

RELIGION AND HERITAGE: A REVIEW OF THE DILEMMA OF MOBILIZATION IN THE PAN-YORUBA MOVEMENT.

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Abstract

The Yoruba people from the southwest of Nigeria are commonly called *omo kaaro ojire*. They have rich cultural, religious, and social history. Unfortunately, religion, an essential element of human civilization and a moral foundation of society, has influenced the culture, social norms, values, rituals, and behaviours of the Yoruba people. This research employs Framing Theory from social movement studies to analyze the argument. The Pan-Yoruba movement advocates a heritage framework, highlighting indigenous Yoruba symbols such as *Odùduwà*, *òrìṣà*, and the sacred city of Ilé-Ifè as the secular cultural basis of a unified identity. A powerful theological counter-frame utilised by Islamic and Christian groups always challenges this structure. This framework calls these symbols fetish, pagan, and against revealed religion. This study used a qualitative methodology, examining sermons, religious literatures, social media dialogues, and interviews with some religious adherents of the major religion in practice in Yoruba land. This study investigates how this fetishist and pagan framework obstructed people from mobilizing and participating in the pan-Yoruba movement. Thus, the research concludes that the counter-framing of foreign religion, which views Yoruba heritage as pagan and fetish, alongside the Pan-Yoruba movement's inability to challenge this religious framing effectively, represents considerable impediments to the growth, development, and overall acceptance of the Pan-Yoruba movement.

Keywords: Religion, Heritage, Review, Dilemma, Mobilization, Pan-Yoruba

Introduction

The Pan-Yoruba movement aims to consolidate and advocate for the cultural and political concerns of the Yoruba community, offering a fertile structure for analyzing the dynamic relationship between religion and culture. This movement originated from the southwestern part of Nigeria, it encompasses several elements of Yoruba identity, such as language, traditions, and religious rituals. An analysis of the relationship between religion and culture in this movement provides insights into the wider dynamics of post-colonial African communities (Peel, 2000). The Yoruba people possess a lengthy history marked by an intricate interplay of native religions, Christianity, and Islam. Prior to the onset of colonialism, the Yoruba people followed a traditional religious system called Ifá, which comprised a collection of deities (Orisas) and a substantial body of tales, rituals, and divination customs.

The advent of Christian missionaries in the 19th century and the spread of Islam brought forth new religious dynamics, resulting in a diverse religious environment (Falola & Heaton, 2008). The Yoruba people of South-West Nigeria intricately incorporate religion with their cultural identity. For example, Ifá, the traditional religion, is not simply a collection of spiritual ideas, but rather an essential component of the Yoruba culture. It has a profound impact on societal norms, morals, and even governmental systems. Equally, religious traditions frequently confer legitimacy upon traditional rulers, known as Obas, who act as intermediaries between the divine and the populace (Peel, 2003). The advent of Christianity and Islam had a profound impact on Yoruba culture. Both religions made significant contributions to the dissemination of Western education and the introduction of new socio-political concepts, which played a pivotal part in the development of modern Yoruba nationalism.

Furthermore, these religions also ignited cultural syncretism, assimilating aspects of indigenous beliefs and rituals into Christian and Islamic worship. Yoruba people who have accepted foreign religions still incorporate some elements and aspects of their traditions into their worship. The syncretism of Yoruba Christians and Muslims is evident in their celebration of festivals, performance of rites, and adherence to taboos that have their origins in traditional religion (Akintoye, 2010). It is a common saying among some religious adherents of Christianity and Muslims that *Igbagbo koni kamasoro ile eni*, meaning accepting Christianity and Islam should not prevent someone from involving or participating in traditional festivals. The Pan-Yorubaism movement aims to foster the cohesion and progress of the Yoruba community, with a particular focus on the significance of cultural legacy. Religion as a moral bastion of the society according to Adabembe (2022) serves a double purpose in this movement. On one side, it acts as a cohesive element as the majority of Yoruba individuals, irrespective of their religious beliefs, partake in shared cultural customs and principles. Equally, the presence of different religions creates a difficulty in achieving unity, which requires active measures to overcome disparities and promote mutual respect (Ajayi, 2007). This is despite the fact that, Southwest Nigeria has been identified to by Adabembe (2025) to be an epicenter of religious harmony in Nigeria.

