



# **JOURNAL OF RELIGION AND CULTURE**

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Department of  
Religious and  
Cultural Studies  
Faculty of Humanities  
University of Port Harcourt

Vol. 21, No. 3, 2021



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# A SOCIOLOGICAL RESPONSE OF RITUALS IN YORUBA THEOLOGY TO COVID-19 PANDEMIC

BY

DR. SUNDAY ELIJAH IYANDA  
UNIVERSITY OF ILORIN,  
DEPARTMENT OF RELIGIONS

## Abstract

Towards the end of 2019, the world has not remained the same because of the outbreak of corona virus. The aftermath effects of this pandemic are enormous and calamitous. In fact, this pandemic has socially displaced the global community and as well dislodged the people. All aspects of human endeavour have suddenly paralyzed, and so far, no pragmatic solution has been provided. This global menace has thus ushered in "the New normal". It is of interest to note that African perhaps Nigeria is not excepted from this menace except that the climate is unfriendly to this virus. In spite of the fact that religious organizations where Yoruba Religion belongs were not carried along, the impact of Yoruba religious leaders were also felt. It is against this backdrop that historical and theological methods would be employed to explicate the veracity of rituals in Yorubaland and as well situate these rituals within the context of divinity saddled with such responsibility. The paper postulates that medicine men (*Onisegun*) and Priests (*Olorisa*) carried and still carry out rituals to curb the spread or ward off Covid-19 pandemic from the Yoruba environment. The paper therefore, concludes that in Yoruba theology, *Osanyin* is saddled with such responsibility. The paper recommends that Yoruba theological rituals henceforth should not be relegated by the government of the day.

**Key words:** Rituals, Covid-19, Pandemic, Yoruba, Theology

## Introduction

The outbreak of corona virus which is referred to as Covid-19, took the world aback in late 2019. This virus was said to have emanated from Wuhan province of China, while Chinese opined that the virus evolved in the United State of America. However, the pandemic unleashed monumental setbacks to the global community and paralyzed all aspect of lives, and the aftermath of the pandemic is calamitous monumentally. Virtually, all aspects of human endeavor were affected. The pandemic has ushered in the "New normal", which people are still coping with. Meanwhile, in March, 2020 the same surge penetrated Nigeria through an Italian expatriate and that was the beginning of the pandemic in the country. Although, the Nigeria climate is unfriendly with the virus. Some social critics were of the opinion that the virus is fictitious, while some believe in the virus *abnitio*.

Despite the involvement of governmental agencies in curbing the spread, no religion organizations were and still not carrying along. Yet in Yoruba environment, rituals, sacrifices, and offerings were carried out by cultic functionaries to ward off Covid-19 pandemic. It is therefore the intention of this paper to look curiously at the sociological response of rituals in Yoruba theology to Covid-19 pandemic.

## An Account of Yoruba Theology

Before the account of Yoruba theology, it would be worthwhile to curiously examine Yoruba people and their religious beliefs.

## **Yoruba People**

The Yoruba of Nigeria occupy a large area, and are found in the South-western part of Nigeria. They are predominantly found in the following states: Ogun, Oyo, Ondo, Ekiti, Osun, and Lagos. A substantial portion of the population of Kogi and Kwara States are also Yoruba.<sup>1</sup> The Yoruba are many and are regarded as one of the most advanced communities in West Africa, especially in religion, agriculture, commerce, education, art, intelligence, government, and warfare. These people have a long history, and they trace their ancestral home to *Ile-Ife* where they believed that the act of creation began. They claimed to have a common ancestor, *Oduduwa*. The people speak the same language, though there are dialectical variations. Among the dialectical groups are: *Egba, Ekiti, Ibadan, Ife, Ijebu, Ijesa, Ilaje, Ondo, Owo, and Oyo*.<sup>2</sup> Their social organization is based on the Kingship system, and the kings are approached through an intermediary that is usually one of his Chiefs. Yoruba language is rich in proverbs, folktales, and pithy sayings. These serve as the basis of the Yoruba culture, and general conceptual frame-work which provides structure for their religious beliefs and practices.<sup>3</sup>

