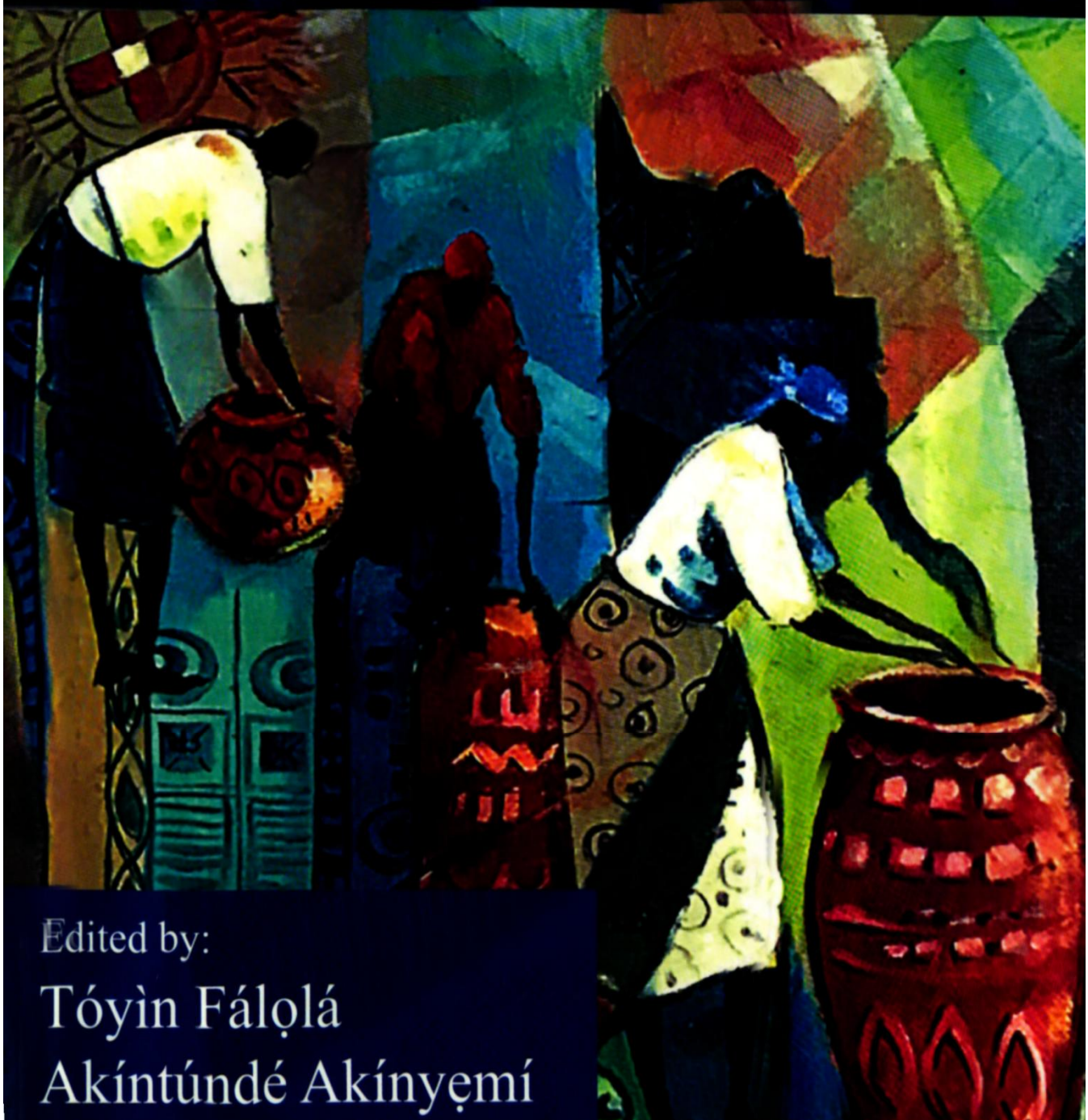
CULTURE AND CUSTOMS OF THE YORÙBÁ



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Chapter 34

Associations: Cultural, Cooperative, and Religious

Hezekiah Olúfẹ́mi Adéọ̀ṣun

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the three major types of associations among the Yorùbá ethnic group of Nigeria: cultural, cooperative, and religious associations. Different kinds of definitions have been given by scholars on what the term 'association' means, depending on the area of academic discipline or context of use. For instance, to a psychologist, association could refer to a connection between conceptual entities or mental states that results from the similarity between those states or their proximity in space or time. To a sociologist, association could be defined as an organized body of people who have an interest, activity, or purpose in common. An association can be an organized group of persons associated together for religious, benevolent, cultural, scientific, political, patriotic, or other purposes. In this chapter, the sociological perspective is appropriate and germane.

