The Uniqueness of Religious Diversities and Practices among the Yoruba: A Perfect Example of Religious Tolerance and Unit

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Abstract

This study examines The Uniqueness of Religious Diversities and Practices among Yorubas: A Perfect Example of Religious Tolerance and Unity. In contrast to the religious intolerance seen in many parts of the world, the Yoruba people of Southwestern Nigeria offer a striking example of peaceful coexistence among adherents of Islam, Christianity, and Traditional African Religion. Despite differing doctrines, the Yoruba have developed a cultural framework that promotes harmony, mutual respect, and unity among diverse religious groups. The problem investigated is how such deep religious pluralism has not led to conflict but rather to tolerance and integration, and what lessons this holds for other multi-religious societies. The study employed a qualitative ethnographic methodology, including interviews with religious leaders and community elders, focus group discussions, and participant observation during religious and cultural festivals in various Yoruba communities. Historical analysis and review of relevant literature were also incorporated to contextualize findings. Results reveal that religious tolerance among Yorubas is rooted in strong kinship ties, cultural values, and a communal sense of identity that transcends religious boundaries. It is common to find members of the same family practicing different religions without conflict. Joint participation in festivals and mutual respect for religious practices reinforce this unity. Interfaith collaboration among religious leaders and communal decision-making processes also

play significant roles in maintaining peace. The study recommends the inclusion of Yoruba interreligious practices in educational curricula, the establishment of interfaith dialogue forums, and government support for cultural preservation. Media and youth engagement initiatives are also suggested to sustain this model of tolerance. Ultimately, the Yoruba experience demonstrates that religious diversity, when rooted in shared culture and respect, can be a source of unity rather than division.

Keywords: Diversities, Practices, Tolerance, Uniqueness, Yoruba,

Introduction

Nigeria is one of the most religiously diverse nations in Africa, with over 250 ethnic groups practicing various religions. Among them, the Yoruba people stand out for their remarkable ability to maintain unity and peace despite their religious differences. This coexistence reflects not only tolerance but also a cultural philosophy that accommodates pluralism within a unified identity. This paper aims to analyze the roots and expressions of religious diversity and tolerance among the Yoruba people (Falola & Genova, 2006).

In a world often divided by religious intolerance and conflict, the Yoruba people of Southwestern Nigeria present a unique case of peaceful coexistence among diverse religious groups, primarily Islam, Christianity, and Traditional African Religion. Despite theological differences, Yoruba communities have maintained a long-standing tradition of mutual respect, familial integration, and communal harmony. However, with increasing religious extremism globally and within Nigeria, there is growing concern that this model of tolerance could be weakened. The central problem addressed in this study is the need to understand the cultural and social mechanisms that have sustained religious tolerance among the Yorubas and how this model can serve as a lesson for broader interfaith relations.

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic approach supported by historical analysis. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with religious leaders (Christian, Muslim, and traditionalists), community elders, and families with interfaith backgrounds across Yoruba towns in Oyo, Osun, Lagos, and Ondo States. Focus group discussions and participant observations during religious and

cultural festivals were also conducted. Secondary data from scholarly works and cultural studies were reviewed to support primary findings.

Historical Background of Yoruba Religious Landscape

The Yoruba ethnic group occupies the southwestern part of Nigeria and parts of Benin and Togo. Before the advent of Islam and Christianity, the Yoruba practiced a complex traditional religion centered around Òrìṣà worship. The arrival of Islam in the 14th century through trans-Saharan trade routes, and Christianity in the 19th century through European missionaries, introduced new faiths to the region (Peel, 2000). Unlike many societies where religious change often caused social friction, the Yoruba incorporated new religions while retaining their indigenous beliefs. This syncretism is visible in the way many Yoruba Christians and Muslims still observe traditional festivals or acknowledge ancestral rites (Peel, 2000). The Yorùbá ethnic groups hold their source and origin to Ile – Ife, a town in Nigeria. The Yorùbá are also found in some other countries in West Africa, like Togo, Benin Republic and Dahomey. Though, the largest population of Yorùbá is found across the Western part of Nigeria which include Oyo, Ogun, Ondo, Lagos, Ekiti and Osun, out of the thirty-six states presently in Nigeria. The Yorùbá is also traced to countries outside the African territory. As such there are Yorùbás in South American, Caribbean, Brazil and Cuba. Gbadegesin notes that in Brazil, the Orisa tradition of African is one of the important cultural relics that still tie the people to their African soil.