## **Yoruba Religion**

The study of any religion is the study of the people who practice the religion. Aside man, there can be no religion. Religion can only come as a result of the activities of two agents, God who reveals Himself to man, and man who embraces and responds to God's revelation.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the study of Yoruba Religion is the study of the people that practice the religion. Yoruba Religion therefore, is an integral part of African Religion; African Religion is the indigenous religion of Africans. That is to say that Yoruba Religion is the indigenous religion of the Yoruba people. There was a time in Nigerian history when the only practiced religion was the indigenous religion.<sup>5</sup> This was also the case with the rest of Africa, otherwise called African Religion by the scholars. The religion has been handed down from generation to generation by the forebears of the present generation of Yoruba by oral tradition.<sup>6</sup> It is a religion that the Yoruba have made theirs by living and preaching it. It has no written literature but it is written everywhere for those that care to see and read. It is written in the peoples' myths and folktales, in their songs and dances, in their liturgies and shrines and in their proverbs and pithy sayings.<sup>7</sup> It is a religion that has no founder and zeal for membership drive, yet it offers persistent fascination for Yoruba whether young or old. The religion is a heritage from the past but it is treated not as a thing of the forgotten past but as that which connects the past with the present and the present with eternity. It is a religion that is practiced by living men and women.<sup>8</sup>

The above shows that Yoruba Religion means the Indigenous Religion of the Yoruba and it has no founder. The revelation of this religion came as a result of human experience of the universe. The Yoruba people pondered over mystery and desire to know the author and brain behind the mystery. In an attempt to get answers, the Yoruba conclude that the mystery must be a Super Natural Power, a Living Being, who orders, controls, and maintains the Universe. This type of process is regarded as human experience.<sup>9</sup> Ogunade is not different from other scholars of African religions when he sees Yoruba Religion as the indigenous faith of the Yoruba which was passed down from the genesis of their generation through oral traditions, art, crafts, liturgies, pithy sayings, proverbs, folklores, stories, songs and wise sayings to the present modern age. And that it has a natural appeal and most of the adherents are born into it and that over the years some non-Yoruba have taken to it such as: a place in North Carolina, USA, America, and Cuba.<sup>10</sup> With the above, it is understood that Yoruba Religion is a religion that evolved slowly through a long period of time and experienced a situation of continuities and discontinuities.<sup>11</sup> This is to say that the people allowed the practices and beliefs that continue to be useful and adequate to their spiritual life and

disallowed those that are not suitable for spiritual growth. The importance of religion among the Yoruba could be noted from Bolaji Idowu's statement when he says, "the keynote of their lives is their religion, and in all thing, they are religious".<sup>12</sup>

### Yoruba Theology

Theology means the study of God, God's talk or God's discourse. Yoruba theology depicts the scientific study of God by the Yoruba. Thus, Idowu, Awolalu, and Dopamu have unequivocally agreed that in Yoruba theology, there are five elements or cardinal pillars which the religion hinges. These five elements include belief in God, Divinities, Spirits, Ancestors, and the Practice of Magic and Medicine. These categories of beings are ever present in Yoruba communities watching over human behaviours.<sup>13</sup> It is understood that humanist perspective of Yoruba Religion is the promotion of life. Consequently, Yoruba Religion concerns itself with what affects human life positively or negatively. Hence, the belief in God, Divinities, Spirits, Ancestors, and the practice of Magic and Medicine are centred on humanity.<sup>14</sup> Beliefs are essential part of any religion; they show the way people think about the universe and their attitude towards life.<sup>15</sup> The structure of Yoruba Religion is based on morality. God is the giver of life and the Power behind everything. This can be supported by Magesa's opinion when he says that, the way of human life originates from God and that, tradition contains the moral code and prescription for an ethical life.<sup>16</sup>

