

## THE INSTRUMENTALITY OF AFRICAN SHRINES AND SACRED PLACES TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

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### Abstract

*In many parts of Africa, Nigeria in particular, the role of shrines and sacred places for conflict resolution, social control and moral development remains evident. However, the fast encroaching urbanization and globalization with their accompanying detribalization of cultural systems have, to a large extent, been observed to have disintegrated African social life. Consequently, religious values and sanctions of tribal life seem to have been fast giving way and this has hitherto, poses a serious enigma to the once enjoyed sustainable development in African. Thus, the desacralizing of African shrines has conversely enhanced the rate of corrupt practices at all levels in many African societies. Irrespective of the foregoing orthodoxy, the present study retracts the instrumentality of African shrines and sacred places for development in Nigeria and further argues that globalization has endangered its vitality which has in turn increased the rate of corruption in many African nations.*

**Keywords:** Shrines, Sacred places, Sustainable Development and Phenomenology

### Introduction

There is no doubt that Africa and Africans are still suffering from the effects of errors done to her by the early missionaries and investigators that came to Africa. Without sufficient knowledge of the philosophies of African life and belief, these missionaries passed a judgement on them as a people who had no knowledge of God and who cannot comprehend anything good or meaningful. Thus, described them and their religion with derogatory and misleading terms such as; primitive, savage, fetishism, juju, heathenism, paganism, animism, idolatry, and polytheism. This is evident in the fact that before the foreign investigators could begin their investigation of what the religious beliefs of the Africans looked like,

there were theorists who have never been to Africa but who regarded it as the “Dark Continent” where people had no idea of God and where the devil in all his abysmal, grotesque and forbidden features, armed to the teeth and with horns complete, held sway.

Again was the dialogue that took place between Edwin Smith, who had gone out as a missionary to Africa, and Emil Ludwig, an eminent biographer. When Ludwig got to know that Edwin Smith was in Africa as a missionary, he was surprised; and in his surprise he asked, “How can the untutored Africans comprehend God? God is a philosophical concept which savages are incapable of framing (Parrinder in Ezenweke, 2013; Ezenweke, 2010 ). This misconception and the treatment accruing from it caused a seemingly permanent damage on African psyche. Succinctly put, the erosion of Africans pride as seen by the sense of inferiority in almost all that concern African life and belief has not been cured. Africans, who they are, what they have and do are still misunderstood and misrepresented. This misconception, affects the various spheres of African life, among which is, the African shrines and sacred places.

In Africa, the place of shrines and sacred places cannot be overemphasized. There is no doubt that Africans are notoriously religious and that religion colours all aspect of their lives (Mbiti, 1970). The socio-religious values of shrines and sacred places are amongst the make ups of the historical identity of the African people. Africans believe in the existence of deities, spirits and ancestors whose abodes are shrines and sacred places. Africans also believe that the aspects or properties of the Supreme Being can rest on natural objects and places for the wellbeing of man. Shrines and other sacred places are therefore, treated with fear, awe and respect.

However, shrines and sacred places serve many purposes that aid sustainable development. They are the trusted avenues for conflict resolution, social control, cultural education and moral development, thus, they are instrumental to sustainable development. However, all these started dwindling with the advent of Christianity, western civilization and globalization. Many people now see shrines and sacred places as homes of demons, evil dwelling and archaic and those who still practice the traditional religion as pagans and heathens. Because of these new perceptions about shrines and sacred places by the Christians, most shrines and sacred places were destroyed and used for the erection of schools and hospitals to mention but a few. And the other ones left are neglected and abandoned. The observed situation seems to be part of the factors for the increasing rate of corruption in Nigeria.

Though much has been written on religious shrines and sacred places, yet, there is a seemingly insufficient document on the instrumentality of African shrines and sacred places to conflict resolution, social control, cultural education and moral development which in turn, curbs corrupt practices and aids sustainable development in this era. This has hitherto, created gap in literature and so, the need for the present study. This paper is therefore an attempt to revisit the veritable roles of shrines and sacred places for sustainable development in Nigeria, Igboland in particular.

The methodology employed for the investigation is historical method. Shrines and sacred places are important aspects of African traditional religion. Africans belief in myriad of deities and their abodes are shrines. The study is therefore, a qualitative one, using both primary and secondly sources of data.

