African Shrines, Altars and Ancestors:

African altars and shrines are sacred spaces. African shrines and altars are sculptures built from the faiths and visions of their makers. They constantly change over time. Offerings are added, old altars crumble, and they are constantly renewed with ritual activity. Shrines and altars are built for gods and ancestors. Objects placed on the altars are symbolic of the god and contribute to the success of the worship.

Altars are reminders of the powers people respect and pray to. They are places where people say prayers and ask for assistance. People offer special gifts or sacrifices to the gods to whom their altars are dedicated. Special priests and priestesses also use objects placed on shrines to help guide people spiritually.

Many people of African descent living outside Africa build altars, too. In Oakland, Detroit, Miami, and Los Angeles to name just a few examples, people have built home altars dedicated to African gods. African altars include natural materials from nature and the wilderness, that is, the world of the unknown and the dwelling place of ancestral spirits. This idea is often symbolized in altars by placing objects from nature like stones, twisted roots and twigs, natural fibers onto the altar. Some altars are actually in the forest. The Mbuti people of Africa leave offerings of food for the spirits of the forest when they have had a successful hunt. The food offerings are either placed in the crook of a tree or laid on a leaf on the ground. In Nigeria, many Yoruba peoples' altars are located in forests, because many believe forests are filled with wisdom and spirits.
The thorny branches on the monuments to the deities Osun and Eziza represent the realm of the unknown. Photography from *Wild Spirits: Strong Medicine*, page 62, photo and copyright Norma Rosen

But Yoruba people and people of other cultural groups like the Edo of West Africa build altars in their homes, too. Each altar is usually dedicated to one god from many in their belief systems. Things that are white, like shells, porcelain, chalk, and beads symbolize Oshun, the Yoruba peoples’ goddess of love, the oceans and streams. One of the most widely worshipped Edo gods is Olokon, the male god of the sea, prosperity, and fertility. Symbolic objects associated with him are clay water pots, white cowry shells, and miniature ladders symbolizing peoples’ wishes to "climb the ladder of success". 

A Yoruba priestess and her daughter before a shrine dedicated to the goddess of childbirth. Photography from *Wild Spirits: Strong Medicine*, page 51, photo and copyright Phyllis Galembo.

http://wdsroot.ucdavis.edu/dept/shrines/content/lessons/readings/african_pdf.html
The various shrine objects of this Òlókun priestess are metaphysical tools through which Òlókun passes messages into the visible world. The chalk drawing under the chair marks a sacred location and greets Òlókun. from *Divine Inspiration*, page 51, photo and copyright by Phyllis Galembo.

The Yoruba god of thunder and lightning is called Shango. He is represented by the color red. Shango holds the power of life or death over humans. He is a moral force and hates people who lie, steal and commit bad deeds. (1)

The Edo peoples' god of metals like iron, and of the cross roads is Ogun. He is the patron of farmers and soldiers, because their tools are metal. The goddess who protects children and fertility is Iemanja. She is represented by objects from the sea, such as sea shells. In Brazil and Cuba, Iemanja blends with the mermaid from the sea with her half-fish, half-woman appearance. One of the most popular Edo nature gods is Eziza, the deity of the whirlwind who brings healing medicines. And there are many, many more.

While these gods are popular, those closest to humans are the spirits of their ancestors. It is believed that they can offer advice and bring good luck.

Altars are raised up from the ground and made of packed soil. The dirt is important because it comes from the earth. Among the Edo people, ancestor altars to fathers and grandfathers contain a bell to call the spirit from the world of the ancestors. A carved wooden staff symbolizes leadership. Altars to mothers and grandmothers hold a figure of a carved wooden hen, to symbolize protection like a hen looks after her chicks. The owner of a Edo house usually makes offerings to his ancestors once a year.

At an altar or shrine, worshippers prepare the space prior to performing their ritual. They sweep and clean the space. The space is purified with special substances, and then the worshipper bathes and sometimes puts on special clothing. White chalk drawings are sometimes made on the ground near the altars, because drawing is another act of communication with the gods. Bells are rung, then drums are beat to attract the attention of the deity. Worshippers sing and chant.
People say prayers at their altars and ask for help. To please the deity, special foods are offered. Usually the offering is related to objects associated with the deity. For example, coconuts, white cotton, china plates and other white things are offered to the white gods like Olokun. The fiery deities like Shango and Ogun accept red foods and red chickens. When people feel their prayers are answered, they may expand the size of their altar.