According to Fádípẹ̀ (1970:243), the tendency to form associations and corporations is very strong among the Yorùbá. Associations are formed for the purpose of promoting and protecting common interests in the fields of politics, economics, religion, recreation and enjoyment. One interesting thing about associations, as noted by Fádípẹ̀, is that wherever there is an appreciable community of Yorùbá, either outside Yorùbáland or even only outside their own particular communities, an organization will spring up complete with officers. The Yorùbá equivalent for association is *ẹgbẹ́,* which

is also used in the sense of 'associate'. Fádípẹ̀ (1970:257) comments that although membership in an *ẹgbẹ́* was not compulsory in traditional Yorùbá society, it was the rule and not the exception to belong to one. A person who had no *ẹgbẹ́* was not a properly adjusted and socialized being. There are various kinds of associations among the Yorùbá which include: occupational guilds, hunters' guild (*ẹgbẹ́ ọdẹ)*, league of traders (*pàràkòyí*), social clubs, secret or initiatory societies, etc. This chapter is concerned with the cultural, cooperative, and religious associations.

Yorùbá Cultural Association

Membership in a Yorùbá cultural association starts at an age when members could hardly be said to have any explicit awareness of the meaning of their action. When a sacrifice is being offered to one òrìṣà or the other, not only the children of the compound but also those of other compounds in the neighborhood are invited to join with the children of the principal celebrant. Out of this kind of association, often strengthened by the fact of the children being playmates, arises a definite organization complete with officers and president. In the choice of the president, they go outside their own circle to look for an adult. The association consists of members of both sexes, but there are a set of female officers as well as a set of male officers, with the *bàbá ẹgbẹ́* (father of the association) as the head both of the male section and of the combined body, while the female section has as its head an officer known as *ìyá ẹgbẹ́* (the mother of the association). The president, when appointed, gives a feast to members at which there is drumming and dancing. The members support the expense of the feast. In the case of social activity in the family of any member, the rest of the members help them. They helped them perform tasks that need to be done as well as help with the occasional grand event with dancing, singing and feasting. Meetings of the association are held every ninth or seventeenth day in the house of the president for the purpose of discussing the general affairs of the association. At this meeting, announcements about any forthcoming feasts in the houses of different members of the association are made. As stated by Fádípẹ̀ (1970:258), the *ẹgbẹ́* was thus a convivial association which ministered to the traditional desire of the Yorùbá for gregariousness, good-fellowship and mutual assistance.

In modern Yorùbá society, cultural associations have extended beyond one's immediate compound or environment. Various cultural associations are emerging in Nigeria's schools known as Yorùbá Cultural Associations that are aimed at promoting Yorùbá language, literature and culture. At the tertiary level, there is a Kegite Movement that has the objective of promoting and preserving Nigeria's culture (Adéọ̀ṣun, 1995). Also, there are students' associations which connote the state of origin of students in Yorùbáland. Examples of such are Ògùn State Students' Association, Èkìtì State Students' Association, Lagos State Students' Association, Ọ̀ṣun State Students' Association, Ondó State Students' Association, Ọ̀yọ́ State Students' Association, etc. Students in these tertiary institutions are always eager to be associated with the associations because of the belief that their welfare and interest will be taken care of. Of equal importance are places of work, communities where people come together to form a cultural association, and even in the Diaspora. Yorùbá people are, today, found

all over the world, especially in the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States, Cuba, Brazil, Latin America, and the Caribbean. The migration of Yorùbá people all over the world has led to a spread of the Yorùbá culture across the globe. Interestingly, some of these Yorùbá people in the Diaspora constitute themselves into cultural association with the name Ẹgbẹ́ Ọmọ Yorùbá / Ẹgbẹ́ Ọmọ Odùduwà or at times, names of some Yorùbá associations portray the state of origin of the members, like Ẹgbẹ́ Ọmọ Ìpínlẹ̀ Èkìtí, Ẹgbẹ́ Ọmọ Ìpínlẹ̀ Ògùn, and so on.