The population of the study is Nigeria while Igboland is the sample. It was selected through purposefully random sample technique. This was deemed most appropriate as Igboland is a microcosm of Africa and so, a true representation of African nation. The remaining part of this paper will be discussed under the following sub-headings;

- I. Shrines and Sacred Places: Conceptual Clarification.
- II. Features of a Objects in a shrine
- III. The Developmental features of Some Specific Shrines and Sacred Places.
- IV. Impacts of Globalization on Shrines and Sacred Places and Effects on Development
- V. Conclusion

### **Shrines and Sacred Places: Conceptual Clarification.**

Arinze (1970) defined shrines as the abode of spirits. Ojiekwe (2014) defined shrines as places of consultation with esteemed extra-human forces to answer unanswerable questions in order to allay fear and provide a way out to resolve problems. Shrines therefore, remain one of the important sacred places which are significant in promoting social and religious activities in various communities. They serve many purposes for traditional Africans, specifically, for religious worship. Iroegbu (2009) referred to a shrine as a sacred place, it inspires awe and elicit reverence because of what they stand for. A shrine is a holy or sacred place which is dedicated to a specific deity, ancestor, hero, martyr, saint or similar figure. Shrines often contain idols, relics or other such objects associated with the figure being venerated. Shrines are found in many of the world's religions, including Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. Shrines can be found in various

settings such as churches, temples, cemeteries or at homes. Bruce (2011), identified different types of shrines allocated within buildings and in the temples designed specifically for worship. A shrine is usually the centre of attraction in the building or place and it is given a place of prominence. Household shrines can be found in homes. Small household shrines are very common among the Igbo where they keep their *Chi*. This shrine is usually a small structure or a setup of pictures and figures dedicated to a deity that is part of the official religion, to ancestors or to localized household deity. There are also yard shrines; shrines that are found in people's compound. Religious shrines are found in most religions. According to Nwankwo and Agboeze (2016), shrine, from the secular point of view, can be categorized into typologies according to their ownership and functions. This includes family shrines, community shrines, religious shrine, individual shrines, village shrines, state or national shrines, festival shrines, etc.

Sacred places on the other hand, are found in different cultures all over the world. Such places are frequently marked or embellished in architectural structures and art. The sacredness of a place is linked in some way to natural objects and features such as trees, stones, water, mountains, caves and forms in the landscape. These natural objects and forms lie at the root of the forms and shapes employed to mark or embellish a sacred site. These same sacred forms and shapes derived from natural objects and features become symbolic or emblematic of the sacred or divine. Sacred places are not only the abode of the divine but also serve as a means to entice the divine to continue to reside at a given place or to take up residence at a new site. Sacred places are often rich in aesthetic experience. Sacred places are important places for religious groups. In Judaism, Mount Sinai is a sacred place because of what Moses encountered with God in the place. Places are referred to as sacred places because of remarkable events that took place in the place or because of its formation or because it is an abode of the gods. Sacred places can be mountains or groves, forests, trees, stones, rivers, streams or lakes. For all these to be taken as sacred, they must be some specific indicator outside what is normal or unique to that natural place or object. For example, the arranging of massive stones into a building or the movement of a stream of water in a particular order outside what is normal. For example, the Zuma rock in Abuja and the hot and cold stream in Enugu State. The sacred places according to Foley (2010), are considered to be beneficial to healing and well-being. Sacred places rekindle reverence for land and cultural diversity and connect nature and culture.

Every civilization has its share of sacred places, that is, geographical locations buildings, monuments or environmental features, such as mountains, lakes, rocks, waterfalls and so on that are believed to be endowed with intense spiritual qualities. Indeed, such places are frequently thought to possess a variety of supernatural power that can heal, rejuvenate, or otherwise affect the human beings who visit them often as devout pilgrims. They are also, sometimes thought to be the focal points of creation, the places where deities first manifested themselves or performed some fundamental actions, and are thus typically steeped in mythology and theological dogmas.

Traditionally, regardless of the varying topologies of shrines, they still serve unique functions and purposes in the traditional African society which include protection, provision, guidance, revelations, etc. These unique functions have attracted much audience and veneration to these shrines as found in the traditional African society.

