



Performing Religious Worship: Discussion around *Ise* and other religious practice among the Yoruba of West Africa

Lead Author

**Rantimi Jays
Julius-
Adeoye**

Affiliation:

Department
of Theatre
and Film
Studies
Redeemer's
University
Ede, Osun
State



Abstract

Nigeria is the most diversified and populous nation in Africa with more than two hundred million people, and over five hundred ethnic nationalities that practice one religion or the other. Though Nigeria pride itself as secular nation, but many of the unrest and violence in the country are caused by religious intolerance. In fact, there is both a church and mosque in the official residence of the president. In fact, electoral position in the country is conducted on religious line. The most popular religion in the country is Christianity and Islam with prejudice against the indigenous belief system. Therefore, this paper employs ethnography theory to discuss the position of Ise and raise study on the hostility that Christianity and Islam religions visited on the practitioners of the indigenous religions. The paper adopts qualitative research methodology to draw attention to the plight of the adherents of Ise. Among the several Ise festivals celebrated majorly by the Yorubas are Eyo, Igogo. Some of the popular Ise among the Yoruba includes Olojo, Oro, Ogun, Malokun, Egungun, and Sango festivals. The Yoruba with approximately forty million remains the leading ethnic nationalities in the world

Keywords: Religion, Ise, Yoruba, Nigeria, performing



Introduction

The argument that religion is essential to human morality and existence may hold true in some significance, but not always. It is not an assumption that society has evolved to the level where the concept of morality and human existence no longer depend on religion. This is more so, as morality cannot fit into one prism just like some religions and philosophers have construed. For example, Laura Schlessinger while re-emphasizing Dostoevsky's position that if "God does not exist, everything is permitted"¹, argues that "morality is impossible without believe in God."² This assertion is far removed from the meaning of morality which is based on where it is derived. For instance morality can be looked at from the perspective of conduct that follow philosophical or cultural principles or sets of belief that individual and group(s) holds dear. On the other hand, belief may be in God as in the case of religion, yet it may be based on personal principles or adherence to community code. This leads us to the discussion of ethic in relation to morality. We can have religious morality and non-religious morality as two different ways of thinking and action. The Latin etymology of morality links it to the custom of the community, while ethic is based on character. Therefore, one can simply link religion to human social practice in the state of both human and societal development. Ethic is possible in the current stage of human and societal development without believe in God in the same way as morality. There is a boundary created by the state that put limit to what is permissible right from the primordial stage of human existence to the current state, religion has played different role as a social system. Therefore, in affirmation of Shack statement, "Religion systems are social system."³ In this case, religion thrive base on the collective practice it enjoys from the interaction of people as social actors within society. As a social system, it connects people together and becomes the instrument of socialization and at the same time continues to change in form and appearance in that stratum, people change with it. Medda, observes that,

Religion has manifested itself in a baffling variety of forms, including much that is crude, futile and

1 Dostoevsky, F. 1990. *The Brothers Karamazov*. Pevear R., and Volokhonsky, L. (translated). New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

2 Schlessinger, L. 2007. *Views of Religion and Morality*.

<http://www.pewglobal.org/2007/10/04chapter-3-views-of-religion-and-morality/>

3 Shack, W.A. 1979. Foreword. George Bond, Walton Johnson, Sheila S. Walker, eds. *African Christianity: Patterns of Religious Continuity*. New York: Academic Press. xv

ignoble, as well as much that is noble, idealistic and conductive to human well-being. Religion is not a static matter. It has passed through a perplexing changes and evolutions in the history of mankind. Religion is a growing and dynamic⁴

The manifestation of religion in variety of forms pointed out in the above quotation, makes the definition of the subject complicated. Therefore, the debate around definition of religion will continue unabated for some time to come as noted by many scholars. In the words of Greil, "It seems safe to assert that no consensus on a definition of religion has been reached and that no consensus is likely to be reached in the foreseeable future."⁵ Right from Emile Durkheim's definition of religion which exclude the role of divine but affirms religion as social institution, to the modern theorists' construction of the subject as something personal to the believer, lend credence to the argument of ambiguity in the definition and the unending debate.