Everywhere in Nigeria, particularly in Yoruba land, there is belief in, and worship of one Supreme and living God. We can equally say that, there is indeed only one God, the Creator of the whole Universe who reveals Himself everywhere, and has not left Himself unrevealed in any place in the world.<sup>17</sup> Belief in God is at the centre of Yoruba Religion and dominates all of her other beliefs. The Yoruba believe in the existence and supremacy of God who is called with various names such as: *Olodumare* (Almighty), and *Olorun* (God). *Olodumare* translates to "The King or Chief Unique, who holds the sceptre, and wields authority and has the quality which is superlative in worth, and at the same time permanent, unchanging and reliable."<sup>18</sup> *Olorun* which is another name for God in Yoruba is always on their lips. This name enters their daily prayers, conversation, discussions, and sayings. *Olorun* translates to "the owner of heaven" or "the Lord of heaven." This depicts God as the Author of all things visible and invisible, the Head or Overlord of all in heaven and on earth.<sup>19</sup> Having realized that God is Supreme, Almighty, and the Creator of the Universe, it will be good if men/women could hold a belief in Him, as the explanation for the origin and continuity of the universe and that God is at the peak of any hierarchy in the universe.

Yoruba Religion believes in divinities, and Divinities are believed to have emanated from the Supreme Deity. They are in consequence off-springs of God.<sup>20</sup> Yoruba believe in lesser gods, to them, these divinities are next to God in hierarchy. They are Ministers in the theocratic government of the Supreme God, they act as intermediaries between God and man and receive day to day sacrifices (from man).<sup>21</sup> Examples of deities in Yoruba Religion are *Orisa-nla*, this represents the ethical purity of God, and the wrath of God respectively.<sup>22</sup> *Orunmila*, is the deputy of *Olodumare* in matters of knowledge; and *Esu*, the Inspector General of rituals and sacrifices. All of these were Primordial divinities.<sup>23</sup> They are equally described as ministers or functionaries with portfolios in the theocratic government of the world with delegated authority or functions.<sup>24</sup>

Yoruba and her religion believe in divinities because they serve as intermediaries between man and God. They also serve as half-way houses for the soul which cannot find full rest and satisfaction. There are divinities that have specific functions to perform. Some of these divinities are anti-wickedness divinities because they punish moral offenders.<sup>25</sup> Their punishment of human beings is royal punishment because they do so on behalf of God who has delegated unto them power and authority.<sup>26</sup> Belief in divinities brings caution to man

because divinities bring instant judgment to offenders and at the same time exonerate the offended. Every falsehood is seriously dealt with out-rightly. With all these in the mind of the adherents, it makes them to think twice before evil is committed against their fellow man.

Next to the divinities in the hierarchy are the spirits. These are forces that can, by careful handling and use of invocations, be manipulated to carry out the wishes of those who come in contact with them. According to Yoruba view, the Universe is composed of visible and invisible parts. It is commonly believed that, beside God and human beings, there are other beings that populate the universe, these are the spirits and they are many. They are emanation of *Olodumare* the Supreme Being just as he is the Creator of all things. The spirits have a status between God and men, and are not identical with either. People often speak about them in human terms, or treat them as though they have human characteristics such as thinking, speaking, intelligence, and the possession of power which they can use as they will.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the fact that the spirits are emanations of *Olodumare*, they are subordinate to him and dependent on him. Some of them may be used by God to run certain errands. Yoruba believe that there are Spirits inhabiting and overseeing some aspects of nature. They reside in places such as mountains, trees, rivers, grooves, rocks, caves, and sky. There are both good and evil spirits wandering about the earth. Some are Spirits of dead people, especially those who died prematurely and cannot be reincarnated. They are immaterial and incorporeal beings.<sup>28</sup> In some societies, it is believed that certain spirits are wholly responsible for some of the evils that people experience. Such spirits have become scape goats for peoples' troubles even if there are more explanations to it. These Spirits are associated with death, and death itself is a Spirit.<sup>29</sup>

