

# TRADITIONAL RELIGION AND CHRISTIANITY IN ILE - IFE: A CRITIQUE OF RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS IN NIGERIA

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## **Abstract**

Religion is a common heritage which Africans share with the rest of mankind. In fact it is considered to be an inseparable phenomenon dominating the whole strata of human existence. Thus, the aim of this paper is to examine the religion situation in Ile - Ife before the arrival of foreign religions such as Christianity and Islam, the encounter of both Christianity and Islam with indigenous religion and the eventual religious harmony in the town. The methodological approach employed in the paper is a combination of historical and sociological approach. In conclusion useful suggestions are preferred as resolutions for the peaceful co-existence among the religionists in Nigeria as a whole. Among the resolutions are: that there should be a forum for inter-faith dialogue where tenets of every religion available would be learnt and that, media houses through which religious groups advertise their religious activities must be objective in discharging their duties.

## **Introduction**

From time immemorial man has always felt an inner urge to worship and this has created in man many forms of religious behaviours (Mamman, 2001). Every society of the world has an indigenous religion and this is Coeval with the evolution of man. The African society is not left out, its religion has been succinctly described by Awolalu and Dopamu (1979:26) in the following words: When we speak of African Traditional Religion, we mean the indigenous religion of the Africans. It is the religion that has been handed down from generation to generation by the forebears of the present generation of Africans.

However, this indigenous religion of Africans has been misunderstood over the ages, it has suffered a serious setback in its encounter with both Islam and Christianity. Indigenous worshippers were the common goal of both Islam and Christianity and they won converts so much so that indigenous religion for some time appeared moribund. Indoctrination gave birth to contempt of the religion and it was regarded with utter disgust and disdain by many. It seems fashionable these days for people to identify themselves with Christianity or Islam since these religions were regarded as the religions of the enlightened people (Dopamu, 1986).

## **He - Ife Before The Arrival Of Christianity**

He - Ife is one of the ancient towns in Osun State of Nigeria and it is believed to owe its foundation to an eponymous ancestor - Oduduwa (the progenitor of Yoruba race) (Johnson, 1921). The town is located on Longitude 4.6° E and Latitude 7.5° N. It has an elevation of about 275 metres above the sea level. As it were, the city is surrounded by a chain of seven hills. They are: Oke-Ora, Oke -Araromi, Oke-Owu, Oke - Opa, Oke-Ijugbe, Oke-Onigbin and Oke-Obagbile. As a result of those hills, the town itself was built in a bow-like physical layout (Eluyemi, 1985).

Traditionally, the Yoruba speaking groups regard Ile-Ife as their place of origin and sacred home. According to one local tradition He -Ife is the place where God created man (Buah, 1967). Though this tradition is without any historical basis, yet the belief shows the reverence which the Yoruba have for their ancestral home of He -Ife. The Ooni (King) of Ife is generally accepted as the spiritual leader of the Yoruba land because he was believed to have derived his status from Oduduwa. He -Ife is an important historical and cultural centre of the Yoruba, it is clear then that a modern study of the history, religion and culture of the Yoruba should centre round Ile-Ife (Government Release, 1977).

Religiously, Ile-Ife is known as the stronghold of indigenous worship and the people there were

traditionalists upholding the religion of their ancestors. Many traditional festivals are marked to commemorate myriads of deities known with the history of the town and Yoruba land in general. Some of the festival include: Edi (in honour of the female heroine - Moremi), Olojo (to commemorate the life of Ogun the god of iron). Others are festivals in honour of Oduduwa, Obatala, Olokun, Yemoo, Oluorogbo, Oranmiyan e.t.c. (Eluyemi, 1985). It is generally believed that it is only one day throughout the year that sacrifice is not made to one deity or the other in Ile-Ife.

### **Christianity Encounter With Traditional Religion In He - Ife: Survival Of The Fittest**

Since there is hardly any place for irreligiosity in Africa, it is natural that an attempt to introduce any foreign religion to the traditional society meant an invasion or loss of groups on the part of traditional religion. In a bid for Christianity to displace traditional religion in He Ife, many factors came into play as the integrity of the African religion was being trampled upon by the new coming religion. It was either to treat the invading religion with uneasy calm or outright violence.

