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GOD AMONG THE YORUBÁ OF SOUTHWESTERN NIGERIA: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL

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Abstract

It is a known fact that till date, the discriminatory attitude of the Whites and African religionists in general on the relationship between God and Africans in general and the Yorubá in particular still persist. The notion that Africans (the Yorubá inclusive) have no idea of God still persist in some minds. To such people, Africa "the dark continent" could not have an idea of God. The introduction of foreign religions (Christianity and Islam) has further relegated the African ideas about God to the background. This paper critically examines the notion that Africans in general have no idea about God using the Yorubá of Southwestern Nigeria as its focus. The objective is to further clear the air on the erroneous notions about African idea about God using the Yorubá as reference. The aim is to establish the fact that God in the African context is not different from God in the European context. The paper concludes that discriminating against a race or nation is tantamount to prejudice and cannot bring meaningful development to any society.

Key words: God, Yorubá, Appraisal, Southwestern, Nigeria

Introduction

It is certain that before the coming of the Whiteman to the shores of Africa, Africans believe in the existence of a Supreme Being who they give various names. The Yorubá for example call Him *Elédàá* (Creator), *Olódùmarè* (the mighty one who goes nowhere), *Aterere-kari-aye* (the one who spreads (is found) everywhere,

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Arìnu rode, Olumò okan (the one who sees both the inside and outside and knows the mind of man) and several other names connoting their belief in His existence and His omnipotent and omnipresent nature. These names are as a result of their experience about the handwork of the Supreme, the Highest Order.

This paper is out to the idea of the White Investigators that God of Africa is a "withdrawn God". In other words, the paper establishes the fact that Africans in general and the Yorubá in particular believe in the existence of a Divine Power (the Supreme Being), who is regarded as the head of everything in existence both in the heavens and on earth and that the existence of everything depends on Him.

In the Yorubá religious beliefs, God is the head. He has various categories of divinities that assist Him in the work of governance of the earth. This is why the divinities are regarded as means to an end and not ends in themselves rather; they act as intermediaries between God and man. No wonder they are appropriated well so that they would act well on the people's behalf before God.

Despite this belief, the Whiteman came with his religion with different objectives and different modes of worship. The religions, (Christianity and Islam) condemn African Traditional religious worships. This is clearly explained in Isaac Deland's novels titled *Lójó Ojó Un* and *Ayé Dayé Oyìnbó*. Today, things have fallen apart and it is not certain if the center could ever hold again.

This paper critically examines the pre-colonial Yorubá religious worships. It concludes that the Whiteman was prejudicial in his assessment and description of African Traditional Religions. This culminated in his wrong notions about the Africans idea of God (the Supreme Being), of which the Yorubá of Southwestern Nigeria is not exempted.

God in Yorubá Religious beliefs

As earlier mentioned, Yorubá believe in the existence of a Supreme Being known as "*Elédàá*" meaning "the Creator". Ìdòwú (1962. Pp.38-47), gives us some attributes of God as found in the

Yorùbá religious belief system. These include among others: God as the Creator (*Elédàá*), God as immortal (*Òba Àìkú*), God as all-knowing, all-seeing, all-wise (*arínúróde, Olùmòràn okàn*), God is omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient (*alágbara, onímò tó ga jùlò, tó sì wà nìbì gbogbo àti nígbà gbogbo*), God is holy and without blemish (*eni mímó tí kò lèèrí*), and several others. Let us discuss briefly on some of these attributes:

As the Creator, the Yorùbá believe that nothing on earth exists without His knowledge. Hence they say, "*eni tí Olórun kò dá, Oba kan kò dá a*" (he, who God does not create, neither does any king create him). He is called "*Elémù*" (the owner of spirit/life), "*Olójó òní*" (the owner of this day/life).

Throughout West Africa, people believe God to be the Creator of everything. Though they recognize the existence of the lesser gods (divinities), they believe that all the divinities own their existence to the Supreme Being (*Elédàá*). He is described as the Creator, the Moulder, the Potter, the Carpenter, the Architect, the Builder of man's life and the likes.