African Ancestors:

Ancestor worship is deeply rooted in the West and Central Africa. This belief is mixed with the idea that ancestors, spirits and gods live in another world and can affect the lives of the living. (1) Ancestors are called upon for important events in life. Wood carvings are made to represent ancestor figures or spirits. Some people make special baskets or boxes to hold bones of their ancestors. Some believe that carved wooden stools represent the power and presence of their ancestors. These and special objects such as masks, rattles or figures are kept in special places and respected.

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In many African societies, social, political and cultural ideas mix with what we call religion, because these groups believe spiritual forces affect crops, people, health, and the way people get along with one another. Many Africans believe in a supreme creator God, who is above everyday affairs of humans. Below this supreme God are the spirits of the sky, sun, water, trees, and so forth. Then there are the spirits who help humans. These are the ancestor spirits. (2)

Some people, called elders, are respected as ancestors because they lived to a great age, had many experiences in life, and took part in the good of family and community. After their deaths, they are looked up to as human, social and religious models that inspire the living. (3) People believe that the presence of ancestors will protect them from harm and bring good luck. Ancestors are the founders of peoples' family and clan groups. The ancestors spirits of high ranking people are believed to have powers beyond human control, such as the ability to bring rain or to protect cattle and crops. Whether of high rank or of family, people offer their ancestors foods, prayers and celebrations. Some ancestors are not viewed as ancient family members, but as distant founders of the community. These spirits protect a village and are believed to reside at some place like a tree, rock or a spring of fresh water.

Shrines can be built to honor the dead. Shrines may contain sculptures of humans. Sometimes carved figures guard special containers called reliquaries, that hold ancestor bones and skulls. These cultures believe that the powers in important peoples' bones do not go away after their deaths. The figures protect the reliquary with its bones, and the bones protect the living family members.

Some royal ancestors are worshipped in small buildings that represent small palaces filled with figures of kings and their attendants. There are two sections - the palace section is where worshippers "attend the court", meaning where they pay respects to the royal ancestors. The other section represents the forest or wilderness. This area is believed to be where the spirits live, so they can be in contact with the living. (4)

Throughout Africa, some rituals to pay respect to ancestors can take place at altars made of cones of earth, stones, or stone pillars. One scholar says that the practice of building ancestor columns is so strong, that when the religion of Islam arrived, ancestor columns were added to the architecture of the mosques, Muslim places of worship. These columns became tall pillars and towers going up the walls of the mosques. (5)
Other places where ancestors can be worshipped could be a yard, a supporting pillar of a house, or an entry way. Among the Bambara people of Mali, the oldest member of a tribe is the one closest to the world of the departed, so this elder is considered the link between the ancestors and the living members of the community. (6)

Among the societies of Africa, peoples’ perceptions of nature influenced power and authority. Many art forms, rituals, and symbols from Africa were formed by these same feelings. (7) At one time before science helped to explain the forces of nature, people feared and held in awe the wilderness. They associated the forest and bush with mysterious things like witches, ghosts and the spirits of ancestors. People created beliefs in order to understand the part of nature that they could not control. By calling for supernatural help, people believed they had some control over their world.

There are many ways people can control their environment to please ancestors and other spirits. Among the Yoruba people of Nigeria some hunters wear special headdresses to honor ancestor spirits. (8) Hunters have special knowledge of the wilderness and can create medicines from natural ingredients found in the wild. Because of their special skills and understanding, hunters help people in their relationships between the wild and the village or places of the living and the world of ancestor spirits. Some people are thought to have special powers to speak with spirits of wild animals or ancestors. These people are called diviners, because they can "see" into the spirit world. They help bridge the natural world with the supernatural world of ancestors and spirits, just like referees help two teams in a game of sports. Sometimes a person with the special power to communicate with the spiritual world is asked for help by a person with a problem. In order to solve that problem, a spirit might ask the diviner or healer to tell his client to make something special. That could be a work of art, music, costume, or a shrine to honor the spirit and satisfy its taste for something beautiful.

Generally, people who are living honor the dead by offering items like special foods, drink, art and entertainment. The ancestors are called to help the community. When the ancestors receive offerings, they are pleased and will assist the living with their wishes.

**Resources used in this section:**

End Notes:


