

Sacred Space: A Comparative study of Awka Traditional Shrines

Ezenagu Ngozi
Department of Tourism and Events Management
Afe Babalola University, Ado-Ekiti
ngoezenagu@yahoo.com

Abstract

Space is central to human survival regardless of its status. The designation of certain spaces into sacred and profane is prevalent in African tradition. Sacred spaces are mapped out in view of their relevance to the community. The concentration of spiritual beings in the realms of sacred space precipitated the erection of shrines upon such ground. This article presents a historical account of the origin of Awka traditional shrines. It further explores the meaning and significance of these shrines to the community. Despite the influence of western culture shrouded in various factors, the relevance of Awka traditional shrines could not be eroded. The major objective of this conceptual article is to showcase the plethora of shrine activities upon which the traditions of the people are formulated, incubated, embellished and transmitted. The study deployed a qualitative research technique whereby data was drawn from in-depth interviews at the selected shrines in Awka in addition to consultation of other related primary and secondary works. The findings of the study revealed the symbolic value of Awka religious shrines in society today.

Key words: sacred, space, shrine, religion, traditions, Awka

Introduction

Space is of paramount importance to various kinds of human activity. Indispensability of space to human behaviour could be compared to animal fight for territorial possession which implies that even animals understand the relevance of space to survival. Man's entire activity revolves around specific space as a result certain spaces are designated for certain activities. An example is sacred space secluded from intrusion. The sanctity of such space determines this seclusion. The foundations for the designation of spaces into sacred and profane are rooted in African traditions intertwined with religion.

However, an insight into Africa traditions to determine why certain spaces are designated sacred and others profane would be difficult without an understanding of their religion the centre of their worldview. Africans exercises absolute belief in the Supreme Being of which can be said of them that they live religiously. Okafor (1999: 80) buttressed this religiosity from his study of the Awka people in the following words:

Before he ate any food at any time the *Ọka* man threw a morsel outside as a sacrifice to the gods. And before he drank any wine, he went outside the room and poured a libation on the ground to the gods. Every morning, before starting the day's activities, he offered a kolanut in sacrifice to the gods, and prayed to them to make his day propitious. Always in his speech he remembered the gods.

This state of religiosity is not farfetched from Africans tenacious grip on its traditions handed down through generations enshrined at the regular point of contact with the divine. This point of reverence had been the concrete evidence of religion. In other words, it is a space made sacred with the presence of the divine beings believed to inhabit the arena.

Sacred spaces abound all over the world recognisably by all cultures and religions both extinct and extant. Purposeful and non-purposeful encounter with sacred places have had a mysterious allure for different categories of people all over the world. Such encounter was recorded in the Christian Bible (Exodus 3, 5) where Moses encountered the God of his Fathers. Islamic religion on the other hand is proliferated with Mohammed seclusion to sacred places for divine encounter with Allah.

Ordinarily, Africans associate sacred spaces with the gods. The sacredness of such place are usually attached to unique features within the natural environment not limited to rivers, rocks, mountains, caves, trees and constructed buildings (shrines). According to Idowu (1996: 129) these exist in all places which are traditionally connected with the presence of the divinities, or such places as have been consecrated to them. Though during the pre-colonial era most shrines could be a feature within the natural environment but many a times considering the influence of modernisation with adaptation to African culture little buildings were constructed in its stead. Shrouded within the shrine is plethora of religious and cultural practices which positions it repertoires of African traditions.

Conceptual Literature

The word 'Sacred' has different meanings to different communities (Verschuuren et al 2010: 1). In most African communities it is the central foci of its traditional belief. Within this sanctity lies the resilient power of its tradition. Primarily, sacredness proposes spirituality. The concept "sacred" manifests itself to man as an atmosphere of spiritual suspense. Such realm is most time attributed to certain space based on the cosmic knowledge of the presence of the divine. Eliade (1959) therefore viewed a sacred place as one where the three cosmic levels, earth, heaven and the underworld, at once come into contact with each other, and are represented. This view clearly projects the African worldview of sacred place which is believed to be the 'meeting-point' of the three worlds of man. The earth inhabited by man, the underworld by the ancestors and the world above by the Supreme God and gods (Mr. Enemmou, 2014). It is at the sacred place that man communicates and communes with Beings in the other worlds. Such world is therefore of religious significance to man. In view of this, Oviedo and Jeanrenaud (2006: 261) defined sacred sites as areas of special spiritual significance to peoples and communities. They may include primarily natural areas (such as forests or rivers), or primarily built or monumental areas (such as temples). Considering the vastness of sacred sites this work is limited to built sacred sites – the shrine.

