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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

THE USE OF RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS AND RITUALS IN AFRICAN POLITICAL MOVEMENTS

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Abstract

Religion has long been a powerful force shaping political identities, strategies, and resistance across Africa. In particular, religious symbols—such as icons, texts, and sacred objects—and rituals—such as ceremonies, oaths, and communal prayers—are deeply embedded in the socio-political fabric of the continent. These elements are not merely expressions of faith but are frequently employed as strategic tools within political movements to mobilize communities, legitimize leadership, foster shared identity, and galvanize collective action against oppression or colonial rule. This paper explores the multifaceted roles of religious symbols and rituals in African political movements, analyzing their significance in historical and contemporary contexts. Through case studies including the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya, and ongoing insurgencies and political campaigns in Nigeria, the study demonstrates how religious elements serve as potent symbols of resistance, sources of moral authority, and mechanisms of social cohesion. The analysis highlights that these religious practices and symbols transcend their spiritual origins, becoming integral to political narratives, mobilization efforts, and cultural resistance. Furthermore, the paper engages with theoretical frameworks such as symbolic politics and collective identity to elucidate how religious symbolism reinforces social bonds and legitimizes political actions. It also considers the performative nature of rituals as acts of defiance and solidarity, emphasizing their enduring relevance in shaping Africa's political landscape. The findings underscore the importance of understanding the religious dimensions of political movements on the continent, revealing that religion continues to be a vital resource for activism, resistance, and nation-building. The paper concludes with reflections on the evolving role of religious symbols and rituals in the digital age and their potential influence on future social and political movements in Africa.

Keywords: Religious Symbols, Rituals, Political Movements.

INTRODUCTION

Across the vast and diverse landscapes of Africa, religion has remained a central force shaping societal values, cultural identities, and political struggles for centuries. From indigenous spiritual practices rooted in ancestral worship to the widespread adoption of Christianity and Islam, religious traditions are deeply woven into the social fabric of the continent. These religious systems have not only provided moral guidance and spiritual sustenance but have also played a pivotal role in shaping political movements, social resistance, and nation-building efforts (Lonsdale, 2000).

Historically, religious symbols, rituals, and narratives have served as powerful tools for mobilization and resistance. During periods of colonial domination, indigenous and religious identities became rallying points for anti-colonial struggles, offering moral legitimacy and cultural resilience against foreign control. Religious leaders and institutions often emerged as influential figures in organizing resistance, framing liberation as a divine mission or moral imperative rooted in spiritual authority (Lonsdale, 2000; Mbembe, 2017). For example, Christian churches and Islamic mosques provided spaces for organizing protests, disseminating ideas of resistance, and fostering a collective sense of moral righteousness that challenged colonial authorities (Lodge, 1983).

In the post-colonial era, the continued significance of religion is evident in various social and political movements across Africa. Religious symbols—such as sacred texts, icons, or ritual objects—and rituals—like ceremonies, oath-taking, or communal prayers—are employed not only for spiritual purposes but also as strategic instruments to foster unity, reinforce moral legitimacy, and mobilize communities during times of social upheaval or political contestation (Mbembe, 2011). These symbols and rituals serve as collective anchors that connect individuals to shared histories, cultural identities, and moral visions.

The strategic use of religious elements in political movements is complex and multifaceted. They can serve to legitimize authority, inspire resistance, or negotiate power relations, often transcending purely spiritual functions to become embedded in political discourse and action. For instance, during the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, churches became central sites of resistance, with biblical narratives and symbols framing the struggle as a moral and divine obligation (Lodge, 1983). Similarly, indigenous rituals and spiritual practices fueled anti-colonial resistance in Kenya's Mau Mau uprising, where oaths invoking ancestors and spirits reinforced group cohesion and divine legitimacy (Ogot, 1992). In contemporary Nigeria, religious symbols continue to influence both political campaigns and insurgencies, exemplifying the enduring strategic importance of religion in shaping political identities and actions (Wilkins, 2017).

Understanding how religious symbols and rituals are employed within African political movements is crucial for grasping the continent's socio-political dynamics. These elements serve not only as spiritual expressions but also as potent tools for social cohesion, resistance, and legitimation. As Africa navigates ongoing challenges such as political instability, social fragmentation, and conflicts rooted in religious and ethnic identities, the strategic deployment of religious symbolism remains a vital aspect of its political landscape (Mbembe, 2017).