Yorùbá Economic Association

Subsistence farming was the traditional preoccupation of Yorùbá people before the arrival of the colonial invaders. This, however, necessitates that each member of society had his own farms and herds which the family members were fed on, and also exchanged their goods and commodities among the neighboring villages (Adéọ̀ṣun, 2007:505). Alao quoted in Adesina and Ọlọ́runfẹ́mi (1998: 127) describes Nigeria's economic system before the arrival of the colonial powers as, "Long before the arrival of the Europeans with their massive demand for tropical raw materials, the people engaged in food farming combined with palm oil processing mainly for home consumption with the unit of production being the farmer and dependent members of his own family, comprising his wives and children."

The quotation above attests to the fact that within each Yorùbá community, there was a specialization built upon the agricultural base. Each household in the community had its own line in food production that could be made available to others at a price or for an exchange. Apart from food production, there were specialist craftsmen and others who would take up a particular craft. Also, there were hunters and fishermen and those who devoted their whole energies to trade. All these were grist to the mill of the multitude of local periodical markets which covered practically the whole Yorùbáland. There were also smelters, mat-makers, pottery-makers, calabash-carvers, leather-workers, and so on (Adéọ̀ṣun, 2007:506). However, before the introduction of a monetary economy, markets were the center of business and commercial activities, social engagements, political and even religious matters in any Yorùbá town. Towns, villages and communities had markets run on daily basis, or in cycles of three, four, five, nine or fifteen days. Some of these markets operated on full day, half day, or nightly schedules (*ọjà alẹ́)*. Even now, markets are held in wide-open areas organized into buying and selling sections; trees of different types and sizes provide shade, while stones which are arranged in parallel patterns serve as chairs and tables (to display wares). There are markets' administrators appointed by the kings to collect taxes, to settle disputes between or among traders, and perform rituals on behalf of the community. Markets are generally located in public squares, adjacent to the palaces, or community centers. The sellers of each commodity or group of goods within a market have their own *ẹgbẹ́* or trade guilds, as do workers in the various crafts. Market traders' associations fix prices for their goods, settled disputes between their own members, and dealt with other issues concerning supply and sales. Many of Many provide informal credit to their members. These economically based *ẹgbẹ́* have*ẹgbẹ́* haght to make and enforce rules and bylaws, which they do through regular meetilar meet each group has

a recognized head. The associations also speak collectively on behalf of their members (Mcintosh, 2010: 226). However, there are some improvement on modern day markets having lock-up shops, car parks, banks, health centers, and police and fire units for security and safety.

From this background, it should be noted that apart from the traders' guilds that ordinarily operated in market places, Yorùbá economic system in times past had different types of economic associations known as *àáró, ọ̀wẹ̀,* and *èsúsú*. No doubt, today's economy is significantly different from what it was decades back. Organized labor, a prominent feature of modern economy still synchronizes with àáró and *ọ̀wẹ̀*. They have both become the engine of economic development in Yorùbáland.

Firstly, àáró (group-labor-by-turns) is a loose labor type where people agree to assist, and to work for each other on trust, and by turns. Youths from 20 to 35 years of age at the village or community level take turns to work for each other without monetary gains (no charges or wages paid). Nevertheless, the àáró labor system is guided by two principles: one, the àáró recipient must provide meals (food and drink) for all labor providers after the task is accomplished; two, since labor is provided by turns, previous beneficiaries must support and help when it is the turn of others. Anything contrary will be seen as going back on a promise and commitment.