In the light of the above, the belief in the existence of spirit provides us with the explanation of many mysteries which are found in the universe. In the Yoruba view of the universe, the spirits fill up the area between God and man, this can be beneficial to peoples' understanding of their own existence and that of God and the universe at large. The above shows that, the spirits are integral part of the religious heritage of the Yoruba and Africa in general. The awareness of the spirit world affects their experiences in life, for better or for worse. Next in the hierarchy of Yoruba belief is the ancestors. According to Yoruba Religion, it is believed that only those who led a good life, lived to a ripe old age, died good death, and are accorded full burial rites can become ancestors.<sup>30</sup> Ancestors are referred to as living dead.<sup>59</sup> Ancestors can be regarded as the departed spirit who stands in peculiar and close relation to the tribe or family.<sup>60</sup> The fact that the family derives its life from him, makes him remain one with them. His favour must be sought at all times and helped in a way to maintain the solidarity of the whole family. Ancestors are called different names; the Yoruba call them *Baba nla*. They are spirits and are approached as spirits because they are no longer visible, but different from divinities.<sup>31</sup>

The Yoruba belief in ancestors cannot be far-fetched because their belief in ancestor supplies strong sanctions for public morality. Ancestors are guardians of traditional morality and they demand from adherents a high sense of respect for the traditional laws and customs. It is the expectation of the ancestors that the living must live the way they lived while on earth. Just as the living parents have the power to punish disobedience in the youth or dereliction of filial duties, so also the neglected or offended ancestors can punish their offsprings for moral offences and can bring disaster upon the whole family. They equally condemn and punish murder, sorcery, witchcraft, stealing, adultery, bearing false witness, taking false oath, incest, and other evils.<sup>32</sup>

Lastly, there is a wide spread belief in magic and medicine. Magic can be described as an attempt by man to tap and control the supernatural powers or other resources for his own benefit; while medicine on the other side is an art of using the available forces of nature to

prevent diseases and to restore and preserve health.<sup>33</sup> The two are means through which one tries to approach that power that one has recognized as 'wholly order' and on whom one must depend for fulfilment.<sup>34</sup> Magic and medicine are so much related that it is difficult to distinguish between them because the two fall within the portfolio of the same divinity which is *Osanyin*.

### **The Phenomenal Import of Covid-19 Pandemic**

The globe has convulsed and is still convulsing as a result of corona virus pandemic. The monumental effect of the pandemic cannot be over emphasized because almost all the facets of lives are paralyzed. World Health Organization (WHO) defines Coronavirus as an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus. Most people infected with COVID-19 virus will experience mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover without requiring special treatment. Older people and those with underlying medical problems like cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, and cancer are more likely to develop serious illness.<sup>35</sup> Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is also defined as illness caused by a novel coronavirus called severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus2 (SARS-COV-2: formerly called 2019-nCoV), which was first identified amid an outbreak of respiratory illness cases in Wuhan City Hubei Province, China.<sup>36</sup> This is to show that coronavirus medically is not new since there is coronary system in the body.

X-raying the origin of the virus, there is endless debate as to where it evolved. The virus was said to have originated from Wuhan province of China in December, 2019, but the Chinese denied the allegation and asserted that it was transported to China from United State of America through sporting events in 2019. Unabatedly, Ex-President Donald Trump affirm that it was a Chinese virus. Efforts to identify the origin of the pandemic has been more of political than scientific veracity<sup>37</sup>. The two superpower nations have been at logger head in an attempt to indict each other. The fact remains that, the pandemic has crippled the world in aspect of human lives. History also abounds that in every one hundred years, there is always the break of pandemic globally. This was traced back to the year 1818-1820 and 1918-1920, there were outbreak of bubonic plague respectively<sup>38</sup>. The pandemic exposed human limitedness, and weakness in all ramifications: socially, economically, medically, technologically, and scientifically to mention but a few<sup>39</sup>. The developing nations such as Africa were not affected as predicted by experts is because, the weather is hot and not favourable to the virus due to the high density in Celsius. This resulted into a less death rate in the developing countries such as Africa than the superpowers where things are working out well.

The aftermath of the outbreak of the pandemic resulted into global lockdown, and movement and activities were restricted. There could not be pilgrimage to the holy lands because every place was totally lockdown. The victim of the virus was isolated or quarantined for the period of fourteen days so as not to infect others around them. It was this that resulted into some precautionary measures of using nose mask, constant washing of hands, using of sanitizer and keeping of social distancing so as to avoid further spread of the virus. The fact remains that the virus has created new normal of individuality where social distancing is permitted, restrictions of movement, social interactions, and this has necessitated development, such as: e-learning, e-transfer, e-banking, e-marriage, e-payment, e-delivery, e-accreditation, e-coordination, e-preaching, online preaching, e-commerce<sup>40</sup>. The new normal has seriously strengthened virtual activities and zooming of any meeting including marriage and wedding engagements.

