

## **Anti-European Religious Movement and Admiration of Yoruba Traditional Values in Churches, 1843-1960**

**O. E. Babalola**

The early Nineteenth century saw the expansion of Christianity into West Africa in general and Nigeria in particular, which was alien to Yoruba culture. The traditional Yoruba value system has significantly suffered as a result of this new faith and associated western norms. African traditions of worship were regarded as inferior and savage by Christian missionaries because of their mode and form of worship. It ridiculed traditional beliefs, undermined self-confidence and eroded respect for traditional authorities. This eventually paved the way for the imposition of missionary thoughts and beliefs. It was this feeling that exacerbated hostility between African and European missionaries which later forced the Africans to break away from European Christian Missionary movement and established their own indigenous churches where their traditional values could be observed and appreciated. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to provide a historical perspective on the many movements that sparked the development of indigenous African churches among the Yoruba in south-western Nigeria. The paper also examines the aspect of Yoruba traditional values that were admired in their indigenous churches established thereafter. The Historical research method will be employed in collection and analysis of data.

**Keywords:** Yoruba, Indigenous churches, Traditional values, Religion, Anti-European.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Africans were known for their ancient religious traditions long before European missionaries infiltrated their society and finally spread the Christian faith. Given the importance of religion in human life, the Yoruba people of western Nigeria adopted traditional religion as their native faith. This Yoruba cultural heritage, which is based on the idea that there is only one Supreme Being, has been passed down orally and through art, crafts, liturgies, pithy sayings, proverbs, folklore, stories, songs, and wise sayings to even the remote generations that have survived them (Odejebi, 2014). With this traditional faith, worship of Olodumare through divinities, deities and supernatural beings (spirits) was not just in words but also in action, which took the form of ceremonies and ritual rites. The contents of Yoruba traditional worship usually includes prayer, singing, dancing, offering and sacrifice and among many others (Abiola, 2020). This must be conducted in reverence and in an appropriate mode and well-disciplined manner to achieve the desired result (Awolalu, 1981).

Yoruba people were more committed to their indigenous faith in their day to day life. Their socio-political organization and the relationship among individuals and society were all controlled by their religion (Olubunmo, 2002). Hence, it is believed therefore and there was consciousness of the eyes of ancestors and invisible spirits watching them in their daily activities. With this in mind, they conducted their deeds and affairs with one another and environment in mutual respect and selflessness.<sup>1</sup> That is one more reason why anything that promotes harmony, happiness, and prosperity should be carried out for the benefit of both individuals and society as a whole, while practices that promote curses, melancholy, tragedy, and disaster should be shunned and regarded as forbidden.<sup>2</sup> This had built up the moral value in the Yoruba society as a strong aspect of their culture.

Besides, the belief in mysterious powers in traditional religion in various Yoruba communities made them to constantly contact oracles and diviners to find out what life has in store for them and also to take cautions against bad and anti-social characters in the society in order to guard against evil (Odejobi, 2014). In a nut shell, traditional religion among various Yoruba communities served as a basis for unity and stability (Gbasha, 1995). This was later faced with challenges by certain forces in the early Nineteenth Century in the various Yoruba communities that degraded it. Prominent among such forces were the Christian missionaries who brought the new religious faith through trade and eventually ended up with Colonialism that had boundless transformation on Yoruba history and culture that conversely introduced new concept of ways of life among these communities.

### **The Emergence of European Religious Movement in Yoruba Religion**

European religious movement began on the African territories by the Portuguese as far back as the Fifteenth Century. In Nigeria, the Portuguese missionaries came to Benin in the Sixteenth century and this new faith met with the stiff resistance of the Edo people with the belief that the acceptance of this new faith will result in cultural breakdown within Edo society (Ojelabi, 1970). During this period, no strong influence was exerted by the missionaries to Christianize Nigerian until the tail end of the eighteenth century and early Nineteenth century when the Church

Missionary Society (CMS) began a successful Christian Missionary enterprise into the Nigerian hinterland.

In Nigeria, particularly Yorubaland, concerted missionary activities began as a result of the liberation of slaves towards the end of the Eighteenth century. In the way that Sierra Leone was important in the history of Christianity in West Africa, the same way was the Yoruba freed slaves in Yorubaland. Yoruba was the largest and the most unified ethnic group in Sierra Leone after the re-settlement of the freed slaves due to their language (Ogunrinade and Ogbale, 2013). Those who were of Yoruba origin that returned from Sierra Leone to Badagry, and who had been converted to Christianity, did not returned to the old traditional ways of worship.

