the fact that liturgical symbols, especially the non-physical ones, are enmeshed in the totality of African culture and that African Biblical scholarship really appreciates the benefits derivable from the use of appropriate African symbols in interpreting the Biblical message to mediate and suite the African situation. Samuel Abogunrin (1991) asserts in justifying the commentaries and importance of some scholars for the African culture opined that:

While God exists totally free from culture, human beings are totally immersed in culture. But God from beginning has used human culture as the milieu to reveal Himself to mankind. In communicating his revelation to man, God has often submitted to cultural limitations because human beings cannot comprehend supernatural truths outside his own cultural understanding. Therefore, God has always revealed himself (sic) in terms of human language and culture. African religion and culture which shaped the lives of our fathers have continued to exert great influence on life in Africa. It therefore, means that biblical interpretation in Africa must take cognizance of this particular spiritual, cultural and intellectual milieu (Abogunrin, 1991:vf).

In fact, images, emblems or symbols are not end in themselves, but means to an end (Adelowo, 1990:162), no wonder all professions or religious bodies, be it traditional religion, Christianity, Islam and other secular bodies expresses their experiences through symbols, while these expressions could be articulated and mediated in religious emblems, ideograms, icons, rituals, songs, prayers, myths, incantations, vows, customary behaviour and personifications (Nabofa, 1994:4). In this wise, Ezeanya (1994:8) opines that “one of the important customs of the Igbo people of Nigeria in connection with the birth of a child, is the naming ceremony. For the Igbo people, for the Hebrews, a name is not just a personal label for the sake of identity. It means much”.

However, in indigenous religious practices the basic assimilation and understanding of these so called religious symbols makes itself to be comprehensive, rapid and compact to use, it equally assists in understanding and concentration during any kind of religious rituals to achieve divine essence (Nabofa, 1994:4). No wonder, when Christianity and Islamic religions came to Africa, because traditional religious symbols have their ambiguities and these could shroud their true meaning to the unwary, they branded those symbol as objects of heathenism, animism, idolatry, fetishism and so on (Nabofa, 1994:5).

Thus, according to Geoffrey Parrinder (1987:127) “such religious symbols are means of expression used by Africans, scriptures of a sort, in the arts which Africans developed and whose originality and power have been recognized by European artists such as Picasso, Epstein and Henry Moore”. He argues that “painting and sculpture, in stone, ivory, brass, wood, clay, cloth and other materials have been used since time immemorial for daily purposes and for important representations. These express people’s beliefs from the inside, though their interpretation by others is not always easy” (Parrinder, 1987:127). Because of the use of such derogatory terms by the Western and Arab scholars, visionary and articulated religious scholars, theologians and leaders of thought in various endeavours deemed it wise to consider giving this term symbol a definition, today the word symbol means an image, object that suggests or refers to something else (Hornby, 1995:1215). Thompson (1970:9) asserts that symbol is anything which exists for its purpose of pointing people beyond itself. Cohen (1974:26) sees symbols as “objects, acts, relationships or linguistic formations that stand ambiguously for a multiplicity of meanings”.

This concept of symbol made Clifford Geertz to conceive of culture as a text (Geertz, 1973:91) which serves as a vehicle for conception (Crapanzano, 1986:68-76). Kreinath (2005:102) argues that this implies that any form of ritual action can be seen as a kind of religious behaviour, which is approached through the lens of a broad linguistic model. Here, what this tries to point out is that we have various symbolic forms and that there is every possibility for one symbolic form to be given several meanings and such meanings would equally be given at different segments depending upon the ability and capability of the interpreter’s level of consciousness and intelligence (Nabofa, 1994:6). However, Susanne Langer (1958:174) in her book *Theology And Life*, simply made a distinction between a mere sign and symbol and according to her, a sign merely or probably indicates a thing, while a symbol however represents it. Buttressing this further, Sundermeier argues that:

Symbol should not be confused with allegory. The law of analogy prohibits this. Allegory links up things which do not belong together, adding something to reality. Symbols, on the other hand, make visible the powers which belong together, and participate in each other. Nor should a symbol be confused with a

sign. Signs are one-directional, unmistakable. Symbols condemn several aspects which are not fully explainable. Interpretation can change, without the previous interpretation losing its validity, even when its significance decreases. Different interpretations are not mutually exclusive. They have to be understood as supplementary, since each interpretation embraces only one level of meaning, be it social [as in social anthropology], legal, psychological or religious. Synchronising these levels is the essential task of the symbol (Sundermeier, 1998:39).

In one of his own contributions, to what symbols stands for, Carl Jung (1979:20) asserts that these are meaningless in themselves; they equally have acquired recognizable meanings through common usage or even deliberate intent. He further argues that:

What we call a symbol is a term, a name or even a picture that may be familiar in daily life, yet that possesses specific connotations in addition to its conventional and obvious meaning. It implies something vague, unknown or hidden from us... Thus a word or an image is symbolic when it implies something more than its obvious and immediate meaning. It has a wider "unconscious" aspect that is never precisely defined or fully explained. Nor can one hope to define or explain it. As the mind explores the symbol, it is led to ideas that lie beyond the grasp of reason (Jung, 1979:20).

