

# Relationship Between African Traditional Religion, Symbolism, Humanity And artificial Intelligence (AI) Among the Igbos and Yorubas in Nigeria

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*Abstract- This paper explores the intricate relationship between African Traditional Religion, Symbolism, Humanity, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) among the Igbos and Yorubas in Nigeria. African traditional religions are deeply rooted in community and spirituality, where symbolism plays a crucial role in expressing beliefs and connecting with the divine. Symbols manifested through rituals, folklore, and art embody spiritual realities, fostering a shared understanding of existence among practitioners. As AI technologies emerge, they present both opportunities and challenges for these religious practices. AI can enhance the preservation of cultural heritage by digitizing rituals and texts, making them accessible to future generations. The aim of the study is to show how ATR symbols emphasis on harmony, balance, and respect for life can inform a more human centered approach to AI development. The objective is to identify and recommend strategies for integrating ATR symbols insight into global AI governance framework, fostering an ATR and ethical inclusive. 7 Igbo Traditional Religious Symbols and 5 Yoruba Traditional Religious Symbols were explored. The integration of AI raises ethical concerns regarding the authenticity of religious practices. The potential for dilution of traditional beliefs necessitates a careful examination of how technology coexist with cultural values. This paper argues for the development of ethical frameworks to guide the use of AI in religious contexts, ensuring that advancements respect and preserve the rich spiritual heritage of Africa. In conclusion, as AI continues to influence African traditional religions,*

*it is imperative to navigate these developments critically, balancing technological innovation with cultural integrity to enrich spiritual experiences in the digital age.*

*Index Terms- Artificial Intelligence Humanity, Symbolism African Traditional Religion Symbolism, Humanity, and Artificial Intelligence*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In African traditional religions, symbols are not simply decorative; they carry complex ideas and beliefs. The use of colors, shapes, and materials in religious artifacts and rituals conveys specific meanings. For example, white often symbolizes purity and peace, while red may represent sacrifice or danger. These symbols help practitioners express their understanding of the divine, the universe, and their role within it. African traditional religions often depict a hierarchical spiritual world, with symbols representing various entities, including a Supreme Being, lesser deities, and ancestral spirits. Each of these entities is associated with specific symbols that reflect their characteristics and roles within the spiritual hierarchy. For instance, the Yoruba god Olorun, the Supreme Creator, is often symbolized by the sun, representing light, life, and omnipresence, while Orishas, the lesser deities, have unique symbols that embody their attributes and domains.

African Traditional Religion (ATR) symbolism refers to the rich, multi-layered use of symbols and symbolic representations within African indigenous

religious practices to convey complex spiritual, philosophical, and moral ideas. Religion enters into every aspect of the life of the Africans and it cannot be studied in isolation. Its study has to go hand-in-hand with the study of the people who practice the religion (Awolalu, 1976). In these belief systems, symbols play a central role in expressing concepts of the divine, the cosmos, humanity's place within the world, and the interconnectedness of life.

According to Choba, 2020, each divinity is worshipped by sacred symbols and emblems. The symbols are the anthropomorphic images of the deity. Symbols in ATR are not just decorative but carry profound meanings, deeply rooted in the worldview, cosmology, and values of African communities. These symbols often manifest in various forms, including objects, rituals, ceremonies, art, nature, and oral traditions. For example, trees, rivers, animals, and celestial bodies like the sun and moon are frequently used as symbols representing the presence of spirits, ancestors, or the divine. Masks and sculptures used in ritual performances also symbolize the spiritual world and serve as channels for communication with ancestors or deities. Cowrie shells, calabashes, and stones may be used in divination practices to represent cosmic forces or human destiny.

A key aspect of ATR symbolism is its reflection of the holistic nature of African spirituality, where the physical and metaphysical worlds are intertwined. Symbols often emphasize the interconnectedness of all beings, reinforcing the idea of unity between humans, nature, and the divine. For example, in many African cultures, the tree is a symbol of life, growth, and connection to the ancestors, representing the idea that humanity is deeply rooted in the past while continuously evolving. In terms of humanity, ATR symbolism often highlights the values of community, shared responsibility, justice, and balance. These symbols serve as reminders of the moral expectations within a society, as well as humanity's duty to maintain harmony with the universe and the spiritual realm. In ATR, symbols like the tree, river, and sun represent the interconnectedness between all living beings. For instance, the tree symbolizes life and continuity, with its roots linking the present generation to the ancestors and its branches pointing

toward future generations. This reinforces the idea that humanity is part of a cyclical relationship where each person is connected to the broader universe, nature, and their community (Thomas, 2015).