Worthy to be mentioned among these liberated slaves was a personality like Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther who accompanied Reverend Henry Townsend the first European missionary of Church Missionary Society that landed in Badagry in 1843.<sup>3</sup> They therefore became the agents and viable tools in the hand of the missionary society for the spreading of Christianity and were later used to effectively challenge the traditional religion in the various Yoruba communities by the end of Nineteenth century (Ojelabi, 1970). The Christian missions in Yorubaland eventually split into various denominations. These are the four oldest denominations: the Anglicans otherwise known as Church Missionary Society (CMS) the Methodist, Baptist and Catholic churches. Other relatively smaller missions mainly of American extraction arrived later, one of which is the Jehovah's Witness. There was serious tension and competition among these denominations.

Another important factor that encouraged the European religious movement in African generally and Yoruba in particular was the establishment of Colonial rule. Towards the tail end of the Nineteenth century, Christian missions and colonial governments had close relations to one another during the end of the nineteenth century, and during this time, Christianity quickly spread throughout Yoruba communities. However, this period also in no small measure formed the basis for the imposition of European cultural imperialism on Africans and especially on Yoruba people.

In addition to this was the military and political influence that some of the Yoruba kings ascribed to the missionaries for them to gain and sustain their political interest. As a result of the political intrigue erupted in most of Yorubaland during this time, some Yoruba kings who had no interest in Christianity had started inviting and embracing Christian missionaries for them to gain political advantages over their enemies or opponents. This was the situation in Abeokuta when Sodeke, the then Alake of Egba warmly received

<sup>1</sup> R.Ogunade, (2010). "Yoruba Religious Worship in Modern Context" cited in Toyin Falola and Dipo Olubomehin (eds) Yoruba Nation and Politics since the Nineteenth Century, Essay in Honour of Professor J. A. Atanda, Texas: Pan-African University Press, 297.

<sup>2</sup> H. O Atansuyi, Gospel and Culture from the perspective of African Instituted Churches, *Cyberjournal for Pentecostal-Charismatic Research*. <http://www.pctii.org> (Accessed on 13/07/2019)

<sup>3</sup> N.A. Fadipe (2012) Sociology of the Yoruba, F. O Okediji & O. O. Okediji (eds), Ibadan, Ibadan University Press. 50

Reverend Thomas Birch Freeman not because he loved Christianity but to gain his support against Ibadan and Ijebu. The same situation occurred in Lagos as the political intrigue between Kosoko and Akintoye caused Lagos to be divided, as Akintoye supported the Christian missions to regain his throne (Falola, 2017). At Ogbomoso, Baale Ogunlabi Odunaro Apaebu extended his friendship to Reverend T.J Bowen and encouraged him to establish his missionary enterprise in his domain after the attempt made to establish in Ilorin failed (Abiola, 2020). Other Yoruba states came to look upon the patronage of missionaries as prestige and began to yearn after them. For instance, from the early 1850s to 1875, Ibadan, Ijaye, Oyo and Ilesha which were large towns in Yorubaland then received the missionaries after they had been long entangled in the civil and fratricidal wars.<sup>4</sup>

The situation was the same in Ekiti with direct missionary intervention in the Kiriji wars. The Church Missionary Society (CMS) was in the fore front of spreading the Christian religion in Ekiti. In 1894, two Bishops from Church Missionary Society (Bishops James Johnson and Charles Phillips) penetrated Ekiti. After a long and inconclusive battle between Ekiti Parapo forces and Ibadan, both parties acceded to the peace move initiated by the missionaries. After the war, all the Ekiti indigenes who were ex-slaves that had converted to Christianity worked to see that Christianity was firmly planted in Ekitiland (Olubunmo, 2002). Among these were, Madam Helena Doherty of Ijero, Isaac Ifamuboni later called Babamuboni of Iyin Ekiti, Charles Jemiriye of Igede etc. The Church Missionary Society (CMS) was active in many parts of Ekiti before the arrival of other denominations in the early 1900s. Among such denominations included the Roman Catholic Mission, America Baptist Mission etc. With this situation Christian missions made formidable move to establish Christianity in Yorubaland and throw off the influence that traditional religion and Islam had entrenched into the Yoruba society (Ogunrinade and Ogbale, 2013).

### Anti-European Religion Movement in Yorubaland

Anti-religious movements did not emerge in a historical or social vacuum. They were influenced by a variety of factors ranging from spiritual, cultural, political, social and contextual circumstances, among others. First of all, rather than cultivating a sense of camaraderie, the early missionaries' attitudes toward the Yoruba people caused a lot of animosity.

<sup>4</sup> E. A. Ayandele. (2002). Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria (1842-1914), cited in D. A. Olubunmo, Religion and Social Change: A Socio-Cultural analysis of the impact of Christianity on the Yoruba, *Arts Courier, African Journal of Arts and Ideas*, 1:104. Also see, Toyin Falola. (2017). (ed) The collected Works of J. A Atanda, Texas: Pan-African University press, pp. 115-116.

The Yoruba social structure and concept of God, which were ingrained in their traditional religion as tolerance of plurality, were not recognized by missionaries as being objectively genuine. The Yoruba traditional religious practice affords each community to worship an individual deity in accordance with its devotional needs. For them, African religion represented a manifestation of wicked superstition, and the outside world represented the reign of darkness (Odejebi, 2014). As a result, the majority of the Yoruba people in this nation did not view the missionaries as true messengers of God, but rather as the spiritual and political agents of their respective governments.

This was demonstrated by the missionaries' behavior in the 1880s, when they gave up on the idea of establishing self-governing native pastorates, which Henry Venn had underlined in his 7<sup>th</sup> Mission Principle, according to which "native agency is vital to the development of the Mission in Africa."<sup>5</sup> He deepened and broadened the concept of training indigenous leadership. The idea of developing indigenous leadership was expanded and deepened by him. As soon as feasible, leadership should take the place of missionaries, he urged. The following is a direct letter that Venn addressed to the chiefs of Sierra Leone in 1846:

"It has been our continual aim and prayer that we may be able to train up a body of native teachers to whom we may release those of your countrymen from the pastoral burden. ...who have accepted the message of Christ... they were those. African churches are entrenched in their hope."<sup>6</sup>

As British dominance was consolidated afterward, this mission principle was disregarded. The white clergy held exclusive rights to all prominent positions in the church. The black clergy, who had the same educational background as their white counterparts became disillusioned (Nmah, 2010). The missionaries were viewed by the Yoruba people as a group with the brazen aspiration to rule over them in the name of Christianity. Clearly, both sides were acting in a distrustful and uninterested manner.

The English Evangelicals placed a strong emphasis on sin, holiness, perfection, and submission to God's will. These Evangelicals preached against the sins of the flesh but did not acknowledge the sins of the spirit they also committed,

<sup>5</sup> H. O Atansuyi, Gospel and Culture from the perspective of African Instituted Churches, *Cyberjournal for Pentecostal-Charismatic Research*. <http://www.pctii.org> (Accessed on 13/07/2019)

<sup>6</sup> Deji Ayegboyin & S. Ademola Ishola. (1997). *African Indigenous churches — Chapter Two Factors Responsible for the Emergence of Indigenous Churches*, Institute For Religious Research,

namely, a lack of tolerance, a lack of empathy for other societies, or a lack of understanding for various mores and moral codes. The Christian missions failed in adapting the gospel according to the African religion and cultural setting due to the fact that they were overwhelmed by the task of church building as a result of increased membership (Nmah, 2010). They exerted a potent opposing force on the mission church, which had been in some ways hostile to African virtues and moralities.

Because of what some African prophetic leaders saw where the established churches pastors' failed to uphold the Bible's mandate and the Church hierarchy's detachment from the basic spiritual needs of the populace, some African prophetic leaders broke away from the mission churches. Many independent clergymen opposed the Mission Churches' leadership for allegedly impeding the path of African converts by imposing European traditions and practices on them most especially in dress and language. Besides this, there were witch-hunting, unduly favoring of white clergy against Africans and other inhuman treatments that African clergy suffered in the hands of less educated white missionaries. For the missionary to maintain their firm control over Africans, especially the Yoruba clergy men they recruited the white clergy men at the expense of qualified and competent Africans.