Mircea Eliade (1987:861) asserts that symbol reveals certain dimension of reality that would otherwise elude our knowledge and this deeper dimension is disclosed or revealed not only through the reflection of the interpreters of the symbols but in the "internal or innermost logic" proper to the symbols themselves. Radcliffe-Brown (1952:143) argues that whatever has meaning is a symbol and the meaning is what is expressed by the symbol. Nonetheless, Symbol by definition is communal that converts latent power into energy (Sundermeier, 1998:53).

Buttressing this further, Paul Ricoeur (1995:5) explains that "symbol as a multiple-meaning expression characterized by a hidden logic of double reference. Symbols are like signs in that they intend something beyond themselves. But whereas the sign possesses a relatively obvious and conventional set of denotations, the symbol's meanings are polysemic, difficult to discern, and virtually inexhaustible in depth". Benjamin Ray (1976:17) posits that mythical symbols and ritual acts are thus decidedly instrumental and they not only say what reality is, but they also shape the world to conform with, this reality. In this respect, religion plays an enormous role in African societies. He argues that archetypal symbols express a community's past and they structure collective rites for corporate benefit and in the traditional context religion cannot be a purely personal affair; the relation to the sacred is, first of all, a communal one (Ray, 1976:17). According to

Sundermeier (1998:38) symbols, unfolds reality in such a way that it communicates reality. He argues that "there is no other reality than that accessible in the symbol. The symbol lives from unity, even when it is directed at the partial. It does not cry out from within reality, but emanates reality in such a way that participation becomes possible. It comes from the whole and unfolds it before us. The 'whole' is the world around, of which the invisible world is an essential part" (Sundermeier, 1998:38).

However, this concept of symbol is seen as, a recognition of one thing as standing or representing another thing (Firth, 1973:79). Tillich (1959:54) asserts that "symbols are similar to signs in one distinctive respect: both symbols and signs point beyond themselves to something else" when "it finds acceptance in the group consciousness" (Tovey, 2004:12). On a general note, symbol from the above definitions given would be seen as a hall-mark of an idea, a logo, a sign, a ritual or perhaps a psycho-behavioural pattern that stands out as an overt representation of an inner experience or essence of the unconscious (Nabofa, 1994:7). Symbols themselves represent the continued role of tradition (Gibson & Dunbar-Hall, 2006:396). Symbols always contain something of them, sometimes strongly, sometimes faintly (Sundermeier, 1998:38). No wonder Montgomery (2016: 17) asserts that "most Africans used the symbol of the master as a cloak for their own spirits".

Through the symbolism the sacred and symbolic objects utilizes and the sacred ethos it invoke, however, it retains the power to influence the spiritual state of its performers and to play a role in the religious consciousness of the Igbo people "by whom or for whom it is performed" (Dunbar-Hall, 2006:59). According to Roger Blench (2009:1) "those who are wedded to European notions of music, in particular regular time signatures, and the key system, find this music hard to interpret and it is thus often ignored in scholarly accounts and other types of anthropological description".

Buttressing this further, Adegbite (1991:45) posits that such symbolic objects to the traditional African peoples may be described as "the vehicle for articulating an abstract idea in concrete form – for communicating thought as matter". He argues that such symbolic objects as an aspect of sacred items in Igbo cosmology, are regarded in traditional African societies as the most immediate expression of Eros; a bridge between ideas and phenomena (Adegbite, 1991:45). Polak (2006:163) argues that sacred ritual objects "has become an integral part of a supra-ethnic, local culture" of the Igbo tradition which "owe a great deal to the African religious heritage" (Behague, 2006:97). The style and its presentation in any socio-religious gathering in Igbo land is quite unique due to its "clarity of thought and communication", and its "original instructions" (Jocks, 2004:141&142). In fact, the style of presentation of such symbolic objects actually represents a tradition of its own because it is "a prayer, a recognition, a mark of solidarity and a symbol of unity amongst our people" (Ojukwu, 2002:v). Ballard (2006:1)

affirms that “oneness, community, unity, and harmony are the very heartbeat” of every Igbo person. Presentation of symbolic objects actually demonstrates and dramatizes the totality of culture, tradition and hegemony in Igbo land which marks complete Igbo identity – a great race that has lived together as one people, in peace and harmony under different kingships, even before the turn of the 19th Century (Nnamah, 2002:7). Ojukwu (2002:v) affirms that presentation of such symbolic objects “symbolizes our comings in, and our goings out, our joy and our sadness. It symbolizes our positions in the society and our achievements and our failures”. He argues that it “remains as a door through which our individual Igbo-ness passes in to an assemblage of Igbo community” (Ojukwu, 2002:v). It is very paramount to mention that in Aguleri cosmology the repertoire and style of presentation of ritual symbolic objects as a sacred paraphernalia represents a tradition of its own because “it is a new development that actually builds on, fuses and recreates different sources” (Polak, 2006:163), which constitutes what Ayu (1986:9) refers to as profound “epistemology”. Ayu (1986:8) again posits that such items or objects have become an important genre. He argues that it is on this genre of popular tradition that a whole critical edifice was erected (Ayu, 1986:9). Buttressing this, James Eze asserts that “beyond these totems and profound meanings lies another oasis of symbolisms and unspoken communication” (2015:1).