The word "shrine" is derived ultimately from the Latin word "scrinium" – meaning "box" or "receptacle", as in "containers of sacred meaning and power" (Courtright 1987, 299). Referring the shrine to box is on the basis of its function in incubating divinities. It is at this place that the divinities manifest their unseen presence to man through their emblems. Avoiding religious saga Van Binsbergen (1979: 101) defined the shrine as an observable object or part of the natural world, clearly localized and usually immobile. In view of this, the shrine could be adjudged a cultural institution encompassing both tangible and intangible cultural material of the community. Within the fabric of this building lie the traditions of the land. The traditions of various communities including their identity are fostered through shrine activities. Within the enclaves of these activities the historical origin of the community

is sustained one of which is the veneration of ancestors. These ancestors were the first occupants or founders of the community. Through such veneration the ancestral origin of the community lives on. To this Dawson (2009: vii) adjudged the shrine in African context as cultural signposts that help us understand and read the ethnic, territorial, and social lay of the land. Further, he asserted that they are the physical manifestations of a group's claim to a particular piece of land and are thus markers of identity. To further buttress the link between shrine and traditions Ezenagu (2014a: 59) asserted that the religious court which is the shrine has been the custodian of cultural materials and traditions for ages in pre-colonial Africa. It also educates the natives of its customs. Thereby, the African shrine could be said to be an embodiment of community traditions.

However, the study of the shrines unravelled the true identity of the Africans shrouded in religious practices. Culture perhaps gives identity to a people but for the Africans their culture is hedged with religion. To this most scholars attest that the understanding of Africans lie in an understanding of their religion. This made the shrine legitimate sources of both tangible and intangible African cultural heritage. Nonetheless, blinded by its religious foundation often scholars have limited the shrine solely to its religious significance. On this religious perspective a "shrine is primarily the "face" of the divinity. There the divinity is represented by the emblems which are regarded as sufficient reminders of his attribute" (Idowu, 1996: 130). In Van Binsbergen (1979: 101) view it is a material focus of religious activities, and perceived and respected as such by the participants. The Yoruba believe that a shrine is only a "local" meeting-place between the divinity and man (Idowu, 1996: 130). Symbolically, it signifies for traditionalists the mystical meeting-point of the invisible world of spiritual beings and the visible world of human members of the community. In an attempt to define this mystical meeting-point (shrine) Awolalu (1979: 114-5) used descriptive method focusing more on the physical structure of the shrine which is a common feature of shrines across Africa. In the light of the above he noted that:

Shrines in Yoruba land are architecturally simple. They are sometimes accommodated in one of the rooms of a house, or situated in a screened-off portion of the sitting room or in a corridor. In some cases separate house or huts are erected. They are usually simple, rectangular thatched roofed buildings with mud walls. They have open courtyards where spectators and supplicants stay; there is also a portion for the drummers and singers. But the room containing the symbol of worship is usually cut off from the public eye and it is so small that it is the officiating priest alone who can conveniently go in. Usually the symbol is placed with mud dais. In some cases the pillars supporting the shrine have some carvings and decorations and the walls have drawings which to an outsider often look crude and meaningless.

This description typically explains the physical structure of Awka shrines which most times appear tattered yet commands awe. Though, not all shrines possess built structures most shrines especially during the pre-colonial era "can be represented with material objects such as ceramic pots, shaped stones" (Dawson 2009: xii). They may also be natural features of the landscape such as mountains, ponds, lakes, rivers, or other water features and embody a specific or localized representation of a larger supernatural force (Awolalu, 1979; Mbiti, 1970; Dawson, 2009, UNESCO 2006). Regardless of the feature traditional African shrine is an indispensable cultural institution and a marker of African identity.

Awka traditional shrines

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 symbolised with natural objects like rock, trees, lake, streams, etc. Later little buildings were used to replace the natural objects. These little buildings are known as shrine set apart to house the sacred emblem of the divinity and other objects of worship. In Awka shrine is known as "*Olulu*" a sacred place usually located in an open ground or a grove of trees or under one big tree often decorated with a white cloth or palm front to communicate its sanctity. Each of the villages which make up Awka town is associated with a shrine. However the shrines discussed in this work include the following *Akputakpu*, *Ofufe*, *Ngene* and *Imoka*.

***Imoka* shrine**

Imoka is a male divinity revered by the entire Awka people. Following the words of *Imoka* chief-priest (name with-held, 2014) the origin of *Imoka* deity could be traced to the time when Awka people were continually menaced by their neighbours and of all, the dreaded king Okoli Ijeoma of Ndikelionwu. He plotted to invade Awka and capture them for slavery but on getting wind of the wicked scheme Awka people sought a way out. They delegated some elders to go to Akpoto near Idoma, a land of acclaimed traditional doctors to invite one who could prepare a charm that would protect them from the invasion. The elders returned with a traditional doctor called Okoyeke who prepared a very strong protective charm that would keep enemies from invading the land. The charm has certain conditions attached to it for potency. One of which is, the charm must be worshipped as a god by the entire people. To accomplish this, the *Umueleke* family in Amachalla village Awka was chosen by lot to feed the charm. In addition, an annual festival was initiated into the worship of the "charm god". However, the presence of the "charm god" prevented war in Awka as predicted and also protected them from their oppressors because of this fact Awka people named the charm *Imoka* meaning the "Avenger god" of the Awka people. A shrine was built for it at Nkwo Amenyi in Amachalla village Awka. The emblem of the god rests there. The grove near Nkwo Amenyi market place was dedicated to *Imoka* along with the black monkeys and other animals inhabiting the forest. Thus, it is a taboo for any to hunt in that forest.

