



UNVEILING THE HIDDEN TRUTH IN RESPECT TO THE DIFFICULTY ENCOUNTERED IN INTERPRETING GBAGYI'S RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS IN OUR CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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Abstract

Symbols, as the name implies, generally represent objects that could be linked to tradition, culture, and religion. The interpretation of religious symbols occupies an important place in the study of indigenous religion because symbols serve as vehicles through which beliefs, values, and spiritual realities are communicated. Among the Gbagyi people of Central Nigeria, religious symbols play significant roles in expressing traditional beliefs, preserving cultural identity, and maintaining the relationship between humanity, ancestors, and the spiritual world. However, contemporary society has witnessed increasing difficulties in interpreting these symbols due to modernization, urbanization, globalization, religious conversion, and the gradual decline of indigenous knowledge systems. This study examines the challenges encountered in interpreting Gbagyi religious symbols and seeks to unveil the hidden truths embedded in them. The objectives of the study are to examine the nature and significance of Gbagyi religious symbols, identify the challenges associated with their interpretation, and propose measures for their preservation and proper understanding. The study adopts a qualitative research methodology using secondary sources of data. Here, data are collected from books, journal articles, theses, archival materials, and relevant scholarly publications on Gbagyi religion and African Traditional Religion. Findings revealed that the loss of oral traditions, religious transformation, language decline, and inadequate documentation of the culture have contributed significantly to the misunderstanding of Gbagyi religious symbols. The study recommends documentation, cultural education, scholarly research, and intergenerational transmission of knowledge as means of preserving the symbolic heritage of the Gbagyi people.

Keywords: Gbagyi, symbols, religion, culture, interpretation, indigenous knowledge, cultural heritage, and contemporary society.

Introduction

Religion is a universal phenomenon that influences the beliefs, values, and practices of people across the world. One of the primary ways through which religious ideas are communicated is through symbols. Symbols represent deeper meanings beyond their physical appearance and often serve as channels through which spiritual truths, cultural values, and religious experiences are expressed. In African Traditional Religion, symbols occupy a central position in worship, rituals, ceremonies, and communal life. They function as visible representations of invisible realities and help adherents understand their relationship with God, ancestors, spirits, and nature (Mbiti, 1969). Among the **Gbagyi** people, religious symbols are important aspects of traditional religion and culture. These symbols are found in sacred groves, shrines, rituals, festivals, traditional objects, and ceremonial practices. They communicate beliefs about the Supreme Being, ancestors, morality, and community life (Umaru-Abdullahi, 2024). Religious symbols play a significant role



in conveying spiritual messages; unfortunately, Western epistemology and the homogenization of cultural practices have succeeded in the misinterpretation of these symbols. Again, the influence of Christianity, Islam, globalization, and urbanization has affected the transmission and understanding of traditional symbolic knowledge. This, in turn, has robbed the **Gbagyi** people of their true originality and the spirituality of the concept. This article seeks to examine the difficulties encountered in interpreting **Gbagyi** religious symbols and to uncover their significance within the religious and cultural life of the **Gbagyi** people

Conceptual Clarification of the Word Symbol

A symbol is a representation, image, object, or concept that carries meaning beyond its literal or physical properties. It conveys abstract ideas, values, concepts, or beliefs through association, convention, or cultural significance. This definition rules out different types of symbols, such as linguistic symbols, which have to do with words, letters, etc.; iconic symbols, which depict images and logos; indexical symbols, which express signs and indicators; and abstract symbols, which showcase concepts and ideas.

Symbols are classified into two categories: vocal and non-vocal symbols. Vocal symbols are sound symbols, which include proverbs, songs, dirges, and the like. Non-vocal symbols are devoid of speech; they include drums, bells, gongs, rattles, and the likes (Nwagwu, 2001). Among the other characteristics of symbols are their ability to speak to a person, their variety of meanings, and their ability to create a link or connection with adherents. A symbol could also mean a contract or an agreement between two parties (Hornblower & Spawforth, 2014).

The word **symbol** originated from the ancient Greek word **symbolon** (or **simbolon**), which is derived from the word **syn**, meaning "together," and **ballein**, meaning "to throw" (Liddell, 2019).

The word **symbolon** implies:

- i. A token or an object that represents something else (Scot, 1654).
- ii. A sign or mark that indicates a particular idea or concept (Robinson, 2012).
- iii. A contract or an agreement between two parties (Hornblower & Spawforth, 2014).