## The Response of the Yoruba Society to Rituals

To start with, ritual is significant to every religion. Before considering its relevance to Yoruba Religion, an attempt will be made to define ritual. Benjamin Ray sees ritual as “a way of communicating with the divine for the purpose of changing the human situation<sup>1</sup>”. Clothey notes that ritual functions as “a paradigm and dramatization of the intent of religion itself”, by using symbols, both visual and aural which along intellectual and sensual images provide participants with a sense of identity. He further explains that the paradigm element of ritual is seen in the transformation of the participant into a new being.<sup>2</sup> Roger Schmidt in his understanding sees “holy rites as formalized and symbolic actions” which direct people towards an experience of the sacred whether, or not the sacred is conceived as a personal being or impersonal creative process<sup>3</sup>. J. C. Plavoet, refers to ritual as “any sequence of customary symbolic actions which are standardized through repetition in social interaction”<sup>4</sup>. Mircea Eliade defines ritual as “a re-enactment of sacred proto types the repetition of the action of divine beings or mystical ancestors<sup>5</sup>”.

Despite the fact that there are triadic rituals, we are to concentrate on calendrical ritual which Van Gennep refers to as communal rites of passage<sup>6</sup>. Calendrical ritual is performed at a fixed period known to the believing community. In Yoruba religious beliefs, there are a fixed period when certain rituals are being carried out in order to bring about blessings or to avert calamity. Awolalund Dopamu opine that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was the outbreak of small pox in some part of Yorubaland. *Sopona*, who is the divinity in charge of small pox was appeased with the necessary rituals in order to tame it. *Sonpona* is also regarded as *Obaoluaye* (The king of the earth), and *Ile gbona* (The house is hot)<sup>7</sup>. Describing *Sonpona*, Richar Gehman said among others that

*Sonpona* is the one of the four main divinities among the Yoruba. He is greatly feared. People greet him as the Lord of the Earth. Only *Sonpona* is known as King who is Lord of the earth. The reason people feared him so greatly is that he not only preserves the seed for the farmer but also sends the disease of small pox. As king he must be respected and thanked, even when he takes someone's life with small pox. He is seen wearing red and moves about in the dry season to curse those who offend him. Since his cult was forbidden in 1917, his shrine can only be found in certain places today<sup>8</sup>.

The above quote of Gehman has established that during the outbreak of epidemic and small pox, *Sonpona* as a Yoruba divinity is responsible and also saddled with the power to tame the outbreak, until the cult was proscribed in 1917.

With regard to Covid-19, two major schools of thought emerged. The first school believes that the virus or the pandemic does not exist, instead, it was a fiction for the government and other medical personnel to swindle the government and other agencies. The governor of Kogi and Cross-River states, Yahaya Bello and Professor Ayade belong to this school respectively. They see Covid-19 as a scam and an avenue to loot the government's coffer. Till now, they have not been in the good book of the government, medical experts, and some politicians. In the same vein, some traditionalists in Yorubaland also denied the existence of Covid-19. They are of the opinion that since rituals are being offered, there is no basis for the pandemic. However, Laguda is of the view that these are living in denial of the virus<sup>9</sup>.

The second school of thought asserts that the existence of Covid-19 is real and indubitable. Some traditionalists who belong to this school explain that some rituals are performed to avert the pandemic and as well put an end to the surge. Thus, the traditionalists offer prayers and sacrifices to the divinity to remove the virus from the community and protect their members<sup>10</sup>. This act can be described as preventive measures. Alamu has argued that most of these rituals are performed in the night<sup>11</sup>. This is in line with the effort of *Ooni* of

*Ife* who at the heart of the pandemic in 2020 was seen spraying 'ero' in the city of *Ile-Ife* so as to ward off the virus<sup>12</sup>.

