

# **African and african diasporic religions: reflections on the relevance and prospects of african indigenous religion**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The importance of Religion in any human community cannot be over emphasized. Man's need to reach out to the divine being higher and mightier than himself appears to be both basic and universal. Man felt this need when mystified by forces of nature, threatened by ferocious wild beasts and perplexed by death and hereafter. The affirmation of transcendental being is the core of religion. Hardly did any human civilization row in early times without giving due recognition to religion. This paper posits that before the advent of foreign religions there had been the indigenous religion upheld by African forebears and passed on to succeeding generations. The paper argues that African Traditional Religion is the religion which emerged from the sustaining faith held by the forebears of the present African generation and which is being practiced today in various forms and intensities by a good number of people irrespective of their colour, tribe or race, openly or surreptitiously. The studies reveals that African Traditional Religion is not a fossil religion (a thing of the past) but a religion that Africans today have made theirs by living it and practicing it. Although African Traditional Religion with minority of adherents all over the globe had spread to some areas on the planet earth especially where Africans are found and has influenced the lives of even non-Africans. African Traditional Religion is found in America especially, the Caribbean Islands, Jamaica, Haiti, Trinidad, Cuba and Brazil among others. The researcher employed historical method in carrying out the research.

**Keywords:** African, African traditional religion, community, culture and diaspora.

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

Religion has played a dominant role in the history of mankind. Its influences cover all aspect of life, from birth of a person to long after his death the indigenous religion is so deeply rooted in African that they find it difficult to sever connections, with it. In spite of the influences of other religion, the adherents rather than abandoning their religions, combine both tenets leading to divided loyalty, if not syncretism.

To this end, to alienate the African from his belief is like beheading somebody's head and expect him to live. The African holds so tenaciously to his religion that they apparently became inseparable.

Religion as part and parcel of the African heritage is as old as the African society itself. It the product of the cogitation and experiences of our forefathers. As part of their heritage, it became practically

impossible to abandon it since no one in the history of humanity has ever repudiated the piece of the land or will left for him by his father.

It is integrated so into different area of life that in fact most of the African languages do not have a word for religion as such. The webbed relationship between the African and his belief in God makes him migrate from one part of the continent to another one from African to other continents with his religion.

Again, African religion in general terms has been responsible to a large extent for shaping the character and culture of African peoples throughout the centuries. To be an African in the traditional setting is to be truly religious hence it has been adduced by scholars that Africans are notoriously religious.

Moreover, African religion gives them a sense of direction and security in life making them realize where they are going and their natural endowments, provides readily solutions to their problems hence they find it extremely difficult to abandon it for any other religion. This fact alone states with the highest degree of precision and exactitude that African religion will continue to be for ever and ever. The religion permeates deeply into the bone marrow of the individual especially the community that holds that belief and performs most of the ceremonies and rituals involved in any given situation, people find it so useful and meaningful in their everyday lives hence they allow it to spread freely. It is taught to children through proverbs, myths, and tales and through practice. Young people also learn about it through participation in religious activities such as initiation ceremonies and during festivals.

In essence, the understanding of the African is very much predicated upon his cosmology. The African believes that the world of matter can neither exist nor operate without the world of spirit. Therefore every action of man is necessarily linked up with the invisible powers that steer the course of this universe.

It is then based on this cordial and smooth relationship that most Africans spend a lot of their money and time on things related to their religion; some died for the sake of the religion especially during the advent of the missionaries and their subsequent destruction of African religion so much so that anything that threatens it would seem to threaten their whole existence. Most of the victims in defense of their faith go into the ancestral world as ‘SAINTS’. They sacrifice and offer the best of what they have for their religion.

From the foregoing discussion it need not be overemphasized that the Africans and the religion are inextricably tied together and no amount of heat from the furnace can melt or separate them; thus, African Traditional Religion was, is and will continue to be till the end of the world. The adherents of African Traditional Religion are optimistic that there is hope for the survival of this great religion in Nigeria and Africa at large.

## **2 THE RELEVANCE OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION**

Before the advent of foreign religions there had been the indigenous religion upheld by our forefathers and passed on from them to succeeding generations. This was the religion whose founder cannot be traced no matter how far back we go into history. We may not be wrong to assert that the religion is as old as the first man who ever lived. This was the religion which emerged from the sustaining faith held by the forebears of the present generation of Nigerians and which is being practiced today in various forms and intensities by a good number of Nigerians, openly or surreptitiously.

Many people who profess Christianity or Islamic religion will at dark hours visit native doctors or diviners for help. Someone Church members who goes to the church in the morning and Muslims who goes to the mosque at midday, might easily invite a voodoo priest over in the evening to seek for solution on their problems. Also some pastors that goes to Church in the morning and preach Christianity equally practice the religion of their forebears secretly.

