

BIBLICAL BRONZE SERPENT AND THE TRADITIONAL IGUN GUIDE (ROYAL BRONZE) OF BENIN KINGDOM: IMPLICATIONS FOR INCULTURATION AND CONTEXTUALIZATION

Kenneth Osarodion Osarumwense PhD

Department of Religions, Faculty of Arts, University of Benin, Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria.

kenneth.osarumwense@uniben.edu

ABSTRACT

This study focuses on sacred craft in Numbers 21:4 – 9 and the Igun (royal bronze) traditional guide of the Benin kingdom. Sacred objects have played a significant role in mediating religious meaning, divine presence, and communal identity across cultures. This biblical narrative presents the bronze serpent crafted under divine instruction as a sacred object through which healing and obedience to Yahweh were enacted. Similarly, the Igun metal-work functioned not merely as artistic expression but as ritual guides embedded in cosmology, kingship, and ancestral mediation. Despite the geographical and cultural distance between ancient Israel and the Benin Kingdom in Nigeria, both traditions reveal a deep intertwining of sacred craft, religious symbolism, and communal life. This creates a theological tension and interpretive imbalance surrounding these sacred crafts, downplaying their original divine authorization and sacramental function. This imbalance has contributed to a theological disconnection in African Christian thought, where biblical sacred materiality is affirmed, and the African sacred craftsmanship is rejected or demonized. Moreso, there is a lack of sustained comparative theological and historical analysis between the bronze serpent tradition and the ritual metalworking of the Igun guide, which has limited scholarly understanding of how sacred craft functions as a legitimate medium of religious meaning across cultures. Part of the findings is that sacred craft in both traditions mediates human encounter with the divine, but while the bronze serpent is a provisional sign whose authority derives from God, the ìgún artefacts carry embedded spiritual and social authority. However, the study recommends that churches should develop frameworks for reinterpreting cultural symbols in light of Scripture, transforming indigenous practices into Christ-centred expressions.

Keywords: Bronze Serpent, Benin Bronze, Inculturation, Contextualization, and African Christianity.

1. Introduction

Recent scholarship in religious studies has increasingly emphasized the importance of materiality in shaping religious experience and theological meaning. Sacred objects, far from being peripheral to belief, often function as sites where religious knowledge, power, and memory are negotiated within specific cultural settings (Eliade, 2017). In both biblical traditions and African indigenous societies, acts of craftsmanship frequently assume ritual significance, transforming material production into a religiously meaningful practice. Material culture occupies a critical place in religious traditions, functioning as a tangible medium through which sacred meanings are articulated and experienced. Religious artefacts often mediate between the visible and invisible realms, embodying theological ideas, cosmological beliefs, and communal memory

(Meyer, 2019). In both biblical and African indigenous contexts, craftsmanship transcends utilitarian production and becomes a sacred vocation through which divine or ancestral power is accessed (Ashley, 2018).

In Numbers 21:4–9, the Israelites' journey through the wilderness culminates in a crisis marked by divine judgment and healing. Following the outbreak of venomous serpents, Yahweh commands Moses to fashion a bronze serpent and raise it on a pole, so that those who look upon it may live. Scholars have noted that the narrative presents the bronze serpent as a ritual object whose power lies not in inherent material agency but in divine authorization and human obedience (Milgrom, 2018; Ashley, 2018). The act of crafting, therefore, is sacralized by divine command, transforming metalwork into a vehicle of healing and covenantal instruction (Egharevba,

1998). This episode illustrates a broader biblical tension regarding sacred objects affirming their mediatory function while simultaneously resisting idolatry (Brueggemann, 2017). African indigenous traditions similarly emphasize the sacred character of craft, particularly in societies where artistic production is embedded within ritual, lineage, and cosmology. In the Benin Kingdom, the ìgún guild, as hereditary bronze and brass casters, occupies a revered position as custodians of both technical skill and esoteric knowledge (Egharevba, 1998). Their craft is inseparable from ritual observance, ancestral veneration, and royal authority (Ben-Amos, 2000; Dark, 2015). Objects produced by the ìgún, such as commemorative heads, plaques, and ritual figures, function not merely as aesthetic artefacts but as active participants in religious and political life. The ìgún guild, understood as the corpus of traditional rules, symbols, and ritual protocols governing metal casting, situates craftsmanship within a sacred epistemology transmitted across generations (Egharevba, 1998).

