

SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST AND THE PARADIGM SHIFT FROM AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS TO CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM IN ILE IFE NIGERIA, THE WAY FORWARD

Haruna Godwin Ojonemi
ojonemigodwin@gmail.com

Akhaine Asabe Duna
Asabeakhaine@gmail.com

&

Ochoechi Jerry
ocholongwajerry24@gmail.com

Christian Religious Studies, Section
Department Of Arts Education
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
Federal University of Education, Kontagora, Niger State.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21926129>

Abstract

Religion is a common heritage which Africans share with the rest of mankind. It is considered to be an inseparable phenomenon dominating the whole strata of human existence. Thus, the thrust of this paper is to examine the historical religious situation in Ile Ife, Osun state, Nigeria before the arrival of foreign religions such as Christianity and Islam on Africa soil. The encounter of both religions on the indigenous African traditional religion enhanced the eventual religious harmony in the town of Ile Ife. The methodological approach to be adopted in this paper is the combination of both historical and sociological approach. In conclusion, useful suggestions are preferred as way forward for peaceful co-existence among religionists in Nigeria such as, Interfaith dialogue and cooperation, cultural preservation, Contextualization of Christianity and Islam to adapt their messages to resonate with local culture and traditions and Community development through joint initiatives addressing social issues like poverty, education, and healthcare among the adherents of different religions.

Keywords: African Traditional religion, Christianity, Islam, Religious co-existence, Nigeria

Introduction

The context, "survival of the fittest" refers to the ability of each religion to adapt, evolve, and thrive in a rapidly changing environment. Factors influencing this survival includes Cultural relevance of Traditional African Religion (TAR's) with strong cultural roots and traditional practices which helps to maintain a loyal adherent. Ile-Ife is considered the cradle of Yoruba civilization, and traditional African religion (TAR) has been an integral part of the culture. With the arrival of Christianity and Islam, the region experienced significant religious shifts. Today, Ile-Ife is a melting pot of TAR, Christianity, and Islam (Abubakar, 2019).

Following the Evangelism and outreach Christians and Muslims proactive approaches to spreading their messages have contributed to their growth. Community engagement of these three religions engage with the community, providing social services, education, and support the essential part of Yoruba culture and identity. Festivals like *Olojo* and *Edil* are still

being celebrated, and traditional priests (Babalawo's) continue to play important roles in the community.

Christianity and Islam were introduced in the 19th century in Ile Ife, Christianity and Islam gained significant attraction with the natives that leads to the birth of many churches and *Masjid* (mosques) denominations built and represented in Ile-Ife community.

Brief History of Ile Ife Origins

The city is known as Ile Ife globally. As the people had no knowledge of writing in the early period, scholars only infer their origins from traditions of the people. As for Ile-Ife, two traditions have become popular in this regard, but both must not be accepted on their face value that is, taken literally.

According to Osaro-edo (2020), the first of the traditions, which can be termed as the creation story emanated from Ile-Ife. Although this tradition has many variants, the gist is the same. In essence, the tradition claims that the ancestors of the Yoruba people came from heaven. These were sixteen Ooye people who are called "immortals". They were sent, according to tradition, by the most High-God (Olorun/Olodumare) to come and create land and human beings to exist on the land.

The creation of land was necessary because at this time, the entire world was covered by water. The Ooye were therefore, given sound cockerel to spread it and iron with which to work. The most prominent among the Ooye were Obatala, Oduduwa, Obaweri, Obawinrin, and so on (Danfulani, 2024). It was said originally that Obatala was the leader, but during the journey of the Ooye, Obatala was said to have got drunk and slept. While he was asleep, Oduduwa took over the leadership from him. These Ooye came to the area around Ile-Ife and landed on Oranfe Hill. There, they organized great land and subsequently human population. From the spot, land spread to cover Ile-Ife and that is why the town is called Ile-Ife, that is, land that expands. Since this story may relate to a period of emergence, then it must be associated with an event which took place from 2000 BC onward (Idankpo, 2018).