Moreover, sacred places are forest fragments of varying sizes, which are communally protected, and have significant religious connotation for protecting the community. Hunting and logging are usually strictly prohibited within these patches. (Gadgil and Vertak, 1975). Such forests are left untouched with huge religious significance attached to their meaning and existence. Most of the sacred groves have strict restrictions, hence it was noted that “traditionally, and in some cases even today, members of the community take turns to protect the place. This is aimed at ensuring maximum compliance to the restrictions guiding the shrine. In Nigeria today, one of the notable sacred places is the Osun-Oshogbo sacred grove which is enlisted in the world’s heritage list by the UNESCO. Other notable sacred places include *Ubinukpabi* sacred grove that is associated with *Chukwu* shrine at Arochukwu, Abia state, *Ohia-Udowerre* sacred grove at Ndiowu and *Okija* shrine at Ihiala, Anambra State, etc. Majority of the sacred groves within the area of study, the eastern region in Nigeria, have close attachment to shrine and in most cases, referred to as shrines hence they are inseparable from shrines.

### **Features of a Objects in a shrine**

#### **The Developmental features of Some Specific Shrines and Sacred Places.**

A shrine is a physical feature within sacred space depicting the abode of divinities. It originated from man’s religious quest of unseen powers controlling the universe. Based on this impulse he marked out certain spots as more significant than others with regard to this religious inclination. The marked spots

were symbolized with natural objects like rock, trees, lake, streams, etc. In many cases, a structure is erected within or beside the natural objects. This structure or building is known as a shrine which houses the sacred emblems of the divinity and other objects of worship. However shrines and sacred places discussed in the pages of this work are mostly from the eastern part of Nigeria in West Africa.

As earlier stated, shrines and sacred places play various roles ranging from; religious, recreational, economic and educational purposes in different parts of Igbo land that are instrumental to development. There are so many of such shrines and sacred places in various parts of Igbo land. We shall use a few of them to illustrate the main thrust of this paper. Apart from Ogbunike cave and Awhum water fall, we may mention in passing where necessary, the widely known ones such as Okija shrine at Anambra state and the Long Juju of Arochukwu at Abia stste but will cite some of the seemingly hidden ones, as hereunder discussed.

### *Ogbunike Cave*

The Ogbunike Cave is a major tourist site in Eastern Nigeria situated in a valley behind the Ogba hills, Anambra State. The cave consists of a network of sandstone chambers and tunnels, and is regarded as one of Nigeria's greatest geographical masterpiece. Cocooned in a valley with tropical rain forest and buffered by 20 hectares of lush vegetation, the caves are occupied by colonies of bats while the surrounding rainforest is home to antelopes, deers, alligators, porcupines and snakes. The collection of caves has been in use over centuries by local people for whom it has particular spiritual significance. Descending into the valley where the caves are located is a lengthy walkway made up of about 317 steps. The caves consist of 10 tunnels and a main chamber which snake their way underneath the hillside. The tunnels are filled with streams and small pools, and within the tunnels are big chambers as well as other tunnels of varying lengths, some of which are inter connected. A stream flows out from one of the tunnels into a rapid flowing river (River Nkissa). At the meeting point of the river and the stream, one can feel the warm water from the caves and the cold river water. The "ime ogbe" celebration is undertaken every year to commemorate the discovery of the caves. Local history records that Ogbunike's ancestors hid from raiding slave traders in the caves. There are so many other interesting tales told about the cave and the locals are always willing to share these stories. The site has sufficient boundaries to protect its values from direct effects of human encroachment.

The Ogbunike cave, though serves a great deal of tourist purpose but has other roles it performs. It is an agent of moral control. For instance, it dictates doers of all kinds of evil acts. When an offense is committed, all the suspects are made to enter the cave it is believed that the culprits are detected by severe marks on their bodies. It is a widely held belief that *ogba* does not harm a just person

### ***Unubi Cave***

Unubi is a town in Nnewi South Local Government Area of Anambra State. It has a cave called *ogba*. It serves the community as a court of appeal. Once there is doubt on an actual culprit of an act, all the suspects would be informed that they will go to *ogba* as the last resort. In many cases, the actual culprit would confess otherwise, once he/she enters the *ogba*, the result will show, either by instant shouts of confessional lamentation which is followed by death, or, the culprit will be scratching his body. The gravity of the punishment depends on the offense committed. The *ogba* Unubi is not for tourism but purely for court of justice and other religious purposes.

