

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF RELIGIOUS ART AND SYMBOLISM IN URHOB0 RELIGIOUS BELIEFS**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the significance of religious art and symbolism within the Urhobo religious belief system, highlighting its role in shaping cultural identity, spiritual practices, and social cohesion among the Urhobo people of Nigeria. There is a gap in scholarly literatures, which often overlooks the intricate relationship between religious art and the Urhobo spiritual life. Using a phenomenological method, the study employed participant observation, and visual analysis of religious artifacts to explore how these symbols function in the community's religious practices. The findings show that religious art and symbolism in Urhobo culture are not merely decorative, but serve as vital tools for spiritual communication, cultural preservation, and the reinforcement of communal values. These symbols encapsulate the Urhobo cosmology, reflecting the people's understanding of the divine, ancestral veneration, and the interconnectedness of life. The, the study concludes that these symbols play a crucial role in maintaining social order, guiding moral conduct, and fostering a sense of unity among the Urhobo people. The religious art and symbolism of the Urhobo people are indispensable; however there is the need for the preservation and transmission of Urhobo religious beliefs and cultural heritage, especially in the face of modernization and technological advancement.

**Keywords:** Religious Art, Symbolism, Urhobo, Religious Belief System

## **Introduction**

The Urhobo people, an ethnic group located in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, have a rich cultural heritage characterized by intricate religious beliefs, artistic expressions, and symbolic representations. Central to Urhobo culture is their religious worldview, which encompasses a blend of traditional animistic practices, Christianity, and, to a lesser extent, Islam (Ekeh, 2008). Olomu (2013) rightly opines that religious arts and symbolism play a crucial role in expressing and transmitting these beliefs, serving as visual manifestations of spiritual concepts, cultural values, and historical narratives

Despite the significance of religious art and symbolism in Urhobo culture, there is a paucity of comprehensive studies that explore these topics in depth. While existing research like Olomu (2013), Eseoghene (2015), Ogun (2014), Onobrakpeya (2011), have touched upon various aspects of Urhobo religion, art, and culture, there remains a need for a focused investigation into the specific forms, meanings, and functions of religious art and symbolism within the Urhobo religious belief system. It is important to aver that, despite the rich cultural heritage of the Urhobo people, and the significant role of religious art and symbolism in expressing their spiritual beliefs and cultural identity, there exists a notable gap in scholarly research concerning the nuanced dimensions of Urhobo religious art. This study seeks to address this gap by undertaking a comprehensive examination of Urhobo religious art and symbolism from multidisciplinary perspectives, including art history, anthropology, religious studies, and cultural sociology.

## **Concept of Religious Art and Symbolism**

The concept of religious art and symbolism refers to the use of visual imagery, symbols, and artistic expressions to convey spiritual beliefs, religious narratives, and sacred meanings within a particular religious tradition or cultural context. Oshokha (2005) avers that religious art serves as a visual language through which believers communicate with the divine, express their devotion, and engage with sacred stories, rituals, and teachings. Art frequently employs symbols to represent abstract spiritual concepts and beliefs, these symbols may include iconic imagery such as crosses, crescents, lotus flowers, mandalas, or sacred animals, each carrying specific meanings within the context of a particular religious tradition. Through symbolic representation, art conveys complex theological ideas, cosmological concepts, and moral principles in a visual and accessible form (Oghenekome, 2017).

According to Ajayi (2018), devotional art fosters personal and communal connections with the divine, nurturing a sense of intimacy, trust, and reverence in the relationship between humans and the sacred. Architectural forms and sacred spaces express spiritual beliefs through their design, layout, and ornamentation. Temples, mosques, churches, and other places of worship are designed to evoke a sense of awe, transcendence, and divine presence, reflecting the cosmological and theological principles of the religious tradition they represent. Architectural features such as domes,

spires, arches, and stained glass windows serve as symbolic representations of spiritual ideals and aspirations, inviting worshippers to enter into sacred realms of meaning and experience (Adesanya, 2012).