Consequently, understanding the relationship between religion and culture in Yorubaland, Southwest Nigeria, and its impact on Yoruba activism is essential. The region has experienced substantial changes shaped by the interaction between native Yoruba customs and the introduction

of religions such as Christianity and Islam (Peel, 2000). The intricate fabric of cultural and religious existence in Southwest Nigeria exemplifies a vibrant incorporation where traditional beliefs coexist and engage with these foreign but rapidly spreading religions. The complex interplay between these factors continues to influence the social, political, and economic landscape of modern Yoruba society (Falola, 1998). Unfortunately, these foreign religions have dominated the region. Therefore, it is imperative to explore the interplay of religion and culture in South West Nigeria to discover how they shape identity, impact the Pan Yoruba movement, and influence social unity in the region.

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of the study is to examine the relationship between religion and culture and its impact on the Pan-Yoruba activism movement.

The specific objectives of this study are to;

- i. Investigate the historical origins and development of the Pan-Yoruba movement, and assess the impact of cultural practices on the religious landscape within the Yoruba community.
- ii. Examine the Pan-Yoruba movement's vision for the preservation and promotion of Yoruba culture and religion.
- iii. Assess the movement's role in addressing contemporary social, political, and economic challenges.

Literature Review

The Yoruba's Pre-Colonial Cultural, Social, and Political Structures

Cultural Structures

The Yorùbá traditional society is a corporate and religious society that is endowed with a rich cultural heritage and values. Religion according to Adabembe (2024), is as old as human life, and there are three main religions in Nigeria. Scholars have conducted extensive research on different areas of Yoruba and their beliefs and have affirmed that, “Yoruba beliefs and practices have a crucial role to play in the maintenance of their cultural values with its cultural implications for

modern Nigeria” (Odudele, Familugba, Fasiku & Adabembe, 2023). The Religion and Spirituality of the Yoruba people are polytheistic. According to the 2006 census in Nigeria, about 63.9 to 67.8% of the Southwestern population are Christians, about 31.6 to 35.5% are Muslims, and the rest are traditionalists (Notre et al., 2016). Their religion is centered on the worship of Orishas, who are deities representing natural forces and ancestors. Each Orisha has specific attributes, domains, and associated rituals (Peel, 2003). Some of the common *orisa* in Yoruba land are: *Ogun* the god of iron, *Yemoja*, the river goddess; *Obatala*, the deity of creation; the deity of creation; *Osun*, the goddess of river and fertility; Sango god of iron, Oya, the river deity and deity of children; *Esulaalu* deity in-charge of ritual and sacrifice ()among others. The king, also referred to as the Oba or Kabiyesi among the Yorubas, holds the esteemed position of being the spiritual leader of the town and is respected by all religious groups in Yoruba land. As a result, the oba carries out traditional rituals that may conflict with the beliefs of Christians and Muslims. Surprisingly, the same ruler will attend a church or mosque service on Sunday to express gratitude for the successful completion of a traditional festival. (Nolte R. J., Khadijeh. T. and Giovanni. O. 2016).

Equally, *Ifá* divination is a complex system used to communicate with the divine. The babaonifa, that is, the Ifa diviner, interprets the patterns made by casting sacred objects (Bascom, 1969). Babalawos are consulted for virtually everything in Yoruba land. *Ikansejaye* is the way to trace or predict the destiny of a newborn. Also, Ifa divination is crucial in selecting a new king. The Ifa diviner plays a significant role among the Yorubas. Ifa must choose from the numerous princes presented for the position of king; anyone Ifa selects becomes the king. *Ifa canfore* that is, the oracle spoke well or spoke otherwise. Moreover, the family structure of Yoruba society is organised around extended families (*Ebi*), which are fundamental social units. These families, according to Johnson 1921), are patrilineal, tracing descent through the male line. Male children in Yoruba land are *daodu* and *opomulero*. The traditional Yoruba families often live in compounds (agboile), housing multiple generations and fostering communal living and support (Bascom, 1955). Meanwhile, next in line to *agbo-ile* are social group organisations, including age grades, which are groups of people of similar age who undergo communal rites of passage together, fostering social cohesion (Lloyd, 1955). Age grade is one of the fundamental and formidable social groups in South-West Nigeria. Some of these groups serve as warriors who protect their towns