The concept of religion in relation to its practice by Christians and Moslem is alien to many societies in Sub-Saharan Africa until the arrival of the two religions in the sub-continent. Though, for the Yoruba, it is inconceivable to doubt the existence of God. According to Taiwo and Taiwo, "Yoruba's religion is characterised by different cultural philosophies and reverences to deities that are regarded as intermediaries between them and Eledumare (the Supreme God)."⁶ Therefore, the belief in a supreme God known as Olodumare is sacrosanct. The creation of the world and heaven is based on its pronouncement into existence by Olodumare (*Ase ni Olodumare fi d'aye at'orun*). The pattern of religious practice is fundamentally different from one race to another and from one society to the other. While Christianity and Islam relied on the belief of human Messiah and Prophet figure with functions of reconciling man to God in the afterlife, Isele on the hand proclaim an orishas that are available as intermediary who take human propitiations to Olodumare.....and also prepare man for continuous life after death on earth in either a glorious heaven or vicious hell where pain is nonstop, the concept of religion in early sub-Saharan African traditions present different narrative with link to deities and the supreme divine. According to

4 Medda, G. 2023 Feb. The Concept of Religion. *Anudhyan: An International Journal of Social Sciences (AIJSS)*, 78, 78-83

5 Greil, Arthur L. 2009. Art: Defining religion. In Clarke, Peter B. & Peter Beyer (eds.), *The World's Religions*, 136. London: Routledge, 135-149

6 Taiwo, M.T., Taiwo, V.O. 2020. Religion Sectarianism in Yoruba Land and Threats to its Millennial Tribal Union. *Randwick International of Social Science Journal*, 1(2), 135-149, 165.



Banwari, many religions use the after-life to speak of the ultimate reward of good and the punishment of evil.⁷ In the words of Bewaji,

That Christianity and other theistic religions believe in God is a basic component of these religions. These religions would not have any further significance and would lose their followers and devotion if the God-head is detracted from. As such, affirmation of the existence of a perfect God is a necessity.⁸

In this same way, every practitioner of any of the Yoruba religion understands that the orishas are messengers to Olodumare, hence they cannot be separated from God. The existence of heaven and hell as they are perceived in Christianity and Islamic theology is foreign to traditional African beliefs. From the Yoruba's perspective, heaven is where every human being descends from after choosing the part to thread on earth. Therefore, heaven becomes the home that one must return at the end of earthly existence which terminates at death. The belief that heaven is a sanctuary for rest without toil give informs the Yoruba aphorism *aye l'oja, orun ni'le* (the world is a market while heaven is home). However, the dead is expected to transit to the realm of the ancestor first and in many instances to be reborn into the same family in a future date after securing permission from Olodumare when never the need arise. This accounts for the presence of such name as *Babatunde* (Our father has return or reincarnated), *Babajide* (our father has awoken), *Babawale* (Our forefather has come home), *Yetunde* (Our mother has return or reincarnated), *lyabode* (Our foremother is back from her sojourn), and so on among the Yoruba of West Africa and the Caribbean. In fact, many Yoruba names with the prefix of *Baba* (Father) and *Iye* or *Iya* (Mother), reference either a male or female ancestor. Therefore, the belief in the concept of reincarnation reinforces ancestral worship among the people, in contrary to Christian and Islamic belief of heaven or hell fire that awaits one after death with no opportunity for a return to earth in any form. There is a contradiction among the Islamic practitioners where anyone who dies in the course of Jihad on earth, is permitted to marry many virgins in aljannah. However, it is also stated that after death, one is going to aljannah to await final judgment of Allah. Therefore, at what time will the marriage to the many virgins take place? Is it while waiting for final judgment at aljannah or after the final judgment?

7 Banwari, S. (2015). *The Theory of Reincarnation and the Journey of the Soul: A Comparison between Greek and Indian Belief*. Master's Thesis, University of KwaZulu Natal, 1.

8 Bewaji, J.A.I. 1998. Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief and the Theistic Problem of Evil. *African Studies Quarterly* 2(1), 1-16, 5



Isele as Religious Practice Among Yoruba People

The concept of religion among the Yoruba takes different shapes and understanding. For instance, as religion relates to common belief and worship, it is also a social identification and interaction. It is both physical and spiritual at the same time. To many of the people, religion is identifiable in what can be seen, touched, feel and imagined. Therefore, the need for the representation of the imagined in form, is linked to the different cultures within the Sub-Saharan Africa. *Isele*, the Yoruba word for tradition, is also used to denote different kinds of festivals held by adherents of the Yoruba traditional religion or culture in Nigeria and Cuba, Brazil, the United States, Benin, and other countries. As Greil and Davidman state in relation to identity theory,

