

Sacred Spaces on Screen: Redefining African Shrines in Nollywood's Global Narrative

Nzas Emmanuel

Postgraduate school, University of Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria.

nzasemmy@gmail.com, +2348068898048

Abstract

This research paper delves into the portrayal of African shrines in Nollywood, Africa's largest movie industry, with a focus on rectifying the incomplete representation of these sacred spaces. The paper emphasizes the profound role that shrines play in shaping the lives of Africans, predating the advent of foreign religions in Nigeria, a nation deeply rooted in religious consciousness. Recommendations are presented, urging a critical review by the federal government and regulatory bodies overseeing the Nigerian movie industry to ensure a comprehensive and accurate portrayal of African cultural heritage. Additionally, the creative industry is encouraged to use forums judiciously to maintain a genuine African identity, especially concerning shrines. Academic departments in theater arts and cultural studies are urged to champion authentic representation, empowering future creators to preserve African identity amidst evolving global cinematic trends. The paper concludes by underscoring the significant responsibility of Nollywood in shaping perceptions of African culture and advocating for a more accurate depiction of African shrines on the global stage, aligning with broader goals of promoting cultural appreciation and sustainable development.

Keywords : Nollywood, Rituals on Screen, African shrines, and Cultural Heritage.

Introduction

The African shrine, intrinsic to practitioners of African Traditional Religion, exhibits inherent diversity across societies, communities, and clans due to its indigenous nature. Consequently, establishing a universally accepted singular definition of the shrine from an African perspective would be inappropriate. Shrines are sacred places situated in the human environment that people confer with for their unanswered question, to possibly quench their dreadful experiences, ameliorate their living conditions and solve their needs.¹ These needs are all-round. As well, this shows the important place of shrine in the African society.

¹ Ojiekwe, E.C. "Oke Kparakpara Deity and its socio-religious influence on Enugu Agu Adoi Enugu State Nigeria" Enugu Providence. (2014).

Henceforth, shrines are perceived as sanctified spaces wherein various religious practices, including sacrifices, rituals, rites, sanctification, healings, and other sacred activities, are conducted. A shrine is customarily to monumentalize an ancestor, deity, or a covering of grave in honour of the deceased.² As integral components of the community, shrines constitute sacred spaces where community members seek consultation to communicate with their ancestors, who are perceived to reside in the realm of the deceased. These shrines fulfil these specific purposes.

Shrines are not confined solely to the African context; they extend globally. However, scant attention has been directed towards understanding how Nollywood has constantly project negative perceptions associated with shrines in its portrayal of African culture. This paper delves into alternative motifs connected to shrines in Hollywood, Chinawood, and Bollywood, while also scrutinizing shrine patterns in select Nollywood films. Additionally, the study explores the role of African shrines in Nollywood and offers recommendations. It concludes that Nollywood, as the largest film industry in Africa, bears a significant responsibility in portraying and disseminating African culture and ways of life to a global audience beyond the continent's borders.

Shrines Across Cinemas: Hollywood, Chinawood, Bollywood

Alternative depictions of shrines in Hollywood, Chinawood, and Bollywood mirror their significance in societies, akin to their role in Africa. These sacred spaces serve as avenues for individuals, families, or society members to communicate with, receive instructions, and seek guidance from their ancestors or supernatural entities. In this context, the Church holds sacred significance in Christianity, the Mosque in Islam, and similarly, the Shrine stands as a sacred place within African Traditional Religion. In the latter, the Shrine represents a distinct entity, serving as the exclusive focal point for religious engagements.³ These sanctified locations are predominantly situated in dense forests, remote areas, or the wilderness. In contemporary discourse, Dawson characterizes shrines as “vessels,” signifying either a dwelling for spiritual entities or their symbolic representation.⁴

² Christine Greenway. “Shrine” in *An Introductory Dictionary of Theology and Religious Studies*, Espin O, et al (eds). Minnesota: Liturgical press, 2007

³ Binsbergen, Van W.M.J. 1979 (1999). *Explorations in the history and sociology of territorial cults in Zambia*. In *Guardians of the land*, ed. J.M. Schoffeleers, 47–88. Gweru: Mambo Press.

⁴ Dawson, A.C. 2009. Introduction. In *Shrines in Africa*, ed. A.C. Dawson, vii–xvii. Calgary: University of Calgary Press.