As a holy person, He is pure, and cannot do anything wrong or evil. He has no fault and do not fail. Yorùbá speak of Him as a pure King without blemish and His whiteness is without pattern. Because God is holy, people are always careful of how they speak of Him. Those who lead others in rituals and ceremonies directed to God are men and women of high moral integrity and in case of women; they are either the aged or a virgin. He is called "*Oba mímó*" (the holy king), "*Alálà funfun gbò ò*" (the one with pure white garment).

God is believed to be all-knowing and all-wise. Yorùbá believe that God knows everything and sees everywhere. Nothing passes unobserved by Him as He sees both the inside and outside of man. He is addressed as "*arínúróde olùmò okàn*". There is also the saying "*amòkùn jalè, b'Óba ayé kò rí o, t'òrun nì wò ó*" meaning "he who steals in the dark, if the king of the world do not see you, the king of heaven (*Elédàá*) sees you. If something happens and they could not trace the person responsible for such happening, they believe that *Elédàá* (Creator) sees such person. To this end they say "*Ohun tó sá pamó fun eniyan, kedere ni ó hàn sí*

Elédàá", meaning "what is hidden before man, is exposed to God". If a person harms another person and hides it, Yorùbá believe that no matter how long that person may hide it; God sees him or her and shall deal with the person.

We need to point out here that even though God is everywhere, simultaneously, he is not identical with anything or any place. Hence, the Yorùbá say: "*kò sí ibi tí Olórun kò wà*" meaning "there is nowhere that God is not present". This is why they call on Him anywhere they are and at any time too.

Among the Yorùbá, God is regarded as a king and one of the major functions of a king is to dispense justice to his people without prejudice. The Yorùbá as well as most African people believe that no sin goes unpunished. Whatever a man does, he must be judged accordingly. To the Yorùbá, "*Elédàá*" dispenses justice without fear or favour. When they feel cheated, they say "*Olúwa á dájó*" meaning God will judge. They see Him as a silent judge "*Adákédájó*" hence they say "*fijà f'Olórun jà, f'owó lérán*" meaning "leave your defense for God and watch".

To the Yorùbá in particular and to Africans in general, God is real. He is not a mere illusion. This is found in their names for God. All Yorùbá names for God are not mere labels but with meanings which could be philosophical, theological or historical. These names arose out of the people's total experience about the Divine.

Furthermore, in Yorùbá theology, God is Unique. He cannot be compared with anything in the universe. This is why they do not have image for God. For instance, the axe in Sàngó shrine symbolizes the wrath of God. The Yorùbá would say "*ta ni a ó fi Elédàá wé?*" meaning "with whom shall we compare the Creator?", "*Oba bi Olòrun ko si*" meaning "there is no King as God".

The conception of the "*Elédàá*" as the king with absolute supremacy emphasizes His uniqueness. One of the Yorùbá names for Him has the connotation of one who wears the unique crown in addition to His superlative attributes. He is the only Deity. He is not of the rank and file of the divinities. He is not a person in the sense that human beings are.

In their worships, the Yorùbá put the "Elédàá" first. The diviners will divine and call on the name of the "Elédàá" before that of any divinity. There is the belief that whatever success one records on earth, it is God who makes it possible. Although, there is the strong belief in destiny (*Àyànmó*), the Yorùbá believe that it is the Creator who gave man's destiny through *Òrìsàálá*, the primordial divinity, who is believed to be in charge of man's choice of destiny in heaven.

Yorùbá also believe in the saying that there is only one God who governs both heavens and the earth. It is unfortunate however that to the Whiteman, Africans as a whole have their own God (the inferior God). They see Africans as inferior people with inferior God. For instance, Emil Ludwig has this to say about Africans conception of what they call "the original" God. He writes:

How can the untutored Africans conceive God? How can this be? God is a philosophical concept which savages like Africans are incapable of framing.

Unfortunately, this claim is contrary to the preaching of both Christian and Islamic religions that there is only one God.

Ìdòwú (1962) opines that Yorùbá offer direct worship to God in this form. A white vessel (symbolizing pureness of God), covered with white cloth, one kolanut. A white circle is made (symbolizing eternity), white bowl is put inside the circle covered with white cloth and the white kolanut put on it. The prayer is then offered in that place. According to him, it was a common affair in those days, it was the duty of women but later, and even now, somebody is usually delegated to perform the rituals.

The rituals are said to be directed to "the White one" above. During the ritual, the name of God was called. He also says that if two people want to enter into serious agreement, they call on "the White one above" to be their witness.