The second tradition, which is the popular tradition, was the one that first emanated in the writings of Clapper ton in the 19th century, who reproduced excerpts from the work of (Bello, 1978 in Danfulani, 1924). This tradition became popular when Reverend Samuel Johnson included it in his book, *The History of the Yorubas*. This tradition, which might be called "migration story", relates that the Yoruba people originated from Mecca in Arabia. They are said to have been the descendants of one Lamurudu (Nimrod). The off springs of this Lamurudu were Oduduwa and his children who formed the Yoruba group. Other descendants of Lamurudu are said to be the king of Gobir as well as the King of Kukawa. All these descendants left Mecca in consequence of a war, which broke out in that country after the rise of Islam. This was largely because they did not want to embrace that religion. Oduduwa led his own group to settle again at Ile-Ife. Since this migration relates an event following the rise of Islam, then it must have happened sometimes in the 7th century AD. Obvious difficulties arose in accepting these versions at face value. (Makama, 2018).

At least, one aspect of it indicates that the tradition cannot be taken literally as it is taken in respect of the leadership of Oduduwa. Both versions named Oduduwa as the leader of the Yoruba people, but when we put both stories in time perspective, one above 2000 BC or a little later, the other definitely is the 7th century AD; it will be discovered that 3,000 years separated both events. It must then be clear that if Oduduwa was a real person, then he could not have lived to be the leader of both events, which the traditions relate. This would mean that the stories must be examined more carefully to see what historical information could be deduced. In doing this, we must understand oral tradition itself that it has one characteristic of

lumping together episodes which belonged to different periods and presenting them as one. Understood in this light, it would be clear that the origins of the Yoruba people being referred to as the creation story as well as the other version of the story, that is, the migration story certainly refer to different episodes.

Indeed, as Akinjogbin (1980) has rightly argued, that each of the stories must be talking of origins of different leaders, for which it is time to provide a common leadership. Indeed, if the traditions were carefully examined, it would be clear that at least one of the traditions has indicated two leaderships. Therefore, it follows that, the Oduduwa episode must have been lumped with the Obatala's episode, even though both belonged to different era or periods. Indeed, the Ikedu tradition, which is older than any of the traditions and which came to light recently through research, coupled with archaeological and linguistics evidence really emerged in Yoruba history about the 8th century AD (Johnson, 1921). In other words, the origin of the history of the Yoruba people did not begin with Oduduwa. To sum up this aspect of this study, therefore, researches based on oral traditions, archaeology and linguistics have indicated the following concerning the history of the Yoruba. That the hitherto popularized origin of the Yoruba people from either Mecca or Egypt cannot be sustained with that of research. Instead, our suggestion is that the Yoruba originated from West Africa as they speak a variant of the KWA group of the Niger-Congo family of languages. The tradition, which indicates that the people came from heaven, should not be taken literally. It is only indicated that the Yoruba people became conscious of themselves in the very remote past and that in the affected homeland, Ile-Ife must be one of the areas occupied (Yahaya, 2018 in Haruna and Buzaije 2023}. Another area had been identified as Iwo Eleru in Oba-Ife near Akure in Ondo-State as well as West Bohemian is said to be the origin of history of the Yoruba people (Akinjogbin 1980}.

Ile Ife before the Coming of Christianity and Islam

Ile Ife is one of the ancient towns in Osun State of Nigeria; it is believed to owe its foundation from the eponymous ancestor Oduduwa the progenitor of Yoruba race (Johnson, 1921 in Nguvugher, 2011). Ile Ife town is located on latitude 4.6 E and latitude 7.5 N, it has an elevation of about 275 meters above the sea level. The town is surrounded by chains of seven hills (Oluyemi, 1985). Traditionally, the Yoruba speaking groups regards Ile Ife as place of origin and sacred home; they called it a place God created man (Bush, 1967 Danfulani, 2024).

Religiously, Ile Ife was a stronghold of indigenous worship and the people there were traditionalist upholding the religion of their ancestors. Many traditional festivals are marked to commensurate myriads of deities known with history of the town and Yoruba land in general. Some of the festivities includes; Edi " in honour of female heroine Moremi", Olojo " for ogun the god of iron", Oduduwa, Obanla etc.