Thus, it became unmistakably clear that Christian missionaries were endangering Yoruba traditions and culture by imposing their own systems of thought and belief, as well as through their continued control over the churches and educational institutions, while the indigenous converts who were crucial to the missionary effort were not exempt from persecution (Abiola, 2020). Hence, the only better option left for the Yoruba people on this situation was to seek redress (Odejebi, 2014). It was on this premise that many educated Africans generally believed that they needed to promote aspects of the African culture against the cultural imperialism of the prideful Europeans (Abiola, 2020).

The prevailing conditions after the First World War in which there was worldwide influenza epidemic and the economic depression also arose the feeling of anti-European religious movement in Yorubaland. Many Yoruba Christians were dissatisfied with the Mission Church leadership during the terrible influenza outbreak that swept through West Africa in 1918 because they felt powerless in the face of the catastrophe. The Yoruba people formed prayer and healing groups through which the epidemic was cured. With the help of this prayer group, congregations like the Faith Tabernacle and the Cherubim and Seraphim Society were created, from which a number of other organizations later broke away.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Deji Ayegboyin & S. Ademola Ishola. (1997). *African Indigenous churches — Chapter Two Factors Responsible*

### **Establishment of Indigenous Churches in Yorubaland and Admiration of Yoruba Traditional Values**

The founding and expansion of the African strand of Christian development has been a defining feature of the period from the eighteenth century to the present. In Africa, this practice has given rise to native churches and prayer groups. These churches, to some varying degrees were characterized by a desire for African self-expression and freedom from missionary-control. These groups have not only taken root but they have proliferated and shown phenomenal growth particularly in Yorubaland.<sup>8</sup> This anti-European religious movement in Yorubaland, in a bid to correct the western doctrines prevalent in the Church in which they had been culturally slighted by the enforcement of monogamy on the members of the church, and the order to divorce second or third wives as a pre-condition to enjoy full church membership and the right of participating in two essential ordinances of the church; Baptism and the Holy Communion, therefore took into consideration their own indigenous culture and religious consciousness.

They held that by these they were breeding their own kind of indigenous Church where Yoruba cultural modes of worship and beliefs would be recognized and respected. They felt that any religious institution, which did not meet the Yoruba daily life's experience, would create spiritual hunger. Therefore from the 1890s onward, series of protests rocked Lagos, Abeokuta and some other Yoruba towns, a protest against the forms of church government, and yearning for "democracy", "self-government" and their fondness for Nigerian clergy and the willingness to enter fully into the Christian communion. It was an age when the spirit of nationalism enveloped the church or the renaissance period in which several churches were destroyed, and missionaries were expelled from Yorubaland (Odejebi, 2014).

Numerous African churches emerged in South Africa, Ghana, and Nigeria at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. From Nigeria, the churches included The Native Baptist Church (1888), The United Native African Church (1891), The African Church (1901), The Christ Army Church (1915), and the United African Methodist Church (Eleja -1917). In response to the inhumane treatment meted out to the African educated clergy who had primarily supported the course of evangelism, there was a longing in the hearts of many Africans to find a mode of religious expression that is psychologically and sociologically satisfying. Charismatic Yoruba leaders like Moses Orimolade and Bilewu Oshoffa and Joseph Ayo Babalola founded additional indigenous churches in the years that followed.

*for the Emergence of Indigenous Churches*, Institute for Religious Research.

<sup>8</sup> Deji Ayegboyin & S. Ademola Ishola. (1997). *African Indigenous churches- Chapter one, some problems of Terminology*, Institute for Religious Research.

These churches were termed as Pentecostal indigenous Churches known as Aladura.

Some of these churches dated back to the 1920s and were founded with the intention of demonstrating the rescuing and healing power of God, especially in the superstitious, impoverished, and disease-ridden populations present in Yorubaland (Odejobi, 2014). These churches included The Celestial Church of Christ, The Church of Cherubim and Seraphim, and The Christ Apostolic Church.<sup>9</sup> These churches are largely Yoruba in conduct and population. They are examples of African Christian Churches that have successfully taken and modified European Christianity to serving uniquely African spiritual needs. These churches despised the overbearing nature and attitude of rulers of the European mission churches. These bodies of indigenous churches put their figures on the religion of European Christian Missions as primary source of the social, moral and religious decay of the day, also taking into consideration the culture, customs and manners of their native land to relate with their God.<sup>10</sup>