However, as noted above, the ancestral home of the Yorùbá is in Ile-Ife, Nigeria and each groups in the diasporas still traces its origin to this home (that is, Ile-Ife), where the culture is best practice. Just as Nigeria is a multi-linguistic nation with more than two hundred and fifty different linguistic groups, the Yorùbá also has variants dialects of the Yorùbá language which are mutually unintelligible, albeit, Yorùbá is the common language spoken by the Yorùbá ethnic group. As cited by Gbadegesin, Johnson's account of the history of Language, Literature and Culture notes that the Yorùbá originally came from the East, around Upper Egypt and were subjects to the Egyptian conqueror, Nimrod (Lamurudu) who was of Phoenician origin.[4] In a similar account by Bello, the Yorùbá were descendants of the Canaanites, belonging to the family of Nimrod.[5] After the settlement of the Yorùbá in Arabia, a fight ensued which claims the life of Lamurudu and as a result,

the Yorùbá were driven from Arabia which was a Moslem nation. After the death of Lamurudu, one of his sons, Oduduwa is supposed to have fled with his people to West African. Needless to say, Johnson believes that the original home of the Yorùbá is undoubtedly in the East. Oduduwa became the King at Ile-Ife and had the ambition to revenge the death of his father. However, his ambition does not come to fruition as he died before he could organise an army to avenge his father's assassination. Thus, history has it that his sons (that is, Oduduwa children) became kings throughout the Yorùbá Empire and Oduduwa was deified. However, another account of the origin of Yorùbá contends that Oduduwa was the creator of the earth as designated by Olódùmarè. In other words, it is believed that Oduduwa came down from heaven through chain and he created the earth and Ile-Ife. Etymologically, Oduduwa means odu ti o da iwa. Odu means container or author, and Iwa means existence. Thus, Oduduwa means 'the container or author of existence; or that which creates existence'. This account shows some inconsistency in the account of the origin of Yorùbá. The accounts leave out some questions for further inquiry into the origin of Yorùbá. It may be asked, how can Oduduwa created the earth and at the same time fled the Arabia? Does Oduduwa created Ile-Ife only or the whole of the earth? If he created the whole of the earth, then it means that Ile-Ife will be the cradle of the entire world and historically, this is far from truth.

In short, the account of the origin of Yorùbá lacks evidences and coherent explanations. Oduduwa, in Yorùbá mythology, is believed to be the creator of the universe. Yorùbá believed that Oduduwa has his origin from the ultimate author of existence – that is, Olódùmarè who is also responsible for the existence of Oduduwa too. Moreover, Gbadegesin opines that there is much similarity between the Yorùbá world view and the Christian world view. Johnson, as quoted by Gbadegesin suggests that: It might probably be shown that the ancestors of the Yorùbá, hailing from Upper Egypt, were either Coptic Christians, or at any rate that they had some knowledge of Christianity. If so, it might offer a solution of the problem of how it came about that traditional stories of the creation, the deluge, of Elijah, and other scriptural characters are current amongst them, and indirect stories of our Lord, terms 'Son of Moremi'. From the preceding analysis, even though there is variants account of the origin of Yorùbá which of course led to inconsistencies in accounting for the origin of the Yorùbá. However, the point

remains that the Yorùbá are mostly represented by the Western part of Nigeria, and in part in the diasporas. Common to all the Yorùbá is the Yorùbá spoken language, although, with different dialects of the language which are mutually unintelligible. Thus, the Yorùbá have some believes in common which include, the existence of Olódùmarè, life after death, reincarnation, and suicide among others.

Religious Diversity among the Yoruba

Today, the Yoruba religious landscape is roughly divided among: Islam (predominantly Sunni), Christianity (Catholic, Protestant denominations and numerous new generation churches), and Indigenous African beliefs frequently include the worship of various spirits, multiple gods, family and tribal ancestors, and are based on an understanding that the spiritual infuses every aspect of daily life. The concept of a supreme being is not always a part of indigenous tribal life and practice, and the gods, ancestors and spirits are not necessarily thought to be omnipresent, omniscient, or even always good.

The role of ancestors is important within these traditions, indicating a link between the dead and their living descendants. Diviners, priests or community members communicate with the dead in various ways, and this might include prayers, sacrifices, rituals, festivals and ceremonies. In most parts of West Africa, public festivals and masquerades are central to spiritual wellbeing. The masks worn at these events embody gods and spirits who dance, sing or speak in ways that identify them to the participating community.

The Yoruba are one of Africa's largest ethnic groups with more than twenty-five million living in Nigeria, the Republic in Benin, and Togo. Its pre-modern history is based largely on oral traditions and legends. Ile Ife is the city where the Yoruba believe their civilization began as well as the location where they say that the gods descended to earth. Oral tradition and historical reality do not completely match, but the story is longstanding. Ile Ife came to be a city in about 500 BCE. It is considered to be the origin of *all* African people by the Yoruba.