Ancestors play a vital role in ATR, symbolized by objects like Egungun (ancestral masquerades) and shrines. These symbols emphasize the belief that humanity is guided by the wisdom of those who have come before and that the ancestors continue to influence the living. This connection to the past offers moral guidance and strengthens the notion of communal responsibility, where each individual's actions affect both the living and the spiritual world. Figures such as Esu, the Yoruba deity of choice and moral duality, represent the constant presence of ethical decisions in human life. Esu, a symbol of the crossroads, reminds individuals of the importance of moral responsibility in maintaining the balance between good and evil. This suggests that humanity is defined by its ability to make ethical decisions that affect both personal destiny and the collective well-being of society.

The integration of AI into African traditional religious practices is an emerging field that holds great potential. AI can be used to preserve and digitize ancient texts, artifacts, and rituals, ensuring that these cultural treasures are accessible to future generations. For instance, AI-powered tools can help in translating and interpreting ancient scripts, making the knowledge contained within them more widely available. Moreover, AI can enhance the way rituals and ceremonies are conducted. For example, AI-driven robots could assist in performing intricate rituals, ensuring precision and consistency. This could be particularly useful in preserving the exact methods and practices that have been passed down through generations.

AI also offers new ways to connect with the spiritual realm. Virtual assistants and chatbots can provide guidance and answer questions about traditional practices, making spiritual knowledge more accessible to a broader audience. This can help bridge the gap between modern technology and ancient wisdom, creating a harmonious blend of the old and the new. The symbolism in African traditional religion provides a rich tapestry of meaning that

connects humanity to its past, present, and future. The integration of AI into these practices offers exciting possibilities for preserving and enhancing this cultural heritage, ensuring that it continues to inspire and guide future generations.

### 1.1 Literature reviews

Ejiuzu,1986 in Ossai, 2018 pointed out when he said that “Sacred images and ideas which ‘reveal’ themselves to the mind through the vital process have been communicated in myth, symbol objects and behavior as accumulated experiences of the people” (p.119). As an instrument of communication, the symbol in Igbo religion unveils the true hidden religious beliefs and practices and how relevant they are to the people. For instance, what chick symbolizes in the traditional ritual cleansing of adultery in the Nsukka cultural area of Igboland, is for purification ritual and ritual purification of the land. “The piping voice of the chick is a call to the ancestors to consider its innocent death and therefore forgive the adulterous woman”. (p.116).

We can see not only what the chick stands for, but the piping voice of the chick which according to Ossai; it is a call to the ancestors for pardon during ritual cleansing of marital infidelity. So the symbol (chick) has revealed the religious belief of the people that ancestors can forgive an adulterous woman. It is also pertinent to note that the symbol (chick) serves as an instrument of communication between the visible (the adulterous woman) and the invisible (the ancestors) The symbol also reveals why the traditional people of Nsukka carry out the ritual cleansing – to ensure a harmonious relationship between the people (the adulterous woman) and the spiritual forces (the ancestors).

#### 1.1.1 African Traditional Religion Symbols in Igboland

In Igbo Traditional Religion, symbols play a significant role in representing spiritual beliefs, cosmology, moral principles, and the relationship between humans and the divine. These symbols are often connected to deities, ancestors, nature, and cultural values. A symbol operates because it bears a relationship with the symbolized and this places a limit upon its use (Udechukwu, 2019).

Below are some important traditional religious symbols in Igbo land and their meanings:

1. Ofo: The Ofo is one of the most significant religious symbols among the Igbo people. It represents truth, justice, and moral authority. It is a sacred staff that symbolizes the connection between humans and the divine, and it is used in judicial and religious rites. It is held by elders, priests, and community leaders as a sign of their moral authority to judge, perform rituals, and make decisions on behalf of the community. The Ofo is believed to grant the bearer the power to call upon the ancestors and invoke divine justice.
2. Ikenga: The Ikenga is a symbolic figure that represents personal achievement, strength, and success. It is an anthropomorphic figure usually depicted with horns, symbolizing power and vitality. The Ikenga is typically kept in the home of an individual, especially warriors, hunters, and men of status, to symbolize their personal accomplishments and ambitions. It serves as a personal shrine and is consulted in matters of success, decision-making, and progress in life.
3. Ala (Ani): Ala, also known as Ani, is the Earth goddess and one of the most important deities in Igbo religion. She represents fertility, morality, and the land, which are central to Igbo life. Ala is also the goddess of justice, and she oversees the laws of the land. The sacred symbols of Ala are often seen in shrines and include the earth itself, sacred groves, and sculptures of the goddess. She is also represented through Mbari houses, which are shrines constructed to honor the earth goddess and ask for blessings. Ala is honored during various agricultural festivals, and the people believe she is responsible for the fertility of the land and the prosperity of the community.
4. Nzu (White Chalk): Nzu is a sacred white chalk used in Igbo religious and social rituals. It symbolizes purity, peace, and blessings. It is commonly used to signify the presence of the divine or the acceptance of a covenant between humans and the gods. Nzu is applied on the forehead or sprinkled in sacred places during prayers and rituals. It is also used in rites of passage such as weddings, births, and funerals to invoke blessings and protection. The chalk is often kept in homes as a symbol of purity and