Ajayi (1979) stressed that the advent of Christianity into Yoruba land was part of the second coming of the religion into Nigeria. He further claimed that the first attempt which was largely restricted to coastal areas of Calabar, Warri and Benin was a failure. Therefore, it was during this second phase that Christianity was introduced to Ile-Ife. In a similar study, Fabunmi (1985) discussed in great length the initial encounter of Ife people with Christianity by the early Roman Catholic Fathers in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. He stressed that these church fathers came from Benin to build a magnificent church at a place called Oke-Ileri in The Ife after due consultation with the paramount ruler of the land. Later, the then **Ooni of Ife - AdemHuyi Ajagun** was baptized as **Thomas John Ooni**. At this time indigenous religion in He -Ife was reduced to the barest minimum and the new converts were admonished against customary matters, so as not to backslide. Thus, Christianity became the religion of the day.

However, immediately after the death of Thomas John Ooni the people of Ife renounced Christianity by claiming that the religion does not help them in their divination. In view of this many of the early converts were expelled from the town while others ran away. An example of this was the case of evangelist Labosinde. According to Philips (1947), the evangelist was living in the palace of the Qom so as to serve as a haven for him, but during this indigenous revolution the evangelist was sent out of Ife without his belongings. They wanted to kill him but he was saved by the people that pitied him At this turning point, indigenous religion came alive again.

To Idowu (1982), the Ife people only bore the imposition grudgingly until they were strong enough to cast off its yoke. When they were sure that they could do this successfully, they appointed a day on which they all assembled and unanimously took a resolution that they repudiate the alien thing It is the spot on which the resolution was registered that is called Oke-Itapa, which signified that it was there that the Ife revolted against the alien imposition. In addition to this, all the available literature relating to foreign religion were burnt and the people took a solemn vow at Oke-Ileri never to embrace Christianity again (Fabunmi, 1985). To mark this final break with the alien religion, the Ife people immediately established the temple of Orisa-nla on Oke-Itapa and there it stand up till today.

### **Resurgence Of Christianity In Ile-Ife**

Propagation of one's faith according to Olayiwola (2001), is a religious demand that cannot be easily suppressed. In the light of this, people that have experienced Christianity before it was stamped out in Ile-Ife were still feeling the inner urge to reintroduce the religion. Therefore, sequel to the pressure from the few remaining converts on the Ooni to allow Christianity in Ife land and the progressive reports about the missionaries in other Yoruba speaking lands, Olayiwola (1993) confirmed, the then Ooni of Ife (kumbusu) sent an invitation to the Church Missionary Society (CMS) at Ibadan that he wanted Missionaries to come to Ile-Ife.

However, this effort could not materialize as a result of lack of evangelists. Adelowo (1992) corroborated this and went further that after the failure of the invitation, a small prayer group headed by John Adelaja - an Ijebu man and Daniel Ologbenla who had attended C.M.S school in Lagos was formed in Ile-Ife . In 1899, they sent delegates to Rev.(later Bishop) Charles Phillips in Ondo asking for C.M.S support. Phillips in response sent one Mr. E. A. Kayode to Ile-Ife on May 23, 1899-to nurture the nascent

Christian Community, (Adelowo,1992).

In a nutshell, the eventual arrival of the Catechist, Missionaries and building of churches such as; St. Phillips' Anglican Church Ayetoro and St. Peter's Church, Irewo had led to the opening of schools and colleges where the natives were taught how to read and write. This in turn ushered in civilization that encouraged tolerance and religious humanism in the town today.

### **Islam in Ile-Ife**

Just like any other Yoruba community, Islam penetrated into Ile-Ife through peaceful means. The religion according to Adelowo (1992) reached Ile-Ife during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century through an Ilorin man named Danielu. This man was a traditional healer who incorporated Muslim prayers, incantation and medical knowledge. Although he won few converts to Islam, he was held in high esteem in Ile-Ife.