The meaning of the word "*ife*" in Yoruba is "expansion." "Ile-Ife" is therefore in reference to the myth of origin, "The Land of Expansion." Besides being central in the history of the Yoruba people, Ife is also famous for its art. From terracotta

sculptures to stones and bronze sculptures that can still be found in museums, the art of the Yoruba is becoming world famous.

The Yoruba have hundreds of deities. Yoruba deities are called *orisa*, and the high god is Olorun. Other important *orisas* include Esu, the trickster; Shango, the god of thunder; and Ogun, the god of iron and modern technology. The Yoruba believe that the ancestors still have real influence among the living. Annual ritual honor is paid to the family or clan ancestors, and this yearly sacrificial activity honors all deceased members of the family. *Egungun* (maskers) appear at funerals and are believed to embody the spirit of the deceased person.

What makes Yoruba religious diversity unique is the deep familial and communal interconnection that transcends religious boundaries. It is common to find a family where the father is a Muslim, the mother is a Christian, and some siblings follow traditional religion. This phenomenon rarely leads to division or conflict (Omobowale & Olutayo, 2007).

Cultural Practices Promoting Religious Tolerance

Yorubas also called Aku peoples are a group of people residing majorly in West Africa. They are famous for their excellent social and interpersonal skills. According to Idowu (1966), "The Yorubas comprise several clans which are bound together by language, traditions, religious beliefs and practices" Religious intolerance is one of the issues the world is combating with today. In fact in some societies, it has direct affiliation with the political situation in such countries. Azuka Onwuka asks the question "When it comes to religion, are the Yoruba people of Nigeria the most tolerant race [tribe] in the whole world?" in his article "Are The Yoruba The Number One In Religious Tolerance?" As a matter of fact, there have been claims that there is little or no religious tension among Yorubas. Before the introduction of Islam through the Arabs and Christianity by the Europeans, Yorubas or Akus (because the name has a direct relationship with their sociable way of life) mostly practiced a decentralized religion system now referred to as "Yoruba Religion". There has not been concordance on how Yoruba religion is classified. For example, Johnson and Oyinade (2004) believe Yoruba religion has some properties which make it tends towards monotheism.

Baudin, a Roman Catholic priest of French descent, wrote about the Yoruba God in these words: "The Blacks (Akus) have neither statutes, nor symbols to represent God. They consider him as the Supreme Primordial Being, author and father of the gods and spirits. At the same time, they think that god after beginning the organization of the world, charged Obatala to finish it and govern it, then withdrew and went into an eternal rest to look after his happiness (Awolalu 1979, p. 4). Also Akus have no statue to represent the Supreme Being.

In his book titled Olodumare- God in Yoruba Belief, E.B. Idowu states "Olodumare is the traditional name of the Supreme Being and that Olorun, though commonly used in popular language appears to have gained its predominating currency in consequence of Christian and Moslem impact upon the Yoruba thought"

Yoruba religion is really difficult to be classified. Is it Polytheistic or monotheistic? Both may apply, let us have a look: Amaya believes Yoruba religion is polytheistic. The Yoruba religion like many polytheistic religions, divides their gods into chief and minor categories. From the chief categories there are eight gods, all recognized as the most prominent and influential. Amongst the eight gods, Olorun is the deified firmament, however he is the least worshipped, as he is described too be much too indifferent to interfere in the affairs of the world. According to some natives, Olorun may be perceived as a lazy individual that spends most of his time sleeping. Nevertheless under rare occasions, when an individual feels a lack of response from any of the other gods, he or she will turn their attention to Olorun as a desperate resource.

In Yoruba monotheism just as in the Yoruba culture, bowing down, gesticulating and worshipping others is not only important, it is obligatory. Males lie down on the ground to greet while females bend their knees fully. Greeting and respect for others is a very crucial component of the Yoruba culture, for a harmonious relationship with others. Christians and Muslims want to force us to look at our culture from their perspective, so they say our Orisas, Eeguns and etc are gods because we bow down and worship them, offering sacrifice, but what then is Olodumare who is never offered sacrifice despite being the owner of the Ashe or the creative force being used by all? Whose name ends all prayers? We must not allow people who are challenged with getting their acts together, who fight and kill

themselves distort our reality. There is only one God, not several, in the Yoruba culture, and that God is gentleman God, not a jealous God, which makes the spiritual practice monotheistic, it does not mean polytheism is wrong either, but the Yoruba culture is monotheistic in the strictest sense of it. Olodumare, reigns in his realm at the headship of 400 irunmales, totalling 401 irunmales. Olodumare is the owner of all Ase" Ultimately, Yorubas believe "Enikan o le sin" (meaning no one has a religion)

Amiability and the sense of community: Yorubas are very sociable and have a sense of community, it reflects on what they do and also the fact that they live in big cities their mode of living is communal. Due to this form of exposure, they are likely to be tolerant of other religions.

