

Seashells and African Religious Rituals

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ABSTRACT

African religions have a long and influential history, and seashells are not only a form of currency in the lives of African people, but also play an important role in their religious lives, thus possessing the attribute of a medium connecting the secular and spiritual worlds of African people. This article mainly explores the role and significance of seashells in daily life and religious activities, thereby gaining a deeper understanding of local African religious phenomena and contributing to a deeper understanding of the inner world of African people.

KEYWORDS

Seashells; Africa; Religious Rituals.

1. INTRODUCTION

African traditional religions have a long history, numerous followers, and a profound influence on the African people. Seashells, as the protective shells of marine mollusks, are common and hold an important place in African religious rituals and daily life. They are not only products of nature but also embody African cultural concepts and religious beliefs. From ancient religions to modern civilization, seashells have maintained a mysterious and revered status in the hearts of the African people. The attributes of seashells are not merely "currency" and "religion," but rather a combination of monetary and divine attributes. Seashells are also endowed with the attribute of being a medium connecting the secular and divine worlds. This article mainly explores the role and significance of seashells in daily life and religious activities, thereby gaining a deeper understanding of local African religious phenomena and the inner world of the African people.

2. THE HISTORY OF SEASHELLS

Seashells first arrived in west-central Africa from the Indian Ocean coast via the trans-Saharan trade routes. The main source of these seashells was the Maldives archipelago. The Maldives, located in the tropical region of the central Indian Ocean, is an archipelago nation formed by numerous coral atolls. The surrounding shallow water environment has created a large number of coral reefs and lagoons. The relatively high local temperatures and shallow, calm waters create ideal conditions for coral reefs and shellfish growth. Trade with Northeast Africa also brought shellfish from the Atlantic coast to the African interior. In the trade between the Maldives and Africa, they used shellfish to trade for palm oil and coconut fiber. Centuries ago, the Maldivian inhabitants invented a method for catching and cultivating shellfish. Women would place large quantities of plant stems and leaves in shallow waters to attract shellfish to feed and inhabit. When a sufficient number of shellfish gathered, fishermen would haul them ashore along with the tied stems. This systematic method provided the Maldives with a large quantity of shellfish for export. For the West African interior, shellfish were a beautiful, hard, and rare commodity, and thus, they were traded as a high-value commodity in the

trans-Saharan gold and salt trade. Shellfish, due to their shape, were also widely used in religious ceremonies.[1]

During the colonial period, large quantities of seashells were brought to West Africa by colonists. With the gradual circulation and use of modern currency in Africa, seashell currency depreciated significantly, weakening its monetary function while strengthening its religious significance. Despite this devaluation, Africans did not abandon seashells but focused on deepening their cultural and religious meanings.

3. THE MYTHOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF SEASHELLS

The Yoruba people believe the world began with "unity," with "one" being the source of all power. Seashells, as natural creations retrieved from the deep sea of West Africa, are seen as "spiritual mediums" bestowed upon humanity by the Creator Olodumare. The deep sea symbolizes "the primordial energy field before chaos," and the seashell is a "symbol of order" born from chaos, carrying the creative will of "from nothing to something, from chaos to balance." [2]

The primary function of seashells is their application in various religious ceremonies and as a symbol of high status. Regarding the shape of seashells, Africans have attributed two different meanings. The smooth surface and inward-facing opening of the seashell resemble female genitalia, and seashells possess a strong reproductive capacity. In early Africa, seashells represented fertility and childbirth, while the ocean symbolized the propagation of life and abundant resources, representing fertility, intuition, and sacred feminine energy. Seashells also represented Yemaya, the sea goddess, and Mote, the water goddess, both patron goddesses oriented towards women, representing feminine qualities and their responsibility as the origin of life. A Senegalese legend about the water goddess goes like this: There was a goddess who lived in the water, named Mote, or more affectionately, "the goddess of water." This goddess lived in the sea, because the sea surrounds all the land and is connected to all the water on earth, so she could enter through any body of water. This goddess was a powerful goddess who influenced the lives of people and other deities on earth. Mote often adopted people as husbands, brothers, sisters, mothers, friends, children, etc. When her adopted human became close to another person, she would become very jealous, because she worried that her adopted person might pay more attention to the other person than to her. The water goddess had the power to reward those who pleased her and punish those who did not. When the water goddess was pleased, she would reward people with seashells, which is the origin of the concept of money. Using them was proof of the goddess's acceptance, and also a reward and gift from her. [3] Seashells were widely used as ornaments in the daily lives of African women. Women collected seashells and strung them into bracelets or necklaces to pray for divine protection. In Senegal, West Africa, pregnant women were required to wear jewelry made of seashells during childbirth to ensure a smooth delivery and protect the newborn from impurity and evil spirits.