Ritual Symbolism and Significance of Fowl Feathers

Strictly speaking, the use of Fowls feathers as sacrificial and ritualistic victims is apparently a common practice in African Traditional Religion. In fact, the use of fowl feathers are commonly seen and used more in all other animals. No wonder then Awolalu comments that “people use fowls very regularly as victims of sacrifice not only because they are easily available but also because certain parts of these creatures have distinct meanings for those who offer them. For example, the chest-feathers of a hen are believed to give protection when ceremonially used” (1978:169). Analytically, according to Nabofa (1994: “the Yoruba must have come about the above belief probably because as a hen protects its young ones with its chest and feathers, they thought that the chest-feathers are instruments of protection”. This belief is thus a symbolic interpretation of the protectivism, ritualism and symbolic power of qualities of those feathers. Awolalu stressed that the people’s belief further that a fowl’s blemishes and secrets are always hidden under the feathers. This is why it is believed that “if a fowl is immolated and the blood together with the chest-feathers is applied to the symbol of the object of worship the worshipper is by such symbolic action and process praying that his own hardship will not be so great as to be known to all around” (Nabofa, 1994:65). Thus, he is praying like the Psalmist “blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man unto whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile” (Ps, 32:ff).

However, on the discourse of the concept of symbolism, Ekeke (2010:6) argues that it is of paramount significance that we align our discussion on the symbolism to a theoretical framework to help us assimilate and understand in full details the orientation we are set to examine and in this wise, one main theoretical view that would be considered very vital would be the symbolic interactionism of George Mead which is a theory synonymous with symbols in social institutions of human interaction. Ekeke (2010:6) again asserts that “once we have conceptualized an object we can now think of that object even when that object is no more invisible. Therefore, the object is thought of symbolically”. He argues further that symbolic conceptions and thought reduces this shortcoming of limited experience of human beings to what we actually see, hear, or fear, therefore concludes that almost all interactions between and among human beings are dimensions of exchange of symbols by presenting four primary and interrelated levels (Ekeke, 2010:6). The first level is impulse and that “impulse which involves an immediate sensuous stimulation, the need to do something about it” (Ritzer, 2000:208). The second one is perception, and according to Ekeke (2010:6) “George Mead sees perception as involving incoming stimuli as well as the mental images they create. People do not simply respond immediately to stimuli but rather think about and assess them through mental imagery. They also actively select characteristics of a stimuli and release among sets of stimuli”. Ritzer (2000:208) argues that such a stimuli, may have several dimensions, and the actor is able to select among them.

However, Ekeke (2010:6) asserts that George Mead calls the third level manipulation. He argues that sequel to the manifestation of the impulse with the object perceived, what follows immediately is action-taking with regard to the conceptualized symbol. The fourth and the last level according to George Mead is consummation and at this level that actor in symbolic interaction particularizes the specific objective of his choices of the many possible meanings or interpretations of the object, towards satisfying the original impulse (Ekeke, 2010:6). In another development, Giddens (1997:565) defines symbols as something that stands for, represents a person, idea, letter, figure, or sign that expresses a sound, a number, a chemical substance. The implication here is that, one symbolic form may be capable of several meanings or interpretations and this made Radcliffe-Brown (1969:142) to argue that whatever has a meaning is a symbol and the meaning or interpretation is what is expressed by the symbol, that is to say, the “translation, explanation, meaning or conceptualization of the sign-object would be in relation with a subsequent sign representing the same object” (Partmentier, 1994:5).

Strictly speaking, symbols vary among different class of people and worshippers and we should not forget the fact that the adherents of the diverse religions believe that they are not worshipping or rather venerating images associated with their religions, but invariably they are using them to stimulate the whims and caprices of their imagination to the proper act of

worship (Okoye, 2011:52). This is why Wosien (1992:30) posits that “when a symbol is made to have finite meaning, as opposed to merely being a paraphrase of the mysterious, an approximation to reality, then it becomes an idol”. Those who are in the field of Psychology of Religion will be most concerned with how symbols are used to manipulate, and how they actually influence the mind and behaviour of the believer (Nabofa, 1994:5).

Nobody can say for sure how feathers came about, but one can speculate that it was through the creation formation that it emanated from. Nonetheless, the origin and place of use of fowls feathers in the present Igbo tradition can be traced to Eri, the ancestral father of the Igbo nation. Eri was the descendants of the tribe of Gad (one of the twelve sons of Jacob) in the land of Isreal (Genesis, 46:17). Through Eri’s subsequent relationship with ritualism, history revealed that it was Eri who introduced the use of fowl’s feathers in Igbo cosmology in his shrine “*Obu-gad*” in Aguleri the ancestral home of the Igbos (Idigo, 2001 & Eyisi, 2011).

