

GRAPHIC IMAGES, SYMBOLS AND ICONS AS RELIGIOUS DIFICATION TOOLS

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Abstract

Humans, though physical by nature, are configured for religiosity. This is as a result of the innate and almost insatiable desire to fill a spiritual void deeply seated there in within the soul. In the anxious quest to fill this void, the urge therefore arises to commune with the spiritual realm. This spiritual journey has endeared some to go wide and deep in seeking ephemeral solutions in various places of worship, even as far as to the occult. At the threshold of this seemingly divine connection, deific mode of worship is activated. This spiritual odyssey continues often for an entire lifetime. However, since the physical and spiritual realms are never at par, it often behooves the worshipper to crave and formulate tangible methods, portals or objects by which to facilitate as well as open up channels of divine communication. This spiritual endeavor has metamorphosed into the use of physical, albeit, graphic images or objects for deific worship such as the Christian Cross/Roman Catholic Crucifix, the Islamic Crescent and Star, the mythological Eye of Horus, Effigies and figurines in African Traditional Religion as well as other memorabilia. This paper discusses and gives reasons why graphically crafted images are a major part of religious worship globally irrespective of diversities in creed, race and ethnicity.

Keywords: Deification, Worship, Spiritual, Image, Symbol, Icon

Introduction

There are very few terms in our academic vocabulary or local parlance which usually evoke the feeling of awe or reverence when mentioned, the word “deity” is chief among them. Whenever the word deity is stated or made reference to, an aura of godliness is entrenched. Deity is a term sparingly used outside a religious enclave but always employed in universal worship, despite obvious differences in dogma, race or location. It is basically used in the allusion to an often invincible Object or objects of veneration, be it in the singular as in monotheism or in the pluralized form as in polytheism. It is also used in various formats either with or without initial caps, as in “God” for Christians and “gods” in Traditional African Religion (ATR). The word deity could be used interchangeably in reference to the following sacred terminologies: divinity, idol, god, goddess, oracle as well as any holy being. Studies conducted by several authorities at various points in time, within our cultural settings, such as Beier, (1968), Fagg, (1971), Kelvin, (1971), Mount, (1973), Okeke, (1982), Adepegba, (1995), Brown, (1996), and Oyelola, (1997), have shown that different ethnicities are acquainted with some particular styles and peculiar design concepts or patterns as being indigenous to their culture. These indigenous designs, which come in the forms of symbols, signs and images, are used extensively by the natives, mostly as cultural symbols which are adapted as well as adopted into bodily adornment, general decoration as well as for

social communication and most often for religious or spiritual purposes. This is also in agreement with Ejiofor (2016), who posits that “in Nigeria some ethnic groups have been specifically associated with various symbols”. Again, these symbols cut across various ethnicities globally.

Deification, a Global Practice

The quest and practice of deific worship is intrinsic and universal. It readily brings to mind the erroneous practice of some Christian adherents regarding a traditionalist as an unbeliever or a devout Muslim referring to a Christian as *Kafir*. The fact is that no man could justifiably be labeled as an “unbeliever” because every man believes in something. Infact, ideology has also been defined as a set of beliefs, values and ideas that characterize a person, group or culture. By this definition, ideology is also a belief system. The question should rather be that of belief in what? The Book, *Mankind's Search for God*, (1990) sheds more light on the global reach of deific worship

Regardless of where you live, you have no doubt seen for yourself how religion affects the lives of millions of people, may be you too. In countries where Hinduism is practiced, you will often see people doing *puja* – a ceremony that may include making offering to their gods in the form of coconut, flowers and apples. A priest will apply a spot of red or yellow pigment, the *tilak*, to the foreheads of the believers.

It went on further to conclude by insisting that

Religion has existed in all human societies from early times. Although belief systems and traditions of worship differ from culture to culture, they also have many common elements. In all cultures, human beings make a practice of interacting with what are taken to be spiritual powers. These powers may be in the form of gods, spirits, ancestors, or any kind of sacred reality with which humans believe themselves to be connected.