Also, because of their eye-like shape, seashells were considered a medium for communication between the human and divine realms. They were worn as amulets to seek protection and the ability to see the future. They were believed to pierce through the darkness of the world, bringing good fortune and protecting the spirit from evil. When feeling confused, one could use seashells to divine one's inner questions; different interpretations of the seashells would reflect different future developments.

4. SEASHELLS IN DIVINATION RITUALS

Divination is one of the most important religious uses of seashells, considered a way to communicate directly with gods, ancestors, and the spiritual world. Shell divination is not merely simple fortune telling, but a sacred dialogue that interprets messages from the divine through a specific system.

Shells are the primary props used in the divination ritual. While the divination result is a simple "yes" or "no," the diviner should be more cautious during the "interpretation" and "questioning" process. During the divination, participants should clearly state their questions to avoid ambiguity for the diviner, which could lead to inaccurate results. When asking questions, one must maintain clarity of thought and objectivity regarding the "content desired" to obtain direct, clear, and unbiased answers. Vague questions will only lead to vague answers. If the person seeking divination "conceals the truth or fabricates questions," the shells will convey "divine displeasure" through "abnormal states," such as repeated stacking and rolling of shells during throwing, failing to form effective combinations. This symbolizes that the divine senses the thrower's dishonesty and is punishing them for misleading information. Forcing an interpretation of the true outcome will completely contradict the divination's interpretation, leading the person seeking divination to make incorrect decisions.

The four-shell divination method is the simplest. Participants accurately ask the diviner their question and then toss four shells. The diviner then interprets the results. The four-shell divination method produces five possible outcomes, each with a different interpretation. All four shells facing upwards are called "Alafia"; four shells with their openings facing downwards are called "Eku or Oyeku"; one opening upwards and the other three downwards is "Ossaran or Okanran"; two openings upwards and the other two downwards are called "Meji, Megi, or Ejife"; and three shells upwards and one downwards is "Tau Ar or Etawa". In shell divination, the direction the shells face also represents "yin" or "yang" attributes: opening upwards is "yang," and opening downwards is "yin." [4]

The combination of shells in divination does not directly correspond to the answer; it requires further interpretation based on context. In general, throwing an Arafia is considered "non-deterministic," and in most cases, a second divination is needed. However, it is generally considered a "positive omen," and if the second throw yields the same result, it is seen as a positive sign of "all things going well." The Arafia symbolizes health and good fortune, representing a perfect union of the "visible and intangible worlds," suggesting a state of goodness both externally and internally. Within the Ifa religious system, it signifies that every step and decision made by the seeker will bring blessings and good luck.

An Eku is considered the complete opposite of Arafia. This is a completely negative phenomenon, and a throw with this result may foreshadow "illness or even death." Similar to the Arafia, the caster needs to throw again to determine if the Eku is truly going to happen or if an ancestor is conveying a message. When this occurs, it is best to use the more accurate "sixteen-shell divination method" for further inquiry. In Ifa, this occurrence can be interpreted as the arising of danger and the search for a solution.

The Otsalan with three shells facing down is also considered a negative outcome, but less dangerous than the Ecu. It indicates that the client may encounter illness, pain, sadness, and potential danger, but not life-threatening ones. It is often interpreted as the client facing unsolvable problems, seeking help from various relationships but finding no one to assist. It suggests the client may not achieve their goals and could even suffer negative consequences. The client needs to consider the matter from a different perspective and act with caution.

Meggie corresponds to "the client's path is unobstructed," indicating no obstacles to any problem, a bright future, and a balanced and comfortable life with ancestral protection. However, the client must be careful not to be careless about minor matters. It is a mixed situation. In this combination, the thrower should maintain a good mindset, be optimistic about the questions raised, and receive divine assistance.

The Taul outcome means that "news related to relatives and friends, future events" will "arrive quickly," revealing "what the client is worried about." The client will soon know the result, unveiling the "mystery and the unknown." In this situation, the issues raised by the client may develop in two directions, for better or for worse. It suggests that the client needs to proactively respond to the inquiry and remain vigilant about surrounding events that might influence the outcome. This outcome

indicates that achieving results will be accompanied by struggle, but as long as the client maintains motivation and pursuit, allowing their energy to prevail, they will overcome the difficulties. The client can only "achieve their goals and obtain their desires" by "re-examining their own perspective." Therefore, the client needs to "strengthen themselves, reassess their self-worth, and establish goals for struggle and effort" to obtain a positive result.

Africans believe that seashells possess the ability to "open the spiritual world" and are tools for communicating with the divine. Each throw is seen as the result of divine intervention, carrying the will of heaven. Therefore, they believe that each seashell throw is a dialogue with the divine, and the thrower's piety will affect the final result. From this, we can see that in African religious views, they place greater emphasis on the interaction between the divine and humans.

