CHRISTIANITY AS A CATALYST FOR SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL CHANGE IN NIGERIA

A Festschrift in Honour of
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ISBN: 978-978-780-683-7

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CHRIDAMEL PUBLISHING HOUSE

No 8, Ejiba Street
Off Stadium Road, Ilorin, Kwara State
07030576353, 08033780568
www.chridamelpublishing.com.ng

CHAPTER 42

GOD OF OUR FATHERS IN YORÙBÁ BEFORE THE ADVENT CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES

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Abstract
It is a known fact that, till date, the discriminatory attitude of the Whites and African religionists on the relationship between God and Africans in general and the Yorùbá in particular persists. The notion that Africans (the Yorùbá inclusive) have no idea of God persists 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 Yorùbá of Southwestern Nigeria as its focus. The objective is to clarify further the erroneous notions about the African idea about God using the Yorùbá as a reference. The aim is to establish 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.

Keywords: God, Yorùbá, 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, whom they give various names. The Yorùbá, for example, call Him Ẹlẹ́dàá (Creator), Olódùmarè (the mighty one who goes nowhere), Atẹ ẹrẹ-kárí-ayé (the one who spreads (is found) everywhere, Arínú r'óde, Olùmọ̀ ọkàn (the one who sees both the inside and outside and knows the mind of man) Ọgbàgbà tí ń gba aláìlárá (the deliverer who delivers one who has no relations, Adúrótini lọ́j ọ̀ ìṣòro (the one who stays by someone in time of trouble) and several other names connoting their belief in His existence, omnipotence, and omnipresent nature. These names result from their experience with the handwork of the Supreme, the Highest Order.

This paper debuts the White Investigators' idea that the God of Africa is a "withdrawn God". In other words, the paper is out to establish the fact that Africans, in general and the Yorùbá, 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 Yorùbá 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 white man came with his religion with different objectives and modes of worship. The religions (Christianity and Islam) condemn African.
Traditional religious worship. This is clearly explained in Isaac Delanọ's novels titled.
Lójọ́ Ọjọ́ Un and Ayé Dayé Òyinbó. Today, things have fallen apart, and it is not certain if the centre could ever hold again.

This paper critically examines the pre-colonial Yorùbá religious worship. It concludes that the white man's assessment and description of African Traditional Religions was prejudicial. This culminated in his wrong notion about the African's idea of God (the Supreme Being), from which the Yorùbá of Southwestern Nigeria is not exempted.

God in Yorùbá Religious beliefs

As earlier mentioned, Yorùbá believe in the existence of a Supreme Being known as "Ẹlẹ́dàá" 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 (Ẹlẹ́dàá), God as immortal (Ọba Àikú), God as all-knowing, all-seeing, all wise (arínúróde, Olùmọ̀ràn ọkàn), God is omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient (alágbára, onímọ̀ tó ga jùlọ, tó sì wà níbi gbogbo àti nígbà gbogbo), God is holy and without blemish (ẹni mímọ́ tí kò léèérí), 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, "ẹni tí Ọlọ́run kò dá, Ọba kan kò dá a" (he, whom God does not create, neither does any king create him. He is called "Ẹlẹ́mìí" (the owner of spirit/life), "Ọlọ́jọ́ òní" (the owner of this day/life).

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

As a holy person, He is pure and cannot do anything wrong or evil. He has no fault and does not fail. Yorùbá speaks of Him as a pure King without blemish, and His whiteness is without a 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 the case of women, they are either the aged or a virgin. Hence, He is called "Ọba mímọ́" (the holy king), "Aláàlà funfun gbòò" (the one with the pure white garment).

God is believed to be all-knowing and all-wise. Yorùbá believes 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 olùmọ̀ ọkàn". There is also the saying "amòòkùn jalè, b'Ọba ayé kò rí ọ, t'ọ̀run ń wò ọ́" meaning "he who steals in the dark if the king of the world does not see you, the king of heaven (Ẹlẹ́dàá) sees you. If something happens and they cannot trace the person responsible for such happening, they believe that the Ẹlẹ́dàá (Creator) sees such a person. To this end, they say, "Ohun tó sápamọ́ fún èniyàn, kedere ni ó hàn sí Ẹlẹ́dàá" 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 them 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 Ọlọ́run kò wà", meaning "there is nowhere that God is not present". This is why they call on Him anywhere they are and at anytime 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," Ẹlédàá" dispenses justice without fear or favour. When they feel cheated, they say "Olúwa á dájọ́" meaning God will judge. They see Him as a silent judge, "Adákẹ́dájọ́" hence they say "fijà fỌlọ́run jà, fọwọ́ lérán" meaning "leave your defence for God and watch".