The word **symbolon** was adopted into Latin as **symbolum**, which has similar meanings:

- i. A symbol or a sign that represents something else (Glare, 2018).
- ii. A token or an object that serves as a reminder or representation of an idea or concept (Lewis & Short, 2019).
- iii. A creed or statement of faith.

Over the years, the word *symbol* has expanded to include a wide range of signs, objects, and representations that convey meaning and significance. Adumbu (2021), quoting Cohen (1974), describes a symbol as an object, act, relationship, or linguistic formation that stands ambiguously for a multiplicity of meanings. He further quotes Nabofa (1974), who describes it as an overt expression of what is behind the veil of direct perception. Otite (1979) describes a symbol as an agent that is impregnated with messages and with an invitation to conform and act. A symbol gives the empirical meaning, value, essence, and mystical element of things (Adumbu, 2021).



A symbol could also mean a sign, word, gesture, or action that represents something beyond its literal meaning. It serves as a medium through which ideas, beliefs, values, and experiences are communicated.

According to Geertz (1973), symbols are vehicles of meaning through which people interpret and understand their culture. Similarly, Eliade (1959) argues that religious symbols reveal deeper spiritual realities and connect human beings with the sacred world. In the context of **Gbagyi** religion, symbols have meaningful representations that communicate religious beliefs, cultural values, social identity, and spiritual experiences. Symbols give deep meaning to things, though judgments on the dimension of symbols can vary from culture to culture (Cencini & Manenti, 2010).

Mbiti describes religious symbols as either natural or man-made. The natural ones are objects that are secluded and situated away from where people live. They include mountains, rivers, stones, trees, and so on. The man-made objects or symbols are venerated and worshipped as deities and spirits. There are persons responsible for serving them, and they are regarded as custodians of those symbols. Such individuals are referred to as intermediaries between the people and the objects (Mbiti, 1999). These intermediaries serve as the medium through which humans interact with the supernatural world. They include priests, priestesses, diviners, medicine men, and the like. They offer prayers, sacrifices, divination, and other services on behalf of the people (Stinton, 2007).

The Gbagyi and Their Religious Symbols

The **Gbagyi** people are an ethnic group located in four states in Nigeria, including the Federal Capital Territory. They are found in Kaduna, Kogi, Niger, **Nasarawa**, and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. They are called **Gbagyi** or **Gbari**, not **Gwari**, as they are popularly called by the Hausas. The **Gbagyi** are believed to have migrated from Borno, while other traditions hold that they never migrated from anywhere but have always lived in their present abode, including Zaria, Birnin Gwari, and the Niger–Benue Confluence. The estimated population of the **Gbagyi** is about 5.8 million, spread across the four states and the FCT, and located in thirty (30) local government areas according to the 2006 population census (Umaru-Abdullahi, 2024).

The Gbagyi believe in a religion called **Kununu**, meaning **Tradition**. It refers to the original, undiluted, and unadulterated beliefs and practices of the people (Ayuba, 2016). Gbagyi beliefs include belief in the existence of a Supreme Being called **Shekwoyi**, belief in divinities known as **Ashna**, spirits known as **Azafnu**, and belief in the existence of ancestors called **Azakwoyi**. The trio mentioned above serves as intermediaries between the Supreme Being and the people. These intermediaries are believed to have emblems or symbols that they represent (Umaru-Abdullahi, 2024).

At the mention of the name **Gbagyi**, what readily comes to mind is the image of a woman carrying a load on her shoulder. This is the symbol of the **Gbagyi** people. They believe that the head is sacred and must be honored by not carrying loads on it. To this end, the **Gbagyi** revere the head as the repository of knowledge and wisdom, which should not be burdened. No matter how heavy a load is, the **Gbagyi** people prefer to place it on their shoulders because they regard the head as the king of the entire body. For this reason, it should not be overused. **Bwapa** (the shoulder) is



made for carrying loads and is better suited for that purpose than the head. The head already carries intelligence, problems, and solutions; therefore, it should not be burdened with external loads (Shekwoi, 1986).

Gbagyi religious symbols are used for many purposes, including worship, because of the strong influence symbols carry in matters of spirituality. These **Gbagyi** symbols are visible and are perceived as artefacts, bodies, entities, facts, masses, matter, phenomena, realities, substances, and the like (Kipfer, 1999). They also include stones, trees, rivers, mountains, and the like (Novelli, 1999). These symbols serve as platforms for elders and priests to exercise their authority and power, especially in interceding for individuals and the entire tribe.