The people visit the traditional religious leaders for protections, favours, success in life, relief from evil forces, etc. people consult diviners and medicine men in secrecy to seek relief from destructive forces like witchcraft, magic and sorcery, this implies that they still regard all these as veritable channels of misfortune. Some Nigerian men and women from all walks of life namely; Politics business, teaching etc., have benefited from the service of these traditional religious leaders in one way or the other. This is an evidence that Traditional African Religion rank first among other religion in Nigeria and the entire world.

African Traditional Religion is rich in moral or ethical precepts which suffer not in comparison with the ethical teachings of other world's great religions and philosophies. African Traditional moral and ethical education has its root in Traditional African Religion. We shall therefore have, in this work run through some African proverb and proverbial sayings which reflect the African Traditional ethical education with a view to galvanizing Africans, particularly those in charge of culture and religious affairs into finding ways of reviving or promoting our cultural or ethical heritage. For in African proverbs lurk many African moral teachings.

And in no part of the globe are proverbs as important as in the continent of African. Proverbs which are just not simply platitudes but sayings that carry authority have rightly been described as "a manual of con" says Bascom (1965:478).

That fact that the proverbs express moral and value judgments, indicating what is right or wrong and what is good or bad gives them an important place in African ethical teachings. This is a very accurate observation, and that is why proverbs are taken by Africans largely as a rule of life. Thus proverbs are a favourite vehicle for society sanctioned ethical instruction for members of African society-youths and elders, the lowly and the high, alike.

No serious Africans can fail to notice the fact that the proverb is commonly utilized to reprove any member of the society who misbehaves, to praise, or ensure, to give support to or withdraw support from a venture and to indoctrinate members concerning the acceptable standard of social behaviours.

In any society where man interacts with his fellow men, the correct procedure for that interaction is usually outlined. And the nature of the interaction, at list in terms of ideal culture, is more often than not communicated to the members by the instrumentality of proverbs.

Consequently proverbs constitute one of the most valuable media of instruction in African. For example, in this work proverbs have been used to epitomize moral lessons which the generality of the African soon wishes to inculcate in their members. As a matter of fact, these proverbs have been used to ensure compliance with African religious and philosophical norms, indeed to express what they like and what they did not like in certain directions in quite an unmistakable fashion. Some of these proverbs “illustrate the ironical wit of the people; they state what ought to be done; providing that this is just what actually being done”.

Proverbs in African Traditional society are cited or used to inculcate value as humility, gratitude, carefulness in speaking, respect for parents and elders, adaptability, co-operation, hospitality, truthfulness and honesty, heedfulness, the golden rule, moderation and so on. Some are used to ridicule gossips, rumour-mongers, theft cases and hypocrites.

As can easily be seen, these highly varied values suggest parallels, similarities approximation and so on with values of other world religions and philosophies. The fact that proverbs are still being quoted today indicates the continuity of African Traditional Religion and that its teachings are still the same up till today from the time immemorial. Among its teachings and values so declared are, to mention a few:

- i. Honesty
- ii. Respect for parents and elders
- iii. Co-operation
- iv. Trust
- v. Love and
- vi. Hard work

The foregoing are but a few examples of the ethical and moral contents as seen in African proverb lore. That they point to the right direction needs no microscope to determine. They are the unwritten ethical laws of Africans who not only use them but seriously believe them, follow them and propagate them without demur.

The number of African moral proverbs even one single ethnic group is inexhaustible. In deed the traditional wisdom of one single African ethnic group is expressed in more proverbs than will be found in the Bible or the Koran or the Veda. For ease of reference Africans have put their philosophy into crisp,

pithy, epigrammatic, self-evident formulae. They are like powerful and useful drugs in tiny, serviceable capsules. Like the Bible, the Koran and other religious books our unwritten books contain a large number of moral value. Taking moderation as example, the mass of proverbs collected on it constitutes recognition by Africans of the fact that man, generally tends towards exaggeration. A masquerade for example, dances until his feathers begin to drop. A bird stays too long on a tree-long enough for the hunter to shoot it or a person to throw stones at it. Thus, African proverbs, idioms and sayings like the teaching of other religions aim at excessiveness in doing anything.

Traditionally, Africans have one of the strongest and most coherent views on ethics that is the philosophy of right and wrong. It is in view of this that Lugard's assertion that African culture had 'no system of ethics and no principle of conduct' should be seen as to say the least unfortunate. It would be absurd to say Africans or any set of people at all have no conception of right and wrong. Every race or any such group has a system of moral rules and these may vary from group to group.