connection to the ancestors. During rites of passage, such as weddings, childbirth, and funerals, Nzu is used to invoke blessings and protection. It is also used when sealing agreements or oaths, symbolizing the purity and sincerity of the act. Nzu is associated with peace offerings and is believed to neutralize evil forces or bad omens

5. Eke (Python): The python, known as Eke, is considered sacred in many parts of Igbo land. It is believed to be a messenger of the gods, particularly the Earth goddess Ala, and is seen as a symbol of fertility, life, and protection. In some Igbo communities, the killing of a python is forbidden, and its appearance near homes is seen as a sign of divine favor or a visit from the ancestors. Pythons are often left unharmed and are sometimes involved in rituals for fertility and blessings.
6. Edo (Red Earth or Ochre): Edo, or red ochre, symbolizes strength, vitality, life force, and, in some contexts, danger or war. It is often associated with the Earth, blood, and the ancestors, symbolizing the deep connection between the Igbo people and their land, as well as the life-giving force of blood. Edo is used in different cultural and spiritual contexts, such as marking warriors, adorning initiates, or during certain festivals. It can also be used in rituals that invoke ancestral spirits or during ceremonies meant to renew a person's life force or energy. Edo is also applied during traditional cosmetic practices or body art, particularly in ceremonies or festivals where vitality and strength are emphasized. It is sometimes used in burial rites to symbolize the return to the earth and the cycle of life and death.
7. Uli: Uli designs often carry spiritual significance. They are believed to have connections with the divine and the ancestors, symbolizing beauty, harmony, and the connection between the physical and spiritual worlds. Uli is also an artistic expression of beauty and identity. It is used to adorn the body during festivals, ceremonies, and important community events such as weddings or religious rituals. It enhances the beauty of the wearer and reflects the cultural richness of the Igbo community. Uli serves as a way to communicate cultural values, including

femininity, fertility, strength, and wisdom. The designs are highly symbolic, with certain patterns or motifs representing elements of nature, such as animals, plants, or cosmic forces.

### 1.1.2 African Traditional Religion Symbols in Yorubaland

The Yoruba religion, a key aspect of African Traditional Religion, is rich in symbols and practices that reflect its spiritual beliefs and cultural heritage. Another sacred symbol in ATR is the shrine, the shrine can be at the river banks, forests, groves, hills, mountains, temples, rocks, etc. this belief is predicated on the fact that the sacred manifests itself in time and space, so that time and space are diaphanous indications of the holy (Choba, 2020).

Below are some significant symbols and their meanings within the context of Yoruba traditional religion.

1. Ori as a Symbol of Human Destiny and Individuality: In Yoruba belief, the concept of Ori represents an individual's spiritual head and destiny. It symbolizes personal identity, self-awareness, and one's connection to the divine. In AI development, the notion of Ori can be relevant when discussing human-centered design, ensuring that AI systems respect individual autonomy, dignity, and personal destiny. By incorporating the concept of Ori, AI systems could be developed to align with ethical principles that prioritize human self-determination and well-being, ensuring that algorithms support individual growth rather than infringing on personal freedoms.
2. Esu as a Symbol of Duality and Ethical Decision-Making: Esu, the trickster deity, symbolizes the duality of choice and the complexity of moral decision-making. In Yoruba religion, Esu often presents crossroads or dilemmas, challenging humans to make choices that reflect their ethical understanding. AI systems, especially those involved in decision-making processes, can learn from the symbolism of Esu. These systems could incorporate more nuanced ethical considerations, simulating the challenges humans face in balancing conflicting moral imperatives.