Secondly, *ọ̀wẹ̀* is another form of labor system similar to àáró in purpose and in function, but it differs structurally. *Ọ̀wẹ̀* is more of a club, or association formed by people of the same age group to render help, and provide assistance to group members when the need arises. Under the *ọ̀wẹ̀* system, members are summoned, or put on notice by the group leader. They are told the nature of the task, the time, and the date. Interestingly, the *ọ̀wẹ̀* system responds quickly to emergencies, unlike àáró because of its loose or weak control. Also, under *ọ̀wẹ̀*, services and help are not limited to farm related jobs; rather, help is provided in areas like construction, building, and community service. Similarly, the *ọ̀wẹ̀* system supports any of its members in times of joy and mourning. This social function is very evident in all Yorùbá towns and villages, especially during ceremonies such as burials, marriages, coronations, anniversaries, house warming, etc.

Èsúsú (micro-credit finance) is another form of economic association among the Yorùbá. The introduction of legal tender in the middle of the 19th century changed the Yorùbá economy for good. Lagos became a crown colony in 1860. In 1884, the Royal Niger Company Charter became operational in Lagos Colony and the Southern Protectorate; and to facilitate easy commercial transactions, paper currency and coins were introduced to replace the cowries previously used in trade-by-barter by the Yorùbá and others. Lagos, thus, became a trading and commercial center for both the Europeans and local traders, the future industrial platform for Yorùbáland. Every sub-group within the Yorùbá nation wanted unrestricted access to Lagos, for this reason, the battle for control over routes always resulted in wars among these Yorùbá towns: Ìbàdàn, Ìjèbú, Ẹ̀gbá, Ọ̀tà-Àwórì. As commercial activities grew in Lagos, cooperative societies (èsúsú) were formed by Yorùbá commercial intermediaries that encouraged safe deposit through money contributions, an improvement on traditional underground safe-keeping method. Monies contributed by cooperative members were returned on

agreed dates, after the depositaries had taken their commissions. Cooperative members had the opportunity to borrow money on interest from association's coffer, but must make loan re-payment on an agreed date; failure always had dire consequences of property confiscation with or without return. Notwithstanding the changes and transformation that the Yorùbá economy had undergone over the decades, the micro-finance system (*èsúsú* or *àjọ*) is still in practice. It is embraced by all, irrespective of social class or educational level. Co-operative societies have become prominent in all government and private organizations in Nigeria today. Different occupational bodies in Yorùbáland such as hunters' guilds, traders' guilds, craft and merchant guilds, etc., have also constituted themselves to cooperative societies that greatly improve their economic standard.

Yorùbá Religious Association

Traditionally, each town in Yorùbáland had its own traditional religion, which is known as òrìṣà. The worshippers of each òrìṣà are organized into an association of which the priests and priestesses are the active members. As in every association in Yorùbáland, there is a hierarchy of office-holders consisting of men and women. The purpose of organizing into an association is to "introduce uniformity in such matters as calling upon the òrìṣà on behalf of the community in such critical occasions as war, drought, pestilence, annual propitiatory sacrifice for ensuring the welfare of the community during the ensuing year, and the selection of a new king or chief" (Fádípẹ̀, 1970:254). The association also meets the need for a central authority that fixes the dates of the yearly festivals of the . Each association supplies its own nominee for the position of state priest or priestess of the particular òrìṣà. This nominee has always been the head of the association.

According to research recently conducted by this writer on the activities of the *akóògùn* traditional worshippers in Abẹ́òkúta, Ògùn State of Nigeria, it was established that this sect has an association in each of the local government areas of the State where its worshippers reside. The executive members of the association in each local government area converge regularly in Abẹ́òkuta (the headquarters) to decide on the issues affecting their members and the . In fact, the annual festival of the òrìṣà is performed in the month of April every year. The actual date of the festival, which always last for seven days, is decided by the executive of the association. This is a clear indicator that despite the infiltration of foreign religion like Islam and Christianity in Nigeria, Yorùbá traditional religion is waxing stronger. There is no town or community in Yorùbáland in which traditional religion is not practiced.

In his submission, Fádípẹ̀ (1970:254) declares that apart from the organization of devotees into separate associations, a great deal of cooperation and camaraderie prevails among traditional religious associations. This camaraderie precludes the priests of one òrìṣà being jealous of the priesthood of another òrìṣà that has a larger followership than their own. However, what operates between the adherents of Islam and Christianity in Nigeria today is an unhealthy rivalry in a bid to win followership to their folds; this has frequently resulted in religious crises in some parts of the country. It should be stated clearly here that in spite the proliferation of churches and mosques

in every nook and cranny of Nigeria, within Yorùbáland in particular, traditional religious associations still flourish with a large number of followers.