Despite differences in theology and worldview, both traditions present sacred craft as a means of mediating power, healing, and memory. The bronze serpent narrative reflects a monotheistic framework in which sacred craft is episodic and subordinate to divine sovereignty, while the Benin tradition reflects a continuous and embodied ontology in which craft sustains cosmological order and social hierarchy (Mbiti, 1990). In both cases, however, material objects become loci of sacred encounter, revealing how religious communities sacralize human creativity in response to existential crises such as suffering, mortality, and political continuity. Yet, whereas the biblical account restricts the sacred object to a divinely circumscribed moment within a monotheistic worldview, the Benin tradition integrates sacred craft into the ongoing religious and political life of the community. This contrast reflects broader differences between biblical and African indigenous ontologies regarding the relationship between material culture and sacred power (Mbiti, 1990). Therefore, the study intends to examine

sacred craft as religious objects and mode of theological expression, authority, and communal identity.

Historical Background of the Bini Artifacts

The Benin Kingdom emerged as a centralized polity by the thirteenth century, with the Oba serving as both political ruler and sacred figure (Egharevba, 1998). Artistic production was organized through guilds under royal patronage, particularly the Igun Eronmwon, the guild of bronze casters. Using the lost-wax technique, artisans produced bronze and brass heads, plaques, and ritual objects that recorded court history and religious cosmology (Dark, 2015; Ben-Amos, 2000). The 1897 British Punitive Expedition marked a decisive rupture in the history of these artifacts. Thousands were looted from royal altars and palaces and dispersed to museums across Europe and North America (Hicks, 2020). This act not only dispossessed the Bini people materially but also disrupted religious memory and ritual continuity. In Bini, objects serve as mediators between humans, ancestors, and the divine (Egharevba, 1998). Bronze heads placed on ancestral altars symbolized the continuing presence and authority of deceased Obas, reinforcing lineage, legitimacy, and cosmic order (Ben-Amos, 2000). Those artifacts functioned as, (i) ritual mediators, facilitating communication with ancestors, (ii) historical records, preserving collective memory and (iii) symbols of sacred kingship, legitimizing political authority. The Bini understanding of material mediation finds resonance in biblical and Christian traditions. The bronze serpent (Num. 21:8–9), the Ark of the Covenant, and later Christian sacramentals and icons demonstrate that material objects can function as vehicles of divine presence without constituting idolatry (Brown, 2020). Second Vatican Council explicitly affirmed the legitimacy of cultural expressions in religious life, stating that the Church “fosters and assumes the ability, resources, and customs of each people” (Hicks, 2020).

The Biblical Bronze Serpent in Numbers 21: 4 - 9

The account of the bronze serpent in

Numbers 21:4–9 occupies a distinctive place within the wilderness narratives of the Hebrew Bible. Set against the backdrop of Israel’s journey from Mount Hor toward the Red Sea, the episode emerges during a period of communal frustration, rebellion, and divine judgment. The people’s complaint against God and Moses leads to the outbreak of venomous serpents, resulting in widespread suffering and death. In response to the people’s repentance, God instructs Moses to fashion a bronze serpent and raise it on a pole, promising that those who look upon it will live. Scholarly interpretation emphasizes that the bronze serpent functions as a divinely sanctioned instrument rather than an autonomous source of power. Milgrom (2018) argues that the object’s efficacy is rooted entirely in obedience to God’s command and the act of trust demonstrated by those who looked upon it. The narrative carefully avoids attributing inherent power to the serpent itself, instead directing attention to God as the true agent of healing. This theological restraint distinguishes the bronze serpent from surrounding ancient Near Eastern practices in which serpents were often associated with fertility, magic, or divine power (Milgrom, 2018). The symbolism of the serpent itself is paradoxical. Traditionally associated with danger and death, the serpent becomes a medium of healing when placed under divine instruction. Brueggemann (2017) observes that this inversion underscores a central biblical theme, God’s capacity to transform instruments of judgment into channels of mercy. The lifted serpent simultaneously confronts the people with the consequences of their disobedience and offers a visible sign of divine grace. Healing, therefore, occurs within a framework of repentance, obedience, and faith rather than ritual manipulation. The temporary and conditional nature of the bronze serpent is further clarified by its later history. According to 2 Kings 18:4, King Hezekiah destroyed the bronze serpent when it became an object of worship, referring to it dismissively as “Nehushtan”. This act demonstrates that the legitimacy of material objects in Israel’s religious life was contingent upon their function as signs pointing to God.