Ile Ife Encounter with Christianity and Islam.

Since there is hardly any place for religiosity in Africa, it is natural that an attempt to introduce any one religion to a traditional African society meant an invasion or loss of group on the part of the traditional African religion (Makama, 2018). In a bid for Christianity and Islam to displace African traditional religion in Ile Ife, many factors came into play as the integrity of African traditional religion was being trampled upon by the foreign religion. The advent of Christianity, to Yoruba land, was part of the coming to Christianity to Nigeria (Ajayi, 1979 in Yahaya, 2020).

He further claimed that the first attempt which was lastly to coastal area of Calabar, Warri and Benin were a failure therefore, it was during the second period Christianity was

introduced to Ile Ife. Similar study shows that, Ife experience the Roman Catholic Fathers in the 16th century which leads to the conversion of Ooni of Ife Oba Adewumi Ajagun who was Baptized as Thomas John Ooni which reduced the indigenous religion of Ife to the barest minimum as native were willingly surrendering to the new faith. More so, the new converts were admonished against customary matters so as not to backslide this made Christianity the religion of the day. The native later revolted to the new religion at one Itapa which signify, revolted against the alien imposition. Though, there were later insurgence of Christianity which resulted to the building of churches, schools for education of the natives. John Adelaja an Ijebu man and Daniel Ologbenila who had attacked CMS School in Lagos joined their efforts to that of the missionaries (Makama, 2018}.

Islam on the other hand like Christianity, came to Yoruba community and Ife through peaceful means. The religion reached Ile Ife early in the first half of the 19th century, through an Ilorin man named Danielu who was a traditional healer. He incorporated Muslim prayer and Incantations and medical knowledge, through that, he won few converts to Islam and was held in high esteem in Ife. Later, an Ife man named Kazeem was sold to slavery in Lagos returned home and met Daniel an old man trying to establish Islam in Ife town, he joined him for the springing forth of Islam. They both observed the Muslim ritual prayers (salat), together in a mosque at Modakeke where Islam was already established (Yahaya, 2024)

Many reasons were advanced for the acceptance of Islam in Ife, they include; support of traditional chiefs, it accords with African culture particularly the practice of polygamy, the use of talisman, charms and divination, these make the native to embrace the new religion Islam

(Danfulani, 2024).

Connectivity of Christianity and Islam as Invaders of African Traditional Religion

Christianity and Islam are both adherents of Abrahamic creeds of monotheism. Both religions have their roots in the universal message of monotheism which prophet Ibrahim (Abraham) peace be unto him (Pbuh), preached to mankind during his time. He invited humanity to the only one true God and to liberate mankind from the servitude of man to the servitude of man to the Almighty God.

The man replied," you are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him". (Bible study tool 2014). Both founders of Christianity and Islam also pursued the same universal The most revered Prophets of God, Jesus Christ and Mohammed (Pbuh), followed the same path as reported in the new international version (NIV) Mark 12:32 says "well said teacher". message with vigor, resilience and decorum aptly captured in the glorious books, they were both hated by evil men of their days (Ali, 2012 in Haruna and Buzaije 2024).

Whether Christianity or Islam, what is common among them is that, adherents of both religions love their country and God. In addition, Nigerians are very hospitable and loving people. They love to live in peace with one another and other people in the world. It has been observed in recent time, that some of the potent tools used by mischief makers to cause unrest and rancor are; disaffection, hatred, disunity, tribal war, ethnicity and religious bigotry which brings divides and disharmony, thereby resulting to propensity of one side having an upper hand against the other (Abubakar, 2014}.

Christians and Muslims adherents are enjoined to genuinely recognize their differences and appreciate them. We are focused more on areas where the both religions adherents concur to work together to strengthen the common ties and design a mechanism that we enable us to mutually appreciate our areas of disagreement with mutual respect to one another. We believe in God and what was revealed to us and what was revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob

and his descendants and the teachings which they gave to Moses, Jesus and other prophets. We make no distinction between any of them and to him do we submit (Chentu, 2014).