In their day-to-day activities, Yorùbá put God first. Even a diviner puts God first. This is to confirm what Quarcoopone (1987) says that the gods (divinities/*orisas*) are means to an end and not ends in themselves. They are regarded as God's

assistants. Just as one cannot see the King without going through the "Esos", in the same vein, Yorùbá approached God through the divinities who serve as intermediary between man and the Creator. Yorùbá believe that whatever success they record in life, it is because the Creator (*Eledan*) wants it.

Similarly too, the names they give their children at birth portray their notion about God, "Elédàá" (the Creator). They have names such as: *Dúrótólúwa* (wait on the Lord), *Olúwapèlúmi* (God is with me), *Olúwatimiléyìn* (God supports me), *Olúwarántími* (God remembers me), *Ìrètíolúwa* (God's expectation), to mention just a few. "Olúwa" in this context means Olú (The overall Head), "Wa" means "àwa" (Us). The combination means "Our overall head".

In their oral literature such as the proverbs, Yorùbá portray their idea of the existence of God. The following few proverbs can be used to justify this claim.

- i. If a person who is not influential in the society is cheated or is about to be cheated but suddenly, he or she escapes and people begin to ask how he or she made it, the person can reply: "*Mààlùù tí kò ní ìrù, Olórún Oba ló nì bá a lé esinsin*" meaning "it is God who helps the cow without a tail (the tailless cow) to drive away houseflies".
- ii. When a person backbites and feels the secret will not leak out, people will say of the person thus: "*Asoro kekele boju wo'gbe, b'oba aye ko ri o, t'orun ni wo o*" meaning "he who backbites in secret, if the king of the world do not see him, the King of heaven sees him".
- iii. When a person is wrongly blackmailed, he can say "*ibaje eniyan, ko da ise Oluwa duro*", meaning "no amount of blackmailing can stop God from doing what he intends to do".
- iv. When someone wishes you dead or when it is rumored that someone is dead, or when someone is involved in a fatal accident and he escapes death, he can say "*Eni Olorun ko pa, oba kan ko le pa a*" meaning "no one can kill a person when God says the person shall not die". We cannot exhaust them here.

In like manner, Yorùbàì express their knowledge of God in their traditional festival songs. For instance, they believe that whatever behaviour a man puts up when on earth, he is going to give account before the impartial, silent judge (*adakedajo*), hence they give warning to people to do good always by singing this song:

<i>E ma sika laye</i> -	Do not do evil when on earth
<i>'Tori a o r'orun</i> -	Because we would go to heaven
<i>Bi a ba de 'bode</i> -	When we get to the gate
<i>A o ro'jo</i> -	We shall give account.

Despite their belief in the existence of evil forces such as witches and witchcrafts who possess the magical power to derail man's destiny (see Ogunlola, 2004), the Yoruba still believe in the Supremacy of the Creator's power over these forces and so they put all their expectations for survival on the Almighty.

There is a Yorùbàì saying that "*ohun kan ni adiye ni je ki agbado to d'aye*" meaning "before the discovery of the maize grain, the fowl had something to eat". Before the introduction of foreign religions, Africans in general worship God through the divinities namely the primordial divinities, the deified ancestors and the divinities created as a result of the people's experience of God's work, hence we have the worship of the sun, the moon and the stars but as earlier said, those divinities are only means to an end not ends in themselves.

It is pertinent to make a distinction between "worship" (*sin*), and "appropriation" (*tu loju/bo*). You worship somebody you believe that your existence on earth solely rest on him/her. Africans in general and the Yorùbàì in particular do not worship the divinities, rather, they appropriate them. Just as one bribes a child sent on errand by giving him/her a token to ensure the message is well delivered, the divinities are also "bribed" so that they would represent them well before the Creator. Just as Christians pray to God through Jesus Christ, so also, the Yorùbàì approach their Creator (*Eledaa*) through the divinities. It is believed that the better they are appropriated, the better they represent their clients well before the Creator.

Discussing the origin of religion, Ìldoìwùì, (1973) opines that the idea of God came as a result of man's experience about his environment. According to him, man saw himself and other existing creatures, he asked himself who could have been responsible for their existence, he found no one, yet he was convinced that these creatures do not exist in a vacuum, there and then, he concluded that the power behind the existence of the creatures deserved to be worshipped even though it is not visible. This power he named "The Creator". Because of his invisibility, man decided to approach the power through an intermediary. This culminated in the idea of the divinities (*òrìṣàs*).