African philosophy defines man by reference to the community. As far as Africans are concerned, the reality of the communal world takes precedence over the reality of individual life circumstances. As Mbiti (1970) has noted, the African view of the person in relation to others can be summed up in this statement: "I am because we are and since we are therefore I am".

Traditional African philosophy thus accepts the fact that personhood is something which is attained in direct proportion as one participates in communal life through performing the various duties imposed on one by the living in the community. In traditional African philosophy, it is generally accepted that persons are owed the duties of justice and equality. Africa also has a rich philosophy of religion. Traditional African philosophy involves belief in the existence of Supernatural beings, who are supposed to control the different aspect of life, for both good and bad. For instance, fortune smiled on one as a result of bumper harvest, this was attributed to a god of harvest being pleased; if some particular epidemics struck they were often attributed to the anger of the perspective gods associated with them.

Hence Mbiti (1970) has noted that the average African is deeply religious. He carries his religion with him through all his activities while sowing on the field, while at river fishing and so on. The average traditional African believes that there is rational basis for holding his religious believes and that religion makes a difference in life.

### **3 THE PRACTICE OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION IN DIASPORA**

At the time when African slaves had a ready market in Brazil and Cuba, the activities of the slave traders were placed under the protection of the saints. One such patron was St. Joseph under whom a religious fraternity had been founded in the church of San Antonio da Barra at Bahia. The statue of this saint was the object of the devotion of slave traders; It had been brought by the Portuguese to the Castle

of Sao Jorge da Mina in 1481. When the fort was taken by the Dutch in 1637 it fell into the hands of Africans who only gave it up again in 1752 when it was brought to Bahai to protect the slave traffic. There was no scarcity of votive offerings to this saint when the captain of one slaving vessel, having escaped from the pursuit of an English abolitionist worship him with a token of recognition for having protected him from such a great, peril and guided him safely to harbor with his cargo.

The ship employed in the trade used to have fine sounding names, such as: Happiness to Angel, peace and Union, Children's Toy, Divine Providence, Victorious Saint Anthony, Beautiful American of Rio, Ave Maria, Saint Anne, Flower of Africa, Glory of Innocence, Nymph of the Sea, and The Sacred Family, Certain of them bore no less than three saints' name each; one in particular- the God Jesus of the Stone, Saint Rita and Saint Domingo –was one of twenty- four ships that had the sole right to slave traffic between Bahia and Cuba (Whydah). Others bore all the sorts of saints' name of the Virgin. All the covert of heaven was enlisted to assure the success of the transactions which brought to Brazil the necessary labour for the sugar plantations and mines to replace the Indians who could not stand up to such work.

Though sons of Africa arrive unwillingly in Brazil and Cuba, their influence was to make itself felt so discreetly and subtly that most people were never aware of it. A Brazilian author, Luiz Vaino Filho, discussing this influence writes:

All of us, even those who have no black ancestors, receive something of the black man into souls, Four centuries of continuous, intimate contact with no great dividing line between the races, were enough to inculcate the whole of Brazilian society subconsciously with characteristics of the culture imported from Africa with the slave... Little by little Bahia became Africanized. The African which was imperceptibly assimilating lots of things that the black slave taught... once freed from the bonds of slavery the African did not fear completion. He was on the upgrade, progressively overcoming his environment and mastering situations which he was once judged incapable of dealing with by reason of his colour. As racial prejudices disappeared so society received more and more African influences which did not disappear but underwent adaptation.

The African influence has its roots so deeply planted in the Brazilian soil and has thrown up so many shoots, it is so well grafted and crossed with the coming from Europe and so well mated with the very depths of the country that it can no longer be dispelled. It is this which is typical of Brazil: this harmonious blending, this willing acceptance, this integration without pride or prejudice between elements coming from such diverse countries of origin. This spirit of sympathy and understanding which has grown up between people of different races constitutes the particular charm of Brazil. In this assembly African does not fail to make her voice heard.

This African influence used to make itself felt upon Brazilians from their earliest days. For children were raised by 'back nannies' who were generally Yoruba. These children heard African songs on their



nurse's knees, they were amused by African fables, their bad behaviours were checked by fear of the same supernatural beings as were known here, and their health was protected by the use of medicines made from the same leaves as were used in Africa. For generations the feelings and reflexes of the children were formed and conditioned by their black nannies, consequently numerous African worlds were included in the Portuguese vocabulary of Brazil.