This paper aims to explore these themes in depth by analyzing historical and contemporary case studies, engaging with relevant theoretical frameworks, and reflecting on the evolving role of religious symbolism in Africa's socio-political

context. In doing so, it seeks to illuminate the enduring power of religious symbols and rituals in shaping Africa's political consciousness and social movements.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To analyze the strategic use of religious symbols and rituals in African political movements, it is essential to engage with established theories from sociology, anthropology, and political science that elucidate the functions of symbols, collective identity, and resistance. Several interrelated frameworks provide valuable insights into how religious elements operate as powerful tools for social cohesion, legitimation, and mobilization.

Symbolic Politics and the Power of Symbols

At the core of understanding religious symbols in political contexts is Clifford Geertz's (1973) concept of symbolic politics. Geertz argued that symbols are not mere signs but are imbued with cultural and moral significance that shape social action. In African contexts, religious symbols—such as sacred texts, icons, or ritual objects—serve as carriers of collective meaning, connecting individuals to shared histories and moral visions. These symbols act as “cultural anchors,” helping groups mobilize around common causes by evoking collective memories, moral authority, and spiritual legitimacy (Geertz, 1973).

In political movements, these symbols often transcend their spiritual origins to become rallying points that reinforce group cohesion and shared purpose. For example, a religious icon or ritual can symbolize resistance against oppression or colonial rule, serving as a moral call to action. This perspective underscores that symbols are performative, shaping perceptions and actions through their cultural resonance.

Collective Identity and Moral Legitimacy

The concept of collective identity - the shared sense of belonging and common purpose among members of a group—is vital to understanding the strategic use of religious rituals and symbols. According to Anderson (1983), collective identities are socially constructed through shared narratives, symbols, and rituals that reinforce group cohesion and differentiate “us” from “them.”

In African political movements, religious symbols often serve to forge and reinforce this collective identity, especially in contexts where cultural or spiritual traditions are central to community life. Rituals such as oath-taking, prayer gatherings, and ceremonies invoke divine or ancestral authority, thus moralizing political struggles and positioning leaders and followers within a sacred moral universe (Eck, 2012).

Religious rituals also serve as rites of passage, marking pivotal moments of collective mobilization or resistance, and reinforcing the moral legitimacy of political actions. These rituals often invoke divine or ancestral figures, framing political resistance as morally righteous and divinely sanctioned.

The Sacred and the Profane: Durkheim's Perspective

Émile Durkheim's (1912/2001) distinction between the sacred and the profane provides a useful lens for understanding the role of religious symbols and rituals in mobilization. Durkheim argued that religion creates a collective consciousness

through sacred symbols and rituals, fostering social cohesion and reinforcing shared values.

In African contexts, this sacred-profane dichotomy manifests in how rituals and symbols are employed to elevate political struggles to a moral or divine plane. For example, during anti-colonial protests or resistance movements, sacred symbols or rituals invoke divine authority or ancestral spirits, elevating the political cause beyond mundane interests to a moral crusade. Such practices reinforce social solidarity and legitimize political authority through shared sacred values (Durkheim, 2001).

Resistance and Ritual Theories of Social Movements

Theories of social movements, particularly those emphasizing resistance and collective action, highlight the performative and symbolic aspects of rituals. McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald (1996) argue that rituals and symbols serve as identity markers that mobilize and sustain social movements by fostering a sense of shared purpose and moral righteousness.

In African contexts, rituals such as oath-taking, spiritual cleansing, or communal prayers are not only acts of faith but also acts of resistance—symbolic defiance against oppressive regimes or colonial powers. These rituals often serve to bind participants emotionally and morally, reinforcing their commitment to the movement's causes.

The Role of Religious Leaders and Institutions

Finally, the theories of charismatic authority (Weber, 1947/1993) are relevant for understanding how religious leaders and institutions influence political movements. Charismatic figures often leverage religious symbols and rituals to legitimize their authority and mobilize followers. In Africa, religious leaders frequently act as mediators between divine authority and political power, using religious symbolism to bolster their influence and command moral legitimacy (Weber, 1947/1993).