### ***Awhum Waterfall & Cave***

Awhum Waterfall & Cave is located at Amaugwe village of Awhum town in Udi Local Government Area of Enugu State. The Awhum waterfall and cave is as a popular tourist site in Enugu, Nigeria. A result of a titanic outcrop of granite rock with water tumbling from the top to form a stream, the waterfall is beautiful at any time of the year. While a section of the waterfall is always warm through the season, the water is said to be therapeutic (have healing power) and capable of vanquishing evil or satanic forces if and wherever sprinkled. Awhum waterfall is 30 metres high and is located close to Awhum Monastery. It takes about 45 minutes' walk from the parking spot to the fall, but it is worth the trek.

Awhum is mainly for religious purposes in addition for tourism and recreation. It is a place for sober reflection and worship because of the belief in the presence of God in practical form there. It therefore, serves religious purposes as well.

### ***Ofia Nri***

Ofia nri is a sacred place in Ora eri town in Anambra State. It is a sacred place which houses the palace and installation ground for Eze nri both past and present. Any action or decision taken at the shrine of Ofia Nri is taken as authentic and binding. It contributes to nation building because, it saves the

inhabitants the negative consequences of kingship and other political hustles witnessed in many part of Nigeria today.

### ***Agadi-Nwanyi Shrine***

The shrine of *Agadi-Nwanyi* in Ikenga Ogidi, Idemili North Local Government area Anambra State performs various functions that help in the development of the town. It maintains justice in the land and the priest directs people on sacrificial rites and requirement appropriate for each occasion.

Because the shrine is owned by a warrior goddess, it protects the people from external attack and always grants them victory at wars, on the condition that they will not take any property from any village they fought. Just like in the biblical narrative of how God instructed the people of Isrealites to destroy Jericho and not to take anything away from it.

It is at the shrine of *Agadi Nwanyi* that priests, diviners, herbalists are determined and her decision is final. People trust any decision taken at the shrine and it is binding on everyone. Refusal to comply with the directions of the *Agadi-Nwanyi* either to take up an office or a profession attracts punishments like instant death or struck with a serious ailment till such a person complies. This hitherto, sustains development as majority of the people comply to the governing laws.

### ***The Odo Shrine***

Odo shrine is located in Nsukka Local Governemnt area of Enugu State. The Odo shrine is a very powerful shrine and largest in Nusikka land. It is situated in the big forest in Nsukka and people are forbidden to enter the forest except on special occasions. The forest where the Odo shrine is located is regarded as a sacred forest.

In Nsukka, anybody alleged of committing adultery or fornication is taken to odo shrine for oath taking, and if such a person is guilty, Odo will destroyed the members of the household. Anybody who gives false witness against anyone is equally destroyed. The Odo shrine therefore, helps to restore peace and tranquillity among the adherents and contributes to social cohesion within the area.

### ***Iyi nta Okoko***

The shrine of *Iyi-nta okoko* is attached to a powerful deity worshipped and revered by the people of item, in the northern part of Abia State, Nigeria. It is

in form of a small river and it has a priest. The chief priest and other servants who are the custodian of the shrine administer oath-taking and covenant agreement for settlement of disputes. It therefore, protects the lives of those who believe in him.

The shrine of *iyi nta* also heals all manner of diseases or sickness. In such situation, the chief priest administers the water from the river (during rainy season) or the sand from the shrine (during dry season) to the sick person, after some offerings or sacrifices, such a person gets healed. It also gives children to those that are seeking for the fruit of the womb and solves other various problems for them.

From the above, we can see the instrumentality of the traditional shrines for development. One thing is clear, that the adherents trust and believe in the power of these shrines to perform these roles. For instance, many culprits have been reported to confess the act at the point of getting to the shrine. This belief in these shrines however, helps some people to refrain from deviant behaviours and evil acts thereby, aiding moral development.

Again, the belief in these shrines as the abodes of the gods instil fear on the adherents and this further makes them to comply to rules and regulations. For instance, the people of Anaku in Aghamelum LGA of Anambra state as in many other shrines mentioned earlier, believe that the Ekwensu shrine is the most just court of appeal to settle disputes, recover debt and take political decisions. This helps to curb the social disorder in many parts of Igbo land.