***Akputakpu* shrine**

Akputakpu shrine is situated at Umubele village square, Ezi nwafo in Awka. The *Akputakpu* deity is the god of Blacksmith (a trade with which Awka people are known for) whose emblem is found in every Awka man's blacksmith house (*Unọ-uzu*). The god is generally owed by the seven sons of Agulu-Awka (Umuogbu, Umubele, Umuike, Umunaga, Umuogbun, Umuenchi and Umuoruka). Agulu the father of the seven villages in Agulu Awka migrated to Awka where he settled to practice his trade, blacksmith. Being a renowned blacksmith he carried along the blacksmith god (*Akputakpu*) with him on his sojourn to Awka. Out of the seven villages which were the direct descendants of Agulu, Umuenchi, the sixth son was chosen to feed the god that is to be the priest of the god.

However, *Akputakpu* god was said to be a blacksmith himself "*onye na-akpu uzu na ndeli ocha*" meaning "who smiths only at midnight". My informant Mr.Obi (2014), a blacksmith confessed that he never believed the saying until he had the experience. In the land of his sojourn, Otuocha, a riverine community of Anambra state. At his residence he built his blacksmith house (*Unọ-uzu*). A certain day at midnight he heard one hitting hammer on the anvil and the sound of the bellows. He went into the blacksmith house found it empty. Also he went into the dark street peradventure the person ran away into the night. He repeated

this action as often as he heard the noise of someone working in his blacksmith house. It was in one of those empty searches that he remembered what his father, a blacksmith told him at the commencement of his trade as a blacksmith that “*Akputakpu*” the god of blacksmith smiths only at midnight. The importance of *Akputakpu* god in promoting Awka blacksmith made mothers to name their children born during his festival after the god “*Nwakputakpu*” – “*Nwa*” means “child” while *Akputakpu* is a “god”.

However, directly opposite the *Akputakpu* shrine stood the sacred tree believed to be where Agulu himself was buried. Since no sacred grove was attached to the shrine, all sacrifices and ritual for the god is performed at foot of the tree.

Ngene shrine

Ngene shrine is the god that controls all streams and water bodies in Awka. It is a powerful male god owned by the Umubele village Awka. According to my informant Rev. Father Chukwu (2014) from Umunoama family, the lineage of *Nwangene* priests (*Ngene* priest) stated that *Ngene* shrine is precisely the only shrine in Awka that was initiated with the blood of a human (slave boy) who was coincidentally named *Ngene*. On the day *Nwangene* was initiated a traditional doctor from *Okpuno*, a land where traditional doctors from Idoma resettled was called upon. Then the slave boy along with some elders went down towards *Obibia Umubele* (a stream in Umubele village). Foremost the slave boy was charmed so as to lose knowledge of his environment, a pit of his height was dug at the location of the shrine. He was given a gourd (*Oku*) to carry filled with all sorts of stinging insects. He was made to enter the pit still carrying the gourd filled with the insects and so buried alive. A symbolic tree *Ogilishi* was planted at the spot where the slave boy was buried alive. The tree grew to about three feet and remained like that till date. Also a feast was initiated for the worship of the god (*Nwangene*). Adherents are initiated into the worship of *Ngene* shrine consequently, non-initiates are not permitted anywhere around the premises. During the research, the priest made it clear that I (researcher) should neither come near the shrine nor take photos of it but was only allowed to go to the river owned by the shrine where none is permitted to fish.

Ofufe shrine

Ofufe shrine is inhabited by a female goddess whose power is believed to transcend all human predicaments. Okafor (1992: 81) stated “she was a goddess next in rank to Chikwu.” He reaffirmed that this goddess “solves all human problems” (*ona ara mkpa*). Being a goddess, the male god attached to her is *Ngene* as Okafor (1992: 81) rightly observed that “every *ovbuvbe* (*Ofufe*) must have her *Ngene*, that is, every female must have a male”. The shrine is owned by the Umuogbu village Awka. It is believed to have been with Awka people since antiquity. But its historical background of how it came into Awka remains silent or perhaps the priest does not want to disclose it for fear of destruction. The divinity worshipped in the shrine is a goddess yet a priest is chosen rather a priestess. The shrine is located within the enclosure of house where people stay unlike other shrines in Awka located usually in isolated areas to avoid the violation of its sacredness.

Appointment of Chief-priest

The sacredness of the gods made human approach to them an act of caution. Following this reason, some Africans make use of helpers in approaching God, although they also approach him directly. These helpers may be called intermediaries. Some are human beings, while others are spiritual beings. The human beings include priests, kings, medicine men, seers, oracles, diviners, rain-makers and ritual elders (Mbiti, 1977: 62). The intermediary relevant to this work is the human priest who bridges the gap between men and

the gods. Their work is “to look after temples and religious places, to pray, to lead in public worship, to receive presents on behalf of God or other spirit beings...They are well versed in religious knowledge, in matters of myths, beliefs, traditions, legends, proverbs, and in the religious practices of their people” (Mbiti, 1977: 159). Beyond the performance of rituals Mather (2003) is of the opinion that priest are curators. They curate the shrine along with other useful items.