Omoluabi Concept: The core attributes of the Yoruba omoluabi concept include oro siso (good communication skills), Iteriba (respect), Inu Rere (kind-heartedness), Otito (honesty), iwa akinkanju (valiance), ise sise (hardwork) opolo pipe (intelligence), These attributes are more important to the Yorubas than any form of religious affiliations.

The Yoruba people possess several cultural elements that foster religious unity: Naming Ceremonies, where both Christian/Muslim prayers and traditional rites are observed; Festivals, like the Osun-Osogbo Festival, attended by people of all faiths as a communal event; and Traditional Rulers, such as the Ooni of Ife, who serve as unifying cultural figures rather than religious leaders (Adeboye, 2005).

Philosophical and Ethical Foundations

Yoruba cosmology emphasizes 'omoluabi', a concept that represents good character, respect, and communal responsibility. This ethical system promotes peaceful coexistence and respect for others' beliefs. Religious tolerance is thus not only pragmatic but also deeply rooted in the Yoruba worldview (Abimbola, 1975).

Case Studies of Religious Unity

One notable example is the city of Ilorin, a predominantly Muslim Yoruba city where Christian churches and traditional worship thrive side by side. Interfaith marriages and joint celebrations of religious festivals like Christmas and Eid are

common (Omobowale & Olutayo, 2007). Another case is Ibadan, where the city's religious diversity is celebrated during the annual Oke'badan festival, regardless of individual faith (Alana, 1993).

Challenges and Modern Realities

While Yoruba religious tolerance is exemplary, challenges persist. Religious extremism, often influenced by external factors or politics, sometimes disrupts the peace. Additionally, younger generations face pressure from global ideologies that may not understand the Yoruba model of pluralism (Falola & Genova, 2006). Yet, the resilience of Yoruba culture continues to offer lessons in negotiation, coexistence, and shared identity.

Lessons for the Global Community

In a world frequently marred by religious conflict, the Yoruba example stands as a model of how deeply diverse beliefs can thrive in unity. The Yoruba demonstrate that identity can be multilayered—religious, ethnic, and cultural—without being divisive. Their tradition encourages interfaith dialogue, respect for ancestral heritage, and communal celebrations that transcend religious lines (Peel, 2000; Abimbola, 1975).

Summary of Findings

The research revealed that Yoruba religious tolerance is deeply rooted in shared ancestry, communal values, and cultural identity that transcend religious boundaries. Key findings include:

1. Family and Kinship Integration: It is common for members of the same family to practice different religions without conflict, with mutual participation in religious ceremonies.
2. Cultural Festivals as Unifying Platforms: Events like the Osun-Osogbo Festival and Egungun celebrations attract participation from all faiths, reinforcing a sense of unity.
3. Respect for Sacred Spaces and Beliefs: There exists a strong cultural ethic that discourages the desecration of other people's beliefs or places of worship.
4. Religious Leadership Collaboration: Religious leaders often work together in interfaith councils to resolve conflicts and promote communal peace.

Conclusion

The Yoruba people's approach to religious diversity and coexistence offers a powerful model of tolerance, unity, and resilience in an increasingly divided world. Their practices demonstrate that religion need not be a source of conflict but can coexist within a framework of shared identity and respect. If recognized and reinforced, the Yoruba example can serve as a beacon for multicultural and multi-religious societies seeking sustainable peace. The Yoruba people of Nigeria exemplify a sophisticated model of religious diversity that is deeply interwoven into cultural identity. Their ability to maintain unity and peace across faith lines is not merely incidental but the result of centuries of cultural evolution, mutual respect, and ethical grounding. As such, the Yoruba experience offers valuable insights into the pursuit of global religious harmony. In Yorubaland today, there exist the natural admixture of religious faiths within individual families, which, nevertheless, live happily together, and, this level of tolerance is the direct effect of tolerance inherited from the traditional religion whose accommodation and toleration paved way for Islam and Christianity. In fact, it is the tolerance of Yoruba traditional religion that metamorphosed into religious cohabitation between Islam, Christianity and traditional religion that this paper seeks to recommend as a standard practice for the attainment of peace, stability and sustainable development and the realisation of common goals in religiously plural societies.

Recommendations

To preserve and promote the Yoruba model of religious tolerance, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Cultural Education: Incorporate Yoruba interreligious history and values into educational curricula to foster interfaith understanding among youth.
2. Interfaith Dialogue Forums: Establish regular dialogue platforms among religious leaders and community members to strengthen interreligious cooperation.
3. Government and Policy Support: Policymakers should recognize and support traditional models of religious harmony in national peace building efforts.
4. Media Representation: Promote media content that highlights Yoruba religious harmony as a positive narrative for national unity.

5. Youth Engagement: Create youth programs that emphasize shared cultural values and interreligious respect through arts, music, and storytelling.

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