Ritual Symbolism, Significance and Protectivism of Eagle Feathers

The Eagle bird as it is known believed in Igbo cosmology is the king of all the birds, hence it perches at the top most of a tree. This is a special privilege from Mother Nature that is why it does not bring itself down to level of other lowly birds which perches on the lower branches as the case may. It is very significant to mention here that the Eagle as the King of birds does not perch on just any how tree but consistently perches at top of a giant trees such as iroko, mahogany and silk cotton trees respectively. No wonder Nabofa (1994:62) opines that “thus the position it occupies among all other birds symbolizes status of a King, royalty and dignity. Consequently, its feathers which are rare to come by also symbolize royalty and dignity”. Nonetheless, those who have attained some important positions or statuses in life add it as their dressing code especially to their red caps or head-gears anytime occasion warrants it. It is on this position that Nabofa (1994:62) comments that “among the Urhobo and Igbo people for each significant achievement a man makes in a community one of such feathers is added to his cap”. He went on to stress that in the olden days among the Isoko and Urhobo, when inter-tribal wars were common features, human hunting was considered as an honourable service to one’s community; and for each head of a human being one gets from an enemy’s town ritual elders added an eagle’s feather to the human hunter’s cap”.

In Aguleri tradition and culture, the brave hunters of Aguleri known as the ‘*Egbenobas*’ through the mediation of their comedic-drama, are usually kept apart and would display their prowess and showcase the skulls of the dangerous animals they have killed and in this “they are presumed to possess an identity as hunters even though they are historically agriculturists, aristocrats, or mercenaries” (Obeyesekere, 2004:282). It is on this position Nabofa (1994:63) asserts thus, that “it is easy for on-lookers during such display to assess the

number of human beings that each human hunter taking part in the ritual drama rehearsing their exploit has killed”. It has been observed that in practical terms only men who have achieved great feats in their various communities that are allowed to wear such feathers. In fact, it’s patriarchal in nature; this is because no woman is allowed to wear it in the physical society. This is why Nabofa opines that “it is an all men affair element of self-decoration; but in getting to the psychic realm both men and women, who have performed great feats in witchcraft wear it” (1994:63). Metaphysically, even in the spiritual world of the witches and wizards, their hierarchies are dictated by the number or numbers of eagle feathers one has accumulated and in this wise it is matriarchal in nature. This why Nabofa again comments that:

It is also said and believed among the Urhobo and Isoko that for each human being a witch or wizard she or he would be given an eagle’s feathers. When he gets up to seven of such feathers he or she would be elevated to sit on a mighty chair and thus become an important officer in that congregation of witches and wizards.... It seems that more women than men are decorated with such honours in the witchcraft covens. Symbolically, the status they (the women) have been denied in the physical they have in the spiritual realm in greater abundance (1994:63).

The King’s Regalia and Nexus with Eagle Feathers in Igbo Paradigm

Although, dressed in his full kingly regalia during the festival which has been imitated by other Kings in Igbo land “without any knowledge of their true significance” (Heuser, 2008:46), every element of the costume and dance is significant and symbolic, revealing some aspects of the inner nature of Kingship, for as the remarks of the royal instructors reveal, the Kings frenzied performance is nothing less than the spontaneous self-expression of the kingship within him (Lincoln, 1987:148). According to Perani & Wolff (1999:28) “in any one cultural context, a particular type of cloth or dress item can be a visible sign, clearly signaling gender, social status, political office, allegiance to a deity or personal prestige”. They assert that “cloth and dressing can also convey esoteric symbolic information understandable only to initiates” (Perani & Wolff, 1999:28). Dike (1987:78) argues it is in this kind of ritual festival like the *Ovala* that “the power normally localized in regalia is released to dramatize the monarchy”. He asserts that “symbols like these items of regalia emphasize the place of Kingship in the political system and command obedience and reverence. They ensure social stability by creating a process of elaboration that filters into the minds of those who behold them. In this way, a system of effective authority is maintained in the affairs of state” (Dike, 1987:78). Nabofa (1994:63) argues that the eagle’s feather’s that are used in decorating the king’s crown symbolizes victory, purity and faultlessness. He asserts that he who wears it symbolically is identifying himself with royalty, dignity,

purity, faultlessness, gallantry, and resounding victory for the community to which he belongs (Nabofa, 1994:63).

According to Gilbert (1993:137) the regalia of “the immortal king reveal him as the holder of the office: their outer form is publicly visible but their inner contents remain veiled, just as the sacredness of the kingship is concealed—though visually represented—within the king’s person”. Perani & Wolff (1999:28) argues that “whether sign or symbol, this ability to transmit information and mediate meaning through shared understandings in socio-cultural contexts is a primary characteristic of cloth”. Schneider (1987:412) affirms that the communicative significance of cloth and dress in leadership contexts where they act as tracers of rank and bolster the visual hierarchy cannot be over emphasized. Buttressing this further, Gilbert (1993:137) argues that the “regalia are public representations of the secret power that lies within and behind the kingship, of the power that holds the state together. He stresses that “the exposure of this power is crucial to the public understanding and legitimization of royal power and authority, yet at the same time it must be kept separate, outside everyday profane life” (Gilbert, 1993:137). This is why Hall (1928:136) argues that “the regalia must be worn correctly and must not be worn profanely”, because it is classified as a “robe of honor” or “coronation cloth” (Perani & Wolff, 1999:124 & 166). This royal ceremonial regalia creates also a symbolic distinction between what Vansina (1978:185) axiomatically refers to as “the elite from the commoner”.