Olúwo Fáyẹmí Fákáyọdé (2015) reveals that in the early 1980s, many youth organizations emerged among Ifá/òrìṣà devotees in Yorùbáland to propagate the religion. There was a youth group known as the "Ọrúnmìlàrians" in Lagos prior to 1980. The members were all of Ìjọ Ọrúnmìlà Ato, Èbúté-Mẹ́ta, Lagos. In Ìbàdàn, a youth organization called Ifá Youth Movement International (IFAYOMI) was formed in 1980. About the same time, Ìjọ Ọrúnmìlà Ato at Èbúté-Mẹta, Lagos witnessed an influx of educated converts from Islam and Christianity. The organization known as "Ọrúnmìlàrians" then metamorphosed into Ọrúnmìlà Youngsters International (OYIN) in 1982 with late Prince Adéwálé Ẹgbẹ́róngbé as the first President. In Ọyọ township, an organization named Ìtẹ̀síwájú Progressive Association coordinated by Chief Fámoríyọ̀ Agboọlá was formed in 1982. The Association of Progressive Ifá Youth Movement (APIYOM) coordinated by Chief Fákáyọ̀dé Ọlánipẹ̀kun was formed in 1994 in Ìbàdàn. Later, in 1997 there were organizations known as "Àdìmúlà Improvement Movement (AIM) and "Òrìṣà Youth Movement" (OYM) in Ọ̀yọ́. In 2005, Ìṣẹ̀ṣe Youth Organization (IYO) was formed and headed by Ọ̀túnba Kẹ́hìndé Ìdòwú. Besides all of these aforementioned associations, there are others that were established in the Nigeria tertiary institutions. Examples of such include "Òrìṣà Students' Association" (OSA) formed in 1986 at Ọbáfẹ́mi Awólọ́wọ̀ University, Ilé-Ifẹ̀, headed by Abíọ́dún Agboọlá and "Ifá Religion Students' Association" (formerly African Traditional Religion Students' Association) at Adéyẹmí College of Education, Ondó, headed by Elder Ọjẹ́bọ̀wálé Ọlọ́jẹdé as the first President and Fáyẹmí Fátúndé Fákáyọ̀dé as the first secretary in 1997. These associations are poised to promote, propagate and improve the religion.

With the emergence of Islam and Christianity in Nigeria, many associations began to emerge within the sects. In Islam, there are associations like the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (SCIA), National Council of Muslim Youths Organization (NACOMYO), The Young Muslim Brothers and Sisters of Nigeria (YOUMBAS), Muslim Students' Society of Nigeria (MSSN), Islamic Brotherhood of Nigeria (IBON), Federation of Muslim Women Association of Nigeria (FOMWAN), etc. In Christianity, there are many associations like Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), Good Christian Women Association of Nigeria, Christian Youth Association of Nigeria, Nigeria Christian Corpers' Fellowship, etc. All of these religious associations, whether Christian, Muslim, or Traditional Religion are established to promote and attract more followership to their circles.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the three associations among the Yorùbá. They are cultural, economic, and religious associations. In an attempt to critically discuss these three concepts, definitions of an association were given from the sociological perspective that describes an association as a group of people associated for a common purpose. The chapter revealed that traditionally the Yorùbá embraced cultural association from childhood, when a child was hardly conscious of being associated with a group of

children in a compound, to adulthood. Even in modern Yorùbá society, there are various types of cultural associations among men and women in towns, places of work, schools, and in the Diaspora. This chapter also revealed some economic associations in both traditional and modern Yorùbá societies. These are àárò, *ọ̀wẹ̀*, and *èsúsú* systems. Though the first two (*àárò* and *ọ̀wẹ̀*) are no longer popular among the Yorùbá, the third (*esúsú*) is still in existence with a modern name, cooperative society. Lastly, religious association among the Yorùbá was discussed. It was revealed that despite the aggressive search of followers by both Islam and Christianity in Nigeria, Yorùbá traditional religion still thrives as it attracts more followers with various associations as found in both Islam and Christianity.

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