3. Ase as a Symbol of Power and Agency: Olupona, 1991 states that Ase is a vital Yoruba concept representing the power to make things happen, to create, change, or destroy. It underscores the potential and responsibility of individuals and deities to influence the world through action. In the context of AI, Ase can inspire discussions on the power and autonomy of AI systems. Just as Ase demands responsible use of power in human action, it emphasizes the need for ethical responsibility in the development and deployment of AI, ensuring that AI's "power" serves humanity positively.
4. Egungun as a Symbol of Ancestral Knowledge and Collective Memory: Egungun refers to the masquerades that embody the spirits of ancestors in Yoruba culture. They serve as symbols of the continuity of human life, memory, and the importance of learning from the past. In AI, Egungun can symbolize the integration of historical data, collective memory, and cultural heritage into algorithms. This allows AI to respect and reflect human traditions, ensuring that technological systems do not erase but rather preserve and honor cultural history.
5. Odu Ifá as a Symbol of Wisdom and Ethical Guidance: According to Coker, 2019 the Odu Ifá are sacred texts in the Yoruba divination system of Ifá, containing wisdom on ethical living, justice, and moral codes. These texts offer guidance on how to live a balanced, righteous life. Odu Ifá's emphasis on wisdom and moral discernment could inform the development of AI systems that require ethical frameworks, such as AI governance and automated moral decision-making tools. The principles from Odu Ifá can guide AI in making decisions that align with human values of fairness and justice.

1.1.3 Investigate how ATR symbols emphasis on harmony, balance, and respect for life can inform a more human-centered approach to AI development.

African Traditional Religions (ATR) symbols emphasis on harmony, balance, and respect for life can inform a more human-centered approach to AI development, drawing parallels between the core values of ATR symbols and key principles of ethical AI. ATR symbols focus on holistic harmony and

balance between individuals, communities, and the environment encourages an approach to AI that prioritizes the well-being of people and societies over purely technological advancement. ATR teaches that all things in life are interconnected, promoting harmony and balance in every aspect of existence (Fashola, 2014). When applied to AI, this concept could inform systems that are designed to work in harmony with human values and societal needs. Instead of solely focusing on efficiency, speed, and economic gain, developers would prioritize creating AI that enhances human relationships, fosters well-being guide to human activities, and minimizes harm. African traditional religious symbols are characterized by a deep connection to the spiritual realm, where various entities including ancestors and deities play significant roles in daily life. Symbolism is a crucial aspect of the religions, as it embodies metaphysical realities and facilitates communication with the divine. Symbols manifest through folklore, rituals, dances, and proverbs, allowing practitioners to express their spiritual experiences meaningfully. This symbolic representation fosters a communal understanding of spirituality, emphasizing the interconnectedness of individuals within their communities. In the African worldview, humanity is seen as an integral part of a larger cosmic order. The belief that "I am because we are" encapsulates the essence of personhood in many African cultures and religions, where identity is defined relationally rather than individually.

The advent of AI technologies introduces both opportunities and challenges for African traditional religions. On one hand, AI can enhance the preservation and dissemination of Africa traditional religion symbols knowledge by digitizing its rituals, texts, and practices. This ensures that valuable and symbolic heritages are accessible to future generations. The integration of AI raises ethical concerns regarding the authenticity of religious practices. The use of technology in spiritual symbols contexts may risk diluting traditional beliefs and practices if not approached carefully. There is a pressing need for ethical frameworks to navigate these challenges while respecting ATR symbolic heritages.

ATR places a strong emphasis on the sacredness of life and the need to respect all living beings similarly it can be seen in the symbols preserved. AI systems developed with this in mind would prioritize human dignity and avoid reinforcing harmful biases or unethical practices. For instance, AI tools in healthcare could be designed to improve patient outcomes without compromising privacy or autonomy. Human-centered AI is a branch of AI that believes that intelligent systems should be built with the understanding that they are part of a wider system that includes human stakeholders such as users, customers, operators, and others (Domfeh, Weyori, Appiahene, Mensah, Awarayi, & Afrifa 2022).

ATR symbols often focus on reminding the people the existence of ancestors with strong ethical decision-making based on spiritual and communal wisdom (Osimiri, 2016). In AI development, this could translate into embedding ethical guidelines that reflect broader human concerns, such as fairness, inclusivity, and environmental sustainability, ensuring that AI technologies contribute to a just society. This perspective reinforces the idea that human existence is intertwined with spiritual entities, nature, and community, creating a holistic understanding of life that transcends mere physical existence.

1.1.4 Identify and recommend strategies for integrating ATR symbols insights into global AI governance frameworks, fostering an ATR and ethical inclusive.