God is real to the Yorùbá in particular and to Africans in general. 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 with 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 an image of God. For instance, the axe in the Ṣàngó shrine symbolises the wrath of God. The Yorùbá would say "ta ni a ó fi Ẹlẹ́dàá wé? meaning "with whom shall we compare the Creator?", "Ọba bí Ọlọrun k ò sí" meaning "there is no King like God".

The concept of the "Elẹ́dàá" as the king with absolute supremacy emphasises 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 worship, the Yorùbá put God (Ẹlẹ́dàá) first. The diviners will divine and call on the name of the "Ẹlẹ́dàá" 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 a strong belief in destiny (Àyànmọ́), 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 believes in the saying that there is only one God who governs both the heavens and the earth. Unfortunately, to the white man, Africans have their own God (the inferior God). They see Africans as inferior people with an 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 offers direct worship to God in this form. A white vessel (symbolising the pureness of God), covered with white cloth, one kola nut. A white circle is made (symbolising eternity), a white bowl is put inside the circle covered with white cloth and the white kola nut is 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" as their witness. In their day-to-day activities, Yorùbá put God first. Even a diviner puts God first. This confirms what Quarcoopone (1987) says: the gods (divinities/òrìsàs) are a 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 "Ẹ̀ṣọ́s", 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 (Ẹlẹ́dàá) wants it.

Similarly, too, the names they give their children at birth portray their notion about God, "Ẹlẹ́dàá" (the Creator). They have names such as Dúrótolúwa (wait on the Lord), Olúwapẹ̀lúmi (God is with me), Olúwatimílẹ́yìn (God supports me), Olúwarántimi (God remembers me), Ìrètiolúwa (God's expectation), to mention just a few. "Oluwa" 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 portrays their idea of the existence of God. The following few proverbs can be used to justify this claim. (I). Suppose a person who is not influential in society is cheated or is about to be cheated but suddenly, escape, and people begin to ask how they made it. In that case, the person can reply: "Màálúù tí kò ní ìrù, Ọlọ́run Ọba ló ń bá a lé
eṣinṣin" 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 say of The person thus: "*Asọ̀rọ̀ kẹ̀lẹ bojú wò'gbẹ, b 'ọba ay é kò rí ọ, t'ọ̀run ń wo ọ*" meaning "he who backbites in secret, if the king of the world does not see him, the King of heaven sees him".

(iii). When a person is wrongly blackmailed, he can say "ìbajẹ ènìyàn, kò dá iṣẹ Olúwa dúró", 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 rumoured that someone is dead, or when someone is involved in a fatal accident, and he escapes death, he can say "Ẹni Ọlọrun kò pa, ọba kan kò lè pa á" meaning "no one can kill a person when God says the person shall not die". We cannot exhaust them here.

In like manner, Yorùbá 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 an account before the impartial and silent judge (adákẹ́d ájọ), hence they give warning to people to do good always by singing this song:

Ẹ má sìkà láyé	- Do not do evil when on earth.
'Torí a ó r'ọ̀run	- Because we would go to heaven
Bí a bá dé 'bodè	- When we get to the gate
A ó ro'jọ	- We shall give account.

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

There is a Yorùbá saying that "ohun kan ni adìyẹ ń jẹ kí àgbàdo tó d'áyé" meaning "before the discovery of the maize grain, the fowl had something to eat'. Before the introduction of the Christian religion, 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 ṣ àngó (god of thunder, ògún (god of iron), the sun god, the moon god, the star god and many others 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" (sìn) and "appropriation" (rù lójú/bọ̀). You worship somebody you believe that your existence on earth solely rests on them. Africans, in general, and the Yorùbá, in particular, do not worship the divinities; rather, they appropriate them. Just as one bribes a child sent on an errand by giving them a token to ensure

the message is well delivered, the divinities are also "bribed" so that they would represent the people well before the Creator. Just as Christians pray to God through Jesus Christ, so also, the Yorùbá approach their Creator (Ẹlẹ́d àá) 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, Ìdòwú, (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 and 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 must be a power behind it; then, he concluded that the power behind the existence of the creatures deserved to be worshipped even though it is not physically 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 divinities (òrìṣàs).