From a secular perspective, the placement and functionality of shrines are determined by the society overseeing them and the roles they fulfil. This encompasses various categories of shrines, including religious, local, state, and national shrines.⁵ Within this context, shrines are present in various parts of the world, such as Hindu shrines, Buddhist shrines, Hades shrines, and others. Notably, cinematic representations from these cultures emphasize the positive roles played by shrines in people's lives and society. Despite this global perspective, African shrines maintain their unique religious, local, state, and national significance, varying across families, societies, and diverse cultures on the continent. This section aims to explore alternative motifs regarding shrines as depicted in international cinema, selecting three films from different movie industries for discussion.

First, "The Wrath of Vajra," a Chinawood film, presents a shrine in a positive context. Within this cinematic narrative, the Hades shrine assumes a pivotal role, serving as the beacon of hope for Japanese military success in conquering China. The movie unfolds the historical background, revealing that in the 1930s, a Japanese death cult known as the Hades recruited impoverished children globally, training them as assassins in China. However, during World War II, the Hades faced dissolution due to conflicting strategies with the Japanese military. Amano Kawao, its founder, was imprisoned, and members were exiled. In the face of strong Chinese resistance, Japan sought to revive the cult for conquest. Amano, while in prison, enlisted K-28's (Yoo Seung-Jun) help, emphasizing the need to establish Hades shrines across China for success.

Notably, the Hades shrine became the Japanese military's sole hope for triumph. K-29 (Yu Xing), a former Hades disciple in exile at the Shaolin Temple, visited the shrine to liberate the innocents captured and trained as assassins. He engaged in a decisive battle, emerging victorious, and subsequently, as the king of Vajra, granted freedom to all, restoring their lives.

Secondly, "Samsara," a Bollywood film released in 2001, revolves around Tashi (Shawn Ku), who underwent Buddhist monk training from the age of five. Approximately two decades later, he experienced a biological shift accompanying adulthood, marked by wet dreams. Departing from the monastery, Tashi fell in love with Pema (Christy Chung), the farmer's daughter. Their union led to the birth of a son, Karma (Tenzin Tashi). Tashi's success as a farmer triggered a conflict with Jamayang (Kelsang Tashi) due to his decision to take the harvest to the city instead of selling it to the local merchant, Dawa (Lhakpa Tsering). Additionally, Tashi grappled with his sexuality, being drawn to Sujata (Neelesha

⁵ Nwankwo, E & Agboeze, M .2014. Community development approaches and preservation of heritage resources in Igbo land. *Nsukka journal of the Humanities*.2,22,143-160.

Barthel), a migrant farmer, during Pema's absence. As Pema was away, Tashi and Sujata explored their sexual lives.

In a pivotal turn of events, an old friend brought the sober news of Apo's (Sherab Sangey), their mentor's, demise. Struggling with guilt over infidelity and his sexual orientation, Tashi faced a dilemma. He had two choices: to return to his religious roots and leave his family, or to continue the life he had forged with them. Ultimately, he opted to re-embrace his religion to safeguard himself from feelings of being lost and confused.

Two fundamental aspects emerge regarding the shrine's role in this film. Initially, the protagonist's early life was deeply entrenched in religious pursuits, emphasizing spirituality within the confines of the shrine. Here, he imbibed moral codes. However, as time elapsed, he uncovered an alternative aspect of life beyond monkhood, entangled in the complexities of sexuality and infidelity.

Secondly, the culmination of his worldly exploration occurred when he received the distressing news of Apo's death. Burdened by guilt over infidelity, he recognized the imperative of returning home—to the shrine. From this perspective, the shrine emerges as a sanctuary, a place where solace and peace of mind can be sought.

Thirdly, "The Forbidden Kingdom" represents a collaborative venture between Hollywood and Chinawood. Jason (Michael Angarano), a teenager from South Boston, developed a fascination with kung fu, frequently acquiring Chinese movies from a pawn shop. Unfortunately, he was unwittingly involved in an attack on the pawn shop but was aided by Old Hop, Lu Yan (Jackie Chan), who facilitated his escape with a staff from the shop. Jason found himself in a Chinese town where he learned of the Monkey King's story and a prophecy about a seeker returning the staff to him. Silent Monk (Jet Li), residing in a shrine and aware of the staff, attacked Jason, Lu, and Sparrow (Liu Yifei), taking the staff. However, Lu and Silent Monk eventually joined forces to assist the seeker in reaching the Monkey King.