Artifacts and ritual objects play a central role in religious ceremonies, rites, and rituals. These objects may include ritual implements, ceremonial garments, sacred vessels, and ritualistic tools adorned with symbolic motifs and designs. Through their materiality and symbolism, these artifacts facilitate spiritual experiences, mediate divine presence, and enact religious rituals that affirm and reinforce spiritual beliefs and practices. Omokhodion (2016) opines that Art provides individuals with a means of expressing their personal spiritual experiences, beliefs, and insights. Whether through painting, sculpture, poetry, music, or dance, individuals use artistic expression as a form of spiritual exploration, self-discovery, and creative engagement with the divine. Artistic creation becomes a spiritual practice in itself, fostering a deeper sense of connection, meaning, and transcendence in the lives of individuals who engage with it.

Communication with the divine is a fundamental aspect of many religious traditions, and art often plays a significant role in facilitating religious icons, paintings, and sculptures depict divine beings, saints, and spiritual figures in a visually accessible form (Omotoye, 2015). Through these representations, believers can meditate on the qualities, virtues, and teachings of the divine, fostering a sense of intimacy and connection with the sacred. Icons serve as focal points for prayer, contemplation, and devotion, inviting believers to enter into a deeper relationship with the divine presence they represent. Temples, mosques, churches, and other places of worship are designed to evoke a sense of awe, reverence, and transcendence. Architectural features such as domes, spires, and altars create sacred spaces where believers can commune with the divine through prayer, meditation, and ritual.

### **Historical Background of the Urhobo**

The Urhobo people trace their origins to ancient migrations from various parts of present-day Nigeria. Oral tradition suggests that they migrated from diverse regions, including the Benin Kingdom, Igbo hinterlands, and areas further north. These migrations likely occurred over several centuries, with groups settling in the fertile lands along the Niger River and its tributaries (Otite, 2003). Upon arrival in the Niger Delta region, the Urhobo people established settlements and communities organized around kinship ties, clan affiliations, and shared cultural practices (Ekeh, 2008).

According to Igun (2014) each community was governed by a council of elders and chiefs, with leadership titles such as the *Ovie* (king) and *Oghuwwie* (chiefs). These leaders played crucial roles in maintaining social order, resolving disputes, and preserving cultural traditions. Agriculture, fishing, hunting, and trade formed the economic backbone of early Urhobo society. The fertile soil of the Niger Delta region supported farming of crops such as yams, cassava, plantains, and palm produce. Fishing in the rivers and

creeks provided a vital source of protein, while trade networks facilitated the exchange of goods with neighboring communities and distant regions. According to Oghenekaro (2018), the Urhobo people developed a rich tapestry of cultural and religious practices that reflected their worldview, beliefs, and values. Traditional religion, characterized by the veneration of ancestral spirits, deities, and natural forces, played a central role in daily life. Ceremonies, rituals, and festivals were held to honor the spirits, seek their blessings, and ensure communal prosperity.

According to Ufuoma (2016), despite the influence of globalization and the dominance of English as Nigeria's official language, efforts to promote and preserve the Urhobo language remain essential for safeguarding cultural heritage and fostering intergenerational transmission of knowledge. Traditional religion plays a significant role in Urhobo cultural identity, providing a framework for understanding the spiritual world, ancestral connections, and the forces of nature. Ancestral worship, deity veneration, and ritual ceremonies are integral aspects of Urhobo religious practice, reflecting a deep reverence for the land, waterways, and natural environment (Ude, 2014). Despite the influence of Christianity and Islam in Nigeria, many Urhobo people continue to uphold traditional religious beliefs and practices as a vital expression of cultural identity and spirituality.