The fear of the Creator, and the believe that man will face God's judgement after death, can be said to be responsible for the Yoruba's laying much emphasis on the observation of their moral values and avoiding what they tagged as vices. The belief is that any morally bankrupt person, no matter his place in the society, shall face the wrath of the Creator.

It is however unfortunate that today, these beliefs have been distorted. Africans in general and the Yoruba in particular have been described as people without the knowledge of God (the Creator). Several reasons are given for the lapses, the most common being colonialism and the two religions which brought new and deviant moral ways of life. Ìsòlá, (2009, p.96) opines that:

Colonialism completely took over the African mind through an unsuitable system of education. In schools, the Yorùbà child was not allowed to speak the mother tongue. The poor children were made to learn foreign lullabies such as "Bah, bah black sheep, have you my wool? This lack of competence in the mother tongue has led to the loss of some valuable literary genres and other precious 'souvenirs' of language. The mother tongue was enthusiastically degraded and English was moved to the center stage. It became the pride of anyone who could stammer some innocuous to the envy of the stupefied illiterates.

We would like to state here that it is not only the mother tongue that is affected by this interference, but the entire life style of the

people. Their culture, religion, politics, names given to children and even their entire social life. No wonder, Ìsòlá goes further to say that:

Religion is intended to water culture, sanitize it to make cultural life more stable. You can change your religion and espouse a foreign one, but you cannot change your culture. The truth is that if your culture has not socialized you into acceptable standard of right and wrong, if you have not internalized those humane qualities of integrity, honesty, transparency, and accountability through your own culture, there will be no foundation on which any religion can build. Being born again really means going back to your God-given culture to learn how to be a good person. (p.96)

From the above, it is evident that culture plays a vital role in the achievements of a people or a nation. A people that dump her culture for a foreign one are not likely to make headway in the areas of politics, economy and social advancement. This implies that no nation can prosper under false pretense. Bánjo (2009, p.135) opines that:

Indiscriminate cultural borrowing may produce deleterious effects, and the degree of impersonality which results from lack of diverse cultures may subtly encourage disloyalty to one's own culture, when little is done to reinforce that culture.

Oládipò (1998, p.34), opines that:

To understand a people through their cultural expressions, one must judge each culture both in terms of the basic assumptions about reality in terms of its goals.

This implies that other people of the world imbibe the life style of only one group of people. He describes such situation as evil especially to developing nations like Nigeria. Ìsòlá (2009) decries a situation whereby the politically and economically strong nations do things even when this is only to their own advantage.

The Yorùbá society is not left out. The situation calls for urgent attention because the worst thing that can happen to a people is to allow other people's ideas and cultures to dominate their own culture. This is the case with the Yorùbá society.

Ògúndèjì and Àkàngbé (2009, p.5) state that:

Though there could not but be some changes and modifications to the traditional systems in the modern context, the changes and modifications should be guided so that the good aspects of it that has to do with the sole existence of the Yorùbá as a people will not be eroded.

Òlátúnjì, (1979, p.2) asserts that:

In most traditional African societies, the kind of dichotomy of divorce of religion and literature does not exist. Among the Yorùbá, for example, literature enshrines the theology and cosmology of the people and reflects their ethics and morale.

What Òlátúnjì is saying here is that literature reflects the moral state of a society and that within the Yorùbá society; religion has many roles to play in determining people's behaviour.

In as much as we believe that religion shapes people's moral, it is also evident that a person who cannot be regarded as being religious can be morally good. It is also possible for a person who claims to be religious to be morally bankrupt. This opinion, according to Adéríbigbé, is in line with the Humanist Philosophers such as Soyínká, who believe that:

It is perfectly possible to be moral without being religious whatsoever. This is because moral convictions can be correct and proper without depending on any religious conviction or practice. (See Adéríbigbé, 1995, p.293).