From this contact of diverse influence and equal respect for and sentimental attachment to them by all concerned, a curious phenomenon has emerged in respect of the religion customs of one section of the population. This is the phenomenon known as syncretism, in which there has been an unconscious endeavour to approximate, combine and identify the cults dedicated to the African deities with the worship of the saints of Catholicism. Originally adopted only by the African section of the population, it has spread and gained group in new circles and at the present time it plays an important part in the spiritual life of the country.

This syncretism brings into play certain characteristics of the saints which may also be found among the Orisha and certain in of these details have been the determining elements in the associations. Thus Yemaja, the well-known Abeokuta Orisha, regarded in Brazil as the mother of the other Orisha, has been identified with the Virgin of the Conception and Nana Buku, the oldest of the water deities, with Saint Anne the mother of the Virgin Mary. Ogun, the god of smiths and warriors, is compared with Saint Anthony in Bahia where, in preference to his capacities as a match-maker, this saint is captain of the Brazillian forces. In Riode Janeiro he has been given the name of Saint George, since this saint is always represented astride a prancing steed, wearing brilliant armour and brandishing a flaming sword. Shanpanna, the god of smallpox, becomes Saint Lazarus by reason of his many 'wounds' Oya, the goddess of the Niger and of storms and the wife of Shango, the god of thunder, is called Saint Barbara, who may well have had some connection with thundering elements considering that on board' ships the powder room is called Saint Barbara and this saint is the patron of artillery.

This same phenomenon reappears in Cuba where there are also many descendants of Yorubas and there it seems that other elements may be brought into play and that the determining factor in these associations may have been a matter of the colours carried by the religious fraternities and those symbolic of the Yoruba Orisha, Thus the habit of the fraternity of Santa Barbara is red and black; the colours of the necklaces worn by Shango worshippers and Santa Barabara have been identified with Shango, White has played the same role linking Obatala and the Virgin de la Caridad del Cobre, the patron of Cuba. Saint Lazarus, probably for the same reason as in Brazil, is the name given there to Shanpanna. Ifa is identified with Saint Francis of Assisi, but I cannot guess what mysterious affinities are implied in this case.

However that may be, this phenomenon of syncretism does demonstrate very well the wish to express equal respect towards the sacred personalities worshipped by either white or black people.

Far from allowing themselves to be dominated by a so-called superior culture, African descendants in Brazil have learnt culture, African descendants in needs and have not only succeeded in preserving their own spiritual patrimony but have proceeded to impose it quietly and imperceptibly upon a much larger group. Jorge Amado expressed the same idea in the part of his speech where he said: 'Our Community had its origins in African and now Sango condescends to extend his rule towards the most diverse countries, from Portugal to Syria and the Lebanon, from Italy to Japan, from Germany to Poland, for we are a mixture of the blood of all these peoples, we are the heirs of all these cultures and we work from within them.'

And that is not a vain hope of Jorge Amado. The cult of the Yoruba orisha has overflowed the strict bounds of the African descendants and has penetrated into many other spheres.

It would be difficult to find a better example of the acceptance of Yoruba values in the midst of Brazilian culture than this manifestation in a Shango temple, under the auspices of the University of Bahia which, it should be noted, is one of the oldest universities in the New World. But I can cite certain other facts which bear out the words of Jorge Amado.

We mentioned syncretism at the beginning of this study the African gods, far from allowing themselves to be westernized, are running a glorious course. Yemanja is identified in her appearance with the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception whilst Oshun has been assimilated by the Virgin of Candlemass. Grand festivals form them are celebrated on the eight of December and the second of February each year. On these days people of all walks of life come in to participate in an offering to Yemanja, the mother of waters She is represented in a rather Latinised form as a statue of a sircu with long flowing hair. The gifts are piled in a huge basket: soaps, perfumes, artificial and natural flowers, lace handkerchiefs, lengths of cloth, fashion magazines, necklaces, bracelets, small mirrors (for this goddess is a coquette) and money-all accompanied by letters of supplication from admirers who wish to ask her some favour, Towards the end of the morning the basket, now exchanged for a huge bunch of flowers, is carried in procession to the beach amidst wild applause, chants and shouts of praise to Yemaja. The offerings are then place upon a boat which sets sail for the open sea followed by a fleet of saverios, local sailing boats, in which a horde of enthusiastic followers sing and beat drums. The offerings are then cast into the sea. To be accepted they must sink beneath the waves and if they float it is because Yemanja has refused them and fresh offerings should be made to obtain her protection.

One must not imagine that the participants in this festival are only of humble origin, such as artisans, labourers, classes come and take part in the festival with equal fervour. It is scarcely surprising when one considers how, from earliest infancy, they must have so often heard the legends of Yemanja. Captains of cargo boats and liners come to fulfill their promises to Yemanja just as they would do before the Notre Dame de la Garde at Marseilles or before the Virgin of Paimpol.



