

APPROPRIATION OF YORUBA TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS VALUES FOR SOCIO-CULTURAL REFORMATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract: *The Yoruba people have strong religio-cultural heritage which maps out not only their identity but also their worldview. Yoruba traditional religious values reflect the beliefs and practices which a religious adherent partake in. Most values originate from sacred texts of each respective traditional religion. Yoruba culture is made of strict rules, norms, and mores that govern the ways a certain individual must behave. However, appropriation of Yoruba traditional religious values will aid socio-cultural reformation in Nigeria. The study employs sociological and descriptive methods to look into the norms and value remains of Yoruba tradition. For socio-cultural values to be*

properly reformed in Nigeria, Yoruba traditional religious values should be embraced and continue to be taught at all levels of education. Only Yoruba Language specialists should be employed to teach Yoruba, as other subject specialists would not do it well.

Keywords: *Yoruba, Traditional, Religious Values, Socio-Cultural, Reformation.*

Introduction

The word Yorùbá refers to a people, language, tribe, culture, and religion. Yorùbá people are one of the most popular ethnic groups not only in West Africa but Africa in general and are predominantly found in the Southwestern and North-central region of Nigeria and in some parts of the Benin Republic and Togo. The Yorùbá people are deeply religious and spiritual people. Available texts identify a Yorùbá Religion which encompasses many traditional religious and psycho-spiritual concepts and practices of the Yorùbá people. Although majority of the Yorùbá people are either Christians or Muslims, with only a few actively present and practicing any of the Yorùbá religions, the Yorùbá psycho-spirituality permeates all aspects of their lives that most of the biopsychosocial-spiritual challenges are attributed to psycho-spiritual influences. With strong belief in a Supreme God, called Olodumare, and the beliefs in the many pantheons, orisa, spirits and ancestors, the Yorùbá people interpret their existence, from birth to death, and afterlife, their health and illness (physical and mental), riches and poverty, blessings and curses from spiritual point of view.

The Yoruba are an ethnic group who live in West Africa. They are currently estimated to be about 64

million people, the majority of whom live in Nigeria where they account for about 40% of the country's population. It is one of the largest ethnic groups in Africa, and they speak the Yoruba language. Yoruba communities also live in other countries besides Nigeria which include Ivory Coast, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Saint Lucia, Venezuela, Trinidad and Tobago, Granada, Brazil, and Jamaica among other regions in the world.

The Yorùbá

According to Peel (2016), in a book titled, *Islam, and Orisa-Religion*, the word “Yorùbá” is a Hausa name of Arabic origin. Hausa was another tribe of Northern Nigeria. It was originally applied just to the Oyo and adopted by the Anglican Church Missionary Society in the 1840s as their name for the people they were to evangelize. Yorùbá was later extended by the Anglican Missionaries to many other cognate peoples such as the Egba, Ilesha, Ijebu, etc. who had many close resemblances of language and culture with the Oyo, as well as traditions of common descent from Ile-Ife. Yorùbá is also attributed to the Nago in Brazil, Lucumi in Cuba, and Aku in Sierra Leone.

Yorùbá is one of the three largest ethnic groups of Nigeria, concentrated in the southwestern part of that country (Gorlinski, 2019). Others are scattered groups in some other West African Countries like Benin and northern Togo. At the turn of the 21st century, the Yorùbá numbered more than 20 million (Gorlinski, 2019). Before, the documented history of the Yorùbá people which start off with the Oyo Empire in the early 17th century, there is the older traditions of the Yorùbá people of Ile-Ife kingdom which are largely oral in

nature. Ile-Ife is believed to be the cradle of creation by the gods, Oduduwa and Obatala. Archaeological dating estimated the settlement at Ile-Ife to the 4th century BC, while the urban structures only emerged in the 12th century (Egu, 2011).

Yorùbá Religion

Yorùbá people are very religious and have almost everything. As earlier expressed, the Yorùbá people do not have any set of religion that is directly centered on Olodumare because they do not count themselves worthy enough to approach God directly; rather, they worship the other lower gods (pantheons) which are numerous in number (meaning that there is no one Yorùbá religion in a stricter sense of it). Peel (2016) expressed this beautifully when he explains the term “Yorùbá religion”. He wrote: “I think the term may be legitimately used in either of two ways: as whatever religion is actually practiced by Yorùbá people or as a religion of distinctively Yorùbá origins and character. These two criteria do not need to coincide in theory and may not substantially do so in practice. Putting them together, we may today distinguish three main concrete realizations or circles of Yorùbá religion over the past century or so, which I may characterize as follows:

1. Yorùbá religion practiced by Yorùbá in their homeland, or what is conventionally called Yorùbá traditional religion (YTR), to which the cult of orisa was central.
2. Religion practiced by the overwhelming majority of Yorùbá people today, not of Yorùbá origin but consisting of various forms of Islam and Christianity.