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

It is, however, unfortunate that today, these beliefs have been distorted. Africans, in general, and the Yorùbá, 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 foreign religions, together with their attendant civilisation, which brought about new and deviant moral ways of life. Yorùbá belief in the existence and the efficacy of the powers of the gods are completely eroded. Ìṣòlá, (2009,96) opines that:

> *Colonialism completely took over the African mind through an unsuitable system of education. In schools, the Yorùbá 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 want to state here that it is not only the mother tongue that is affected by this interference but the entire lifestyle of the people. Their culture, religion, politics, names given to children and even their entire social life. For example, most Yorùbá moral values such as respect for elders, faithfulness and truthfulness in all things, respect for virginity intact and the like have been relegated to the background, while societal vices such as stealing, lying, murder, kidnapping, adultery, fornication adultery and the likes are on daily increase. No wonder Ìṣòlá 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 their 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 pretence. Bánjọ (2009, 13) 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.*

Ọládipọ̀ (1998, 34), opines that:

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

This implies that other people of the world imbibe the lifestyle of only one group of people. He describes such a situation as evil, especially in developing nations like Nigeria. Ìṣòlá (2009) decries a situation whereby 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, 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.

Ọlátunji, (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 Ọlátúnjí is saying here is that literature reflects the moral state of 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 morals, it is also evident that a person who cannot be regarded as 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 Ṣoyínká, 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 religious convictions or practices. (See Adéríbigbé, 1995, 293).*

In the Yorùbá society of today, evidence abounds that some people (Pastors) who are supposed to use their positions in society to improve the moral standard of the people, use them to commit evil. This implies that one's position in society does not determine his moral state. No wonder the Yorùbá will say 'aṣọ ńlá kọ́ ni èèyàn ńlá' meaning "the size or quality of one's dress does not determine his greatness". This is what the humanists, like the late Tai Ṣolarin 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, 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 the standard of right conduct or behaviour sanctioned by or resulting from Christian morality, and Christian moral values rest only on the judgment of God. He writes:

> *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. They would ensure they are not involved in whatever their religion forbids.

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 an individual's behaviour goes a long way to determining 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. According to him, African religion upholds the firm belief that the Supreme Being and the divinities have set the standard of morality. Adéríbigbé (1993, 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, Awóniyì (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 has 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 (*Ẹlẹ́dàá*) is often referred to as

"*Ọlọrun gbogbo ayé*" meaning "God of the whole world (universe), and not "*Ọlọrun èyà kan*" (God of a tribe).

From the preceding, it is also evident that what Christianity preaches about God (the mightiness and oneness of God) had been with the Yorùbá from inception. Yorùbá have always put God first in their day-to-day activities. For instance, before they engage in any new project, they ask for God's support. Even before a child is named, enquiries are made from God through the divinities. Can it, therefore, be said that the Christian belief about God is an archetype of the Yoùbá belief about God?

This is to say that Yorùbá express their views about God (*Ẹlẹ́d àá*) 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 (*òrìṣàs)* 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 Yorùbá Traditional religious worshippers jealously guide their attitudes. For instance, the fear of being punished with thunderstorm will make a person desist from stealing, telling lies and the like. It is also believed that breaking 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 has gone a long way in destabilising society. The gods are no more respected; hence, the moral decadence level of the societies is on a daily increase. Today, evil acts such as banditry, kidnapping, robbery, murder, and human rituals are rampaging societies, and Christians are not exempted. The fear of God has eluded most societies. People now hide under the auspices of foreign religions (even Christianity) to commit evil. The number of Pastors is on a daily increase but the question is, "how many of them are divinely called? Pastoral work has been commercialised in our society today. The Yorùbá traditional religionists (and indeed Africans) are tagged as idol worshippers. Christianity describes Traditional religions as fetish. Africans have abandoned their traditions without getting something of value to replace them.

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

Yorùbá says, "Àparò kan kò ga ju ọ̀kan lọ̀ àyàfi èyí tó bá gun orí ebè" meaning: no bush fowl is taller than the other, except one climbs the heap. To compare Jesus Christ with the divinities may look blasphemous to Christians. Still, the fact remains that traditionally Yorùba also worship God (*Ẹlẹ́d àá*) through the divinities just as Christians worship God (the Creator of heaven and earth) through Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, as much as the Bible tells us that God is one and is for all people and all nations, this infers that all nations have an idea about God, the mode of worship only differs. Yoruba adage says: "*báyìí là ń ṣe ní'lé wa, èèwọ̀ ibòmíràn ni*" meaning: the way we do things in our family is forbidding in another family. The difference in the mode of worship does not in any way infer that Yorùbá have no idea of God or that they do not worship God. The divinities are a means to an end but not an end in itself.

The Yorùbá belief in the mightiness of God is as solid as ever, but the introduction of the Christian faith is jeopardising this faith. The paper concludes that as long as Africans and the Yorùbá in particular) allow the foreign religion to dominate their religious affairs and allow the

discrimination against their traditional way of worship to continue, the negative effects of such action will continue to manifest in them, and this may not benefit the society in so many ways.

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