Among the Hindus of India, which is a polytheistic religion, their several deities and gods are ascribed with several symbols and images mostly animistic. Globally, in orthodox and Pentecostal Christianity, Deity is used when making reference to the divine Being, God Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth. But because the use of graven images is forbidden in the divine worship, however, to create an acceptable and distinguishing identity, Christianity is generally symbolized with the Cross, or Crucifix mostly by the Roman Catholics. Also in Islam, the use of images is also prohibited, in fact, it is a taboo (*haraam*), however, for identity sake, the combination of the Crescent and Star have become an *Islamically* accepted symbol.

To effectively situate this paper, certain terms have to be contextually defined, because one cannot explain religious icons without first understanding what religion means. Religion has been defined as the “the belief in and the worship of a supernatural being...” On the other hand, Supernatural, has also been expressed as “that which is above and beyond nature, often considered so because it is given by a deity or some force beyond that which humans are born with...” Consequent upon the foregoing, it is no gain saying having been already established by ancient philosophers the fact that man is naturally a religious being. The need to worship a deity or deities supposedly is beyond and above the scope of the human enterprise hence calls for desperate measures. This innate quest for a divine connection with the harbingers of the spiritual realm is altogether necessary since due to human limitation, the fear of what happens

after death is a trigger for this divine desperation. Comparatively, as noted by Gatta, Lange and Lyon (1991) “graphic designers use a combination of shapes and forms, words and images to communicate visually to others. So also, religious adherents, use a combination of icons, chants, prayers and or incantations to communicate spiritually with deities.

Part of these measures now metamorphosed into the need to locate this “invisible” Being (or beings as the case may be) by certain factors, which include often intangible and or tangible or tactile substances or objects. The intangible may include: prayers, incantations, visions and mantras, while the tangible or tactile, in the context of this paper are grouped under the following subheads: images, symbols and icons. It is however, important to note that most times, in the execution of this divine connection, the intangible and the tangible, go hand-in-hand. For example, a devout Catholic must recite the Rosary while cossetting the Chaplet, same applies to the Muslim and his *Tesbiu* or *Misbaha*.

Tactile Substances Employed in Deification

- **Image:** an image is simply a mental or physical picture of any object or thing...such as helps with communication, representation, explanation or description. It is in the foregoing regard that Smith (2010) notes that:

For centuries, Africa has been home to a multitude of societies with different cultural landscapes, social structures, and strongly defined aesthetic ideals. In the absence of the written word, Africa’s legacy consists of a vast mélange of complex symbols, patterns, and signs. These aesthetically abstract configurations and unique characters replaced linguistic symbols commonly used for recording the history of remarkable events, the deeds of great kings, celebrations, births and deaths, and extraordinary occurrences.

- **Symbol:** a symbol is a character representing an idea, concept or object. Symbols have been in use since the era of the Stone Age. Shedding light on what a symbol is, Willet, (1971), asserts that “...Signs, [which according to Nwanna, (2006), is derivation from semiotics] and symbols as constituents of art have been known to have preceded civilization, as the early man has been noted to have drawn images of signs and symbols on rocky surfaces, depicting his hunting escapades”. It is in this same line of thought that Ogumor, (1998) stated that letterings started with the early man in form of scribbles and symbols. Madubugwu, (2017) also cited Ikwuemesi (2000) as asserting that the “primitive man, having no distinct mode of communication, used symbols, signs and patterns for identification and for communication”. It is worthy of note, that in spite of the technological breakthroughs of the present century, the use of symbols as a means of communication, has not diminished, rather could be said to be on the rise, as the major tool of the present age, the computer, is wrought with symbols and icons, howbeit, digitally.

- **Icon:** an icon is an image, symbol or picture or other representation usually as an object of religious devotion. It can also be a painted image of a religious figure or event, especially a painted panel that is characteristic of the Roman Catholic Church. The term *icon* is derived from the Greek *eikēnai*, meaning “to resemble” and refers to an image believed to be sacred in itself that can aid in contacting the represented figure. Venerated persons, who are late and have been canonized, are usually represented on panels and are hence referred to as saints. In the same vein, Iconography, an artistic genre, is derived from the term icon and is also associated with symbolism.