3. Religion of Yorùbá origin practiced in the world today, overwhelmingly outside Africa by people who are not Yorùbá. (Peel, 2016)

According to "Deities of the Yorùbá" (2019), due to the large numbers of Yorùbá people and those who practice Yorùbá religion in West Africa and their wide dispersal through slavery in the Americas, the Yorùbá are probably the best-known West African ethnic culture in the world. In Africa alone, Nigeria and the Republic of Benin have the largest concentration of Yorùbá and Yorùbá religions while in the Americas, Yorùbá cultural influences are most apparent in Brazil, Cuba, Haiti, Jamaica, Trinidad, and Tobago, especially in the religions of the masses, including Vodon, Santéria, Camdomblé, and Macumba, and so forth, ("Deities of the Yorùbá", 2019). It was estimated in 1989, that more than seventy million African and New World peoples practiced one form or another of Yorùbá religion ("Deities of the Yorùbá.", 2019).

Yoruba Culture

Culture refers to beliefs, values, behaviour and material objects that constitute a people's ways of life. It is distinguished between thoughts and things or material and non-material culture. Macionis (2000) defines culture as "involving all that entirely surround a person: beliefs, rules for behaviour, ideas of right and wrong and material objects; he views culture as the social heritage of a people, those learned patterns for thinking, feeling and acting that are transmitted from one generation to the next, including the quintessence of those patterns in physical objects". The Yoruba culture is made of strict rules, norms, and mores that govern the ways a certain individual must behave. An individual must therefore

respond in appropriate ways to the norms of the society or community in which she or he lives. To achieve this, she must internalize certain societal values through the process of socialization and social control. Yoruba culture according to Ayo (2002) is transmitted through the family, age sets, elders and secret societies. Thus, the transmission of culture from one generation to the other does not necessarily end with the use of language; it also involves how understanding establishes relationships among people in a given society.

Socio-Cultural Value

Socio-cultural values are defined as "an enduring prescriptive or proscriptive belief that a specific end state of existence or specific mode of conduct is preferred to an opposite end state or mode of conduct for living one's life" (Rokeach, 2013) or as "abstract ideals, positive or negative, tied to any specific object or situation, representing a person's beliefs about modes of conduct and ideal terminal modes" (Rokeach, 2013). In other words, socio-cultural values are individuals' beliefs about what is right or good and what is wrong or bad and determine not only what is acceptable and unacceptable to individuals, but also what people's needs are, the way they satisfy those needs, and the way they establish and achieve their goals. Williams (2008) have viewed socio-cultural values as "the criteria people use to select and justify actions and to evaluate people (including the self) and events". Socio-cultural values have been shown to have a considerable influence on the emotional and behavioral responses of individuals.

Socio-cultural values have been studied from a variety of viewpoints by researchers in various fields of social sciences, such as psychology, sociology,

organizational behavior, consumer behavior, and others. In fact, Rokeach (2008) has pointed out that the concept of socio-cultural values lies at the core of all social sciences. He has further concluded that socio-cultural values are the primary dependent variables in the study of culture, society, and personality and the primary independent variables in the study of social attitudes and behaviors. In short, socio-cultural values are both a powerful explanation and an influence of human behaviors (Homer & Kahle, 2008). Although it is clear that socio-cultural values have important implications for political researchers, it is not clear how socio-cultural values influence by the traditional religious of the society.

Yoruba Traditional Religion for Socio-Cultural Values in Modern Africa

Many of the cultural values and practices of traditional Africa discussed, however, can be considered positive features of the culture and can be accommodated in the scheme of African modernity, even if they must undergo some refinement and pruning in order to become fully harmonious with the spirit of modern culture and to function most satisfactorily within that culture (Gyekye, 2002). These are some of the Yoruba traditional religious values that are fully harmonious with the spirit of modern cultures and as well function most satisfactorily and bring about reformation and sustainable development in modern Africa.

