

Affinity Between Natural Milieu And Yoruba Religion Conviction**Babalola Olatomide . E.**Department of History
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Odudele, Rotimi. ODepartment of Christian Religious Studies,
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Yoruba of South-Western Nigeria enjoy a rich ever-green forest and some other physical relief features which enhances their flourishing and co-existing life. These natural milieus have a profound significance in the traditional religious practices among the Yoruba people. It is generally believed among the Yoruba that there is power in these natural features that constitute their environment. It is equally viewed that gods dwell in most of these features. Consequently, most of these features were deified and commonly worshiped by various towns and villages in Yoruba land. It is against this backdrop that this paper is set to carve out the geographical location of Yoruba land and some notable natural features that make up Yoruba environment. Besides, some of the features that were deified by the Yoruba are x-rayed while the mode of worship and importance attached to these features is equally discussed. Historical analysis approach was explored in this research while both secondary source and personal observation were made use in the process of data collection. From our findings, we observe that many of these natural features are seen by Yoruba people as religion symbols or sacred objects that create the venue through which the worshippers enter into a relationship with the divine world. This piece concludes that the convivial relationships between these natural features and traditional Yoruba religion accentuate the faith of the worshippers of certain deity in Yoruba land.

Introduction

The Yoruba people in ancient times and even today lay in the West of the lower Niger which is today known as Southwestern Nigeria. This geographical location shares boundary in the Northwest with Borgu, Nupe and Epira in the North, Esan and Edo in the Southeast, Igala and other related groups to the Northeast. On the map, Yoruba homeland lies between longitudes 20° and 30° East of Meridian and latitudes 6° and 9° North of the Equator (Akanbi and Aladesanmi, 2006: 88-89). Besides, Yoruba is a name common to a linguistic group that occupied the Eastern Benin of Nigeria, the Republics of Dahomey and Togo. Some of this group is also found in Diaspora as a result of trans-Atlantic slave trade which

caused dislocation of many Africa people. Hence, the focus of this paper will be centered on the Yoruba in the South-western Nigeria. Among the major and most populous ethnic groups in Nigeria, Yoruba is the second largest with about 21% of the total population after Hausa/Fulani with 29%, and consists of six states of the Federal Republic of Nigeria which include: Ekiti, Ondo, Osun, Oyo, Ogun and Lagos. (www.indexmundi.com2014) Some principal tribes within these states are; Ijebu, Ijesha, Awori, Akoko, Egba, On do and Ekiti. Yoruba is more united due to the claim to Oduduwa as ancestral origin. This is evident in their common culture and Ile-Ife as their ancestral home and cradle of Yoruba land (Samuel, 2001:xx).

The major geographical features in the Yoruba land include the rugged terrain of highlands such as Kukuru hills, Olumo rock, Olosunta hill, Idanre Hill, etc. Between these highlands and the Ocean, runs a Coastal plain. There are many rivers in Yoruba land; the major ones among them are river O sun, Ogun, Owena, river Osse, etc.

The location of Yoruba in the tropical climatic zone with high temperatures throughout the year results to the high rainfall experience in all parts of the Yoruba land. This climatic condition also favours forest vegetation where there are presence of different species of hardwoods such as Iroko, Mahogany and Obeche. This vegetational zone also encourages Yoruba people to be involved mostly in agriculture as their major occupation. Other works they engage in are hunting, fishing, weaving and sculptor.

However, as the physical features and climatic conditions of Yoruba environment informed the occupation of the people, it equally has a profound relationship on their religious practices. The Yoruba people were using most of these natural features in their environment as symbol of worship while some were deified with the belief that the spirit of the departed heroes were resided in them. These natural features and the spirits in them were believed by the Yoruba people as intermediary between the supreme God and human being. Hence, the Yoruba people, therefore, referred to these features which served as symbol of worship as Orisa (Divinities).

Concept of Religion and the Yoruba Religious Practices

Religion has been defined by various scholars in the way they look at it. The theologians defined religion on the basis of God's activity in creation and redemption; sociologists from its function in society; psychologists from people's consciousness, and anthropologists from people's cultural heritage. The word religion, however, could not be affixed to only one generally acceptable definition. Religion could be defined as a man's attempt to establish and maintain cordial relationship between mankind and what is regarded as sacred, which are divine forces in the spiritual world (Akinseye, 1999:57).

According to Onyeidu (2001:16-19) the nature of human beings which is made up of both spirit (conscious) and body (matter) is the basis of their religion. Man as matter, is limited in space and time, they are relative and dependent on something. But as spirit, they develop consciousness. With consciousness human beings began to think in abstract terms, to analyse themselves as well as raising questions about their destiny and the world. Through this, man realizes that he can not survive on his own without establishing a working relationship between himself and the powers above him. Religion began when man became conscious of the existence of power greater than himself. Through this, man seeks for help,

internal peace, looks for a harmony in the universe and ways of satisfying man's emotional and psychological needs and also to acknowledge and respect these powers (Womiloju, 1989:207).