Finally, Abubakar (2017) is of the opinion that Christian Muslim relationship in Nigeria is often determined by selfish, uninformed and bias minds. He says " there are two aspects of relationships between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria that is often not taking into consideration. As sisters' religion, Islam and Christianity share so many things in common".

He further buttresses that; the two religions share belief in one God who created everything. The two sacred scriptures are full of interrelated histories of the past and shared many morals admonishments. Islam on most part made many important references to Jesus Christ and his disciples. Secondly, both Christianity and Islam in Nigeria shared the same race and boundaries. The dominant population of Christians and Muslims ought to have made Nigeria into a great nation. A nation dedicated to believers who are truthful, trustworthy and hardworking, resilience, incorruptible, sincere and spiritually upright, but what we see in return is agitation and conflicts between the adherents of the two noble religions.

Conclusion

No society is an Ireland; society depends on one another for symbiotic relationship in every area of human endeavors. Civilization opens every part of human history such as cultural, religion, political, administrative language, tradition, technological to mention but a few, mankind is never sufficient in itself from time immemorial, we continue to evolve and depend on one another (Idankpo, 2018). To him, civilization involves the blending, simulation and fusing of culture, traditions and religions of a people. When a stronger culture or religion steps into a society there's always a realignment and fusing that takes place like the situation of the emergence of Christianity and Islam in Ile Ife. Ile-Ife is considered the cradle of Yoruba civilization, and traditional African religion (TAR) has been an integral part of the culture. With the arrival of Christianity and Islam, the region experienced significant religious shifts. Today, Ile-Ife is a melting pot of Traditional African Religion, Christianity, and Islam.

Way Forward or Suggestions

- i. Interfaith dialogue and cooperation encourages mutual understanding and respect among adherents of different faiths in a given community or society.
- ii. Cultural preservation: ATR can leverage its cultural significance to promote Yoruba heritage and values to accommodate other faiths for co-existence
- iii. Contextualization of Christianity and Islam can adapt their messages to resonate with local culture and traditions.
- iv Community development should focus on joint initiatives addressing social issues like poverty, education, and healthcare among the adherents of different religions.

References

- Abubakar, D (2014.). Alliances between Religious Leaders and Politicians in Nigeria: A Challenge for Sustainable Development.” Towards Peace, Security and Sustainable Development in Africa. Berlin: Media team IT Educational Publishers.
- Abubakar, D (2017). Peaceful Co-Existence and Amicable Relationship between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria. International Centre for Interfaith Peace and Harmony. Jos: ICIPH,
- Akinjogbin, A. (1980). The Concept of Origins in Yoruba History: The Ife Example, in: University of Ife: Department of History Seminar Paper, March 1980.
- Clapperton, H. (1929). Narratives of Travels and Discoveries in Central Africa, London 1828.4, S. JOHNSON, History of the Yorubas, Lagos 1921.5I.
- Haruna, G.O (2023). Christianity and Islam barrier to peaceful co-existence and Harmonious living in Nigeria,
- Haruna, G.O {2023}. Recurrent Clashes between Fulani Herders and Settlers of Bagana Community of Kogi State: The Role of Religion. Masters’ dissertation faculty of Arts, Department of Religion and Philosophy, University of Jos
- Idanpo, S (2018). Religious Pluralism in Nigeria: Implication for National Integration. A Seminar Paper presented in Kogi State coverage of education Ankpa,
- Mamkaa, I (2018). *Farmers Herders Conflict and Socio-Economic Development in Tiv Land*. PHD Thesis submitted to the Post graduate School Benue State University.
- Nguvugher, C D. (2011). Symbiosis: Paramount to Our Corporate Existence. Jos Journal of Humanities, 5(3), 201- 211. www.josuga.org. <http://study.com/academy/lessons/Structural-functional-theory-in-Sociology>.
- Osaro -Edo, V. (2020). Benin–Ife Relations in Historical Perspective. A Study of Kingdoms, one Institution. West Bohemian Historical Review.
- Tanko, P. B. (2024). Dialogue, Peace Building and Reconciliation in 21st Century Nigeria. Jontal press Zaria.