African priesthood is a position mostly occupied by the male folk and occasionally by the female. The position of priestess is more tasking as they are more often regarded as wife or daughter of the divinity which rules out marriage unless the divinity pleases. The appointment of priests varies from one shrine to another depending on the divinity. For the shrines discussed in this work the appointment of priest is most often an answer to divine call while “there appears to be no specific calling in the technical sense to Yoruba Priesthood” (Idowu, 1996: 136) expect for *Orisa* divinity. Categorically, Idowu (1996: 139) noted that often a person is “called to belong to the *Orisa*...by possession during which the person becomes ecstatic and then it is said that *Orisa* has taken or possessed that person.” With this exclusion the position of priesthood in Yoruba land is attained by voluntary training of individual for the position when “individuals...offer themselves to train as priests, but in many cases their parents send them to be trained” (Mbiti, 1977: 139). Such training takes place at the shrine which involves learning various prayers, dances, songs, rituals, skills and crafts, and all aspects of their religion (Mbiti, 1977: 159).

The call to priesthood in Awka depends on the divinity and his status in the community (if worshipped by the entire community or just a clan). The priest of shrines belonging to clan is rather trained by older priest in the course of service to the divinity such position runs in a particular lineage chosen by the divinity as is the case with some shrines in Awka like *Ngene* and *Akputakpu*. For *Imoka* deity worshipped by the entirety of Awka people the priest is solely chosen by the god following the death of previous priest. Such a person is identified by “divination...or by an extraordinary sign from the god – such as a cluster of bees ... or a tortoise” (Okafor, 1992: 84-85). This was the experience of the present *Imoka* priest. According to the priest (name with-held) cluster of bees suddenly appeared at his resides in Benin City (Edo state, Nigeria) and would not leave till after a while. The disappearance of the bees was replaced with a tortoise that would not leave his compound. The continuous presence of the tortoise perplexed him and he decided to unravel its motive. Through consultation with the oracle it was ascertained that those signal his call to priesthood. Thus, he abandoned his work and came home (Awka) to be initiated into the office of *Imoka* priest. After qualifying for the position of priesthood by reason of divine mandate there are certain rituals necessary for initiation into such an office. This initiation rite prepares him to serve in the capacity of a priest which would take place within the first twenty-eight days (28) from the day the oracle revealed his identity as priest.

Traditional festivals of Awka shrines

Traditional festivals are sacred periods set aside to commemorate certain events by the community. One of such events is the *Imoka* festival, a period in Awka lunar calendar when the entire community would gather to pay homage to *Imoka* deity for commencement of a new planting season. *Imoka* festival is the most populous and important of all traditional festivals held in Awka. It marks the beginning of the planting season. The festival usually takes place around the month of May of every year and lasts for four days or one native week. The ceremony is not restricted to the male folk as is with most traditional festivals in Igbo land. Though, it is a masquerade festival where young men initiated into masquerade cult dress in different colourful masquerade regalia along with other young men carrying stick roam the streets entertaining people. While the aged sit by, recalling the feast in their youthful days on such occasions. The grand finale is the day the whole participants and

masquerades converge at the *Imoka* shrine where the priest performs some rituals and prays that the god gives them favourable weather for planting and other needs of the people on which note the festival ends as everyone disperses to their home showering praises on the god.

Another glamorous festival is *Ukwu na Ije* celebrated in honour of *Akputakpu* deity. It is a festival marking the end and beginning of the blacksmithing year. This feast is celebrated towards the end of the year around November known in Awka lunar calendar as *Onwa asaa*. During this festival it is mandatory that all Awka blacksmith must return to partake of the feast. It is celebrated at Umubele village square (Ezi Nwafor) where Agulu was buried. There they appreciate the god for guiding them in their business during the previous year. After which they will eat, drink and dance till night fall and everybody goes back home.

The feast of *Ngene* is not meant for all *Ngene* adherents rather for those who have been initiated into the *Ngene* shrine. If not so, once an uninitiated eats or drinks at *Ngene* shrine he must die. The feast is eaten right inside the shrine. One could be initiated into the feast by providing the material for the ritual which is sealed with the killing of a fowl. The priest dips the blood of the fowl into the adherent's mouth, this qualifies him to partake in the feast. Much will be eaten and drank until night fall after which all will disperse to their various homes.

Features of a shrine

The uniqueness of the shrine as a cultural institution lies in its collection of ritualistic objects. Regardless of its religious function these objects are mere creative works of art upon which Africans civilization thrived. Notable are the great art works of Ife, Benin and Igbo-Ukwu. The concept created in these art works dumbfounded the early Europeans to African. This is because the African recreated their world through arts such that their work expresses values, attitudes, and thought. These objects are thus the features of the shrine. In Van Binsbergen (1979: 101) opinion these observable features of a shrine are defined within the participants' local religious system, which entails a limited selection of material objects (man-made or not) that possibly qualify for a shrine. The material object determines the divinity inhabiting the shrine. In other words, the emblems of the divinities, ancestors or any spiritual beings are the main collections of the shrine. In addition to the emblems of divinities, there are, in the shrine, paraphernalia for worship for example gongs or bells, rattles, old swords, large pots, calabashes and old bottles. The equipment varies according to the nature of the divinities to which the shrines are dedicated (Awolalu, 1979: 115). The objects of worship are coated with myth of great historical significance and are believed to possess some powers.