Iconography: The Encarta (2009) defines iconography in art history, as the study of subject matter in art. The meaning of works of art is often conveyed by the specific objects or figures that the artist chooses to portray; the purpose of iconography is to identify, classify, and explain these objects. Iconography is particularly important in the study of religious and allegorical painting, where many of the objects that are pictured - crosses, skulls, books, or candles, for example - have special significance, which is often obscure or symbolic as well as possessing religious undertones.

The Encarta (2009) goes on further to state that

The use of iconographic symbols in art began as early as 3000 BC, when the Neolithic civilizations of the Middle East used nonhuman or animal figures to represent their gods. Thus, the Egyptian mother goddess Hathor was associated with the cow and usually appeared in relief sculpture and wall paintings as a cow-headed woman. The sun god Ra had a hawk's head, and the creator Ptah appeared as a bull.

The issue of associating objects of worship with symbols is not a recent development as further indicated by Encarta (2009)

In ancient Greece and Rome, each of the gods was associated with specific objects. Zeus (Jupiter), the father of the gods, was often accompanied by an eagle or a thunderbolt; Apollo, the god of art, by a lyre; Artemis (Diana), the hunter, by a bow and quiver. In addition, the Romans perfected the use of secular allegorical symbols. For example, a woman surrounded by bunches of grapes and sheaves of wheat would be readily understood as a representation of the bounties of the earth.

The foregoing assertions are neither restricted to paganism nor merely ancient practices as Early Christian art during the period of Roman persecution as well as in the present dispensation, according to the Encarta (2009) is still

Highly circumspect, and innocuous objects—the fish and the dove—were used to symbolize Christ and the Holy Spirit. Later Christian art, however, became replete with iconographic symbols. In particular, many of the saints became associated with specific objects—Saint Peter with two keys, for instance, or Saint Catherine with a broken wheel. During the Renaissance and through the 18th century, allegorical paintings were especially popular, as artists constructed elaborate symbolic schemes to illustrate such themes as the vanity of human existence. Objects such as jewels, coins, and musical instruments personified the vain pleasures of life, while skulls, hourglasses, and extinguished candles were *memento mori*, or reminders of death.

The foregoing assertions, are global practices, in the same vein, various indigenous deities in Africa, particularly, Nigeria are associated with symbolic imageries as is elucidated below.

Some Nigerian Ethnic Deities, Their Attributes and Symbolisms

In the traditional African setting, Nigeria particularly, deification is conducted by various ethnicities, with various referential names, objects and symbols. For example, the main deity in Edoland, *Ogun* is known and worshipped as the god of iron and as such is symbolized with the object of Iron or metal. In Yorubaland, *Shango* is a major deity with a symbolic reference to fire or thunder. This applies to several other ethnic groups within the Nigerian nation and elsewhere beyond the African continent. The list of deities, especially in the African traditional context are almost in-exhaustive, but for this study, only the following few will be discussed:

Tribe	Deity	Attribute(s)	Symbol(s)
Yoruba	Olodumare	Creator	Sun and Sky
	Oshun	Fertility/Love	Rivers and Mirror
	Shango	Thunder/Lightening	Double-Headed Axe
	Eshu	Confusion/Mischief	Double Faced
	Olokun	Healing/Mystery	Oceans
Igbo	Chineke	Creator	The Earth
	Amadioha	Thunder/Lightening	White Ram
	Agwu	Divination	Roots and Herbs
	Ifejioku	Agriculture	Harvest/Yams
	Anyanwu	Light/Vision	Sunlight
Edo	Osanobua	Supreme God	Sun, White Flag and Pole
	Ogun	War/Vengeance	Iron/Metals
	Obiemwen	Fertility	Child Birth
	Osun	Medicine/Magic	Rainforests
	Ogiuwu	Death and Force	The After Life

Reason for Images, Symbols and Icons in Deification

Communication-wise, humanity is basically practical; however, the case is different in spirituality. A significant aspect of spirituality is intangibility: the state of being without a physical form or body, the incapability of being perceived or beholden by the human senses. These physical limitations, may have given impetus to the quest of worshippers

of various deities, resorting to creating substantial means of reaching out to their spiritual, often invisible benefactors – this applies to all religious adherents, irrespective of differences in belief systems. Myriad of religions exist globally, but due to dearth of space, only a few will be discussed in this paper, hence, graphically crafted objects associated with some religions/deities are hereby presented.