Religious Symbols in African Political Movements

Religious symbols are central elements in the collective consciousness of African societies, serving as powerful tools for mobilization, resistance, and identity formation within political movements. These symbols transcend mere spiritual significance; they are imbued with cultural, moral, and political meanings that resonate deeply with communities and serve strategic functions in social struggles.

Types of Religious Symbols

Sacred Texts and Religious Icons: In many African contexts, sacred texts—such as the Bible, Quran, or indigenous scriptures—are used as symbols of divine authority and moral legitimacy. Religious icons, such as crosses, crescents, or traditional spiritual objects, are similarly employed to invoke divine or ancestral endorsement of political causes (Eck, 2012).

Ritual Objects and Sacred Items



Objects such as sacred stones, amulets, or ritual tools often symbolize divine protection or ancestral approval. For example, in indigenous African traditions, ritual objects like drums, masks, or sacred relics are employed during protests or ceremonies to signify divine presence and moral authority (Ogot, 1992).

Symbols of Religious Authority

Clerical vestments, religious insignia, and architectural features like churches or mosques also serve as symbols of religious authority that lend moral legitimacy to political leaders and movements. Religious leaders often wear specific attire that signifies their spiritual status and role in social activism.

Rituals and Ceremonial Acts

Ritual acts - such as oaths, prayers, fasting, or processions - are symbolic actions that reinforce collective resolve and invoke divine or ancestral power. These rituals serve as visual and performative symbols of resistance and unity.

Significance and Functions of Religious Symbols Mobilization and Collective Identity

Religious symbols serve as rallying points that unify communities around shared beliefs and cultural identities. During anti-colonial and resistance movements, symbols like sacred objects or rituals foster a sense of collective purpose rooted in cultural and spiritual heritage (Lonsdale, 2000).

Moral and Divine Legitimacy

Symbols rooted in religious traditions invoke divine authority, framing political struggles as morally righteous and divinely sanctioned. For example, during the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, biblical symbols and references to divine justice provided moral legitimacy to resistance efforts (Lodge, 1983).

Resistance and Defiance

The strategic use of religious symbols often becomes an act of defiance against oppressive regimes or colonial powers. Rituals or symbols that invoke ancestors or spirits serve to spiritually empower activists and symbolize resistance rooted in divine or ancestral authority (Ogot, 1992).

Cultural Preservation and Identity Assertion

In indigenous African movements, symbols drawn from traditional spiritual practices serve to preserve cultural identity and challenge Western or colonial dominance. They reaffirm indigenous cosmologies and assert cultural sovereignty.

Examples of Religious Symbols in African Political Movements Apartheid Movement in South Africa

The anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa exemplifies the strategic employment of religious elements to mobilize opposition. Churches, especially the African National Congress (ANC) and other religious organizations, became vital sites for resistance, framing the fight against racial oppression within a moral and divine context (Lodge, 1983).

Leaders like Nelson Mandela often evoked biblical imagery—such as liberation, justice, and righteousness—to garner moral support. For instance, Mandela’s speeches frequently drew upon Christian themes of liberation and redemption, positioning their struggle as a moral imperative rooted in divine justice (Ntsebeza & Moyo, 2007).

Religious symbols, such as the cross or biblical references, served as rallying points for oppressed communities, transforming local churches into centers of resistance. The “Churches’ Role in Anti-Apartheid Struggle” extended beyond moral support—they provided safe spaces for organizing protests, distributing literature, and rallying international attention. Rituals like prayer meetings, fasting, and symbolic acts like singing freedom songs infused with biblical themes became acts of collective resistance.

The Mau Mau Uprising in Kenya

In Kenya, the Mau Mau rebellion (1952–1960) demonstrates how indigenous religious symbols and rituals were central to anti-colonial resistance. The Mau Mau fighters drew upon Maasai, Kikuyu, and Luo spiritual practices to reinforce their cultural identity and divine legitimacy (Ogot, 1992).

Oaths and initiation rituals played a critical role—oath-taking ceremonies invoked ancestors’ spirits and supernatural forces to bind fighters and instill discipline. These rituals created a sacred bond among fighters, positioning their struggle as divinely sanctioned and ancestral. The oaths often included symbolic acts such as swearing on sacred objects or invoking spirits, which reinforced collective resolve and resistance against colonial powers.