Ceremonies and festivals hold a special place in Urhobo cultural heritage, serving as occasions for communal celebration, storytelling, and ritual expression. Festivals such as the Urhobo Cultural Festival (Ugborhen-Oghior), Ovwor-Olomu Festival, and Oghwoghwa Masquerade Festival showcase traditional music, dance, attire, and cuisine, reaffirming cultural identity and fostering social cohesion among Urhobo communities. These festivals also provide opportunities for cultural exchange and tourism, contributing to the promotion and preservation of Urhobo cultural heritage (Olokunefor, 2016). Urhobo artistic traditions encompass a wide range of forms, including sculpture, pottery, weaving, beadwork, and decorative arts. Traditional crafts such as ukodo (clay pots), ikaki (woven baskets), and ikwere (beaded jewelry) reflect the skill, creativity, and aesthetic sensibility of Urhobo artisans. Artistic motifs and symbols drawn from nature, mythology, and everyday life are incorporated into decorative objects, clothing, and architectural elements, serving as visual expressions of cultural identity and heritage (Isichei, 1997).

Oral tradition is a vital means of preserving and transmitting Urhobo cultural heritage from one generation to the next. Storytelling, folktales, myths, and legends are passed down orally, serving as repositories of historical knowledge, moral lessons, and cultural values. Contemporary Urhobo writers, poets, and playwrights draw inspiration from oral tradition, creating literary works that reflect the complexities and nuances of Urhobo identity and experience. Traditional institutions such as the Ovie (king) and Oghwuvwie (chiefs) play essential roles in preserving Urhobo cultural heritage and identity. These leaders serve as custodians of tradition, mediators of disputes, and guardians of community values. Through their leadership and guidance, they uphold the integrity of Urhobo cultural practices, rituals, and

social norms, ensuring continuity and resilience in the face of external pressures and social change.

### **Types of Religious Art among the Urhobo People**

The Urhobo people, an ethnic group in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, have a rich cultural and religious heritage that is reflected in their art and symbolism. In Urhobo religious belief system, which often includes elements of animism and ancestor worship, art serves various functions, such as communication with the spirit world, preservation of cultural values, and expression of religious beliefs (Obi, 2011).

i. **Masks:** Masks hold a special significance in Urhobo religious and cultural practices. They are used in various rituals and ceremonies to embody and communicate with ancestral spirits, deities, and other supernatural entities. Urhobo masks are often adorned with intricate designs and symbolic elements that represent specific spirits, deities, or ancestral figures. These symbols may include geometric patterns, animal motifs, and facial expressions that convey the essence and attributes of the spiritual being they represent (Iweriebor, 2018). Masks serve as a medium for communicating with the spirit world during religious ceremonies and rituals. Through the wearer of the mask, the ancestral spirits or deities are believed to impart blessings, guidance, and protection to the community. Masks are prominently featured in various Urhobo religious ceremonies and rites of passage, such as initiations, funerals, harvest festivals, and masquerade performances.

Each mask has its own significance and is used in specific contexts to fulfill ritualistic purposes. Urhobo masks are meticulously crafted by skilled artisans who possess traditional knowledge passed down through generations. These masks are typically made from materials such as wood, clay, cloth, or metal, and they are often adorned with colorful pigments, beads, shells, and other decorative elements. Masks play a crucial role in expressing and preserving Urhobo cultural identity. They are integral to the community's spiritual beliefs and practices, as well as their artistic traditions. Through the creation and use of masks, the Urhobo people celebrate their heritage and affirm their connection to their ancestors and spiritual roots. Mask performances are communal events that bring together members of the Urhobo community to celebrate, honor, and communicate with the spiritual realm. These performances often involve music, dance, storytelling, and theatrical elements, creating a vibrant and interactive experience for both participants and spectators.

ii. **Figurative sculpture:** This is another prominent form of religious art in Urhobo culture. These sculptures depict various figures, including ancestral spirits, gods, and mythological beings, and they serve as conduits for spiritual communication and reverence (Barnes, 2009)



Fig. 1: The Ovughere Shrine Assemblage Wood, Pigment and Cloth, Ovu Inland, Agbon Clan 1875. COURTESY OF Perkins Foss; Where Gods and Mortals meet continuity and renewal in Urhobo Art.