Establish panels where ATR scholars and practitioners can participate in shaping AI ethics guidelines, alongside representatives from African traditional religion and philosophical traditions, to ensure a diverse range of values and moral systems are considered.

The introduction of AI into African religious practices presents both opportunities and challenges. AI technologies can enhance communication between practitioners and spiritual entities for spiritual guidance or virtual reality for immersive experiences.

These innovations could democratize access to spiritual knowledge and foster global connections among believers. However, there is a concern that reliance on technology may dilute traditional practices and cultural values. It explores how symbolism in these religions conveys profound spiritual truths and community values, serving as a means of connection to the divine. As AI technologies emerge, they offer innovative tools for enhancing religious practices, such as AI-powered chatbots for spiritual guidance and the digitization of rituals, which preserve spiritual heritage. However, the integration of AI also raises ethical concerns regarding the authenticity of traditional practices. The potential for dilution of cultural values necessitates a careful examination of how technology can coexist with spirituality.

ATR emphasizes community welfare, respect for nature, and harmonious living, which can be translated into AI ethical frameworks that prioritize social good, environmental sustainability, and mutual respect among diverse cultures. Engaging the local communities in AI decision-making put ATR highlights in community consensus and participatory decision-making. AI governance structures could mirror this by involving local African communities in the governance process, allowing them to influence the development and deployment of AI technologies in ways that align with their cultural symbols and spiritual values. The public sector plays a vital role in the development and uptake of AI (Kuziemski, & Misuraca, 2020).

ATR values can guide how AI technologies are applied in African societies, ensuring technologies respect indigenous knowledge systems and local traditions. ATR's deep respect for nature and symbols can inspire AI governance models that emphasize using AI technologies for environmental preservation and sustainability. AI-driven solutions can be developed to address issues like deforestation, biodiversity loss, and climate change, in alignment with ATR's spiritual connection to the land. ATR provides a holistic worldview that considers both material and spiritual dimensions. AI governance frameworks can benefit from incorporating ATR symbolic perspectives by including not just economic

or social risks in AI risk assessments but also spiritual and cultural impacts.

ATR's emphasis on balance and harmony suggests a measured approach to AI adoption, where rapid technological development is weighed carefully against long-term societal and cultural impacts, avoiding the reckless pursuit of innovation at the cost of human dignity. Build capacity among African scholars and institutions to actively participate in global AI governance, ensuring that ATR and other African perspectives are well-represented in shaping the future of AI. Molino, (2023) stated that at present, AI continues to emerge as a transformative force with the potential to revolutionize environmental conservation efforts.

Encourage the development of AI technologies that are inspired by or aligned with ATR values, focusing on solving challenges unique to African contexts such as healthcare, agriculture, and education, while adhering to ethical principles derived from ATR. Integrate ATR ethics into the curriculum for AI developers, particularly those working on projects in Africa, to foster respect for African cultural symbols and spiritual traditions. The balanced approach embraces technological advancements while respecting and preserving the rich spiritual traditions of ATR as stated in the Igbo and Yoruba traditional religion. It highlights the need for ATR ethical frameworks to guide the use of AI in religious contexts, ensuring that innovation enhances rather than undermines symbolic cultural integrity.

African traditional religions are deeply rooted in community and spirituality, where symbolism serves as a vital means of expressing beliefs and connecting with the divine. Symbols manifest through embodying spiritual realities and fostering communal understanding. AI technologies are increasingly influencing African religious practices by providing new tools for communication and engagement. AI facilitates the digitization of cultural heritage, preserving ancient texts, rituals and symbols for future generations. This digital preservation ensures that the rich spiritual heritage of Africa remains accessible. Ethical considerations surrounding the use of AI in religious contexts necessitate clear

guidelines to maintain the integrity of African spirituality.

#### 1.1.6 Conclusion

The symbolism in the ATR often reflects a hierarchical view of the spiritual world, where various beings ranging from the Supreme God to lesser deities and ancestral spirits play distinct roles in guiding human affairs. Both the Igbo and Yoruba traditions utilize rich symbolism to express spiritual beliefs and experiences. Symbolism serves as a medium through which practitioners engage with the divine and the spiritual realm. This deep-rooted connection to symbolism fosters a communal understanding of spirituality, where individuals find their identity within a larger cultural framework. The intersection of Igbo and Yoruba traditional religions with artificial intelligence illustrates a dynamic landscape where ancient beliefs confront modern technological advancements. The ongoing dialogue between tradition and technology will shape the future of spirituality in Africa, necessitating a balance that honors cultural heritage while exploring new possibilities for connection and understanding.

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