The **Gbagyi** people possess numerous religious symbols that reflect their worldview and traditional beliefs. These symbols include shrines, sacred trees, ritual objects, sacrifices, traditional festivals, ancestral sites, and ceremonial artefacts. They can represent divinities, spirits, ancestors, magic, or medicine. **Shekwoyi**, the Supreme Being, is believed not to be among the ranks of the divinities, spirits, and ancestors. Unlike the intermediaries that have symbols, **Shekwoyi** is not represented by any symbol.

Gbagyi shrines, altars, and groves are usually established to satisfy the people's religious needs. In most **Gbagyi** altars or shrines, items such as utensils, spears, charms, and food are found. Sacrifices of goats or chickens are offered on the altar alongside libation. Items found in shrines or on altars are not usually tampered with. For example, stones, trees, and animals are protected because of the sacredness of the ground (Makumba, 2019).

The ancestral cult symbolizes the continued presence of ancestors in the affairs of the living. This cult is called **Azakwoyi Kuta**. It suggests that death does not bring an end to human life, but that life continues after death. The **Azakwoyi Kuta** shrine is symbolized by stones. Each stone represents an ancestral spirit and is arranged serially in ascending order, beginning with the first known elder who died and ending with the most recent. Family members remember and honor them, especially during festivals. **Azakwoyi Kuta** is believed to possess great potency, and worshipping it attracts blessings such as good health, children, bumper harvests, and longevity (Kure, 1980).

Sacred trees and groves are believed to be dwelling places of spiritual beings and locations for religious activities. **Ashna**, or the divinity, is symbolized by the baobab tree, large trees, mountains, rocks, or other natural phenomena (Idowu, 1962). These symbols are dedicated to the deity and serve as media through which humans communicate with the divine. Other **Ashna** include **Eshe**, the divinity for married women, symbolized by a heap of clay with feathers stuck in it; **Adobu**, the divinity for children, represented by a stone; and **Apo**, the divinity associated with twins. **Gbagyi** divinities and their representations are believed to possess great potency. Those who honor, respect, and worship these symbols are believed to receive favor from the divinities (Umaru, 2013).

Ritual objects such as staffs of office and sacrificial materials symbolize authority, protection, and communication with the spiritual realm. Among the **Gbagyi**, the symbol of authority is called **Ebe**. **Ebe** symbolizes the sword in **Gbagyi** tradition and represents leadership, sovereignty, and the



backing of the ancestors for the newly appointed leader. It is handed over to the newly appointed **Sa Gbagyi** during the coronation ceremony. The sword signifies that the king ceases to be an ordinary person and becomes a divine custodian of the community. It gives the king the authority to exercise supreme leadership over his people. It also symbolizes spiritual guidance and support from **Shekwoyi**, **Ashna**, **Azafnu**, and **Azakwoyi**. Furthermore, the sword serves as a source of defense, protection, social order, and peace where conflict exists. **Ebe** is hidden from profane or ordinary people; only the king and chiefs are permitted to see it (Kure, 1980).

Traditional festivals, songs, dances, and **Amwamwa** masquerades also function as symbols that preserve cultural heritage and reinforce **Gbagyi** communal identity. Through these symbols, the **Gbagyi** people express their understanding of life, death, immortality, and the supernatural world. The traditional attire worn by **Amwamwa** masquerades, **Zhibaje** priests, medicine men, and diviners signifies continuity and connectivity between the past and the present. Such attire is believed to possess great power (Zakari & Jagaba, 2019).

Symbols in a typical **Gbagyi** society serve everyone, including the priests. They are reference points because of their acceptability, which creates room for encounters with the spiritual realm. In short, they serve as a window to those who encounter them because of the spirits involved. At this point, people understand more about the realities of life. In addition, the judgmental dimension of symbols cannot be overemphasized, though it varies depending on the magnitude of the scenario or event (Cencini & Manenti, 2010).

Many of the symbols are in the custody of the community, which serves as their custodian. During sacrifices and offerings, many of these symbols for example, trees, stones, and mountains become the epicenters of ritual activities. This attracts people from across the community to participate in the occasion, such as the **Zhibaje** festival, which is celebrated at the beginning of the planting season (Umaru-Abdullahi, 2024). At such times, rituals, sacrifices, offerings, and prayers are performed by the priest facing the symbolic object. These ceremonies often take place at the foot of a rock, hill, or mountain alongside sacrificial items such as food, drinks (beer), **Eje**, and animals like chickens or goats. It is widely believed that these moments usher in ease and encouragement.