and villagers from invaders. Also, societies like the Ogboni play crucial roles in maintaining social order and justice, often acting as advisory bodies to the kings and chiefs (Morton-Williams, 1960). The Yoruba are renowned for their sophisticated art, particularly in sculpture and pottery. Their textiles include Aso-Oke, which comes in different kinds such as sanyan, alaari, etu, and opaaro, among others. These artworks often depict religious themes that play important roles in Yoruba socio-cultural expressions (Thompson, 1974). These artworks are used in various ceremonies in southwest Nigeria (Drewal, Pemberton, & Abiodun, 1989).

The Yoruba political system is highly hierarchical, with kings, *Obas*, holding significant religious and political authority. They are considered divine or semi-divine figures (Smith, 1988). *Oba* are still regarded as *alaseekejiorisa* to this day. The kings are supported by the Council of chiefs, who assist in governance and administration. These councils are composed of high-ranking nobles and advisors (Atanda, 1973). Pre-colonial Yoruba land was not a unified empire but consisted of numerous independent city-states, such as Ife, Oyo, and Ibadan. Each had its own governance system but shared cultural and religious similarities (Falola, 1984).

Historical Origins and Development of the Pan-Yoruba Movement

The Pan-Yoruba Movement's evolution is one of the nationalist movements that emerged in Nigeria and throughout Africa during the early 20th century. There are similar nationalist movements in Nigeria, such as the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), founded in 1999, aiming to revive the Republic of Biafra and advocate for the self-determination of the Igbo people (Ezeani, 2013). In 2012, Nnamdi Kanu founded the Ingenious People of Biafra, Nigeria (IPOB), in the eastern part of Nigeria. The movement's objective is to seek the secession of the south-eastern region of Nigeria, aiming to form an independent Biafra (Olokor, 2017). The Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF) was founded in 2000 to promote Northern Nigeria's socio-economic and political interests. In 1945, Yoruba leaders like Obafemi Awolowo established Egbe Omo Oduduwa, aiming to advance Yoruba culture and political goals within the broader Nigerian context. The Egbe Omo Oduduwa aimed to safeguard Yoruba customs and promote self-governance at the regional level within a federal Nigeria (Falola & Heaton, 2008). After Nigeria gained independence in 1960, the Pan-Yoruba movement continued to develop. The Action Group, under the leadership of Awolowo, advocated for the political interests of the Yoruba

people in both regional and national contexts. The movement prioritized the significance of federalism, cultural conservation, and economic advancement for the Yoruba community. The Pan-Yoruba movement has demonstrated its ability to adjust to evolving political and social forces in recent decades. Groups such as Afenifere, a socio-political organization that supports Yoruba interests, have been instrumental in addressing current issues, including resource control, federalism, and regional development (Olukoju, 1997).

Impacts of Islam and Christianity on Yoruba Culture, Traditional Religion and Pan-Yoruba Movements

The introduction and spread of Islam and Christianity have significantly impacted Yoruba culture and traditional religion, leading to transformations in religious practices, social structures, and cultural expressions.

Religious Syncretism and Coexistence

One notable effect of Islam and Christianity on Yoruba traditional religion is the emergence of religious syncretism. Yoruba people often blend traditional religious practices with those of Islam and Christianity, creating a unique form of worship that incorporates elements from multiple faiths. This syncretism is evident in the ways Yoruba festivals, rituals, and ceremonies have incorporated Islamic and Christian symbols and practices. Adogame (2013) noted that, "The Yoruba have demonstrated remarkable adaptability and resilience by integrating elements of their traditional religion with those of Islam and Christianity, creating a hybrid religious identity that reflects their cultural and historical context" (Adogame, 2013). The spread of Islam and Christianity has also led to changes in social and cultural practices among the Yoruba. These religions introduced new moral and ethical frameworks, which sometimes conflicted with traditional beliefs and practices. For example, certain traditional practices, such as the worship of deities like Ogun and Sango, faced opposition from Christian and Islamic teachings that promote monotheism. However, these changes have not been entirely negative. Olajubu (2012) affirms that, "The interaction between Yoruba traditional religion and the Islam and Christian faiths has led to a dynamic cultural exchange, enriching Yoruba culture with new forms of artistic expression, literature, and music" (Olajubu, 2012). Equally, these foreigners have influenced the institutional structures of Yoruba society. The introduction of Islamic and Christian educational institutions has played a significant