Therefore, among the important shrine objects are: the emblem of the god usually placed in a very quiet corner inside the shrine an example is the emblem of *Imoka* deity kept inside the shrine only displayed during the festival. *Oku* are small calabash used for ritual or sacrifice in the shrine. *Opu* are sacred horns. The type found in *Imoka* shrine now is those of ivory which is only used during annual worship by the priest. *Ogene* is an iron-gong which the chief-priest uses to invite or invoke the presence of the deity. *Ofo* is a small wooden structure representing the symbol of truth and authority used in oath taking and covenant. All the above are observable features but not necessarily found in every shrine unlike altar upon which the divinity is worshipped. Awolalu (1979: 117) expressed this importance that "at every shrine there is an altar...considered necessary because of the need to have something visible and tangible on which to place a gift made to the invisible and intangible deity". The altar could be described as circular mound about 4 feet high with about four to six earthen vessels (*Oku*) half buried in the ground. It is here that blood is poured and feathers are stuck

in the ground (Arinze, 1970: 108). But the altar can also be a heap of stone. In place of unroofed shrine, the altar could be situated at the foot of a big tree such as the *Iroko*. It is important to note that the emblem of the gods is kept on the altar of the shrine.

However, considering the possession of cultural objects the shrine could be best described as a traditional museum where art objects are displayed for ritual purposes. Unlike the western museum its objects are functional and through them the sanctity of the place is maintained.

Shrines and rules of conduct: An examination

The concept of what to do and what not to do or what is right and wrong constitute moral principles. Morality is that sound judgement separating good and evil. It sets certain actions as bad thus should be avoided and some good therefore should be imbibed. The discernment of conducts essential for relations is created in man by God but rarely put to use considering the corrupt nature of man. In view of this, religion immersed with divine sanction appears to be a reliable source of morality. As Idowu (1996: 149) rightly observed that “morality is basically the fruit of religion and that to begin with it was dependent upon it.” In this way, the shrine serves as a physical repository of morality. Every shrine in Awka is hedged with rules of conduct expected to regulate human relations. A breach of which attracts severe penalty from the gods. Such laws are referred to as taboos. In Idowu (1996: 146) opinion “*tabu* took their origin from the fact that people discerned that there were certain things which were morally approved or disapproved by the Deity”. Generally, the conducts disapproved by the deities include stealing, cheating, murder, incest, lying, covetousness, and so on while approved conducts are not limited to kindness, hospitable, honesty, respectful, transparency, and truthfulness.

Nonetheless, there exists certain things which include animals, food and words considered forbidden by these deities. Amongst these the *Imoka* shrine forbids the use of palm wine in pouring of libation instead dry gin both local and foreign could be used. The present priest narrated how *Imoka* deity killed his priest who in presence of foreigners used palm wine in the absence of dry gin for libation. In addition, *Imoka* forbids the killing of monkeys (*enwe*) that live in the grove dedicated to him. These black monkeys are *Imoka* emissaries which he used to alert Awka people when war was upon them. The grove where the monkeys reside was dedicated to *Imoka* deity along with all living things both flora and fauna therein. Henceforth, it is a taboo for an Awka indigene to either kill or eat the meat of monkey either from the grove or anywhere. Awka history has it that these monkeys protected them during the Nigeria civil war by sweeping their foot print off the ground to confuse their pursuers. Nevertheless, there have been stories of how Awka people who ate the meat of monkey in their place of sojourn were gradually killed by *Imoka*. This custom led to the saying that “Awka have surplus that is why they dedicated the monkeys to the gods”. In reality no Awka indigene under any circumstances would knowingly kill or eat the meat of monkey.

Akputakpu, the god of blacksmith in Awka forbid strangers to neither touch anything nor smith in a blacksmith workshop owned by an Awka man. Equally, guns are not to be brought into the smith house. When these taboos are breached, the common punishment meted out to the culprit by *Akputakpu* deity is barrenness or curse the blacksmith never to return to his homeland. Once appeased the punishment will cease unlike *Imoka* who cannot be appeased for he kills any who breaks his taboos. Other shrines taboos are only meant for the custodians of the shrine. *Nwangene* forbids the act of fishing in most of his rivers. The fishes are not to be eaten therefore certain myths exist narrating the consequences of breaking such laws.

Evaluation of the African shrines as a repertoire of African traditions

The African shrine performs pluralistic function primarily as an abode of the gods then as a cultural institution without which African culture stands rootless. Awka traditional shrines constitute very important cultural resources centre. It is a priceless cultural possession which serves the following:

Centre for Religious Expression

Since time immemorial, the tradition of visiting sacred places to attain religious merit, washing off the sins and accomplishment of desires has been a common practice across the world (Frembgen, 2012). Adherents find fulfilment in such visits as it affords them the opportunity to come in contact with the object of their worship. From its inception till date the African shrine has primarily served as a medium through which worshippers' communion with the god or gods through rituals and sacrifice. These rituals provide structure and meaning to the life equitable to that of the church to the Christians and Mosque to the Muslims. As Levin (2008) observed from his study of *Sufi* shrines that people come to *Sufi* shrines to manage their social and psychological problems. While Abbas et al (2013) stated that the major reasons for visiting *Sufi* shrine included praying for the daughters' marriage, passing exams, to mitigate the family disputes, resolve family conflicts, praying for marriage with the beloved and praying for better future of children, and for birth of child. In Nigeria, the Osun Osogbo shrine known for its fertility potency is visited by barren women for children. To this, *Imoka* shrine is visited by people seeking vengeance, protection and blessings. Every Awka blacksmith pays homage to *Akputakpu* for prosperity in business while *Ngene* keeps the river flowing. Awka shrines are an integral part of its traditional religion where man gains psychological, physiological, spiritual and material liberation from the visible world of evil.