Conclusion.

Gbagyi religious symbols are important expressions of indigenous beliefs, values, and cultural identity. However, their interpretation have become increasingly complex and difficult due to modernization, religious change, language decline, urbanization, and inadequate documentation. To this end, **their interpretation** requires **an in-depth** understanding of the cultural and historical context of the people. Preserving these symbols requires collective efforts from scholars, cultural custodians, educational institutions, governments, and community members. Through documentation, research, education, and cultural preservation, the symbolic heritage of the **Gbagyi** people can be safeguarded for future generations.

Recommendations

Having highlighted and discussed some of the challenges encountered by **Gbagyi** religion, this work provides some solutions that could be implemented in the short and long term. Some of the short-term solutions are:



- i. Organizing workshops and training, especially for scholars and researchers within the community, with the aim of providing accurate interpretation and proper understanding of symbols within the **Gbagyi** religious setting.
- ii. Promoting cultural awareness by developing **Gbagyi** cultural sensitivity and programmes to reduce the misrepresentation of symbols among the **Gbagyi** people.
- iii. Creating awareness centers or a **hub** that will showcase **Gbagyi** arts, culture, and traditions, whereby the **Gbagyi** people can tell their stories better.
- iv. A long-term solution can take the form of detailed documentation of **Gbagyi** religion and its symbols, including their meanings and importance within the cultural context.
- v. The establishment of study programmes that will allow research institutions to develop in-depth research and understanding of symbols within the **Gbagyi** religious setting.
- vi. Encouraging community-based research participation, whereby every member of the community will have an equal opportunity to research and correctly interpret their religious symbols.

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BOOK REVIEW

INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIAN ETHICS AND CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

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Establishing Perspectives

A book constitutes more than the bound pages of texts in chapters or blocks. It is a vessel and well spring of knowledge, history, memory, imagination, and wisdom. It preserves and perpetuates human thought across time and space by allowing ideas, experiences, and values to travel beyond their original context and influences. A book inspires, challenges, instructs, and consoles its readers. It is a mirror where readers see and discover their innermost capabilities and innate abilities. Consequently, a book is a window through which individuals can peer into and encounter worlds beyond theirs. The encounters enable personal growth, arouse and thrust companionship. These are achieved because books have educated from when they were codices in papyrus and parchments to their present form.

John Ishaku, PhD, has showcased these qualities of books in his 354-page piece entitled “Introduction to Christian Ethics and Contemporary Issues”. According to Dr. Ishaku, he conceived this book of Ethics and Ethics of Religion as a compass and map for navigating the often turbulent and morally ambiguous landscape of our contemporary world. An era defined and shaped by unprecedented technological advancements, rapid globalisation and profound social and cultural shifts causing groundbreaking changes in the ethical and moral dimensions of human life



and socialisations. These changes require soft but firm, robust and morally sound ambient for constructive and productive decision-making that uphold the essence and dignity of humanity and its society. This book educates on the socio-ethical changes that have happened in humanity's history for fruitful decision-making.

While the primary intention of Dr. Ishaku is to educate, expand understanding, provide clarity, and connect its readers to key ethical problems and issues, he projects to inspire the young and to perpetuate memory. His book's unique stylistics of composition is eclectic of a few current moral and ethical problems debasing humanity and painfully impacting on societal dignity. His main objective is to enable his readers understand the nature, theories and praxes of these social and moral issues so as to arrive at constructive decisions for managing social ills bedeviling human beings. In the words of the late Prof Dickson Dyaji, who wrote its Forward, the book identifies some of the lingering global ethical issues like terrorism, kidnapping and the scourge of HIV/AIDS, drugs, sex, pornography, abortion, examination malpractice, birth control, surrogacy and stem cell with the deliberate view to proffering solutions to them. This book is not simply on understanding of the different ethical theories, but on developing the skills of ethical discernment, critical reflection and responsible action. Hence, the book is a tool for ethical formation, and not just an academic survey of ethical ideas.