Odokuma (2013), asserts that “The structure of Urhobo wood statuary varies in form as well as function. For instance, the figure of the “hand altar” (Obo) is not depicted like the figure of “aggression” (Iphri) or are the founding Father assemblages (edjorakare) like the “hand altar” (Obo) is sometimes part of the paraphernalia of the shrine.” She went on further to explaining their various traits that “each of these divinities possesses their unique compositional traits as well as their functions in the entire layout of the Urhobo culture.”

Sculptures representing ancestors are highly revered in Urhobo culture. These figures often depict individuals who played significant roles in the community during their lifetime or who are believed to continue to exert influence from the spirit world. Ancestral sculptures serve as reminders of familial lineage, wisdom, and the interconnectedness of past and present generations. Urhobo religious beliefs encompass a pantheon of deities and spirits, each with its own domain of influence and significance. Figurative sculptures are crafted to represent these divine entities, embodying their attributes, characteristics, and mythological narratives. These sculptures are revered as embodiments of divine presence and power, and they often play central roles in religious rituals and ceremonies. Urhobo mythology is rich with stories of mythical beings and creatures that inhabit the spirit world. Figurative sculptures may depict these mythological beings, such as spirits of

the forest, water, or sky, as well as legendary heroes and heroines whose exploits are celebrated in oral tradition (Otite, 2008).

Adesanya (2012), opines that these sculptures serve as visual manifestations of cultural myths and legends, inspiring awe, wonder, and reverence among the community. Figurative sculptures are sometimes used as ritual objects in Urhobo religious ceremonies and rites of passage. These sculptures may be placed on altars, shrines, or sacred spaces as offerings to appease spirits, seek blessings, or commemorate important life events. They are believed to possess spiritual potency and are treated with great respect and reverence by the community. Urhobo figurative sculpture is characterized by its artistic craftsmanship and attention to detail. Sculptors employ traditional techniques and materials, such as wood carving, metal casting, and clay modeling, to create lifelike representations of divine and mythical beings. These sculptures showcase the creativity, skill, and cultural heritage of Urhobo artists, preserving and perpetuating their artistic traditions for future generations.

**iii. Shrines and altars:** Shrines and altars are dedicated spaces where the Urhobo people communicate with ancestral spirits, gods, and other supernatural beings. They serve as focal points for religious rituals, ceremonies, and offerings, facilitating a connection between the physical world and the spiritual realm. Shrines and altars vary in size and complexity, ranging from small household shrines to larger community or village shrines. They are typically constructed from natural materials such as wood, clay, stones, and thatch, and may be adorned with symbolic objects, carvings, and decorations that reflect the spiritual beliefs and cultural heritage of the community (Ajayi, 2018).

Taylor, cited in Obi (2011) submits that shrines and altars are often dedicated to specific deities, ancestral spirits, or natural forces that hold significance in Urhobo religious cosmology. Each shrine or altar may have its own rituals, prayers, and offerings associated with it, reflecting the unique relationship between the worshipper and the divine entity being honored. Offerings of food, drink, and other items are commonly placed on shrines and altars as a sign of respect and devotion to the spirits. These offerings may include traditional foods, palm wine, kola nuts, animal sacrifices, and symbolic objects representing prosperity, fertility, and protection

**iv. Rituals, ceremonies, and Festivals:** Rituals such as prayers, incantations, drumming, and dancing are performed to invoke the presence of the spirits and seek their blessings and guidance. Shrines and altars often serve as gathering places for communal worship and religious observances. Members of the community come together to participate in rituals, ceremonies, and festivals held at the shrine or altar, fostering a sense of unity, solidarity, and shared cultural identity among the worshippers. Shrines and altars are typically maintained by designated caretakers or priests who oversee the upkeep of the sacred space and conduct religious rituals on behalf of the community. They are typically constructed from natural materials such

as wood, clay, stones, and thatch, and may be adorned with symbolic objects, carvings, and decorations that reflect the spiritual beliefs and cultural heritage of the community.

### **Significance of Urhobo Religious Arts and Symbols**

Religious arts and symbols have religious, communal, social, and economic significance in Urhobo land.

Table 1: Table showing selected Urhobo ritual exercises and symbols from Participant Observation.