Religion is a way of life and a product of experience in people's existential situation. This is expressed in worshiping and adoring of the divine forces in their various religious institutions. Corroborating this view, a Frenchman, Emile Durkheim as cited by Familugba and Babalola (2013:176-178) defined religion from its social origins and functions in society according to him "religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices which are related to sacred things which bring all adherents together into a single moral community".

Ugwu (2002:1-3), in his own view, defines religion as faith and practices involving the relationship between mankind and what are regarded as sacred. He expatiates further on this that religion is the outward act or form by which man indicate their recognition of the existence of gods having power over their destiny; to whom obedience, service and honour is due. Religion, therefore, can only come as a result of the activities and mysteries of the world which man reflects on and which gave him the idea of a supreme being.

It has been revealed historically that no society or races of mankind are without one form of religion or other. As posited by Onyeidu (2001:14-18), religion is a human activity found in all cultures hence, no society or community has been found without religion but some communities are more religious than others. He further discerned that religious beliefs and practices differ from one religious system to the other. These differences could be visible in the time and place of worship, system of symbols, rites and even in the dress of the observance of such religious beliefs.

The Yoruba Religious Practices

The traditional Yoruba religious practices were rooted in their experiences and environment. The life of Yoruba people is in their religion. As posited by Toyin Falola (1982:27),

In all things, they are religious, Religion forms the foundation the all governing principle of life for them. As far as they are concerned, the full responsibility of all the affairs of life belongs to the Deity; their own part in the matter is to do as they are ordered through the priest and diviners whom they believe to be the interpreters of the will of the Deity.

This is the more reason why Yoruba people are, to greater extent, very religious in all things. For instance, the Yoruba political system rested not only on the political power of their rulers but also on their religious power. This also confirms why all festivals of divinities in Yoruba communities belong to the king and he also partakes actively in all the activities involved (Basil, Buah and AdeAjayi, 1975:122-123).

Yoruba people do not engage in anything without attaching it to their religion. They are so intently and inseparably link to their religion. It is believed that no major progress could any individual, community or group of people make in life without active support of the supernatural. Hence they make regular consultation with the oracle which usually directs their paths. Both social and economic lives of Yoruba are as well proved to be religious.

Generally, Yoruba people believe in the supremacy of Olodumare (The Almighty God). According to Idowu (1975:36), Olodumare is a Supreme deity in traditional Yoruba society who is an equivalent of the Judeo-Christian orthodox God. The word Olodumare means, the one with whom man may enter into covenant, or communion with in any place and at any time. He further stressed that Olodumare is the one who is supreme, incomparable and unsurpassable in majesty, unchanging, constant and reliable. Yoruba traditional religion has often been regarded as polytheism that is a religion without a unifying, transcendental being. This idea has been discarded by the Yoruba concept of the position of the supreme deity which is a reflection of their cultural pattern.

According to Oso (1978:22-23), Yoruba worship God according to their cultural background where they are organized on hierarchical basis, an ordinary man in Yoruba land does not make a request for something directly from an Oba (King) or village head such man goes through an intermediary. In the same vein, God is majestic and high to be approached directly and this is the more reason people go through the various divinities. These divinities are the lesser gods which are to serve the will of God in creation and in theocratic government of this universe. The status of these divinities is equivalent to those of the "saints" and the "angels" which are symbolized by different status and images at strategic places in Roman Catholic Churches. Olodumare, the Supreme Being who also serves as unifying force works in collaboration with the minor gods or deity otherwise known as 'Orisa'. The Orisa (Divinities) are those that have been simply chosen out of the host of departed ancestors for national veneration.

The principal deities among the Yoruba are: Orunmila, great minister of Olodumare sent from heaven to earth charged with the responsibility of putting the earth in order (Wande, 1972:40-44). Orunmila invented the Ifa, geomantic system which satisfied man's urge and curiosity to know what future had in store for him, (ToyinFalola, 1982:34). It was recorded that Orunmila came to the earth in company of other deities such as Esu, Shango and Ogun. Each of these deities charged with specific functions; Esu, emissary of gods; Ogun was charged with the supervision of matters dealing with war and other things demanding the use of iron while Shango was in charge of thunder. These groups of deities are known as primordial divinities and common to all Yoruba states. According to Awolalu (1978: 20-51), primordial divinities are believed to have been with the supreme deity long before the creation of the earth and human begins as well.

The explosion of population and subsequent dispersal of Oduduwa children from Ile Ife led to the creation of other Yoruba states. Some of these states, therefore, began to develop loyalties to other gods being deified by them apart from the principal ones. Those that were deified include the ancestors or men and women that had performed bravely in the society during their own time. ToyinFalola (1982: 34) a notable historian hinted on the deification in Yorubaland thus, " Most of the Yoruba deified heroes and some of the gods could be regarded as great achievers and thinkers whose accomplishments revolutionized the ways of life of many people ".

Such personality may be a great warrior, hunter, herbalist or soothsayer who had done a lot in the past to save his people or his territory. After the death of such person, he or she will be honoured by revering and invoking his spirit. This can be done by personification of natural forces and phenomena. The spirit of the departed hero or heroine will be associated with natural objects such as earth, river, mountains, wind, sea and trees.