Perani & Wolff (1999:124) argues that it is in this way that, “the king’s body becomes defined and framed by the striped panels of the big gowns and whether standing or seated, the gown ensemble serves to virtually center, stabilize and focus attention on him as a source of energy and power”. In Aguleri paradigm, “the King is imbued with a certain sacredness, but not just by reason of his office” (Dike, 1987:78). According to Akintola:

Before its use, and to get it energised or to imbue it with mystical potency, the regalia must be consecrated in an appropriate ceremony. Also, the allegoric and emblematic figures with which the regalia is emblazoned or adorned conceal the secret formulae for spiritual, moral or mental and physical regeneration, and are used in the same way that the halo, the nimbus and the aureole are used in Christian religious art and usages; or the rosary in Islamic usage (1992:36).

Hendrickson (1996a:9) writing on the context of Bori devotees argues that as a patron cloth it has a relationship with the supernatural by providing attire for the spirits and such “clothes gives substance to these incorporeal beings...They extend the spirits’ *personae* in space and time. The garments have potency”. Masquelier (1996:74) affirms that such “clothes concretize the conversation between human and spirits by literally providing the connecting threads through which they can relate to each other”. In addition, the multifarious colours of the regalia worn by the King

appropriately add so much effect that the regalia becomes totally transformed into what Thot Hermes Trismegistus, the ancient adept and founder of Egyptain learning, describes as the “mystic chemistry of the soul” (Hall, 1928:46). Hall (1928:46) again stresses that the robes, insignia, emblems, jewels and ornamentations of the king “symbolize the spiritual energies radiating from the human body of the initiated users”. Buttressing this further, Hall (1928:136) again in mystical and philosophical form describes the robe of the King as “the garments of glory, for they resemble the regenerated and spiritualized nature of man, symbolized by a vestment which all must weave from the threads of character virtue before they can become high priests after the Order of Melchizedek”. This is why Danfulani (2000:101 &102) argues that it is mandatory for the King to wear his royal regalia during celebration sessions because “it forms part of his seat” and it symbolizes his “political power and authority”. Weiner (1992:6) affirms that they are imbued with “the intrinsic and ineffable identities of their owners and are not easily given away or sold”. Perani & Wolff (1999:83) argues that “when used to empower individuals and the spaces they occupy, leadership cloth, garments and regalia, in particular, function as inalienable possessions. ...and passed on from one office holder to the next”, as true relic revealed as a typical and repeated configuration (Schopen, 1998:265). Perani & Wolff (1999:83) again asserts that “they are stored in the palace treasury under the care of a specific official who ensures their safety and proper use during state ceremonies”. Weiner (1992:37) opines that “when a leader draws upon these inalienable possessions and put on the robes of office, his body is transformed from its natural form to the body politic, conferring the authority of the past to the present incumbent”, thereby fostering values of identity and incorporation (Smith, 1987:28). Apart from the Kings regalia, his headdress is something very symbolic because according to Henderson & Umunna (1988:28-29) “the great crown—*nnukwu-okpu* is worn for the annual *Ofala* festival, when the chiefs and King assemble with their people in the royal palace square and viewed from a distance, it primarily display plumage”. Drewal (1975:18) posits that “the headdress provides a point of contact, a crossroads, and denies the mundane function of carrying load”. Henderson & Umunna (1988:29) argues that “the clustered feathers and intimations of branching of this spectacular crown suggest birds perching on a tree, and therefore a tree itself, an implication made quite explicit in the community like the Aguleri people’s prime metaphor for leadership: the leader is a mighty tree *Oke Osisi* — [this is a general term accommodating diverse types of trees], that gives birds perching on its outstretched arms and shoulders a safe abode”. They affirms that one dominant symbol of this headdress is a tree of this kind, while the chiefs head rests under a small depression whose top side is exaggerated to form a mound, out of which rises the central pillar that—in one dimension of meaning—designates the trunk of the tree (Henderson & Umunna, 1988:29-30).

Buttressing this further, Henderson & Umunna (1988:29) again asserts that “in the early 1960s, the use of imported ostrich feathers overshadowed that of the more traditional local birds like the cattle egret, and some feathers were dyed in colors including purple, yellow, red, green, or violet, creating spectacular effects. But among this varied array of feathers must also be those of the vulturine fish eagle, *Ugo*, King of birds. No wonder Nabofa (1994:63) comments that “the eagle’s feather also symbolizes victory, purity and faultlessness. He who wears it is symbolically identifying himself with royalty, dignity, purity, faultlessness, gallantry and resounding victory for the community to which he belongs”. Typically, the large feathers have been stripped except for their tufted tips, lending a strong branch-like aspect to the superstructure”. Idigo (1990:34) affirms that “at long last the *Eze* fully robed in his majestic attire of embroidered velvet silk and muslim of multifarious colours makes his appearance with his cabinet and extended family members”, through his dignified dance moves slowly, trailing a cloth train extending his feet behind to further enhance its beauty and power (Perani & Wolff, 1999:127).

As a point of emphasis, Bosah (1973:36) cited in Hahn-Waanders (1990:88) asserts that the symbology of “the red caps worn by other chiefs was introduced by Obi Okosi [1901-1931] in order to differentiate the members of the native courts from other title holders and from ordinary citizens”. He affirms that “these red caps are called *okpu ododo*. *Ododo* is a Bini word and it means red. Later on, these red caps were worn by the *Ozo* members all over Igbo land” (Hahn-Waanders, 1990:89). We should not forget that fact that it was Eri the progenitor of the Igbos who introduced the republican and aristocratic institution of *Ozo* title known as *Odoloma* Eri. In Aguleri Kingdom, the *Odoloma* Eri later metamorphosised into *Ozo* title society and its members act or sever as advisers and ambassadors to Eri who were mainly made up of spiritualized fathers (Idigo, 2001:110-119). But according to Onwuejeogu (1981:168 & 67) this group later was transformed into a secret society, which has a highly disguised language that is understood only by its members and such secret language was developed and used before indoctrination and for domination, “so that the head of the ritual groups could send messages backwards and forwards”.

No wonder why traditional red cap popularly called *Okpu Ododo* in Igbo language serves “as the most distinctive symbols of the political elite to identity membership in a royal family or a connection to the aristocracy” Perani & Wolff (1991:135). A critical examination of the conditions a person should fulfill before he could be decorated with a red cap and an eagle feather and the ethical behaviour required of such a person, Nabofa comments that:

The eagle feather laureate behaves proudly as if the victory belongs to him per se he regards the achievement and honour as belonging to the divine guardian forces of the community and the good-will of his fellow citizens. While parading about his laurel

on festival and other special days, he would be symbolically demonstrating the victory of the spiritual guardians of the community over those of the opposing and enemy communities (1994:63).

Perani & Wolff (1999:125) again affirms that “the visual brilliance and textual complexity is enriched by scintillating surface, sparkling and shining in a kaleidoscope of color and light in the appearance of the mounted ruler under an impressive twirling state umbrella”. Also, as the king dances round the King’s square, “his eyes bulge with this surge of energy, and the ordinary affect of his face is lost, becoming a mask for the invisible power within” (Murphy, 2012:87), it shows the captivating rhythm of the swaying and shuffling which according to Aguleri tradition and hegemony represent “a unique way of dancing throughout the world” (Heuser, 2008:48). Nketia (1989:112) argues that as the king dances on an important occasion of public worship, like the *Ovala* festival, he points his dancing sword skywards to acknowledge ‘HIM’ as the power on whom, he and his god depend. McMullen (1987:217) asserts that the ritual occasion enable the King to “affirm the benevolence of the cosmic order and of his own role in mediating between it and the human hierarchy”. Kaplan (2000:117-118) argues that insofar as “the king seats on his throne, he is awe-inspiring. He alone possesses the royal coral-bead regalia—the crown, the staff, and the royal coral bead shirt and strip wrapper combined with different colours which have symbolic meanings. He is a living proof of the cogency of Kingship. Nonetheless, he has the ability to control the beneficent and destructive forces of the earth”. However, the colours of his regalia may be combined in significant ways, but their meaning/symbolism is situational and can never be read automatically; one cannot write dictionaries of symbolism in African art (MacGaffey, 2000:233). Kaplan (2004:190) argues that “the clothing the king chooses to wear each day is traditional and symbolic with meanings. It is a statement of occasion, intent, mood, power and all have meanings and evoke memory”.

Parrot Feathers and it’s Nexus with the Traditional Musicians in Traditional Religion

Now, let us imagine a world without any form of feast or festive occasions, in this case life would be too serious, solemn, empty, even boring and at the end life would be uninteresting to cope with (Nti, 1990:1). According to Nti (1990:1) again “throughout ages man has devised ways of expressing ideas, issues and emotions. Men have devised ways or methods of showing gratitude to their gods and ancestors for various reasons known to them and consequently commemorate such occasions. Such activities come in the form of feasts involving entertainment, and various forms of artistic performances and dance” Buttressing this further, Mowat (1989:54) affirms that “events meriting special celebration include initiations ceremonies, the naming of a child, the cutting of a child’s hair, preparation for battle, the clearing of a garden, the harvest of certain crops, convalescence after an illness, and death, to name a few”. She

argues that “ceremonies, such as those where the sacred *Yurupary* musical instruments are displayed, must not be witnessed by women, who may retreat to the rear of the house while they take place” (Mowat, 1989:54-55). According to Wosien:

In dance ritual – and all early ritual is dance – man undertook to represent his god, celebrating and commemorating the god’s measured movements in creation and the traces of his journey on earth. Man sets out to make present the divine actions at the beginning of time and, through practice repetition of the rite throughout millennia, to anticipate time’s end. By dancing, out again and again the original Mystery of Creation, the dancer, as the interpreting medium and centre of the rite, is put in touch with the primal event, which, at the same time, transforms the dance into an act of self-realization, both aspects being necessary ingredients for the promotion of life, on the cosmic as well as on the individual plane (1992:13).