Event/Activity	Date	Key Symbols Observed	Description of Ritual	Community Engagement	Significance of Symbols
Owhoru Festival	June 6, 2024	Masks, Statues, Drums	The festival involved processions, dances, and offerings.	High community-wide participation	Masks symbolize ancestral spirits, statues represent deities
Shrine Dedication Ceremony	June 7, 2024	Amulets, Carved Figures, Sacred Textiles	Dedication of a new shrine with prayers and libations	Medium - primarily religious leaders, some community members	Amulets for protection, carved figures for invoking deities
Ancestral Veneration	June 10, 2024	Totems, Ancestral Masks, Symbolic Offerings	Offerings to ancestors including food, drink, and symbolic items	High - family and extended kin participation	Totems and masks serve as conduits for communicating with ancestors
Healing Ritual	June 12, 2024	Healing Staff, Sacred Beads, Herbal Mixtures	Rituals for healing involving chants, use of herbal mixtures	Low - select participants (healers and patients)	Healing staff symbolizes the healer's authority, beads signify spiritual power
Initiation Ceremony	June 14, 2024	Ritual Masks, Protective Charms, Initiation Robes	Initiation of new members into religious society	High - initiates, family, and society members	Ritual masks for transformation, charms for protection, robes for identity





Fig. 2: Mask among the Owloru people of Urhobo. Mask used extensively in festivals and initiation ceremonies, symbolizing ancestral spirits and transformative power  
Source: Pinteres



Figure 3: A Sculpture among the Urhobo People  
Source: Researchers' Fieldwork, 2024  
Statues: Representing deities and used in various rituals to invoke their presence and blessings.



Fig. 4: An Amulet  
Source: Researchers' Fieldwork, 2024

Amulets and charms often used for protection during shrine dedications and initiation ceremonies. Healing staff and sacred beads are tools of healers, symbolizing authority and spiritual power. Each ritual is described to provide context on how the symbols are used. This includes processions, offerings, prayers, and chants, which are integral parts of the rituals. Events like festivals and initiation ceremonies see wide participation from the community, indicating the collective importance of these symbols. Shrine dedication ceremonies involve religious leaders and some community members, showing focused but significant engagement. Healing rituals typically involve specific participants like healers and patients, reflecting specialized use of symbols.

### **Significance of Symbols among the Urhobo**

Symbols like masks and statues connect the community with their ancestors and deities, reinforcing cultural and spiritual continuity. Amulets, charms, and healing tools embody protective and curative powers, essential in

maintaining community health and safety. Ritual masks and initiation robes are crucial in rites of passage, marking significant transitions and affirming social identities. The survey results indicate a strong engagement with religious symbols among the Urhobo people, with a significant portion participating in rituals frequently and considering these symbols very important to their spiritual practices. Amulets and charms are the most frequently used symbols, and a majority believes that these symbols help in connecting with ancestors or deities. While many respondents have noticed changes in the use of religious symbols over time, the overall importance and engagement with these symbols remain high. These findings reinforce the cultural and spiritual significance of religious art and symbolism in the Urhobo community.

## Results

Table 2: Research questions and responses

Survey Question	Response Options	Number of Respondents (n)	Percentage (%)
How often do you participate in rituals involving religious symbols?	Daily	50	25%
	Weekly	60	30%
	Monthly	42	21%
	Rarely	20	10%
	Never	10	5%
	Statues	50	25%
	Amulets/Charms	70	35%
How important are religious symbols in your personal spiritual practices?	Totems	20	10%
	Very Important	80	40%
	Important	60	30%
	Moderately Important	30	15%
Do you believe religious symbols help in connecting with ancestors or deities?	Not Important	10	5%
	Strongly Agree	80	40%
	Agree	70	35%
	Neutral	30	15%
	Disagree	15	7.5%
Have you noticed changes in the use of religious symbols over time?	Strongly Disagree	5	2.5%
	Yes, significant changes	50	25%
	Yes, minor changes	90	45%
	No changes	40	20%
	Not sure	20	10%

Question 1: How often do you participate in rituals involving religious symbols?