Later, an Ife man named Kazeem who was sold to slavery in Lagos returned home and met Danielu , then an aged man trying to establish Islam in the town. Danielu, Kazeem and the sprinkling of Muslims then observed the Muslim ritual prayers (as-salat) together in a mosque at Modakeke where Islam was already established. It was not until the early part of this century that the religion took root in Ile-Ife and the first recognized mosque was built at Itakogun in 1903. Many reasons have' been advanced for the general acceptance of Islam in Ile-Ife. These include: support of traditional Chiefs, its accord with African culture particularly on polygamy, use of talisman, charms and divination. These make Ife people to embrace the religion without despising their indigenous religion.

### **Religious Harmony In Ile-Ife**

There is no gain saying the fact that the arrival of the acclaimed modern religions namely: Islam and Christianity have dealt a great blow to the growth of indigenous religion in view of the loss

of most of its adherents to the new faiths. However, it is pertinent to say that even though the Ife people are today mostly Muslims and Christians, yet they still practice their religions within the context of their indigenous cultural background. The diversity in religious beliefs of Ife people shows that the people have wider religious experience and this makes it possible to have a high degree of religious interaction in the town.

Areas of religious interaction in Ife in recent years include the following: First and foremost is the area of interfaith participation. Certain traditional festivals are the concern of every member of the society irrespective of their religious traditions. Though, both Islam and Christianity have an overwhelming majority of adherents in Ile-Ife yet, many people still participate in Olojo (a festival in honour of Ogun, the god of iron) and Edi (a festival in honour of Moremi, an heroine in lie - Ife). To them the religious ceremonies have ceased to have religious import as they have shifted grounds to social and entertaining values. Some of the Christians and Muslims see participation in such traditional festivals as expression of traits of African culture which have nothing to do with their beliefs. Some even justified their participation with statement laden with ecumenical import that 'all roads to God' (Akinseye, 2001).

Secondly, the scramble for material well being has led many people to totally embrace some aspects of traditional religion. Magical practices are still applied to new circumstances and these are used side by side with Biblical and Quranic texts for protection and security. In other words, more people patronize medicine men to solve their problems, for economic advantage and for healing their ailments.

Furthermore, in Ile-Ife today, both Christians and Muslims rush at chieftaincy titles and these of necessity involve rituals and ceremonies which are associated with traditional religion. After the coronation, the new Chief will appear in either church or mosque for the thanksgiving service on the following Friday or Sunday with all his kith and kin to thank God for the hitch free ceremony.

Again, in the time of crisis, many people still resort to traditional practices. When all is well they follow the new religions with gusto but in time of crisis or problems, people forget all about the new religions which they believe cannot give them the much needed protection. Sequel to this,'they seek after the diviners whom they believe can give them guidance. The recent Ife - Modakeke crisis is a case study in which charms and others African related powers were freely used.

In addition, both Muslims and Christians still use traditional objects during naming, marriage and other ceremonies. These objects are used with their attendant symbolism. For example Qrogbo (bitter Kola)

symbolizes old age, water symbolizes an undisturbed life while kolanut symbolizes the warding off of evil.

In a nutshell, the Ife people are enjoying a high degree of religious humanism, they seek justification for this in Yoruba philosophical sayings such as:

Oju kan ko lojaa ni

Literally: It is not an entrance that is taking to the market.

'Oju orun to eye fo lai fara kanra

Literally: The sky is wide enough for all kind of birds to fly without disturbing one another.

Taking refuge in the above saying, the people see nothing wrong in attending the Christian services on Sunday and on subsequent days of the week engaging in traditional practices. Thus they could seek efficacious solutions to their problem; spiritual, economic, health etc at the feet of herbalists, who provide them, with charms, amulet and medicine for trio-purposes of prevention, protection and cure (Aderibigbe, 2001).

Among the Yoruba race, Ile-Ife has experienced a high degree of heterogeneity of religious humanism, this is due to the wide acceptance of Islam and Christianity by the people who were hitherto practitioners of indigenous religion. Each of the three religions (Traditional religion, Islam and Christianity) practiced in Ile-Ife has its tradition and culture within the context of which its adherents operate in their dealings and actions. Schools and Colleges dedicated to one divinity or the other in the town, such as Oduduwa College, Idita Community High School etc. are being attended by children of both Muslims and Christians.