Source of legal system

Traditional laws usually referred to as customary laws are the traditions guiding human relations and interaction in African communities. Such laws unlike the European laws are unwritten. In view of this, Ibekwe (1975: 297) stated that "European laws are written, because the art of writing and reading had long become part and parcel of their civilization". Regrettably enough, Awka customary law is unwritten. It was handed down orally for ages from generation to generation. Like a creed, it seems to live in the minds of the people. Therefore, the unwritten feature of the Awka customary laws does not relegate its efficacy and potency in executing fair judgement in trials because it is indelibly inscribed upon traditions of the land. These unwritten laws of are shrouded in religious fabric invoking divine mandate at the seat of it execution - the shrine.

Hence, shrine may be akin to the European court in the sense that it is a source of discipline, a fountain from which law flows down to the members of traditional Awka community. In pre-colonial period, most people took their problems to the oracles for fair judgement. This is because the judgement of the gods is indisputably fair and just. Apparently, the gods through ordained priests were considered as judges who preside over issues in the traditional African court (shrine) (Ezenagu, 2014b: 90). The judgement of the gods pronounced by these priests are dreaded owing to the absence of visible executive body yet due punishment are bequeathed to culprit. Critically speaking, Awka people dread the irrevocable judgement of the gods. Based on this the shrine has become a source of law and order, peace and justice

in Awka town as it controls the cruelties of man in the community in the absence of status and organised judicial system.

Pilgrimage centre and Covent

The traditional Awka shrines like other religious shrines serves as pilgrimage centre. *Imoka* shrine which is the largest traditionalist temple is a centre for pilgrimage. This religious act was well observed in the past, because of the renowned strength of *Imoka* deity as a god of vengeance. People make pilgrimage to this shrine annual usually weeks before its famous *Imoka* festival. The purpose of this religious journey is for adherents to renew their spiritual affiliation with the gods.

On the other hand, Awka shrines acts as a school or convent for traditional medicine men and potential priests like today's Seminary and theology colleges. Precisely, after being chosen by a deity to serve as a priest, such a person is mandated to reside in the shrine for a long period of time chosen by the gods. During the isolation period such one would be initiated into the cult of the divinity under the tutelage of an aged priest, diviner or medicine man. Likewise, an apprentice on traditional use of herbs for treatment must pass through the traditional college of medicine (shrine) where oath of professionalism (truth) would be taken. There the apprentice would be taught the uses of various herbs for treatment of all sorts of diseases. He is trained in the shrine for sincerity in practise. There he will swear an oath not to use his knowledge for evil as people do today. During his stay at the shrine no one is expected to see him

Embodiment of cultural knowledge

The cultural function of the shrine is not limited to the display and transmission of traditional rites beyond that it is both an arena and an actor in traditional education and upbringing processes. There are many taboos that ensure correct behaviour in these places of power. Children have to start memorizing taboos connected with special places, actions and words. The memorization of the location of sacred places requires a deep attention to the environment and to the distinguishing features of the landscape along with plant composition, which will ultimately be conducive to a respect towards life forms in their great diversity (Khamaganova, 2006: 254). In this way, the shrine projects and protects the cultural identity of the community. Shrines in Awka are an embodiment of Awka cultural norms. Through the many activities that take place in the shrine cultural ties are strengthened. In effect through this the younger generations learn more about the activities of past men. For instance, during traditional festivals and other notable events like title taking and traditional marriage people see culture at work. By observing and participating in these events one is reoriented into his cultural background.

Centre for oath taking, covenant and initiation rite

Oath taking is one of the notable rites performed in shrine which gives succour to adherents in cases of dispute. It is one of the reliable methods of dispute resolution of pre-colonial Awka still in practice. The execution of such act involves the use of the *Qfɔ* to invoke the presence of the gods needed to seal the oath. As Ilogu (1974) observed that the *Qfɔ* is used for swearing in all grave cases. The act of oath taking is dreaded especially when taken in the presence of the gods who instantly bequeaths punishment to an offender. People take oath to maintain sincerity in relationship or any form of interaction. The oath is taken at the shrine by pointing at, touching or holding the emblem of the gods or any of its paraphernalia in the shrine.