The African Christians therefore wanted a Christianity that would picture their society, culture, and values. They desired a Christianity that recognizes African indigenous cultural worldview and uses this as a medium of communicating the Christian message and expression to them (Ogunrinade and Ogbole, 2013). They resolved to pursue this through the promotion of Yoruba language, music and drumming. They had a strong conviction that their culture was going through a historical and cultural transition, and that the Christian faith needed to be indigenous. The indigenous Christian denominations in Yorubaland that split from the so-called European mission churches started to reform colonialism's influence on church doctrine and practices, substituting Yoruba practices such as praying for kings (Obas) and chiefs instead of the Queen of England as instructed in the prayer book. This was especially true of the African Church (incorporated) (Odejobi, 2014). Some Yoruba elites dropped their English dresses and names and retained their native dresses and names while self-support and self-government was introduced in most of these churches.<sup>11</sup>

They therefore began to express God within African concepts other than erstwhile European perception. The

liturgy was made more local by using theater, singing, drumming, and dancing. The gospel was expressed using Yoruba idioms and traditions. They started to give their beliefs, religious observances and customs, language, psychological emotions, and more generally their conducts a distinctive rectitude and local influence, some of which were components of Yoruba cultural manifestation.<sup>12</sup> The indigenization of European Christianity brings about the prominence of the Church pastor or prophet who functions as spiritual consultant in the office vacated by European missionary.

The indigenous religious movements as Yorubaland concerned seceded from the mission churches because they were culturally affronted by the missionaries and they believed that if Christian worship is to mean anything to the indigenous people, it must not be presented in foreign culture. Hence there were reformation exercises of expressing God within their local concepts by removing the elements of colonialism and replacing them with Yoruba substitutions. In the aforementioned Yoruba indigenous churches, some of the significant traditional values and customs that came about as a result of their religious beliefs and an embodiment of their cultural patterns are observed, such as men dressing in colorful flowing Agbada, buba, and sokoto, while women appear in Iro, buba, and gele to match instead of European dressing of shirt and trousers or gown, skirt, and blouse, respectively, as observed by them as marks of Christianity and civilization which the converts should manifest (Odejobi, 2014).

## CONCLUSION

The Yoruba traditional values are bound together in their culture, this is the totality of the way of life of the people in an attempt to meet the challenge of living in their environment, which gives order and meaning to their social, political, economic and religious norms and mode of organization, thus distinguishing a people from their neighbors.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, culture and religion are connected, according to the idea that people are made right with God within the context of their culture, which frequently reveals the form of worship and style of faith.

Thus, the Yoruba people have a strong belief that the Christian faith that the missionaries introduced should be indigenous and stand for racial uniqueness to portray some

<sup>9</sup> Accessed online, [http://en.wikipedia/wiki/eternal\\_sacred\\_of\\_cherubim\\_and\\_seraphim](http://en.wikipedia/wiki/eternal_sacred_of_cherubim_and_seraphim), 13/07/2019

<sup>10</sup> H. O Atansuyi, Gospel and Culture from the perspective of African Instituted Churches, *Cyberjournal for Pentecostal-Charismatic Research*. (Accessed on 13/07/2019)

<sup>11</sup> Toyin Falola and Dipo Olubomehin, (eds), *Yoruba Nation and Politics since the Nineteenth Century, Essay in Honour of prof. J.A Atanda*, Texas: Pan-African University Press, 298-299.

<sup>12</sup> H. O Atansuyi, Gospel and Culture from the perspective of African Instituted Churches, *Cyberjournal for Pentecostal-Charismatic Research*. (Accessed on 13/07/2019)

<sup>13</sup> See cultural policy for Nigeria (1988). Cited in Ajah, Okpo, *Africa: Basic Issues in Cultural Orientation for Sustainable Development*, Lagos. Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization, 99- 100

of the basic traditional values such as tolerance, modesty, hard work, respect for leaders and elders which were highly cherished generally in the Yoruba societies in order to dispel bitterness and ensure societal peace, harmony and progress. This idea served as the foundation for the anti-European missionary discontent, while the new African movements emerged in an effort to reform the European teachings in the church while taking into account Yoruba culture and religious consciousness.

### Conflict of Interests

The author(s) declare no conflict of interest.

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