... identity is the pivotal concept linking social structure with individual behavior; thus, the prediction of behavior requires an analysis of the relationship between self and social structure. Since everyone has multiple roles and, therefore, multiple role identities, the key question for identity theory becomes discovering which identities get translated into behavior.⁹

This informs why there are shrines and identifiable objects used in the representation of the divine or Orisha before worship takes place. This is more so, when someone who had lived at one point in time as human being is elevated to the status of deity based on the accomplishment while on alive. A case in point is Sango and many of the peoples' ancestors. In the words of Taiwo and Taiwo:

Essentially, the Yoruba claim that their multiple deities only serve as intermediaries through which or whom they commune with God just like Jesus Christ in the case of Christian and Mohammed in the case of Muslim, and that the fact that they have multiple deities does not make them polytheists. Some of the popular deities that have always formed Yoruba religion are: Orunmila, Obatala, Oduduwa, Osun, Ogun, Sango, Oya, Yemoja, Esu, Ajesaluga, Egungun, Ela, Oosa lfe, Osu, Esidale, Ori, Odu, Edan, Sonponno,

⁹ Greil, A.L., Davidman, L. 2007. Religion and Identity. *The Sage Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*. 531-549, 536.
DOI:<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781848607965>



Orisa oko, Osa[n]yin, a few out of more than four hundred deities worshiped by the people.¹⁰

Argument subsists about Christianity and Islam - two Mediterranean religions that grew out of Judaism, which itself is believed to develop from Zoroastrianism belief of monotheism. According to James Barr,

The development of within Jewish religion of such matters as angels, dualism, eschatology, and the resurrection of the body is commonly attributed to the impact of Iranian religion. This would not be surprising, at least in theory; for the Jews lived about two centuries under Pax Persica, and some of their most important books were written in that time.¹¹

Here, Persia being ancient Iran, and the bible acknowledged that the patriarch, Abraham, followed his father Terar out of his ancestral land known as Ur of the Chaldees in Persia. What distinguishes the people from one another plays a vital role in defining what to reverence and what to worship. Heckert, link of Zoroastrianism and Christianity further strengthen the argument,

While there clearly are commonalities among the Zoroastrian faith, Judaism, and Christianity, the purpose of this chapter is to look at Zoroastrian ideas and practices that the early Christian community adopted directly. Oddly, not everything that became a part of Christian canon had an initial place in Judaism or stayed within Jewish traditions. Some things have roots in Zoroastrianism and jump directly to Christianity without having the same impact on Judaism. Key areas of transition include good and evil ethical beliefs, angelic and demonic hierarchies, ideas about death, and the coming day of judgment. All of these topics have their roots in Zoroastrianism, although some of these early Christian beliefs were further developed or seemingly reappear under Popes like Gregory I and theologians like Thomas Aquinas.¹²

10 Taiwo, M.T., Taiwo, V.O. 2020. Religion Sectarianism in Yoruba Land and Threats to Its Millennial Tribal Union. *Randwick International of Social Science (RISS) Journal* Vol. 1 (2) July, 135-149, 166.

11 Barr, J. 1985. The Question of Religious Influence: The Case of Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Christianity. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 53(2), 201-235, 201

12 Heckert, J. 2023. Reflections Across Religions: A Historical Examination of Common Themes in Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity. Master Thesis, Winthrop University, 33



Early sub-Saharan African religions have different formation patterns. This is because; experiences are not the same from one ethnic group to the other. Acceptability and understanding can only be reached collectively when the barrier to the identity is obliterated. The more reason while there are plethoras of divinities or deities among the people. Whereas some of the religions are monotheistic, many are deistic. Nevertheless, like most religions from other parts of the world they follow similar patterns of observance. For example, the Yoruba people understood religion from worship and praise, chanting and incantation as necessary requirements needed in the people's association with the divine or the more than one hundred Orishas. In this regards, there are both individual and collective practice of worship and praise, chanting and incantation. For instance, every time a Moslem chant, *Allahu Akba*, they are engaging in the act of praises of Allah as the greatest. This is also synonymous with the Christian pronouncement of "praise the Lord, Hallelujah." Like the Romans who ascribed days to the worship of the different phenomenon in the cosmos, the Yorubas named an Orisha as the custodian of a particular day of the week.