The persistence of Orisha cults in Brazil and Cuba has maintained across the Atlantic not only the Yoruba language, traditional dances and songs as well as musical instruments but also African cooking. Bahia is justly proud of the reputation and regard in which it is held by the rest of the country for its culinary specialist which are no less than the dishes of Yoruba land. The recipes were remembered, as these dishes formed part of the offerings of food made to the Orisha. So one finds: the amala dear to Shango; akara; the delicacies of Oya; the muluku and adun which Oshun loves; certain dishes made from maize such as eko, olele, offered to Shapanna; and the caruru prepared from okra and oil for the Ibeji.

When slavery was abolished the communication established between Brazil and the area round the Gulf of Benin was actively maintained because of the trade in palm oil, great quantities of which were required in Bahia for the preparation of the diet of the bulk of the population descended from African. Later on, when the European shipping companies established regular steamship services between Europe and Africa on the one hand and Europe and South America on the other, the direct links, which had been so frequent between the Bay of All Saints and the Bight of Benin until the decades of the last century finally disappeared.

To make up for the progressive scarcity of palm oil, plantations were started in Bahia where this oil goes by the name of Azeite de Deude,

Another factor which illustrates the complete integration of Yoruba religion into modern Brazilian and Cuban life is that it provides for artists and intellectuals. Painters and sculptors show in their exhibitions works inspired by these beautiful ceremonies; in theatre plays are based upon the myths of these African gods; some composers make piano arrangements of folk airs collected in Bahia whilst others have composed symphonies whose motives have been borrowed from Orisha music; others again create ballets based on certain legends of the gods and copying their choreography directly from the dances of the Orisha worshippers.

The principal art gallery of Bahia is named Oshumare after the Yoruba rainbow god. A restaurant bears the name Yemanjá and a large company has given the same name to a block of flats in one of the best residential districts of the town.

An amusing detail which shows how much the Orisha form part of the daily life of Bahia is the habit which very devout worshippers of these gods have wearing glass necklaces in the symbolic colours of their particular gods. These worshippers of African gods, especially the women, like to set up little store in the street where they sell the special dishes already referred to. According to the day of the week they will show respect to the particular Orisha on his day by wearing the appropriate coloured necklace. Thus absent-minded people can remember what day it is by glancing at the necks of these traders. On Monday the necklaces are black and white for Eshu or red and black for Shapanna. On Tuesday they are dark blue for Ogun, on Wednesday red and white for Shango, Thursday green for Oshossi, Friday white

for Obatala, Saturday yellow for Oshun or beads clear as crystal for Yemanja, and on Sunday there is no definite colour as this day is dedicated to all the orisha- but who is going to forget Sunday, anyway.

It is no more incompatible with modern life that people should respect dead and maintain the idea of family continuity through the cults of Masquerade.

#### **4 CONCLUSION**

From the foregoing, the African Traditional Religion is so valuable and indispensable to the Africans that they can never separate themselves from it hence its bright future. The Africans believe they must continue to find succor and solace in this religion and cannot do without it.

It must be admitted that Christianity posed a great threat to African Traditional Religion, sapping her of some of her viable features but has equally refined manners and morals and with her attendant technological innovations we now live in a better and congenial atmosphere. Although African Religion has been badly represented and described it taught some basic truth and provided some highly commendable spiritual values.

Some Christians tended to relegate the status of traditionalists in the dust and classified them as 'second class' citizens in the kingdom of God. They believed that the traditionalists would all go to hell. This is an erroneous conception of the goals of the people because they have the sound belief that they would join their ancestors after a befitting burial ceremony has been accorded them.

Today the wind of cultural nationalism and cultural Renaissance is blowing all African efforts towards resuscitating all the functional elements of our cultural institutions and values. This has been described by Africans as indigenization or africanization. It is high time Africans become proud of their colour and combined at least certain imported ideas with what is indigenous to them.

It is noteworthy that African religion is not only recognized in Africa but world over. In America, it was the elaborate belief of the Africans in their religion that made them survive the ill-tempered treatments meted out to them. The foreigners have so realized the importance of this religion that most of the modern scientists are now busy testing some age, old herbs for their own use. The African dance forms and beats which are part and parcel of the Traditional Religion has become the foundation of most foreign type of music.

Again, the rate at which African scholars are carrying out research work on this religion and its position on radio and television programme are evident reasons for its continued existence. Again the course, African Traditional Religion, has been given a very vital position in institutions of higher learning both here in Africa and abroad.

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