Once the object obscured divine authority or encouraged misplaced devotion, it was removed. Scholars identify this moment as a critical biblical boundary against idolatry and the sacralization of material forms (Brueggemann, 2017). In John 3:14–15, Jesus draws upon this narrative to interpret his own crucifixion, presenting the lifted serpent as a typological anticipation of the Son of Man being lifted for the salvation of humanity. This Christological reading reinforces the interpretive principle that material symbols in Scripture serve as revelatory purposes that ultimately point beyond themselves to God’s redemptive action (Beale, 2016). From an African Christian theological perspective, the bronze serpent narrative offers a valuable framework for engaging material culture. It affirms that physical objects may function as pedagogical and symbolic aids within faith communities, provided they remain subordinate to God’s authority. At the same time, the narrative cautions against attributing spiritual power to objects themselves, a concern particularly relevant in contexts where material mediation plays a significant role in religious expression. The bronze serpent thus provides a biblical model for discerning the appropriate theological use of material symbols one that upholds divine sovereignty, encourages faith, and resists idolatry.

Theological and Pastoral Implications for African Christianity

The comparative analysis of the biblical bronze serpent (Numbers 21:4–9) and the *ìgún* guide of the Benin Kingdom yield important theological and pastoral insights for African Christianity. Both traditions demonstrate that material culture plays a significant role in shaping religious consciousness, communal identity, and theological meaning. When critically engaged, such comparisons offer a constructive pathway for African Christian reflection on faith, culture, and tradition. Firstly, the comparison underscores the centrality of inculturation in African Christian theology. It enables the gospel to be expressed through indigenous cultural symbols while remaining faithful to Christian revelation. Just as the bronze serpent functioned as a culturally

intelligible symbol within Israel's wilderness experience, the ̀gún guide reflects a deeply embedded African understanding of sacred craft, lineage, and communal responsibility (Egharevba, 1998). African Christianity is thus invited to reinterpret indigenous symbols in the light of Christ, allowing culture to serve as a vehicle for theological expression rather than a competing religious authority (Shorter, 2009; Bediako, 1995). Secondly, the study highlights the importance of material mediation in religious life. Both the bronze serpent and ̀gún artefacts reveal that physical objects can mediate spiritual realities and convey theological meaning. In the biblical narrative, the bronze serpent becomes an instrument through which divine healing is experienced, though its power remains entirely dependent on God's command. Similarly, ̀gún artefacts mediate communal memory and sacred meaning within the Benin worldview. African Christianity can draw from this insight by recognizing that material symbols when properly interpreted can enrich worship, teaching, and communal identity without displacing divine agency (Brueggemann, 2017; Milgrom, 2018). Thirdly the comparison provides a cautionary framework for distinguishing between syncretism and contextualization. While syncretism occurs when cultural practices are merged with Christianity in ways that compromise core Christian beliefs, contextualization involves the critical reinterpretation of cultural elements to communicate Christian truth (Shorter, 2009). The later destruction of the bronze serpent (2 Kings 18:4) serves as a biblical warning against allowing material objects to acquire autonomous spiritual authority. This principle is particularly relevant for African Christianity, where respect for tradition must be balanced with theological discernment to ensure that Christ remains central (Kalu, 2008). Fourthly, the comparative study encourages deeper theological reflection on African cultural heritage. Rather than dismissing indigenous traditions as incompatible with Christianity, African theologians and church leaders are challenged to examine cultural practices for their symbolic, ethical, and communal value.

Such reflection enables African Christianity to articulate faith in ways that resonate with local worldviews while remaining rooted in Scripture (Bediako, 1995). Finally, the comparison carries significant pastoral implications. Effective pastoral ministry in Africa requires an informed engagement with cultural practices and symbols that shape believers' religious imagination. Understanding traditions such as the ̀gún guide allows pastors to address questions of faith, fear, identity, and belonging with sensitivity and theological clarity. This approach fosters trust, reduces confusion, and strengthens Christian discipleship by demonstrating that the gospel speaks meaningfully to African cultural realities.

Implications for Nigerian Christianity

The comparison between the bronze serpents in Numbers 21:4–9 and the ̀gún guide of the Benin Kingdom offers particularly relevant insights for Nigerian Christianity, where Christian faith interacts daily with strong indigenous traditions, material symbols, and communal religious consciousness. Nigerian Christianity, especially within Pentecostal and charismatic expressions, operates in a context where questions of power, healing, protection, and spiritual mediation are deeply embedded in cultural experience (Ekechi, 2012).