The battle within the shrine did not depict malevolence; instead, it became a site of great significance. Firstly, it linked these individuals to their destinies, representing a divinely planned encounter for the duo's forthcoming journey. Secondly, it marked a pivotal starting point for their collective journey. As the group traversed the 'Five Element Mountains,' they faced another confrontation against Ni-chang (Li Bingbing) and her army, resulting in Lu's injury. Seeking refuge in a monastery, they highlighted the shrine's role as a place of solace, aiding Lu's recovery before the final battle.

Moreover, films like "Mr. Bones" portrayed a mobile shrine in a positive light, consulted in the search for the lost prince of the King of Kuvuki land. Notably, series such as "Into the Badlands" underscored the significant role of shrines, often in the form of monasteries where armies are trained, moral codes are instilled in children, and the wounded find solace. In conclusion, various Hollywood, Chinawood, and Bollywood movies, along with other

international cinema, convey the positive impact of shrines, playing substantial roles in the lives of individuals and societies.

In the Heart of African Spirituality

Africans, like all individuals inhabiting the Earth's surface, hold a belief in a supernatural entity. This belief stems from the persistent unanswered questions that have preoccupied the African mind. Various objects serve as channels for divine manifestation, including stones, sky, moon, sun, breeze or wind, sea, smoke, sound, and dew. These objects are designated as religious entities. For instance, the occurrence of a solar or lunar eclipse is not viewed merely as a natural and simple phenomenon; rather, it carries significant meaning for the observing community, often functioning as a warning of an impending catastrophe.⁶ In response to adverse events such as epidemics, catastrophes, or challenges impacting their communities, Africans exhibit a heightened spiritual consciousness regarding their geographical space. In times of crisis, they promptly turn to spiritual mediators, diviners, and practitioners to intervene by appeasing the gods, deities, or ancestors. This reflects the acknowledgment of the African people that certain problems may surpass individual or communal capabilities, potentially stemming from the commission of abominable acts.

The concept of spirituality remains notably pertinent in our contemporary world. Despite the coexistence of foreign faiths with African Traditional Religion (ATR), the latter continues to exert a positive influence on the people. On this note, Sussy et al observed:

...A new hybrid of African spirituality has been developed consisting of traditional African beliefs and practices, Christianity, Islam and the culture of modernization. However, it must be noted that African traditional religions continue to influence the lives of many people today, including some of the highly educated, as well as many African Christians and Muslims. It must also be noted that African religions are not static.⁷

Moreover, individuals practicing Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion share a sense of spirituality that brings fulfilment, hope for unanswered questions, and contributes to socio-spiritual uplifting.

As a result, "Any meeting of two different realities incurs the risk of conflict. We do, in fact, observe at times conflict between the cultural heritage of black Africans and

⁶ John Mbiti. *African Religious Philosophy*. Uganda: H.E.B paperback, (1967), 15

⁷ see Sussy Gumo, et al. "Communicating African spirituality through ecology: challenges and prospects for the 21st century" *Open Access Journal*, (2012, 3)523-543

Christianity.” These represent distinct religious entities with diverse beliefs and practices. Despite these differences, both acknowledge a belief in a supernatural deity that they hold onto. This divergence may be attributed to variations in beliefs, values, cultural practices, and religious engagements. Summarizing the prevalence of African religiosity, Uchenna states:

Presently many African Christian theologians - Catholic and Protestant, male and female, indigenous and expatriate - have played a significant role, not only in creative Christian theologizing but also in giving written expression to African Traditional Religions and in re-affirming religious beliefs, values, symbols, and rites that have been at the heart of African culture for centuries before the coming of other religions. He acknowledged that many theologians are passionate in their desire to recover the profound traditional integration of religion and life, and the meaningful ancient beliefs, symbols, and rites of their peoples which they feel were needlessly, sometimes ruthlessly, suppressed by the missionaries of the last century and a quarter.⁸

In conclusion, spirituality in the African context encompasses Africa’s religious essence, its pursuit of answers to nature’s unresolved questions, and the commitment to a supernatural being. In this regard, Africans hold a profound appreciation for their values, ethics, ethno-cultural practices, and spirituality. Despite the diversity in cultures and traditions across various communities and ethnic groups, Africans unite in a shared way of life marked by unity and mutual understanding.