The use of indigenous symbols, such as sacred trees, ancestral shrines, and ritual dances, infused the movement with cultural significance beyond mere political rebellion, transforming it into a spiritual mission rooted in indigenous cosmologies. These rituals served to mobilize communities and legitimize the rebellion as a sacred fight for indigenous sovereignty.

Contemporary Movements in Nigeria

In Nigeria, religious symbols continue to shape political movements and conflicts. Boko Haram’s insurgency (begun in 2009) employs Islamic symbols and rituals to justify violence, framing their campaign as a divine mandate to establish an Islamic state (Wilkins, 2017). Their use of Quranic references, Islamic rituals, and symbols like the crescent moon reinforces their religious legitimacy among followers.

Conversely, political campaigns often invoke Christian and Islamic symbols to appeal to religious constituencies. Politicians participate in prayer sessions, display religious icons, and invoke divine endorsement to reinforce their moral authority and legitimacy. For example, during election campaigns, Christian pastors and Muslim clerics often endorse candidates, framing their political support as divinely sanctioned.

Religious symbols thus serve as tools for both mobilization and legitimation, mobilizing followers by aligning political objectives with divine authority. In all, Religious symbols in African political movements are multifaceted and deeply rooted in the cultural and spiritual fabric of societies. They serve strategic functions—mobilizing communities, legitimizing authority, resisting oppression, and asserting cultural identity. These symbols are dynamic, adapting to changing political contexts

while maintaining their core spiritual and cultural significance. Recognizing their importance enhances our understanding of Africa's socio-political landscape, where religion remains a vital resource for collective action and social transformation.

Rituals as Acts of Resistance and Mobilization

In many African societies, rituals are not merely spiritual practices but serve as powerful acts of resistance and tools for social and political mobilization. These performative acts reinforce collective identity, symbolize defiance against oppressive forces, and serve as strategic tools in challenging authority or colonial structures. The performative, symbolic, and emotional dimensions of rituals make them central to the dynamics of social movements and political resistance across the continent.

The Performative Power of Rituals

Rituals are inherently performative; they enact collective values, histories, and moral commitments through embodied practices. In African contexts, these acts often invoke divine, ancestral, or spiritual authority to legitimize political resistance and moral causes (Turner, 1969). By participating in rituals, individuals affirm their collective identity, reaffirm shared goals, and demonstrate their moral stance. These acts often create a sense of communal solidarity that sustains social movements, especially during times of hardship or repression.

For example, during anti-colonial protests, community prayers, oaths, and ceremonial acts served to mobilize communities and symbolize resistance. Such rituals are performed in secret or public spaces, depending on the context, and are often accompanied by symbolic gestures like singing, dancing, or the use of sacred objects (Ogot, 1992). These performative acts serve to emotionally and morally bind participants, fostering resilience and collective resolve.

Rituals as Acts of Defiance and Resistance

Rituals often function as acts of defiance against oppressive regimes or external domination. Invoking ancestors, spirits, or divine authority during rituals symbolizes moral and spiritual resistance. These acts challenge the legitimacy of colonial rulers, apartheid authorities, or oppressive governments by asserting cultural sovereignty and spiritual independence.

For instance, during Kenya's Mau Mau uprising in the 1950s, oath-taking ceremonies invoking ancestors and spirits were clandestine acts that symbolized resistance rooted in indigenous cosmology. These rituals created a spiritual bond among fighters and positioned their rebellion as morally sanctioned by divine forces (Ogot, 1992). The oath-taking was not only a moral commitment but also a symbolic act of defiance against colonial authorities, asserting cultural sovereignty and spiritual resistance.

Similarly, in South Africa's anti-apartheid movement, secret prayer meetings, fasting, and symbolic acts like singing freedom songs served as acts of spiritual resistance. These rituals created a moral and spiritual space for resistance in the face of institutionalized racial oppression (McGregor, 2007). They reinforced the moral righteousness of the struggle and provided a sense of divine or ancestral endorsement.