Depicting its Content

After a succinct establishing of the book's introduction in chapter one, chapter two explicates terms and concepts of theories on Christian ethics and moral theories, and clarifies them from key philosophers like Socrates, Aristotle; and from philosophies like stoicism, hedonism, consequentialism, and utilitarianism. The book provides theoretical analysis and evaluation of the moral issues demanding logical engagements with from chapter three to chapter sixteen. Chapter three deals with the history and factors responsible for kidnapping and terrorism. It outlines the lack of justice and equality, campaigneering and electioneering, unemployment, poverty, illiteracy, religion and greed as some of their informing factors. It underscores that these vices create fear, trauma and economic regression. The chapter advised for the deployment of anti-kidnapping units, job creation and economic empowerment as solutions to kidnapping and terrorism. It equally laid the biblical foundations of how to deal with kidnapping and terrorism. Chapter four highlights how HIV/AIDS is contracted; it foregrounds their symptoms, preventions, transmission, history, and prevention. Among ways to prevent it, it suggested early and regular testing, use of polyurethane condoms and waterbased lubricants. It underscores the biblical position on the matter. Chapter five starts by presenting definitions of euthanasia and suicide. It is followed by the classification of euthanasia, its history and biblical disapproval.

Drug abuse is the issue showcased in chapter six. It talks about the impact, history, types, and effects of drug addiction. It evaluates community involvement in its prevention. Chapter seven deals with abortion, its types and consequences. It concludes with Christian views on abortion. Cultism is the issue dealt with in chapter eight. It chronicles its history, types, causes, effects on education, individuals and society. The chapter contends that the Bible depicts cultists as false apostles. Wanting to reflect on the ethics of organ procurement and transplant, chapter nine presents its regulatory framework, procedures and types of acquisition of organ and the nature of transplanting. This chapter gives much thinking to the ethics and morality of its procurement in the backdrop of religious and socio-medical perspectives.



Chapter ten looked into the thorny issue of pornography ravaging a lot of people's lives. It traced its history to the 18th century and warned of its dangers from a biblical perspective. One of the oldest professions in the world is prostitution. Chapter eleven explicates on it through a definition and a listing of its types. It asserted the causes and effects of prostitution, and concludes with its biblical condemnation. Chapter twelve concerns the highly debated matter of birth control. It traced its history and it suggests that it has been part of human society. It showcased the medical conditions and operations behind it and risk factors arising from their use. Examination malpractice in Nigeria is a phenomenon that is not welcomed in the academia and it is being vigorously fought as a serious immoral and unethical palaver. Chapter thirteen speaks of forms of its practice, its causes, and proffers effective solutions, one of which demands strengthening examination security and invigilation.

Chapter fourteen describes and explicates blood transfusion on the grounds of its usefulness and ways of acquiring it. It concludes with its biblical review. Surrogate motherhood is suggested as a solution to childlessness in marriage but it comes with its attendant consequences and moral dilemma; chapter fifteen is dedicated to it. Science and technology have grown in leaps and bounds to make life easier and better especially in the area of medicine. Consequently, there have been mind-blowing medical discoveries like stem cell to battle and win hitherto "incurable" ailments but it has faced its problems and criticism. Chapter sixteen is about stem cell.

The moral implication of most of these ethical issues have not been fully understood by most Nigerians and especially Nigerian Christians. This book's content fills that gap.

Style and Contribution

Stylistically, the book is engaging because it is written in simple English expressed in a reflective tone. It avoids unnecessary jargons, making it suitable for Lecturers, students and every day enthusiasts of books for knowledge. Because the core focus of the book is to equip readers with the intellectual and moral resources necessary to navigate the moral complexities of the 21st century from a distinctly Christian perspective, it is worthwhile. The cover design is attracting. One could judge it to be good by its cover, especially that its characters are readable.

Dr. Ishaku's ability to eclect and weave ethical and moral issues for the good of mankind enriches the book. The book's greatest contribution is the instructive powers embedded in the issues it dealt with. To Lecturers and students, it offers a realistic account of the common issues we take for granted and just live on without questioning them. On the whole, this is a refreshing contribution to ethics in various shades of opinions

Evaluation

While the book is commendable for its honesty and scope, one may note that certain sections could have benefited from tighter editing. In an attempt to make the book's typesetting contemporary, exaggerated emphasis dots parts of it. The redaction of the book was hurriedly done as there are redundant repetitions. This quite affects the quality of the stylistics of the book because its style of citation is not uniform and the arrangement of arguments are not often logical and on complete syllogism. Chapter two of the book needs better grounding and expatiation. Hence, there is no serious moral and ethical evaluation and explication of the vices the book dealt with. For instance,



in talking about HIV/AIDS, it does not educate its readers on the controversy and position of some Christian denominations that do not support and permit the use of condoms for whatever reason. Through the book, he gave biblical evaluation in the bid to establish Christian backgrounds, but did not look into the various Christian traditions behind these moral and ethical issues.