Nollywood’s Sacred Spaces: A Filmic Overview of Shrines

In Nollywood movies, a multitude of shrine portrayals have conveyed messages that are perceived as unjust to Africans and Nigeria. This paper aims to spotlight, discuss, and analyze the depiction patterns of shrines in four prominent movies. It will explore how these sacred places are represented, examining the dissemination of erroneous ideologies through this medium: *Issakaba 1* (2000), *Living In Bondage* (1992), *Karishika* (1996) and *End Of The Wicked* (1999). “Aside the highlighted Nollywood movies to be discussed, “*Circle of Doom*(1993), *Idejimba*(1995), *Blood Money*(1997), *Rituals*(1997), and *Last Burial* (2000) ...”⁹ are movies with thematic representation or rituals, as shrines are places where these practices are observed. These are few of the numerous films with the

⁸ Uchenna Onuzulike, “African Crossroads: Conflicts between African Traditional Religion and Christianity” *International Journal of the Humanities* · vol. 6. (January 2008): 165

⁹ Nkechi B. Asiegbo, “Rituals In Nollywood Film: A Discourse In Ideology” *Creative Artist* vol. 11, 2017. <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/cajims/article/viewFile/165024/154520> (Accessed January, 24, 2020).

misrepresentation of shrines as places for evil rituals, possession of evil powers and practices.

I. Issakaba 1

Produced in 2000 and directed by Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen, this film depicts a society plagued by crime, where traditional policing fails to maintain peace and provide security. The Issakaba boys, led by Ebube, assume the role of vigilantes, effectively combating the robbers terrorizing the community. Ironically, Chief Mbanefo, a well-known philanthropist, orchestrates the recurring crimes by colluding with corrupt Police Officers involved in the gun trade. Zulu, a spiritualist, creates charms for the armed robbers and their sponsors, rendering them seemingly invisible on the battlefield. Despite the success of the Issakaba boys in the end, they also employ charms obtained from a spiritualist.

In this narrative, the shrine is portrayed negatively as an evil place rather than a sacred site for religious activities. The spiritualist, Igugu, aligns with the armed robbers due to personal gain. However, this portrayal does not accurately reflect the broader truth about shrines in African society. On the contrary, the Issakaba boys operate in the spiritual realm, with Ebube possessing the ability to sense when a crime is occurring. This echoes the traditional role of deities, gods, or ancestors in African society, tasked with punishing perpetrators of crimes. The question arises as to why the king (Amaechi Muonagor) did not consult the gods to address and prevent these criminal activities, leaving this inquiry unanswered, with the decision to rely on the services of the Issakaba boys.

ii. Living In Bondage

The theme of suffering is utilized in this narrative to depict authentic aspects of human existence. The protagonist, Andy Okeke (Kenneth Okonkwo), faces financial struggles despite working in four different companies, earning a meager income. Despite having a loving and patient wife, Merit (Nnenna Nwabueze), who prioritizes their peace and happiness, Andy becomes obsessed with material possessions owned by his friends, leading to impending depression. Ironically, Andy possesses something his friends lack—a stable home and peace. While they find happiness in their material wealth, Andy remains deprived.

In pursuit of financial fulfilment, Andy turns to his best friend, Paul (Okechukwu Ogunjiofor), who introduces him to making money through a shrine where he swears loyalty to Lucifer. Ultimately, Andy sacrifices his wife to achieve wealth, leading to torment by her spirit and eventual insanity. Tina (Rita Nzelu), a prostitute initially used by Andy, rescues him and introduces him to her church, leading to his recovery.

The film portrays the shrine with a sinister identity as the abode of Lucifer, associated with evil rituals and sacrifices. When Rita mentions 'Jesus,' the spiritualists become disoriented, symbolizing the shrine as a realm of darkness, not a sacred place for religious activities.