The individual and collective reverence of the divine meet as common practice with age-old tradition for the sustenance of personal, group and societal lives, and the rejuvenation of the presumed dead in a common observance of *Isese*. Therefore, it is considered as ethical behavior to reverence the different Orishas in order for the continuity of human existence. There is no collective religious book like the Christian Bible, Moslem Quran, Torah of Judaism or the Indis' Sanskrit in *Isese*. However, there is the common belief that *Ifa* – oracle in spite of its oral nature, serves as the text for many of the Orishas. The fact that *Ifa* belongs to *Orunmila* – the Orisha in charge of divination - makes it the repository of the total knowledge of all the Orishas. Therefore, one can authoritatively conclude that *Isese* has no definitive religious text. Nevertheless, only those versed in the language of divination as Babalawo can interpret what is seen on the divination board. This is buttressed by Ogunnaike Oludamini in his rendition of the Odu Otura-Ogbe,

A kọfá mọfá Babalawo t'ó bá kọfá mọfá A ma di
Babalawo Oniṣegùn t'ó bá kọ̀gùn-mọ̀gùn A máa
dì àgbàlágba ṣegùn
One who studies Ifa, knows Ifa A Babalawo who
studies Ifa and knows it Will become a [senior]
Babalawo A traditional doctor, if he studies medicine

and knows it He will become a revered elder in medicine.¹³

Isese – primordial religious practice - refers to the age-old practice of communal worship or ritual for the veneration of any one of the myriad orishas within the Yoruba pantheon in a personal or festival form. According to Matthew Agbaje, "*Isese*, the Yoruba word for tradition, is also used to denote different kinds of festivals held by adherents of the Yoruba traditional religion or culture in Nigeria, Cuba, Brazil, the United States, Benin, and other countries."¹⁴ Agbaje writes further that, "important aspect or practice that is common in the festival celebration is offering sacrifices made to gods like Obatala, Sango, Ogun, Sankpanna, and Esu, which are peculiar to the Yoruba..."¹⁵ Contrary to Agbaje's position, these are not gods but orishas. They are simply orishas, different from Olorun - the owner of heaven. In fact, the orishas are worshipped based on demand with chants, praises and incantation. The relationship is that of father to son, acolyte and priest or priestess, and not as slave that serves his or her master. The essence of praises and incantation is to eulogize and appeal to the kindness of the Orishas in order that he or she can be benevolent to the people.

Isese is about the primordial practice of knowledge of existence - conjunction of two words and actions. "*Ise*", *Igba iwase*, *ni ibi oju gbe mo wa*, the beginning of creation when day was revealed, and "*se*", is action in motion or to do and doing. Therefore, *Isese*, simply refers to the practice of that which was in the beginning of man existence or dawn. This is synonymous with the biblical creation story in Gen. 1:1-31. The act of creating the earth, heaven, calling light to existence putting separation between day and night, and making every other things including man and woman. Therefore, *Isese* is about reverencing, acknowledgement of and deifying all those creations at the beginning as integral part of our cosmos. *Isese* is considered by the Yorubas as the oldest tradition and ways to worship not only the different phenomenal or beings that inhabit our conscious existence, but the unconscious as well. In this case, being the oldest tradition, *Isese l'agba* - the first among all traditions. Therefore, the *Isese*

13 Ogunnaike, Oludamini. 2015. *Sufism and Ifa: Ways of Knowing in Two West African Intellectual Traditions*. [Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University], Graduate School of Arts & Sciences. <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:23845406>

14 Agbaje, M. 2023. Five things to know about *Isese* festival. *Punch*. punchng.com 13th July 2023

15 Agbaje, M. 2023. Five things to know about *Isese* festival. *Punch*. punchng.com 13th July 2023



practitioners known as *Oni'sese* or *Oni'se*, argue that as practitioners, "we hold the earth at the center of our beliefs and strive to bring forth 'The Good Condition', with the aim of making this plane of existence a better place one day at a time. Our tradition has been passed down orally for thousands of years, making it a treasure trove of ancestral knowledge and wisdom."¹⁶ *Ise* is Yoruba spiritual systems that recognize Olodumare, Orishas, earth and heaven with all that inhabit them. In this case, the environment plays a significant role - river, sea, stone, rock, mountain, air, tree, rain, harmattan etc. The mode of reverence and requirements for the worship of the different Orishas are not the same as each one has its own demands and worshippers, as well as priests and priestesses. Only the monarch is expected to worship all the Orishas during the appointed day for each of them.