In Nigeria, Christianity did not emerge in a cultural vacuum but encountered a religious system, rich in symbolism, ritual practice, and sacred craft. The bronze serpent narrative demonstrates that God may employ culturally intelligible symbols to communicate divine action, while still maintaining absolute theological control over their meaning and function. This biblical precedent affirms the legitimacy of inculturation within Nigerian Christianity, where indigenous symbols and artistic expressions may be reinterpreted in the light of Christ rather than rejected outright (Bediako, 1995). The ̀gún guide, as a hereditary institution governing sacred craft in the Benin Kingdom, represents a Nigerian example of how material culture is intertwined with identity, memory, and authority. Nigerian Christianity is therefore challenged to engage such traditions critically, discerning how cultural forms can be redirected toward Christian teaching without

preserving pre-Christian religious meanings. Inculturation, in this sense, becomes an act of theological transformation rather than cultural compromise (Shorter, 2009).

Nigerian Pentecostalism places strong emphasis on divine power, healing, and spiritual deliverance. Within this framework, material objects are often viewed with suspicion, particularly when they resemble traditional religious artefacts. The bronze serpent narrative offers a corrective balance: the object itself possessed no intrinsic power, yet it functioned as a visible sign through which God's healing was experienced. Its later destruction when it became an object of devotion reinforces the Pentecostal conviction that material symbols must never replace reliance on God (Milgrom, 2018; 2 Kings 18:4). For Nigerian churches, this distinction is pastorally significant. Nigerian Christian teaching should clearly emphasize that spiritual authority resides in God alone. Material symbols may serve educational or illustrative purposes, but healing, protection, and deliverance flow through the work of the Holy Spirit rather than through objects (Anderson, 2016).

Syncretism, Deliverance, and Discernment

Syncretism is specifically pronounced among Nigerian Christian, where conversion often involves a decisive break from traditional religious practices. The comparison between the bronze serpent and the Ìgún traditional guide highlights the need for discernment rather than fear-driven rejection of culture. Syncretism arises not from cultural engagement itself, but from allowing cultural symbols to retain autonomous spiritual authority that competes with Christ (Kalu, 2008). Pentecostal deliverance theology in Nigeria emphasizes freedom from spiritual bondage, yet this freedom must be accompanied by sound teaching that distinguishes symbolic representation from spiritual dependence. The biblical dismantling of the bronze serpent when it became a spiritual stumbling block provides Nigerian pastors with a scriptural model for confronting practices that distort faith while preserving what can be redeemed and reoriented toward Christ (Kalu, 2008). Nigerian

Christianity is profoundly communal, reflecting broader African social structures. The bronze serpent was lifted up before the entire Israelite community, emphasizing collective responsibility, shared suffering, and communal healing. Similarly, the Ìgún guide functions within a communal framework, linking craft to lineage and collective memory (Egharevba, 1998). These parallels resonate strongly with Nigerian Christian expressions of faith, where worship, testimony, and spiritual experience are shared realities rather than purely individual pursuits. Pastorally, this comparison encourages Nigerian church leaders to address cultural identity as part of discipleship. Faith formation must engage communal memory and cultural consciousness, helping believers reinterpret their heritage through a Christ-centered lens. This approach strengthens Christian identity and reduces the tension many Nigerian Christians experience between faith and culture. Kalu (2008) observes that, African Pentecostalism emerged partly as a response to fears of spiritual contamination and syncretism, especially where traditional religious symbols are perceived as carriers of pre-Christian spiritual power. However, Pentecostal theology is not inherently anti-cultural. Recent Pentecostal scholarship emphasizes contextualization that remains faithful to Scripture and responsive to the work of the Holy Spirit (Yong, 2010). From this perspective, inculturation does not involve the continuation of indigenous religious functions, but the transformation of cultural expressions under the lordship of Christ. Sacred craft, therefore, may be re-appropriated as historical memory, didactic symbolism, or aesthetic expression, provided it no longer functions as a spiritual mediator competing with the Holy Spirit. The distinction between syncretism and inculturation becomes particularly clear at this point. Syncretism occurs when sacred objects retain or acquire spiritual agency independent of Christ, thereby introducing alternative sources of protection, healing, or authority. Inculturation, by contrast, occurs when cultural forms are reinterpreted and subordinated to biblical revelation.