Buttressing this further, Wosien again posits that:

As a symbolic expression of man’s understanding of the world, dance ritual reveals a reality which transcends empirical reasoning and abstract cosmological speculation. At most times, for most peoples, it has been the central concern of their lives; from it have later emerged all the arts. Some instant or fragment of life, it was felt, some potency had to be arrested, the experience of it repeated and celebrated so as to have an established relationship to it, thereby solidifying the flux of life and giving it support. Ritual strengthens the growth of consciousness by providing it with a frame of reference. Dance ritual throughout the ages is a self-delineation of developing man; it promotes by analogy the leap beyond the confines of consciousness, and bridge the chasm between spontaneity and reflection (1992:14).

Hudgens & Trillo (1990:52) affirms that “nowhere in the world is music more a part of the very process of living than in Africa”, without it “the efficacy of the people’s worship are reduced to nothing” (Akinfenwa, 2013:6). According to Pratt (1914:60) “of these artistic appeals, none is on the whole more penetrating or more intense than music. Nothing that can be urged by those who profess themselves to be insensible to musical impressions, or by those who have become righteously exacerbated by the misuse of sacred music here or elsewhere, can break the force of this general truth. There is no artistic means of getting at the internal springs of feeling in popular heart that can compare with music”. Leonard (1906:429) argues that “the religion of the natives [Africans] is their existence and their existence is their religion. It supplies the principles on which their law is dispensed and morality adjudicated. The entire organization of their common life is so interwoven with it that they cannot get away from it”. No wonder, Shorter (1978:49) affirms that “...Africans are notoriously religious”, while Isichei (1976:24)

particularly asserts that through the music like the *Egwu Evio* in Aguleri cosmology “the Igbos are nothing if not profoundly religious, and all accounts of their life reflect the fact”. Stephen Ezeanya (1980:324) posits that in Africa, “life is religion, and religion is life”. Ekeke (2013:3) argues that “this means that religion could not be explained away in Africa and whoever tries it will be seen as a stranger to Africa”. Mbiti (1975:9) asserts that religion is by far the richest part of the African heritage. In this wise, Chernoff describes African religion as a “danced belief” (1999:172), and as a form of worship that is visible and inherently attached to bodily action (Heuser, 2008:35). Buttressing this further, James Early posits that:

Throughout world history sacred sounds have served as a medium for human cultures to raise queries, advance beliefs, give praise, and inspire others to join in exploration of the mysteries of earthly existence and the greater universe. These sacred sound traditions encompass a broad range of expressive forms: melodic and repetitive vocalizations called chants; sharp, passionate, emotions-filled hums, groans, shouts; percussive, rhythmic hand claps and foot stomps; and extended song, sermon, and instrumental arrangements. Instrumental music, sung prayers, and mystical chants have been used to communicate with the divine, to unite religious communities, and to express moral, political, social, and economic aspirations. Sacred sounds in many traditions are the central means for invocation of spirits. The utterance of particular sounds is thought by many cultures to form a connection to all the elements of the universe. In some belief systems music and sound vibrations are pathways for healing body, mind, and spirit. Among the wide range of human expressive behaviour, the capacity to infuse the joys, sorrows, and humility that characterize religious and spiritual beliefs into oral poetry, chants, songs, and instrumental music is certainly one of the most powerful and inspirational ways all peoples and cultures acknowledge the spirit of the Supreme in their lives (1997:1).

Akinfenwa (2013:7) asserts that “the origin of music and dance is a mystery, but their importance cannot be over emphasized in religious circle”. According to Nti:

In the olden days, during the Stone Age, records show that Africans were mostly wanderers moving from place to place and living inside caves. Their major occupation was hunting for animals which served them for food. When the man comes home in the evening he tells his family stories of his exploits for the day. Imitating the movements of the animals that he encountered in the forest. Some scholars believed that it was from his imitation of the movement of birds that dance was born (1990:20).