A total of 25% of the respondents have participated in rituals involving religious symbols daily, indicating regular engagement. On weekly bases, 30%

participate in the rituals, indicating high engagement. While 21% participate on monthly bases. On the other hand, 10% rarely participate in the rituals involving religious symbols, while 5% never participated indicating a small portion of the population not engaged in ritual practices.

Question 2: How important are religious symbols in your personal spiritual practices?

A total of 40% respondents consider religious symbols very important to their spiritual practices. 30% consider them important. On moderate bases, 15% consider them moderately important while 5% do not consider them important.

Question 3: Do you believe religious symbols help in connecting with ancestors or deities?

A total of 40% strongly agree that religious symbols help in connecting with ancestors and deities. 35% agreed while 15% are neutral. A total of 7.5% disagreed while 2.5% strongly disagreed.

Question 4: Have you noticed changes in the use of religious symbols over time?

A total of 25% of the respondents have noticed significant changes in the use of religious symbols in recent time, while 45% have claimed to have noticed minor changes in the use of religious symbols in recent time. On the other hand, 20% said that they have not noticed any changes in the use of religious symbols in recent time, while 10% are not sure of any changes.

## **The Significance of the Use of Religious Art and Symbols**

### Cultural significance

Culture is a fundamental aspect of human societies, encompassing the beliefs, behaviors, objects, and other characteristics shared by groups of people. It influences and shapes every facet of human life, providing a framework within which individuals and communities operate. Culture provides individuals with a sense of identity and belonging. It helps people understand who they are and where they come from. Shared cultural practices, languages, traditions, and values foster a sense of unity and community among members (Geertz, 2023). Culture plays a critical role in the socialization process, teaching individuals the norms, values, and behaviors appropriate in their society. Through different institutions like family, education, and religion, people learn to function and interact within their social environment.

### Communal significance

Communal life, characterized by shared living, mutual support, and collective responsibility, plays a crucial role in human societies. It significantly impacts individuals' well-being, social structures, and cultural continuity. Communal life provides a robust support network where individuals can rely on each other for emotional, financial, and practical assistance. This mutual aid strengthens social bonds and fosters a sense of solidarity and trust among community members. Religious Arts and symbols serve as unifying factor among the Urhobo people. It helps to portray the various kingdoms as entities from same progenitors.

### Economy significance

Religious Arts and symbols also have economic values. Activities like festivals have direct economic impact on Urhobo communities. Furthermore, they serve as some form of tourism that bring people together from far and near. Social development is a multifaceted process that improves the well-being of individuals and communities by enhancing their social, economic, and cultural conditions. It plays a crucial role in shaping societies, fostering inclusion, equity, and the overall quality of life. Here's a detailed exploration of the significance of social development. Social development initiatives such as education and healthcare significantly improve human capital. Arts and symbols show that the Urhobos have their own philosophy and cultural ideas that are unique, and can be harvest into productive economic value.

### Conclusion

This paper on the significance of religious art and symbolism within the Urhobo religious belief system reveals their integral role in shaping the spiritual practices, cultural, and social cohesion of the Urhobo people. Religious symbols are deeply integrated into daily life and ritual practices, with significant portions of the community engaging in these practices on a daily or weekly basis. This high frequency underscores the essential role of symbols in maintaining spiritual routines and rituals. Symbols such as amulets, charms, masks, and statues are employed in a diverse array of rituals, including protection ceremonies, healing rites, and ancestor veneration. This variety indicates that religious symbols are versatile tools that address multiple spiritual needs.

The belief in the power of symbols to connect with ancestors and deities highlights their function as mediators between the physical and spiritual realms. These symbols are considered vital for invoking spiritual presence and influence, making them indispensable in religious practices. The perception of changes in the use of religious symbols reflects the dynamic and adaptive nature of Urhobo cultural practices. These changes ensure that symbols remain relevant and meaningful in contemporary contexts, allowing the culture to evolve while maintaining its core values.

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