Theological Implications of Material Mediation

Material objects play a mediating role in religious life, but their legitimacy is contingent on proper theological orientation. The bronze serpent's power is derivative of God, highlighting that material mediation can be meaningful without conferring autonomous authority (Milgrom, 1990; Brueggemann, 1997). The ìgún tradition, while culturally and artistically rich, embeds spiritual authority within the object itself, illustrating the potential for tension between indigenous practice and Christian faith (Ben-Amos, 1995; Dark, 1973). African Christianity, including Pentecostal communities, must navigate these dynamics by promoting discernment: material objects may serve educational, aesthetic, or commemorative functions, but the Holy Spirit remains the primary agent of divine presence (Archer, 2009; Anderson, 2014). Theologically, this approach preserves cultural identity while ensuring Christ-centred worship.

2. Conclusion

This study has examined the bronze serpent (Numbers 21:4–9) and the ìgún traditional guide of the Benin Kingdom as parallel expressions of sacred craft and mediated healing within distinct religious and cultural worlds. The analysis demonstrates that in both traditions, crafted objects functioned as conduits of meaning, memory, and power, not as autonomous sources of efficacy. In the biblical narrative, the bronze serpent became effective only through an obedient gaze grounded in Yahweh's command, while in Benin cosmology; ìgún metal-works derive significance from ancestral sanction, ritual consecration, and communal belief systems. In each case, the material object mediates an encounter with an unseen transcendent reality.

The comparative study highlights that material mediation is not alien to biblical faith, but rather carefully regulated. The later destruction of the bronze serpent (2 Kings 18:4) affirms that when a sacred object is detached from its theological purpose and absolutised, it

References

- Anderson, A. (2016). *An introduction to Pentecostalism: Global charismatic Christianity* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Ashly, M. (2018). *A Pentecostal hermeneutic: Spirit, Scripture, and community*. CPT Press.

risks becoming an idol. Similarly, ìgún ritual objects, though embedded in indigenous spirituality, are not understood merely as "art," but as repositories of history, authority, and moral order within Benin society. This underscores a shared human impulse to express spiritual realities through tangible forms, even while theological interpretations differ. For African Christianity, especially within the Nigerian context, the study offers an important corrective to uncritical rejection of indigenous material culture as well as to unreflective syncretism. Pentecostal and evangelical traditions rightly emphasize Christ as the ultimate source of healing and salvation, yet this study suggests that the pastoral challenge is discernment, not denial, recognizing the communicative power of symbols while re-centering faith in Christ alone. This corresponds with Meyer (2014) and indicates that religion operates through material forms that generate a "sense of presence," making it vital for Christian theology in Africa to engage local material cultures thoughtfully rather than dismiss them wholesale.

3. Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made. These are as follows:

Churches should develop frameworks for reinterpreting cultural symbols in light of Scripture, transforming indigenous practices into Christ-centred expressions.

Clergy should teach believers the distinction between symbolic representation and divine power, using biblical examples like the bronze serpent.

Traditions such as the ìgún traditional guide should be studied for their communal, ethical, and artistic value while addressing theological tensions responsibly.

Cultural practices that obscure Christ's authority must be corrected and those that communicate gospel truths should be embraced.

- Beale, G. K. (2016). *A New Testament biblical theology: The unfolding of the Old Testament in the New*. Baker Academic.
- Ben-Amos, P. (2000). *The art of Benin*. Thames & Hudson.
- Brown, N.O. (1990), *Love's Body* (reprint ed). University of California Press.
- Bediako, K. (1995). *Christianity in Africa: The renewal of a non-Western religion*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Brueggemann, W. (2017). *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, dispute, advocacy*. Fortress Press.
- Dark, P. J. C. (2015). *An introduction to Benin art and technology*. Oxford University Press.
- Ekechi, F.K. (1971). *Missionary Enterprise and Rivalry in Igboland 1857-1914*, The Anchor Press Ltd, Tiptree, Essex, Britain.
- Egharevba, J.U. (1998). *A Short History of Benin*, University Press, Benin City.
- Hicks, J. (2020). *Pop Culture: The Real-World Learning Resource*. Oklahoma State University Press.
- Kalu, O. U. (2008). *African Pentecostalism: An introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- Meyer, E. (2014). *The Culture Map: Breaking Through the Invisible Boundaries of Global Business*. Public Affairs/Hachette Book Group.
- Mbiti, J.S. (1990). *African Religions and Philosophy*. Heinemann (Oxford/Portsmouth, N.H).
- Milgrom, J. (2017). *Numbers*. Jewish Publication Society.
- New Jerusalem Bible, (1985). Darton, Longman & Todd/Les Edition du Cerf.
- Shorter, A. (2009). *Toward a theology of inculturation*. Orbis Books.
- Yong, A. (2010). *In the days of Caesar: Pentecostalism and political theology*. Eerdmans.