Buttressing this further, Wosien (1992:17) affirms that “man was taught how to dance by the animals, which he observed closely and learned to imitate. He depended on them for his food, clothing, tools and weapons, and therefore needed to study their habits and characteristics”. Akinfenwa (2013:7) argues that “people specialized on them and earned their daily bread. Music and dance cannot be replaced by anything in the world. A world without music and dance will face trouble. This is because of the important position they occupied in worship. Man was made to worship the Supreme Being and the worship is not complete without music and dance”. Music infuses all the activities of the African from the cradle to the grave (Hailey, 1957:67). Awolalu (1991: 132) affirms that “the Africans are a singing race. A lot of their music is of a religious nature. In these songs, they portray their joy and sorrow, their hopes and fears. In each song there is a wealth of material for the student who will patiently sift and collate. Ritual songs and dancing follow prescribed patterns and a study of them will reveal a lot of the people’s beliefs”. According to Ruth Stone (1994:391) “religious aspect of music is fundamental to the very being of many musical acts and cannot be stripped from the performance. Thus, it is only for analytical ends that we can, to any extent, pull the religious from the performance bundle from temporary scrutiny”. Reaffirming this affirmation, Gorer, (1935:289) cited in Doob (1961:73) posits that Africans allegedly dance for joy, and they dance for grief; they dance for love and they dance for hate; they dance to bring prosperity and they dance to avert calamity; they dance for religion and they dance to pass the time. Mutua (1999:173) argues that “that is why the degradation of African religions should be seen as the negation of the humanity of the African people”. Onwochei (1998:286) explains that “there are so many ways Africans express their musical heritage”. Nketia (1989:119) argues that interacting and rejoicing with music and dance in the context of ritual and worship is also an important aspect of the African concept of religious expression and may be given free reign at religious festivals.

Music has universal appeal especially African and Nigerian music are sang or produced in local language and that is why Euba (1977:13) argues that “Nigerian tone language usually had its own inherent melodic structure and the imposition of an imported melody resulted in a conflict with the natural melodic structure of the text, thereby distorting its meaning”. The spirituality of sacred sounds, bodily movement, chanting, incarnations, and divinations are literarily, in tandem throughout the African diaspora, no wonder Melville Herskovits asserts that:

The African past must be included under the rubric traditions of the past, whether these traditions are held overtly or not, becomes apparent when the religious habits of Negroes in the Caribbean and South America are anchored to both ends of the scale whose central position they comprise—to Africa, the aboriginal home of all these varieties of religious experience, on the one hand, and to the United States,

on the other, where the greatest degree of acculturation to European norms has taken place (1941:224).

Now considering the protectivism, ritualism and spirituality of the bird Parrot in African context, Parrot is regarded as gentle and peace loving bird among traditional Africans. In African thinking, Parrot is believed to be the most intelligent, eloquent and gentle soft speaking among all the birds in creation. In view of the above Nabofa comments that Africans “believe that its feathers especially those at its tail, which are scarlet in colour are imbued with eloquence, divine wisdom, royalty, dignity, sacredness, intelligence and priestly qualities (1994:64). Continuing with his assertion, Nabofa again wrote that “It is because such understanding that many herbalists in Urhobo and Isoko use some parts of this creature, especially its head, beak and feathers in preparing charms and medicines which are believed to enhance a person’s intelligence, eloquence in speech, good voice quality and love affairs” (1994:64).

Considering Parrot Feathers and its Nexus with the Traditional Musicians in Traditional Religion in the thinking of Africans, it is a highly chosen and favoured bird among the musicians all over. No wonder Nabofa in his unforgettable, wonderful and well-illustrated description that matches this assertion wrote that:

Many of their musicians, dancers, public actors, town criers, speakers in traditional community, government and modern politicians quite often procure medicines prepared with parrots. Many of them attach scarlet parrot feathers to their caps and hats or at the ones at the back of their heads. Some women also wear a scarlet bead attached to a small parrot feather. They stick these items to the hair at either the back or on the centre of their heads. Some expose it while others cover it up with their head ties” (1994:64).

Buttressing this point, Nabofa (1994:64) again opined that those musicians, public actors and women who make use of Parrot’s feathers in that way believe that they would be “infused and imbued with those qualities which the parrot in its entirety symbolizes. They would thus be enabled to perform excellently well and admired by their spectators as people always admire the sonorous voice of the Parrot and the beauty of its scarlet feathers”. It is on this position that Guenther (1975:164) asserts that such men and women “are widely idolized – especially by boys and youths adults – their song, their idiosyncrasies of dancing and their exploits are talked about widely”, and in that form they are “searching for spiritual ideal” (Warren, 2006:106), and “personal identity” (Alford, 1988:51). Guenther (1975:164) argues that “to a large extent the wealth, prestige and glamour of the dancers stem directly from the dance and its inherent affective, integrative and moral power”.

II. CONCLUSION

From the fore going, I can tersely, say that the feathers of the above mentioned analysed birds to many adherents of African Traditional Religion especially the Igbo symbolize outward and inward purity and holiness that are basically required of the devotee to enhance or improve his human spiritual conditions and dignity. The emblematic rituals that are attached to the religious expression and expression of these feathers showcases Kingship, royalty, dignity, strong affinal protectivism in their usage in Igbo race. They are highly impressive and ritually filled heart-warming ceremonies enveloped in classical idiomatic religious expressions and gestures packed with a rich wisdom. It is in the aspects of metaphysical applications and practical performances of magic and medicine in African religion that these symbols feature most prominently among the Igbo Kings and the Ritual Symbolism of Feathers.

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