In Yoruba land, the deification was effected through absorption of the attributes of certain earlier divinities. In Old Oyo, Sango who was then Alaafin of Oyo was deified after his death resulting from his displayed of unique power of magic and medicine and also his prowess (Ojo, 2006:47). Others worth to mention in this category are Oloje (Olosunta) in Ikere who was a brave warrior and a soothsayer. He was deified by Ikere people and a Hill called Olosunta was being worshiped every year. Osun at Osogbo, Elemi at Igede-Ekiti, Orosun at Idanre, Olumo at Abeokuta, Orosun of Idanre to mention but a few.

ToyinFalola (1982:30) affirms that, in many cases, the natural environmental object common or peculiar to a community was usually associated with a god which the people of such community worshiped. Prominent among the object mentioned are hills and highlands, sea, rivers, lagoon, grove and trees. Most of the deified objects or natural features that Yoruba people set aside to worship are believed to have possessed some spirits and often regarded as the abodes of different gods. Hence their belief in the duality of man and in indestructibility of human soul given rise to equate the spirit of their departed heroes and heroines as well as their ancestors to those indestructible and “immortal” features such as rock, river, sacred groves and trees such as Iroko “Igiose” “Porogun” which the Yoruba people believed to be sacred trees that can not be fell indiscriminately. Their acknowledgment of these features rested on the premise that the spirit in them will continue to act as inter- mediaries between Olodumare and human beings.

Corroborating this view, Womiloju (1989:212) avers that the concept of intermediaries simply constitute the middle course enabling the mind to conceive of communication between these two realities; god and man. She stresses further that indeed the mind can only justify the existence of intermediaries when a gap separates the communicators. Thus, in such a system, anything can be a means of access to the deity.

In Yoruba land an average family worships more than one divinity because each divinity has its own functions in relation to the need of man. Likewise, there is a mutual relationship between the devotee and the gods, the devotees worship the divinities while they provide for their needs. As a result of this, the devotees are free to choose another divinity if the present one does not satisfy them. This is reflected in Yoruba adage which says, “*Orisati a sin tikobagbeni a o fi silegbe omiranni*” it interprets to mean “If a divinity does not serve one despite all efforts to worship him he should be changed for a better one.”

Mode of Worship of the Deities in Yorubaland

It is obvious among traditional Yoruba society that there was no dichotomy that could be created between religion and the society. Hence individual strived to maintain a religious relationship with his ancestors. These ancestors often regarded as ever-living who were interested in the well-being of individuals. Therefore, individual worshipped different gods which was believed to bring fortunes and prosperity of its devotees and also be a solution to some of their problems. Worship as defined by Oso (1978:57) as the spontaneous expression of man's inner attitude as he was brought into contact with the supernatural whom disposition discerned to be the determiner of his destiny. Man, however, discovered specific objects to symbolize his worship in the Yoruba society such object of worship include rock, highland or hills, rivers or stream.

The use of symbols is all-embracing in traditional Yoruba religion because religious experience deals with two worlds at the same time - the world of space and time where we live and move, and the unseen spirit world which cannot be easily located. These symbols serve as 'illustrations', 'pointers', and 'bridges', through which religious people participate simultaneously in both worlds (Onyeidu, 2001:38-40).

As the community developed, the idea of a place where people congregate for worship became sacred and this resulted to building of shrines and temples. In Yoruba land, shrines are dedicated to divinities and spirits in the house, crossroads, and market places and in the field. There are shrines in the groves and some clearing portion in the bush or forest. Each shrine contains some specific objects which are symbols of the particular divinity to which the shrine is dedicated. Some of these objects include graven images or sacred plants and trees e.g., "porogun" pieces of rock, metal, etc. Whatever forms these symbols are they are not regarded as gods but they are to make the presence of gods felt in the place of worship.

In Yoruba land, the worship of deity was at regular interval, i.e., daily, weekly and annually often called sacred day depending on the deity. Such worship is accomplished with prayers, sacrifice, incantation and invoking the spirit of the deity as well as rituals. These are done by the priest and the devotees of the deity. However, worshipping of the deities serves as adoration and reverence to appease him and in return ask for his blessing and favour. At worship, worshippers renew their vows, asking the divinity for protection and good things in life; in turn, they would promise loyalty to the divinity.

Conclusion

It has been established in this piece that the geographical location of Yoruba land is constituted with forest vegetation and other relief features such as highlands, rivers, lagoons and rocks. And it has been equally observed that there were convivial relationships between these features and traditional Yoruba religion. These features mostly served as the object of worship that accentuates the faith of the worshippers of certain deity in Yoruba land. Since the Yoruba believed the gap between the supreme Deity and the divinities were wide and there must be an intermediary between these gods and man. This resulted to the deification of the ancestors and divinities with these natural objects with the belief that the spirit of their ancestors are dwelling in these objects. In addition to this, it has been observed in this piece that the indestructible souls of the ancestors and divinities has engendered the cordial relationship that existed between the natural features and Yoruba traditional religion which caused many of these natural features to be seen as religious symbols or sacred object that create the venue through which the worshippers enter into a relationship with the divine world.

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