Humanity and Brotherhood: Traditional African cultures recognize the dignity and integrity of the human being as a creature of God. Our common brotherhood is intrinsically linked with our common humanity. There is

only one universal family, to which all human beings belong. This family is fragmented, however, into a multiplicity of peoples and cultures. The recognition of all human beings as brothers in the light of our common membership in one human species is a lofty ideal, that is, of great importance to the African people.

Communalism and Individualism: The value that traditional African societies place on communalism is expressed in the sharing of a common social life, commitment to the social or common good of the community, appreciation of mutual obligations, caring for others, interdependence, and solidarity. At the same time, the claims of individuality are recognized. African ethic, however, urges the avoidance of extreme individualism, which is seen as potentially destructive of human values and of the whole meaning and essence of a human society. Attempts are therefore made to balance communalism and individualism so that they can co-exist.

Morality: The morality espoused in both traditional and modern cultures, and societies of Africa is a social, no individualistic morality. This kind of morality is held as enjoined by social life itself. There is a preoccupation with human well-being in the African moral thought and practice. The African moral system puts the ethic of responsibility above the ethic of individual right, even though the latter are also given due recognition. The importance of character as the engine of moral life in practice is stressed.

The Family: Marriage is considered as a valuable institution, for without it there would be no family, that is, the basic unit of social life. Without the family there would be none of the kinship ties that are essential to a comprehension social life, with an intricate network of

social relationships. Values associated with the family include recognizing the responsibility to share life with a wife or husband and children in the nuclear family and with members from an entire lineage in the extended family, recognizing the need to have and to care for children, respecting parents, taking care of our parents in their old age and so on.

Economic Ethic: Africans seek and put a high values on wealth, both private and family (clan). The right to, and the importance of private property are recognized in the traditional African economic system, where private ownership exist side by side with public (command, state) ownership. Families (i.e. lineage, clans) operate independently of the chiefs, who, thus, do not control all the dynamics of the traditional economy. The traditional African society is a welfare state, functioning on the ethic of fair distribution. Everyone has access to the resources and goods of the community or state, but this system is not socialist in any Marxist sense.

Chiefship and Politics: In the political thoughts and practice of the traditional African society consultation and consensus are highly valued, for they are outstanding features of political decision-making. This practice allows for the involvement of all the people in the political process. The chief who is the highest political authority, rules with the consent of and in accordance with the will of the people. In the actual exercise of power, the people in effect, are the sources of authority, directly or indirectly through their representatives on the chief's council. The political authority of the Chief is based on a trusteeship principle that ensures his accountability of the people. Freedom of expression, of political opinion is appreciated and

practiced. Misrule by a chief is not tolerated and can lead to his being disposed.

Human Rights: The most important values in which human rights are rooted are put into practices in the traditional African cultures. These include individuality, personal responsibility, the dignity and integrity of every person, the intrinsic values of every person, consideration of every persons as an end in himself or herself and worthy of respect and equity of the moral worth of all people. Other rights that are acknowledged and protected include: the right to the use of lineage land, right to food and protection from hunger, the right to a fair trial and the right to own private property. These rights are fundamental to the social structure, customs and ethic of the traditional African society and do not need to be vociferously demanded and belligerently fought for.

Knowledge and Wisdom: In the traditional African culture, knowledge is highly valued especially practical or empirical knowledge. This type of knowledge is based on observation and experience. Practical wisdom is most relevant in the reconstruction of the African society and the promotion of human well-being.

Aesthetics: Art in traditional African cultures has both functional and aesthetical dimension. Beauty is seen not only in works of art and in the human figure but also in human conduct, in humanity itself and in a person's character. Among the criteria of aesthetic value and judgment are appropriateness and fittingness. For instance, music, dancing and even clothing must be appropriate to the occasion (Gyekye, 2012).

Conclusion

The Yoruba people have strong religio-cultural heritage which maps out not only their identity but also their worldview. Yoruba traditional religious values reflect the beliefs and practices which a religious adherent partakes in. Most values originate from sacred texts of each respective traditional religion. Yoruba culture is made of strict rules, norms, and mores that govern the ways a certain individual must behave. However, appropriation of Yoruba traditional religious values will aid socio-cultural reformation in Nigeria. For socio-cultural values to be properly reformed in Nigeria, Yoruba traditional religious values should be embraced and continue to be taught in all levels of education. Only Yoruba Language specialist should be employed to teach Yoruba, as other subject specialist would not do it well. Yoruba Language curriculum should be restructured for effective reformation of socio-cultural values in the country.

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