In the Yoruba society of today, evidence abounds that some people (Pastors), who are supposed to use their positions in the society to improve the moral standard of the people, use them to commit evil. This implies that one's position in the society

does not determine his moral state. No wonder, the Yorùbá will say "*aso nlá kó ni èyàn nlá*" meaning "the size or quality of one's dress does not determine his greatness". This is what the humanists like the late Tai Sòolarin believed. He is quoted as saying:

The more we see religious heat being turned on in Nigeria, the more we see corruption, nepotism, of man's inhumanity to man, spreading across our horizon and making the firmament thicker still. (*Sunday Tribune*, November 11, 1990, p.4).

Writing on Christian moral values, Akanmidu (1993, p.165) says that morality in Christianity must derive its content and sanctions from God. It is a system of conduct that conforms to standard of right conduct or behaviour sanctioned by, or resulting from Christian morality and that Christian moral values rest only on the judgment of God. He writes that:

Christian moral values are values which take source from the doctrines of Christianity and have standards in the authority of God. This means that Christian moral values may be estimated in terms of the content of Christianity. What Christianity means to people as a religion forms the basis upon which its impact on the people is known.

This is not different among the Yorùbá who are often guided by their religion. Whatever their religion forbids, they would ensure they are not involved in it.

In like manner, Adéríbigbé (1993) writes on the relationship between religion and morality. In his opinion, the average believer has come to assume that the influence of religion on the behaviour of an individual goes a long way to determine the sort of moral life he lives. To a religious believer, he asserts, separating religion from morality amounts to removing God from the scheme of human life. African religion, according to him, upholds the strong belief that the Supreme Being and the divinities have set the standard of morality.

Adéríbigbé (1993, p.297) says:

This is why African Religionists have always desisted from crimes to avoid incurring the wrath of the divinities that will not leave the breaking of covenant unpunished. To the African Religionists, being moral would be the expressed fulfillment of the covenant relationship between man and the creator.

Adéríbigbé suggests that religious belief must be seen as the foundation of moral belief. To separate the two is neither acceptable nor desirable.

In like manner, following Longnore, Awóníyí (1975, p.365) opines that:

If a man does away with his traditional way of living, and throws away his good customs, he had better first make certain that he has something of value to replace them.

It is doubtful however, if Africans in general, and the Yorùbá society in particular, are conscious of this fact. Unfortunately today, Yorùbá society have lost almost all its good customs but it is doubtful if the ones they have acquired to replace them have the proper value.

Findings, Suggestions and Conclusion

In this paper, we have been able to establish the fact that the discriminatory attitude of the Whites against Africans especially on the universality of God, (the Creator), is borne out of prejudice. Since no religion, foreign or indigenous, preaches against the universality and oneness of God, the Yorùbá are not likely to be different. God (*Eledaa*) is often referred to as "*Olorun gbogbo aye*" meaning "God of the whole world (universe) and not "*Olorun eya kan*" (God of a tribe).

The Yorùbá express their views about God (*Eledaa*) through their literature (oral and written), through the names they give to babies, through their various methods of worship, through their utterances and so on, putting God first in everything and trusting God for everything. The roles of the divinities (*orisas*) are those of assistants and this is why they are seen as means to an end and not ends in themselves.

This paper has also proved that the Yoruba Traditional religious worships jealously guide their attitudes. For instance, the fear of being punished with thunderstorm will make a person to desist from the acts of stealing, telling lies and the likes. It is also believed that breaking of taboos will be punished by the gods who are believed to be messengers of the Supreme Being.

It is also established that the discrimination against the African's idea about God have gone a long way in destabilizing the society. The gods are no more respected; hence, moral decadence level of the societies is on daily increase. People now hide under the auspices of foreign religions to commit evil. The number of Pastors and Alfas are on daily increase but the question is "how many of them are divinely called? Pastoral work has been commercialized in our society today. The Yoruba traditional religionists (and indeed Africans) are tagged idol worshippers. Africans have abandoned their traditions without getting something of value to replace them.

The paper suggests that to move the society forward, we should all cooperate to promote what is ours. The Yoruba traditional religious worships do not condone acts that are detrimental to the norms and customs of the society. For instance, any morally bankrupt person have no place in the society; this is because their faith in God do not condone the practice of acts regarded as vices among the Yoruba.

The paper concludes that as long as Africans in general refuse to applaud their faith in their Creator (*Eledaa*), the discrimination against their traditional way of worship shall continue and this may not benefit the society in so many ways.

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