The misrepresentation of shrines in this movie, dating back to 1992 when “Living In Bondage” was first produced, has perpetuated harmful stereotypes about African Traditional Religion on the global stage. Early missionaries labeled African Traditional Religion as Animism, fetishism, paganism, perpetuating negative perceptions.

iii. Karishika

This film, accompanied by the popular song ‘Karishika! Karishika! Queen of demons, Lucifer! Lucifer! Prince of darkness,’ revolves around a character named Karishika (Becky Okorie), dispatched from Hell to ensnare souls for Lucifer. Adopting a human guise, her mission is to deceive people, possessing supernatural abilities such as appearing and disappearing at will, transforming into different individuals at various times, and assuming different forms—from human to non-human. The narrative delves into the challenges confronting Nigerian, African, and potentially global societies, portraying the battle between distinct realms—the physical and spiritual, the realms of light and darkness.

However, the film intricately weaves religious activities involving spiritual entities operating at varied levels. Lucifer is depicted as occupying the ultimate shrine for his diabolical plans and activities, contrasting with Jonathan (Amaechi Muonagor), who, under the guise of a church pastor, secretly engages in traditional rituals in a secluded area. Consequently, the movie portrays shrines as malevolent places associated with nefarious practices. Intriguingly, it not only reinforces this negative perspective but also contributes to the misrepresentation of traditional religious practices. It shows its negativities, but as a dwelling place for Lucifer called.

iv. End of the Wicked

The movie “End of the Wicked” explores themes of witchcraft, demonic possession, and malevolent practices, framing a fierce confrontation between the God of Christians and that of Africans, juxtaposing their indigenous ways of life and practices. The cast includes Stella (Hilda Dokubo), Emeka (Ramsey Nuoah), Chris (Charles Okafor), and Pastor (Helen Ukpabio), who also serves as the producer.

In essence, the film depicts shrines and churches as battlegrounds for spiritual warfare. However, it is crucial to recognize that these themes do not comprehensively represent African tradition and shrines. The portrayal of the African shrine in this movie categorizes it as an ominous place associated with witchcraft, juju, evil practices, and the dwelling of malevolent spirits.

Concluding this overview of the discussed Nollywood movies, it is noteworthy that films like “Oracle” stand as exceptions in providing a more balanced representation of African shrines and their true functions. Nevertheless, the emergence of newer productions such as “The Issakaba Girls” (2018), “After The Last Burial” (released in 2019, following the first

production in 2000), and the 2019 version of “Living In Bondage” produced by Ramsey Nuoah, illustrates the persistent misrepresentation of African shrines on the global stage.

The Instrumentality of African shrine in Nollywood

In the context of this paper, it is essential to provide a concise overview of Nollywood. The term “Nollywood” lacks a specific historical origin. Consequently, various epochs mark the emergence and development of Nollywood. Uchenna highlighted:

Nigeria’s film history can be partitioned into four eras: the Colonial period: 1903-1960; the Independence period: 1960-1972; the Indigenization Decree period: 1972-1992; and the Nollywood period, 1992-Present. The Colonial era begins with the first exhibition of film in Nigeria in August 1903 at the Glover Memorial Hall in Lagos.¹⁰

Having explored the historical epochs in which Nollywood emerged, this paper refrains from providing an extensive historical account of the industry’s growth across West, South, and North. Nonetheless, the significance of Kenneth Nnebue’s film “Living in Bondage,” released in 1992, resonates with the portrayal of African heritage, encompassing socio-political lives and cultural heritage. George observed:

An ardent of the “home video” will learn, apart from the moral lessons they teach, the indigenous socio-political organization, traditional family life, indigenous religion and other traditional institutions which together form the fabric of African traditional societies. Of these traditional institutions, however, the indigenous religion and all that is associated with it has been as negatively portrayed as devoid of any positive character.¹¹

The portrayal of African Traditional Religion in Nollywood often deviates from its true essence. Instances of witchcraft, sorcery, rituals, and other negative aspects tend to involve African indigenous religion. Unfortunately, the authentic identity of African indigenous religion is not adequately represented in global cinema, a practice that is disrespectful and unjust to the adherents of this faith.

¹⁰ See Uchenna Onuzulike, “Nollywood; The birth of Nollywood: The Nigerian Movie Industry” *Black Camera*. Vol, 22, No. 1 (2008): 25

¹¹ See George Tersie, “African Traditional Religion in Nigerian Video Films: A Rethink” *American International Journal Of Social Science*. Vol. 2 No. 1 (January, 2013): 24

Interestingly, Nollywood not only employs African culture to depict the religious and cultural lives of African people, particularly Nigerians, but it also plays a pivotal role in influencing and shaping the lives of Nigerians and Africans at large. According to Uchenna, Nollywood exerts influence on how Nigerians and Africans dress, eat, speak, and interact. As a potent source of influence, it has the capacity to either undermine or promote genuine African cultural values.