### **Critique Of Religious Crisis In Nigeria**

From the religious situation in Ile-Ife today, we can find that traditional religion still has great impacts on the society, be it moral, social and spiritual. It might have borrowed from other cultures, but definitely, Islam and Christianity have also borrowed from it. The major problem is that while all of them believe in God, they disagree on how to go to God. It is pertinent to note here that the two major religions in Nigeria that provoke religious sentiment, especially in the northern part of country, are Christianity and Islam. Rather than the antagonistic posture that characterize the relationship of these two religions, there are enough grounds for them to cooperate because they have one common origin - Judaism, and they both accept one God (Hertz, 1990).

It is on record that religion is fast becoming one of the ready-made weapons that are often manipulated by self-seeking leaders. Also, the religious crises often experienced in Nigeria seem more political than religious. With the emergence of the new era of religious conflict in Nigeria since 1980 when Maitatsine sect launched a violent attack on the people of Kano, there have been several similar upheavals in some parts of the country. There was the Bulumkutu riot of October 1982, the various Kaduna riots of 1987, 1988 and year 2000.

Besides is the recent Kaduna riot of 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2002 where about two hundred people were reportedly killed and property worth millions of naira was destroyed. This crisis was said to have been caused by what the people termed 'blasphemous publication'<sup>1</sup> (Tribune, 2002) and protest against 'Miss World beauty contest' scheduled to hold on December 7, 2002 in Abuja (Hope, 2002). It is important to state here that the rate of religious crises in this country needs our urgent and adequate attention so as to proffer solution to this spiritual and social problem in Nigeria.

### **Suggestions On The Prevention Of Future Religious Crises**

For the purpose of religious harmony and mutual understanding in our country (Nigeria), several suggestions could be made as solutions to religious crisis between Christian and Muslims especially in the northern part of the country.

First and foremost, the media houses (Television, Radio or Newspapers) through which these religious groups advertise their religious activities must be objective in discharging their duties in order to prevent another crisis. They must be guided by the ethics of their profession, which include objective and unbiased dissemination of information.

Secondly there should be a forum for inter-faith dialogue where proper understanding of tenets

of every religion would be learnt. The adherents should be properly guided as regards the belief system of religion other than their own. It is fair and proper that people should treat religion as personal and private affairs as it is done in other parts of the world, if for nothing else, for the stability of the nation.

Both the state and federal governments should not get themselves involved in any of the religious activities of any religion in the country. There should be no favoritism from government toward any religion. Every religion should be given equal treatment and opportunity

Besides, government at all levels must provide gainful employment to their citizens. This is very important because it was discovered that some idle hands usually cause religious conflict because such provide them opportunity to loot in order to make a living. We also learnt that some dubious religious functionaries do employ the idle people and manipulate them to cause confusion and tension in society.

Again, as it is known today that religion is fast becoming one of the ready-made weapons that are often manipulated by self seeking leaders. The-masses who are manipulated should not simply assume that those who claim to be championing their cause are operating without any hidden agenda.

Equally of importance is the issue of Sharia. This is a sensitive issue that needs careful handling. The Muslims, especially in the northern part should exercise some patience and educate the people about Sharia until they are convinced that it is not being entrenched into the constitution to achieve any selfish end. Apart from this, the exclusion of non-Muslims from the operation of the Sharia law must be guaranteed.

Last but not the least, no religious leader should look down on other religious leaders, all should respect one another's religious belief system. There should be no religious victimization, hostility and disregard among religious leaders and adherents

### **Summary And Conclusion**

This paper has discussed the religious situation in Ile-Ife before the arrival of modern religions (Islam and Christianity) and the encounter of Christianity with the indigenous religion, which was vehemently resisted by the native. It also examined the religious situation in Ile-Ife today where religious interaction, coexistence and harmony exist as a result of their wider religious experience. Lastly, suggestions were proffered on the need to prevent future religious crisis in the country.

Finally, it must be noted that for any country to develop either politically or economically, religious harmony and tolerance must be first of all put into consideration. After this other things can follow. It is on this note that the paper is calling on the religious leaders of both Islam and Christianity in the northern part of Nigeria to borrow a leaf from their southern counterparts and enjoy religious harmony as it is been enjoyed in the Southern part of the country.

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