Rituals as Tools for Mobilization and Solidarity

Rituals also serve as mechanisms for mobilizing communities and fostering solidarity. Collective ceremonies, prayers, and initiations create shared emotional experiences that reinforce group cohesion. These acts often mark pivotal moments in social movements, such as protests, revolutions, or independence celebrations. In Zimbabwe, for instance, Liberation Day celebrations incorporate national rituals and ceremonies that invoke religious symbols and ancestral spirits to commemorate historical struggles. These rituals serve to renew collective commitment to national liberation and reinforce a shared sense of identity rooted in spiritual and cultural symbolism (Raftopoulos & Savage, 2009).

In indigenous societies, rituals such as initiation ceremonies, communal dances, or ancestral offerings act as rites of passage that reaffirm social bonds and political resilience. These rituals often invoke divine or ancestral authority to legitimize social and political claims, creating a sacred space for resistance and social cohesion.

Rituals in Contemporary Political Movements

Even in modern political contexts, rituals remain vital. For example, during election campaigns in Nigeria, politicians often participate in prayer sessions, invoke divine blessing, or display religious symbols as acts of moral and spiritual legitimacy (Wilkins, 2017). These performative acts reinforce their moral authority and connect political leadership with divine approval, mobilizing religious constituencies.

In conflicts and insurgencies, rituals such as spiritual cleansing or sacrificial offerings are believed to empower fighters spiritually and physically. Such rituals are strategically employed to bolster morale and symbolically assert divine or ancestral backing for their cause.

In summary, rituals in African political movements function as acts of resistance and mobilization by creating collective emotional bonds, asserting cultural sovereignty, challenging oppressive authority, and inspiring resilience. They are performative acts that invoke divine, ancestral, or spiritual authority to morally legitimize struggles and reinforce social cohesion. These rituals are adaptable to different contexts—be it clandestine acts of defiance or public ceremonies—and continue to play a vital role in shaping political activism across Africa.

CONCLUSION

Religious symbols and rituals occupy a central place in the political landscape of Africa, serving as powerful tools for mobilization, resistance, and identity formation. Throughout the continent's diverse history, from anti-colonial struggles to contemporary political conflicts, these spiritual and cultural elements have been strategically employed to inspire collective action, legitimize authority, and challenge oppressive regimes. Whether through sacred objects, religious icons, ceremonial acts, or oaths invoking ancestors and divine forces, these symbols and rituals reinforce a shared moral universe that unites communities against external and internal threats.

The strategic use of religious symbols often transcends their spiritual origins, becoming potent political acts that affirm cultural sovereignty and moral legitimacy. Rituals of resistance—such as oath-taking, prayer meetings, fasting, or symbolic acts—embody collective defiance, bolster resilience, and forge emotional bonds

among participants. These acts serve as performative expressions of resistance, embedding moral and divine authority into struggles for justice, independence, or social change.

Furthermore, these practices underscore the enduring importance of religion as a resource for social cohesion and political mobilization in Africa. They demonstrate how sacred symbols and rituals are not static relics of tradition but dynamic tools that adapt to changing political contexts, serving both to preserve cultural identity and to challenge or legitimize authority. In contemporary settings, religious symbolism continues to influence political campaigns, insurgencies, and social movements—highlighting the ongoing significance of spiritual and cultural resources in shaping Africa's socio-political trajectories.

Understanding the role of religious symbols and rituals in African political movements offers vital insights into the deep-rooted connection between spiritual life and political activism. It emphasizes that religion in Africa is not merely a personal or private matter but a collective force that shapes social realities, moral visions, and political actions.

Looking forward, future research should explore how these religious symbols and rituals are evolving in response to globalization, technological change, and digital media. The rise of social media platforms has created new avenues for the dissemination and transformation of religious symbolism, influencing contemporary activism and political discourse. Additionally, further comparative studies across different regions and religious traditions could deepen our understanding of the diverse ways in which religious symbolism continues to shape political resistance and social cohesion in Africa.

In sum, religious symbols and rituals remain vital to the fabric of African political life—embodying a rich history of spiritual resistance and ongoing social mobilization. Recognizing their significance not only enhances our understanding of Africa's past and present but also illuminates the enduring power of faith and cultural memory in shaping future pathways toward social justice and political change.

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