The belief in the power of shrines also helps in the area of medicare. For instance too, the Uchu shrine in Umuchu, Aguata LGA of Anambra state is known for her healing power. The water from the shrine heals all kinds of ailments especially the issue of infertility in men and women. This is also same as *iyi nta* as mentioned above and of numerous other deities.

More so, traditional shrines serve as locations for traditional festivals which attract both adherents and visitors from all across the nation and beyond. Participation in these events is not restricted to traditional adherents only as non-adherents also share in certain momentary occasions of ritual. The rituals are occasions in season when a community commemorates certain events which enhances their identity as an entity such include traditional festivals, coronation of rulers and elders, initiation rites, myths of migration and so on. These events illuminate the historical and mythological basis of such events and therefore, an occasion for cultural education which aids to cherish the heritage of a people.

In addition, since many of these festivals attracts visitors to the shrine, it gives shrines a touristic attribute. As Nolan and Nolan (1992) rightly observed that religious festivals are the principal attractions for non-follower and the secular tourists. At present these activities invariably portrays the shrine a tourist centre where religion is the nucleus of the attraction. In view of this, Awolalu (1979) stated that the Osun shrine in Osogbo is rapidly becoming a tourist centre. Therefore, shrines are always considered as a source of recreation not only for the followers but also to visitors.

As we can see, there are numerous shrines that perform different roles and each in one way or the other enhances compliance to virtues and high moral standing. This in turn, aid development. However, the belief in the power of some of these shrines seems to have dwindled in the modern era, yet, many are still waxing strong and still serving the needs of the people. It is worthy to note that for example, in the area of healing, it works for those that believe and seek healing from these shrines. Even if it is psychological healing, one basic fact is that they feel the relief from their problems.

### **Impacts of Globalization on Shrines and Sacred Places.**

Globalization as a concept refers to the ways in which developments in one region can rapidly come to have significant consequences for the security and wellbeing of communities in quite distant regions of the globe. Interregional flows and networks of interaction within all realms of social activity from cultural to the criminal on different regional levels from global to local. Giddens (2001) defines globalization as the intensification of social relations throughout the world, linking distant localities in such a way that local happenings are formed as a result of events that occur many miles away and vice versa.

Globalization can refer to those spatial-temporal processes of change, which constitutes the fundament of the transformation of human concerns in an organization, linking together and expanding human activity across regions and continent. Thomas Larsson, in his book "The Race to the Top: The Real Story of Globalization", says that globalization is the process of shrinking of the world, the shortening of distances, and the closeness of things. Robertson (1992) refers to globalization as both the compression of the world and intensification of consciousness of the world as whole.

In pursuit of the white man's way of life. Positively, we cannot be discussing of using shrines and sacred places as tourism and recreational centres, if not because of globalization, which breaks down barriers and connects people from

different regions and also brings the world into a global village. It makes happenings in one place known to all.

Thus, globalization has helped to spread the African stories as written by Africans themselves. It has also led to the neglect and abandoning of the shrines in search of western method of doing things and this has hitherto, contributed to the rate of corruption in the recent time. For instance, the rate of corruption and deviant behaviours was seemingly lower in traditional societies than as it is now. This is because people in the traditional communities are much more afraid of the consequences of non compliance to laws and general opinion due to the sense of sacredness attached to those laws. Because of urbanization and globalization, many people commit sin and break laws without apology.

Again, many traditional communities have a simple and cost free ways of settling disputes at their shrines. Because these shrines are believed to be the abode of the gods, the concerned parties trust the judgement passed at the shrine. But today, many prefer to go to court of justice even when they are fighting unjust case, believing that money can buy judgement. This has led to waste of human and material resources which is detrimental to development.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout Africa, shrines and sacred places have always been a focal point in religious worship but with the advent of civilization and modernization they were relegated to the background. Shrines and sacred places are amongst the heritage resources of a people and hence, contributory to the all- round development of the people. Evidence abound in that tribal societies comply to tribal laws because of the sense of sacredness attached to these laws and this helps them to live together in peace. However, urbanization and globalization in turns, help to desecrates and secularize these laws, thereby, leading to increase in the rate of deviant behaviours and corrupt practices. The paper calls for the retrieval of the elements of African heritage and values that have potentials for sustainable development.

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