role in shaping contemporary Yoruba society. These schools often emphasizes religious teachings, which may have led to the marginalization of traditional religious knowledge and practices. Children of African traditional religious practitioners are forced to adopt one of the foreign religions in school.

Impact of Cultural Practices on the Religious Landscape within the Yoruba Community

Despite this, traditional Yoruba institutions, such as chieftaincies and councils of elders, have persisted and adapted to the changing religious landscape. Peel argues that, "The Yoruba have managed to preserve many of their traditional institutions by finding ways to integrate Islamic and Christian elements into their existing social and political structures" (Peel, 2016). Likewise, Yoruba rituals and festivals have also been transformed by the presence of Islam and Christianity. For instance, annual festivals dedicated to traditional deities now often include prayers and blessings from both Islamic and Christian clerics. Equally, that Obas in Yoruba land are saddled with the responsibility of engaging in customary rituals that contradict the beliefs of Christians and Muslims, while also serving as the cultural and spiritual authority in the area. This shows the pluralistic religious identity of the Yoruba people. In some cases, traditional festivals have been reinterpreted or rebranded to align with Islamic or Christian values. For example, the Udiroko Festival in Ado-Ekiti, the Ojude Oba Festival in Ijebu Ode, Ogun State, and the Eyo Festival in Lagos State, among others, are originally traditional Yoruba events that have incorporated elements appealing to both Muslim and Christian participants, making them more inclusive celebrations.

All these show that despite the pervasive influence of Islam and Christianity, there has been a resurgence of interest in Yoruba traditional religion in recent years. This revival is partly driven by a desire to reclaim and celebrate Yoruba cultural identity in the face of globalization and cultural homogenization. Scholars have documented efforts to revive and promote Yoruba traditional religion through academic research, cultural festivals, and the establishment of traditional religious organizations. Abiodun (2018) states, "The contemporary revival of Yoruba traditional religion is a testament to its enduring significance and the resilience of Yoruba cultural identity".

The impact of Christianity and Islam on the Pan-Yoruba Movement

This article aims to examine the influence of Christianity and Islam, the two predominant religions among the Yoruba people of southern Nigeria, on the Pan-Yoruba movement, a socio-political and cultural effort. In the past, during the Pre-Colonial era, the Yoruba people had a vibrant history and a well-established indigenous religion called Ifá. This involved the veneration of deities known as Orishas. Simultaneously, the emergence of Christianity and Islam brought up new religious dynamics, which consequently modified the conventional customs and social structures of the Yorubas. Christianity witnessed fast growth during the colonial era as a result of missionary efforts. However, Islam had already established a substantial foundation through existing trading links. The colonial authority frequently showed a preference towards Christian missions, resulting in significant effects on the socio-political scene. Christian missionaries founded educational institutions and introduced Western education, resulting in the emergence of a new educated upper class within the Yoruba community. This educated class gained prominence within the Pan-Yoruba movement, advocating for the advancement of modernization and socio-political changes.

A significant number of Yoruba leaders involved in the nationalist movement were adherents of Christianity. They strategically deployed their authority to organize support for the cause of Yoruba solidarity and the preservation of their cultural heritage. Christian institutions frequently served as a forum for political discussion and mobilization. Notwithstanding these factors, Christianity, with its Western influences, occasionally clashed with indigenous Yoruba traditions and beliefs. Islam, deeply embedded in Yoruba society, fostered a feeling of unity among the Yoruba Muslims. Islamic institutions served to strengthen communal ties and preserve cultural identity. Yoruba Muslims have actively contributed to the Pan-Yoruba movement, campaigning for policies that align with their religious and cultural principles. The involvement of significant Muslim leaders facilitated the reconciliation of differences among various Yoruba sub-groups. Islam has exhibited a greater level of syncretism with traditional Yoruba customs in comparison to Christianity. The integration has facilitated a more effortless blending of religious and cultural identities, enhancing the Pan-Yoruba movement.