5. SHELLS AS SACRED CARRIERS

Shells serve as sacred tools in many religious ceremonies, placed on altars as offerings to ancestors and deities. Their monetary and "spiritual" properties led to their placement in the coffins of the deceased for use in the afterlife. Religious characteristics are also retained within their monetary aspect. Locals believe that the shells' strong reproductive capacity allows their users to continuously generate wealth. In Voodoo, shells are used as decorative elements in idols and ritual implements, often forming head ornaments or eyes to symbolize divine power. White shells are frequently chosen for idols and related implements, signifying purity, echoing the white symbolism in "Obatala," both representing divine holiness and justice. [5]In Voodoo, Eshu is the medium between the god Oris and humanity. Eshu "guards crossroads, gateways, and spiritual pathways," and the "opening and closing" of seashells is seen as Eshu's way of "observing human behavior and listening to human needs"-during divination, the changes in the state of the seashells are direct signals of Eshu's "response," such as "Alafia (four open shells)" representing Eshu "opening paths and conveying positive messages"; and "Eku (four closed shells)" representing Eshu "warning of danger and preventing humanity from going astray."

However, the divinity of the seashells is not innate and needs to be activated through a "consecration ceremony," i.e., feeding the seashells. This consecration ceremony involves a blessing ritual to bring the seashells into contact with divinity. Priests offer butter, cigars, and fruits as sacrifices and recite prayers requesting the gods to make the seashells a tool for communication between them. These consecrated seashells are forbidden to be touched by unauthorized persons; if someone touches them, it is considered "blasphemy" and will result in divine retribution. Those who wish to touch the seashells must do so with the priest's permission and have completed a purification of their bodies beforehand, namely, abstaining from smoking, alcohol, and sexual activity. To ensure one's alignment with the divinity of the seashell, one must ensure a connection. [6]

In some religious traditions, priests ring a bell above the seashell. The vibration of the bell is considered the key to awakening the seashell's divinity, and the requirements for the bell are quite strict. First, the bell ringer must be in a quiet environment, free from any surrounding noise. Simultaneously, the bell's sound must be synchronized with the seashell's "natural frequency" to connect with its spirit. If the bell's sound is chaotic, the seashell will not receive the divine message, rendering the result ineffective. After the thrower casts the seashell, the priest will touch it to sense any divine indications. [7]If the seashell's temperature rises, it signifies the descent of a benevolent deity, while a drop in temperature suggests things may be going in a negative direction. The sound of the seashells colliding during the throwing is also considered a divine indication. A crisp sound signifies "divine affirmation," indicating a valid result; a dull sound indicates divine hesitation, requiring a re-throw or additional offerings. Experienced priests can identify which deity is making the sound by its frequency.

After the ceremony, the seashell must be given "thank you." The priest would smear a small amount of "Corojo butter and tobacco powder" on the surface of the shell, reciting prayers of "Thank you, Orumira, Eshu," an act meant to "transmit human gratitude to the gods through the shell." [8]The priest would then evenly spread the offering at the opening of the shell, symbolizing the gods' complete acceptance of the people's thanks. Afterwards, the used shells would be collected and sealed in a specific order, covered with white cloth to prevent "worldly noise from interfering with the shell's divinity," ensuring the accuracy of the next divination.

6. CONCLUSION

Seashells hold a unique place in Africa, embodying both monetary and religious significance. They are not static, mere "objects," but dynamic "individuals" that accumulate meaning throughout their life cycle. A seashell, harvested from the waters of the Maldives, travels long distances through trade networks, acquiring different values in various cultures-currency, decoration, and divination tools-and may ultimately be buried with someone.

The enduring existence of seashell culture demonstrates remarkable cultural resilience. Although the economic value of seashells collapsed due to colonization, their value as religious and cultural symbols has transcended centuries and oceans, continuing in the diaspora communities of the Americas. This is not simply cultural preservation, but a powerful cultural resilience. As a small, portable object, the seashell became the only symbol of homeland that enslaved people could retain in extremely harsh environments. It transformed from an economic symbol into a symbol of "survival" and "resistance." This resilience is the fundamental reason why seashell culture remains vibrant today. The role of seashells in African religions is multidimensional and dynamic. They are both divination tools for communicating with the divine and amulets carrying meanings of wealth, fertility, and protection. Its complex transformation from secular currency to a sacred medium profoundly reflects the cultural adaptation and creativity of African people in the face of historical change. The value of seashells far transcends the economic realm; they are a comprehensive embodiment of African history, culture, worldview, and identity. Their "object biography" tells an epic story of trade, faith, diaspora, and resilience. The continued existence of seashell culture in modern Africa and global diaspora communities demonstrates its enduring appeal as a microcosm of the African spiritual universe. The study of seashells offers a unique perspective for understanding the complex and profound connections between objects, culture, and faith.

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