Conclusion

This paper discusses the ever presence position of the different religions within the African continent and also practiced by Diaspora Africans either in its authentic form or syncretise mode as obtained in some countries of South America. Emphasis is placed on the meaning and importance of *Ise* among the Yoruba of Southwest Nigeria. The argument is stressed that long before the emergence of Christianity and or Islam – two religions with Abrahamic foundation, there exist in sub-Saharan Africa different indigenous belief system, specifically referred to as *Ise* by the Yoruba. This is further stated that lack of tolerance for the expression of *Ise* among most practitioners of Christianity and Islam in Nigeria and the government of the federation is against the fundamental human rights of the people as well as the preservation of unique African culture. Therefore, the political elites and adherents of African forms of Christianity and Islam will do well to allow *Ise* to peacefully co-exist with other religions instead of the hostility that is accompanies it at the moment in some part of Nigeria. It is essential to reiterate the demand of Yeye Omolara olatunji who urges government to give each religion equal treatment in the state as enshrined in the constitution for peace to reign.¹⁷ The decision of the governments of some Nigerian states like Ekiti, Ondo, Kogi, Kwara, Lagos, Edo, Osun, Ogun¹⁸ to appropriate a day in August to the

¹⁶ Ifalowo, A. *Divine Motion*. Aboru, Aboye, Abosise.

<https://www.divinemotion.org/what-is-ise-l-agba>

¹⁷ Agbaje, M. (2023). Five things to know about Ise festival. *Punch*.

<https://punchng.com/five-things-to-know-about-ise-festival/>

¹⁸ Agbaje, M. (2023). Five things to know about Ise festival. *Punch*.

<https://punchng.com/five-things-to-know-about-ise-festival/>

celebration is laudable. One can only hope that the government at all level will integrate fully the indigenous religion practice one day, so that Christianity and Islam will no long health.

Reference

Agbaje, M. (2023). Five things to know about Isese festival. *Punch*. <https://punchng.com/five-things-to-know-about-isese-festival/>

Akinyemi, D. (2023). Isese Festival: I don't intend to bring idol worship to Ilorin. *Vanguard*. <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2023/07/isese-festival-i-dont-intend-to-bring-idol-worship-to-ilorin-says-obatala-priestess/>

Banwari, S. (2015). The Theory of Reincarnation and the Journey of the Soul: A Comparison between Greek and Indian Belief. Master's Thesis, University of KwaZulu Natal

Bewaji, J.A.I. 1998. Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief and the Theistic Problem of Evil. *African Studies Quarterly* 2(1), 1-16, 5

Dostoevsky, F. (1990). *The Brothers Karamazov*. Pevear, R., Volokhonsky, L. (translated). New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
Greil, Arthur L. (2009). Art: Defining religion. In Clarke, Peter B. & Peter Beyer (eds.) *The World's Religions*, 135-149. London: Routledge.

Greil, A.L., Davidman, L. (2007). Religion and Identity. *The Sage Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*. 531-549, 536.
DOI:<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781848607965>

Heckert, J. (2023). Reflections Across Religions: A Historical Examination of Common Themes in Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity. Master Thesis, Winthrop University

Ifalowo, A. *Divine Motion*. Aboru, Aboye, Abosise. <https://www.divinemotion.org/what-is-isese-l-agba>

Iwuagwu, E.K. (2018). The Relationship between Religion and Morality: On Whether the Multiplicity of Religious Denominations have Impacted Positively on Socio-Ethical Behavior. *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences* 6(9), 42-53

Medda, G. 2023 Feb. The Concept of Religion. *Anudhyan: An International Journal of Social Sciences (AIJSS)*, 78-83

Ogunnaike, O. 2015. *Sufism and Ifa: Ways of Knowing in Two West African Intellectual Traditions*. Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, Graduate School of Arts & Sciences.
<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:23845406>

Schlessinger, L. 2007. *Views of Religion and Morality*.
<http://www.pewglobal.org/2007/10/04chapter-3-views-of-religion-and-morality/>

Taiwo, M.T., Taiwo, V.O. 2020. Religion Sectarianism in Yoruba Land and Threats to Its Millennial Tribal Union. *Randwick International of Social Science (RISS) Journal* Vol. 1(2) July, 135-149.