The Pan-Yoruba Movement's Vision for the Preservation and Promotion of Yoruba Culture and Religion

Promoting the Assimilation of Religious and Cultural Beliefs

The Pan-Yoruba movement can endorse initiatives that preserve and safeguard the integration of religious and cultural customs. A unified Yoruba identity can be strengthened through festivals, cultural events, and media depictions that incorporate components from both Islamic and Christian traditions (Adebayo, 2019). These initiatives aid in acknowledging and appreciating the varied contributions of both religions to Yoruba culture.

Tackling prevalent socio-political obstacles

The Pan-Yoruba movement has the capacity to establish forums or working groups that encompass leaders and people from both the Christian and Muslim communities, to tackle urgent socio-political matters. Cooperative efforts in areas like poverty reduction and healthcare can promote an integrated strategy to address problems while also strengthening social unity (Ibrahim, 2020). This inclusivity guarantees that solutions are culturally appropriate and universally embraced, even across different religious groups.

The Movement's Role in Addressing Contemporary Social, Political, and Economic Challenges

In the contemporary Yoruba community, there is an increasing desire towards inter-religious interaction and collaboration within the Pan-Yoruba movement. Christian and Muslim leaders collaborate to tackle shared socio-political issues affecting the Yoruba community. The movement aims to achieve balance in the religious diversity within the Yoruba community, while simultaneously advocating for a unified cultural and political identity. Strategic measures are taken to prevent religious disparities from overshadowing the shared objectives of the Pan-Yoruba movement.

Consequently, using the religious strengths to foster a unified pan-Yoruba movement. The Pan-Yoruba movement attempts to foster cohesion and safeguard the cultural heritage of the Yoruba community, yet it faces the challenge of integrating diverse religious influences.

Meanwhile, both Christianity and Islam have unique strengths and distinct qualities that might enhance a unified and all-encompassing Yoruba identity.

Fostering Inter-Religious Dialogue and Collaboration

Both Christianity and Islam have extensive legacies of engaging in community service, promoting education, and providing social welfare. The Pan-Yoruba movement may utilize all these rich traditions of religious communities to effectively tackle shared socio-economic problems and develop unity among the community. Engaging in inter-religious discussion can foster a sense of mutual understanding and respect. Collaborative efforts, such as community service projects or educational programs, can act as platforms for cooperation, strengthening a collective Yoruba identity that goes beyond religious divisions (Ojo, 2017). Through collaboration towards shared objectives, Yoruba Christians and Muslims have the potential to enhance their collective sense of identity while effectively tackling societal issues.

Harnessing the Potential of Educational Institutions and Embracing Modernization

The Pan-Yoruba movement has the potential to form partnerships with Christian and Islamic educational institutions to develop curricula that prioritize the study of Yoruba history, culture, and values. The aforementioned strategy not only safeguards cultural heritage but also fosters a collective perception of identity among Yoruba adolescents (Adegboye, 2018). Meanwhile, integrating indigenous education with contemporary education methods will assist the movement to establish a comprehensive educational framework that upholds religious and cultural settings.

In conclusion

The Pan-Yoruba movement has been influenced both positively and negatively by Christianity and Islam. Although new educational, social, and political dynamics have been created, they have also presented difficulties in preserving a unified cultural identity. The popularity of the movement stems from its adeptness in leveraging the virtues of both religions, while simultaneously nurturing a cohesive and all-encompassing Yoruba identity.

By promoting inter-religious dialogue, utilizing educational resources, encouraging cultural integration, and addressing shared socio-political concerns, the Pan-Yoruba movement may effectively leverage the advantages of both Christianity and Islam. This method not only promotes

a cohesive Yoruba identity but also provides an open atmosphere where many religious viewpoints can contribute to the overall welfare of the Yoruba community.

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