Graphic Images, Symbols and Icons Associated with Major Deities and Religions Around the Globe.

Figures: 1, 2 & 3



Symbol: Cross
Deity: Jehovah
Religion: Christianity
Founder: Jesus Christ
Book: Bible



Crescent and Star
Allah
Islam
Mohammed
Qur'an



Star of David
Yahweh
Judaism
Moses
Torah

Figures: 4, 5 & 6



Symbol: Eye of Ra
Deity: Sun God
Religion: Egyptian Myth
Founder: Atum



Ancestral Mask (figurine)
Ancestors
African Trad. Religion
Unknown



Yingyang
Kami
Taoism
Lao-tzu

The Cross or Crucifix

The tenet of the Christian faith, to a very large extent, forbids the use of physical images as its doctrine is doggedly tied to spirituality and the exercise of acute faith, which deals with “the belief and trust in an invisible but ubiquitous Being.” Be that as it may, the Cross however, is among the very few objects of veneration that are accepted as a significant aspect of worship in the Christian faith. This could be alluded to the fact that Jesus Christ, the founder of Christianity paid the ultimate price of salvation on a cross, despite being also a Roman instrument for death penalty.

The Crescent and Star

As stated heretofore, the Islamic faith also prohibits the use of images in its worship. In fact, the introduction of any form of image in Islam is termed “*haram*” or taboo, which may attract a death penalty to the offender. However and perhaps as a result of the Islamic calendar which depends on the actual sighting of the new moon in order to commence the celebration of its various festivals, could be the reason for accepting the celestial icons of the crescent and a star as the symbol for Islam.

The Star (Magen) of David: Hexagram

The Star of David (Hebrew “Shield of David”), as described by Oegema, (1996) and Gunther (1991) is a six-pointed star made with two equilateral triangles and has been a symbol of Judaism since the 17th century. It is the central motif on the flag of Israel, and since 1897, the emblem of Zionism.

The Use of Graphic Images, Symbols and Icons in Cult and the Occult

It would not be out of place to state in this study that belief in certain cults and the occult is also a part of religion. This assertion is in line with a definition of religion as any practice that someone or group is seriously devoted to. In the same vein, the occult is defined as belief or practice of anything “pertaining to mysticism, magic or astrology”. The common factor in all these definitions is that they point to the singular practice and belief in something- an ideology or deity, which is usually beyond and above the scope of the practitioners or adherents.

Universally, several occultic organizations abound in all races and locations. For example, in Japan, the Yakuza is a well established cult, with very elaborate and colourful dragon tattoos as their graphic imagery or identification of membership. In Italy, the Mafia is an organized cult. In Nigeria, the Yoruba have the Ogboni fraternity, the Ku Klux Klan or KKK is an American white supremacist cult and the list can go on. The major common denominator in all these is the fact that membership is exclusive and devoid of non-adherents. For easy identification of membership, certain graphic images, symbols and icons are usually employed. Apart from the use of graphic symbols, such as uniforms and tattoos, certain tactile but obscure methods of greetings, gestures, handshakes and hugs specific to members alone are used.

Conclusion

In the exhibition of all these, non-members are usually in the dark. Often times, the bond that exists between members of a particular cult is usually stronger than natural family ties between siblings. This is as a result of the probable oaths of secrecy and allegiance to which members are subjected to. Conclusively, to maintain membership clandestineness, certain common symbols but with underlying ambiguities are therefore, employed for deific worship and spiritual connectivity strictly amongst adherents.

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