Hence, the use of deity to seal an oath makes it a covenant binding on both parties. Any breach is punishable by the deity on whose name the oath was sworn. There are various methods involved in oath taking. Idowu (1996: 86) identified two methods using the Yoruba god of Iron- *Ogun*- before whom covenant are made:

One method is to put a valve of kola-nut on a piece of iron and when each person has made the requisite undertaking in a prescribed statement, one takes the valve of kola-nut and bites off and eats a portion of it, then replaces the remainder on the emblem of *Ogun*; the other person takes the remainder and eats it. For several people there may be several valves of kola-nuts. Or the covenant-makers may partake of the water into which a red-hot iron from the smithy fire has been dropped, or one in which an emblem of *Ogun* has been washed. It is believed that anyone who swears falsely by *Ogun*, or breaks an oath or covenant made before *Ogun*, will come under his severe judgement; he will die or be mutilated or deformed through a gun-shot, a machete, or an engine or machine accident.

The consequent punishment meted out to covenant breakers made oath taking before any shrine a serious matter unlike the oath of office or oath taken in court before the benevolent Christian God or Muslim God whose punishment are rather reserved for a day of judgment probably not in this present world.

Tourist attraction

In its religious capacity Awka 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 the community commemorates certain events which enhances their identity as an entity such include traditional festival, coronation of rulers and elder, initiation rites, myths of migration and so on. These events illuminate the touristic attribute of the of Awka shrines. As Nolan and Nolan (1992) rightly observed that religious festivals are the principal attractions for non-followers 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: 116) 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 those who casually visit there. Studying *Sufi* shrines Khan and Sajid (2011) noted that *Sufi* shrines also attract the secular tourists and others for the sake of enjoying social gathering and recreation.

However, the opening of sacred ground to tourists or to people with no feel for the religious essence of these sites, without observance of the traditional respects, is often criticised (Ceesay and Ceesay, 2009: 54). The Argument was that the commercialization of religion will led to the loss of its essence. Nonetheless, this commercialization of religious activities further strengthens its survival as a location of both for cultural and religious activities. The Imoka shrine with its sacred grove and festival is a source of tourism attraction as long as the visitors do not infringe on the norms of the shrine. Therefore, it's imperative to note that without these shrines traditional festivals and rituals will have no place in the cultural life of the people. Thus, the relevance of shrine in the study of tourism in Nigeria has aided the development of shrines as tourist sites.

Source of environmental conservation

African traditional religions involve many beliefs and practices, traditions and customs, which are the ways people, express their religion. Religious values beneath these beliefs, customs, and traditions helped people maintain a good relationship with their environment. The environment been the abode of men are also inhabited by spirit beings. Therefore must be protected from human exploitation and destruction to avoid the consequent wrath of the gods. This led to the dedication of certain portion of the environment or even trees to the gods and is thus protected by the shrine. Any fauna and flora under the protection of the shrine remains in its pristine condition. In other words it becomes a taboo for any to defile the laws of the gods by tampering with such. Through this means the unnecessary and ceaseless exploitation of the environment is curtailed. Following this attitude in its entirety has helped in the preservation of the environment which according to (Oviedo and Jeanrenaud, 2006: 261) is of great value for ecological research and nature protection. The pristine condition of the environment as a result of its sacredness positions it a repository of genetic variations which Oviedo and Jeanrenaud, (2006: 261) noted can be useful indicator sites, which are helpful in assessing the potential natural vegetation of degraded ecosystems. The genetic materials from these sacred places can be used in replenishing degraded vegetation and preventing the extinction of rare flora. *Imoka* sacred grove serves the above purpose been unexploited for ages

Symbol of cultural identity

The shrine came into existence as the physical mark of human expression of religious belief yet serves other purposes. Considering it numerous functions (Soedjito, 2006: 64) stated that they also project cultural identity. In other words shrines are the nucleus of cultural identity following its collection of both tangible and intangible materials. Amongst the tangible heritage include traditional paraphernalia. These creative works arts of particular style and design are associated with certain communities which can be used to identify them bearing in mind that African traditions are preserved and expressed in ritual objects. For instance the "Awka *Ajalija* stool" - a title stool owing to its unique style was used to identify the Awka people by early Europeans.

Since time immemorial, Awka shrines served as traditional museum preserving traditional paraphernalia. This includes all kinds of objects ranging from carved wooden objects and figures to cast iron and bronze objects. These objects gave identity to the people. The beauty of these objects dumbfounded the Europeans that they enviously attributed the work to other western civilization. All these objects were produced because they were greatly patronised and appreciated by the community traditions. Today, the destruction of shrines led to decline in the production of ritual objects. Fortunately, Archaeological study contributed to the salvage of most shrines in Awka. The study of these cultural objects preserved in the shrine and its attendant activities has been used to reconstruct the history of past human activities.

Traditional Shrine a of Reservoir African traditions

Traditional Awka shrines through its religious functions serve as a platform for the transmission of community values. These are the educational centre of traditional Awka town. It is at these places that the young Awka people imbibe the identity of his culture. Prior to the advent of western model school, Awka people were educated in the traditions of the town with the use of oral literature emanating from ritual ceremonies. This proves the

existence of literary works though unwritten yet written in the traditions of the Africans before the coming of Europeans. To this Isichie (1976: 39) attests that “much of the knowledge of the Igbo people’s past comes from the oral traditions preserved in Igbo communities in the forms of stories, folklore, sage sayings, proverbs and in some cultural solidarity celebrations”. These are lucrative avenues for the transmission, socialization and integration of young Africans into the African world view. Oral literatures in Awka are instructive materials used in moulding the values and character of the young ones. Therefore, that the concept of learning in classroom may not exist in pre-colonial Awka community does not rule out the act of learning in its entirety. As classrooms are made out of every place including shrines for the purpose of learning where performance are appraised based on experience. That is why wisdom in African is attributed to wealth of experience. The African world is proliferated with mysterious symbols of diverse meaning which constitute much of its wisdom which can only be acquired by experience affordable by age.