During his ethnographic research to Lagos Island, Laguda asserts that at the heart of the virus, some traditionalists and medicine-men were engaged performing various rituals, some to avert the trend, some as preventive measures, while others to remove it completely from the environment<sup>13</sup>. Gehman has acknowledge that Yoruba theological belief tries always to make the divine powers as instrument of man's personal welfare<sup>14</sup>. Man's personal welfare and sustainability have been the main reason for the various rituals. That Africans perhaps Nigerians are not the graveyards of this pandemic as insinuated by World Health Organization (WHO) and Bill Gate shows that African Religion indeed makes the divine powers an instrument of man's personal welfare.

In Yoruba theological motif, man is at the center of the religion. Therefore, the personal welfare of man is of paramount importance to the *Olodumare*- The Supreme Being and the society. It is of interest to note that the health and healing of the Yoruba man is paramount to *Osanyin*-the divinity in charge of magic and medicine. This, in latent understanding, produces sound health to humanity. At the heart of the pandemic in Yorubaland, some custodians or traditionalists, offered and still offer holistic medicine by applying traditional herbs to forestall and cure the pandemic. Gbenda argues that to heal is simply to cure, prevent and restore health. Spiritual healing in African traditional Religion is the manipulation of the mystical forces and substances in the visible and invisible world, in curing and restoring the sick as well as casting out evil spirits or demons<sup>15</sup>. Yorba man strives to be in harmony with God, the deities, and fellow men both living and dead. But when man fails to live a spiritual and dutiful life expected of him, the Supreme Being or divinities, spirits among others punish the person or group concerned. Punishment is normally in terms of diseases, calamity, and misfortune. This is true of the Yoruba<sup>16</sup>.

Gbenda again observes that the service of the spiritual healers become necessary and appropriate because healers in African religious life include herbalists, medicine men, and priests. The services they render to the people are highly appreciated and people cannot live without them. Among the Yoruba people, a priest is *Olorisa*, while the medicine man is *Onisegun*<sup>17</sup>. Thus, no medicine is regarded as potent without religious rites. Rituals, sacrifices, and prayers are used for the reconciliation with the invisible world or agents. In the preparation and in administering the medicine, the priests and medicine men make some incantations, invocations, signs by calling on God or his divinities to complete the healing process. A handful of people throng these people for help during this Covid-19 especially in Yorubaland. It was obvious that visiting any market, village, town, city, local and international trade fair in Nigeria, you would see traditionalists at work. Despite the fact that the government did not involve them in the fight against Covid 19, they still made themselves relevant by carrying out necessary rituals to curtail the spread and to also immune their clients from the pandemic. In addition, some local materials were also recommended for use. Suffice it to say that moringa leaf, turmeric, ginger, garlic, warm water, pawpaw leaf and among others were traditionally recommended, and throughout the period till now people are still using them on daily basis.

In the light of the above, it is glaring that during Covid-19 pandemic, traditionalists, custodians, priests, medicine-men made and still making frantic efforts to curb the spread of this virus in the little way because the government of the day does not give them preference and recognition. They did their best by offering sacrifices both at the day light and at night. In fact, the *Ooni of Ife* himself was openly involved by spraying 'ero' at the heart of the pandemic in 2020. In spite of the relegation of the traditionalists, the World Health Organization (WHO) is aware that many elements of traditional medicine are beneficial, and

it is out to encourage traditional medicine and ensure that it is examined with open mind and is integrated into the health care system<sup>18</sup>.

## Conclusion

The sociological response of ritual in Yoruba theology to Covid-19 still subsists or rests on the two schools of thought. It is the facts that, the traditionalists who do not believe in the existence of the virus because rituals are carried out at will which can avert the pandemic. The second school of thought that believes that it exists but it could be ward away by rituals. Looking at these two schools of thought, it will be deduced that rituals are significance in Yoruba societies to Covid-19 pandemic. The fact that the climate is not favourable to the pandemic is another plus to the divinities, and every form of sacrifice offered to the divinities. The activities of the government agents in the management of the pandemic gave room to the traditionalists that there were scams in the process because every slightest headache and malaria patients were taken for covid-19. Those activities made the society believe that it was not a pandemic but just an epidemic which the divinities when appeased could ward off the disease.

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