In contrast to Christianity and Islam, which receive significant attention, and due to the impact of westernization and global trends, their places of worship are often deemed sacred while shrines are viewed as malevolent places associated with evil activities. However, in African society, shrines serve multifaceted purposes, contributing to good health, enhancing socio-cultural lives, and nurturing spiritual well-being, thereby providing individuals with social fulfilment.

The Nigerian film industry has played a role in disseminating these negative perceptions to its citizens and across Africa, leveraging its status as the largest movie industry on the continent. African shrines often do not receive equitable treatment compared to other foreign religions in Nigeria. This bias stems from the historical influence of missionaries who used derogatory terms such as Animism, juju, primitive, paganism, and more to describe Africans and their way of life. Consequently, sacred spaces and shrines are portrayed as locations inhabited by evil spirits in the Nigerian film industry. Regrettably, these outdated ideas and philosophies embraced by the Nigerian movie industry contribute to a distorted portrayal whenever a shrine is depicted on screen, echoing the missionaries' terminology.

This misconception has led to increased moral decay, with shrines being falsely associated with practices like making blood money and acquiring spiritual powers for malicious and political purposes. This has further exacerbated the prevalent issue of corruption in Nigeria and across Africa.

Remarkably, the very medium that perpetuates these misrepresentations holds the potential to rectify the situation. African shrines are highly instrumental, serving as trusted avenues for conflict resolution, social control, cultural education, and moral development. Thus, they play a crucial role in fostering sustainable development.”¹²

The significance of African shrines in Nollywood cannot be overstated. This medium serves as a platform through which non-African nations can gain insight into the authentic role that African shrines play within African societies. Contrary to misconceptions that portray

¹² See Elizabeth and Chikaodili. “The Instrumentality of African Shrines and Sacred places To Sustainable Development In Africa: A Phenomenological Approach” *African Journal of Arts and Humanities* Vol. 3 No 5, (July 2017): 46

shrines solely as residences for evil spirits, places for ancestor worship, rituals, and spiritual empowerment, Nollywood portrays them as integral spaces for cultural education. Shrines are depicted as fostering a peaceful atmosphere for coexistence among community members, facilitating social control, contributing to health, ensuring social fulfilment, and, at its zenith, serving as a venue for spiritual attainment where individuals can seek the highest level of spiritual satisfaction.

Recommendation

This paper underscores the importance of bridging the gap in the portrayal of African shrines in Nollywood, as these sacred spaces hold profound significance in shaping the lives of Africans. In Nigeria, a nation deeply rooted in religious consciousness, shrines have played a vital role in the fabric of society even before the advent of foreign religions.

1. Moving forward, it is essential for the federal government and regulatory bodies overseeing the Nigerian movie industry to engage in a comprehensive review of how African shrines are presented in Nollywood. This initiative is pivotal for promoting a holistic representation of African cultural heritage, embracing the multifaceted roles that shrines play in the lives of the people.
2. Furthermore, the creative industry, including scriptwriters, movie directors, and producers, must conscientiously utilize forums to uphold a genuine African identity through accurate depictions of shrines. These sacred spaces should be portrayed not merely as sites for rituals and supernatural activities but as integral components of worship, health, socio-cultural activities, and avenues leading to socio-spiritual fulfillment.
3. Academic departments, specifically those focused on theater arts, cultural studies, and movie studies, are encouraged to champion the cause of authentic representation. By upholding the true essence of African shrines, these institutions can empower aspiring writers, actors, and directors to maintain a distinct African identity amidst the evolving trends of global cinema.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Nollywood, being Africa's largest movie industry, carries a considerable responsibility in shaping perceptions of African culture and ways of life. However, the incomplete portrayal of African shrines in the global cinematic narrative poses a challenge that demands immediate attention. Rectifying this gap will not only contribute to a more accurate representation of African identity but will also serve to enhance the understanding

of the instrumental role that shrines play in African societies. This endeavour aligns with the broader goal of promoting sustainable development and cultural appreciation on a global scale.

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