Western culture verses the resilient nature of Awka traditional shrines

The Westernization of the Awka people came with the invasion of the town by the British in 1902. This was the event that left the Awka people neither Africans nor Europeans given that westernization was aimed at producing Africans with western culture. This goal seem unattainable despite the introduction of western model education and religion intended to modernize the already civilized people not until the identity of the people was altered with the consequent batter of their traditions. A people can only be identified by their culture summed up in varied patterns of life. This identity in Africa is rooted in religion as Mbiti (1970: 9) stated that “religion is found in all areas of human life. It has dominated the thinking of African people to such an extent that it has shaped their cultures”. Awka people are solely guided by what they believe which can influence their action that is what they do. As soon as Awka culture lost its religious grip it was easily altered. Thus, Awka shrines stood rootless in the absence of its religious efficacy.

Therefore, the influence of western civilization was visible through its attack on Awka traditional religion the reason for the seclusion of sacred space or the erection of shrines. The success of this attack made Awka culture vulnerable to foreign influence. With western culture came all the vestiges of western civilization not limited to Christianity, western model education and colonization experience including strange practices one of which is the spirit of individualism as against the African communal life. Employing these measures it was not difficult to detach Awka people from their religion.

The early missionaries used Christianity as an ideology to convince the Awka people to accept western culture of education - an eye opener that further drew a line of disparity between western culture and African culture. These missionaries Christianized the Africans in western culture. That is isolated them from their culture in order to Christianize them. This led to the use of derogatory terms such as evil, demonic, salvage etc to describe the African traditional religion. Indirectly they relegated African traditional religion to demonic worship which had to be destroyed. Consequently, shrines were destroyed most times burnt to ashes. In this vein, Awka people with their own hands destroyed their cultural heritage in bid to appear civilized. The ritual objects of the shrines destroyed where thereafter greatly sought for by these Europeans owing to the uniqueness of the shrine objects yet they encourage its destruction which led to the decline of the trade as these works of art were created for their religious function. Although the shrine might be destroyed yet the sacred space remains unused as (Van Binsbergen, 1979:101) observed that “the shrine will only cease to be a shrine, will lose its sacred nature altogether, when it has entirely ceased to instigate any such positive or negative” effect on the community. This belief in the potency of

the gods restrained most shrines from destruction. Some of the shrines that were not destroyed on basis of its sanctity were rather reformed as Awolalu (1979: 116) asserted that in the wake of Western civilization, some of the shrines in Yoruba land are being modernised. The roofs of some shrines are now made of corrugated iron sheets instead of thatch. Notably example is the Osun Osogbo shrine renovated by Susan Wenger.

From the foregoing, it is clear that with westernization came modernization and development. Of which both according to (Verschuuren, 2010: 63) have further accompanied unprecedented resource acquisition and caused the absorption of many great civilizations and cultures through western colonization. While Sampang (2010: 254) stated that it “tend to influence the changing cultural and spiritual values among the youth” of today. Consequently, Awka youths are keen in practicing Christianity rather than the religion of their tradition. With this loose hold on the youth the future of shrines is threaten. Nonetheless, despite the threat from the vestiges of westernization, shrines (sacred space) remain deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of the community. The benevolence of Christian and Islamic religion on executing judgment on culprits proved the efficacy of African religion in curbing societal ills. Also the import of western education created the thirst for sustainability of indigenous African culture. Considering the relevance of traditions, Awka people have realised that the continuous destruction of shrines will deface the African in them. Thus, today with the declaration of some shrines national monument and world heritage, laws are promulgated to guard shrines destruction and even reconstruction.

Conclusion

A retrospect of the functions of the traditional shrine in Awka before the advent of western civilization showcases its role as vital cultural institution in the service of the community. Primarily, it created a channel of communication between the people and the spiritual world, preserved important cultural objects, promoted nature conservation and gave social entertainment.

At present, the existence of this great institution is under threat by the vestiges of western civilization – western education, culture and religion. The assimilation of these factors led to the westernization of the Africans. Consequently, the shrine and its activities were destroyed by its own makers. However, the resilient nature of traditional shrine closely tied to the Africans religiosity preserved this institution to date. As most people have continued to participate in traditional religions either in practice or in belief. In Awka the taboos are religiously observed by all and sundry. Traditional priests – healers, diviners, seers’ etc- are constantly consulted as the need arises. Thus, traditional shrines are repositories of African traditions which answer the Africans’ deepest questions of identity.

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Oral Interviews

Mr. Enemmou, Farmer (60 years) 12/06/2014

Imoka Chief-priest (name with-held) (50 years) 15/06/2014

Mr. Obi, Blacksmith (68 years) 10/07/2014

Rev. Father Chukwu, Catholic priest (45 years) 28/05/2014