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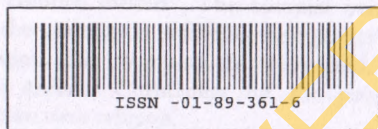
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Yoruba Movies and Religious Propagation in Yorubaland

Lateef O. ABBAS, Ph.D and Dare AbdulRazaq AMOS

Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies,
University of Ibadan, Nigeria.
latabs05@yahoo.com.

Abstract

Yoruba movies have made its debut and prominence from the stage plays, cinemas and celluloid stock during the colonial era. The influx of Yoruba movies encouraged some religious groups to manipulate these means to propagate their faith, while some of them turned it to tools of war meant to wield at will. Yoruba language is unique in its ability to express long words in a short form to promote wisdom and intelligence. Based on these facts, this paper addresses some pertinent features; on the relevance of religious belief to the Yoruba, the relationship between the cultures and traditional drama in Yorubaland by focusing the three major religions in Nigeria with particular reference to Christian evangelism through Yoruba movie outlining how it has distorted Islamic values and maligned the image of the Muslims, which led to the analysis of Agbara Nla. This paper also sheds light on the Islamic accommodation of cultural values so long it does not go against its fundamental principles. It concludes by warning on the danger in using Muslim personalities to project bad characters in Yoruba movies and encourages the Yoruba artist to implement the use of Yoruba movies to facilitate unity among different religious groups in Yorubaland. If this warning is heeded it will promote peaceful coexistence among the different religious practitioners.

Introduction

Watching movies in general has become a means of relaxation in many Nigerian homes. The cable television of present day technology has helped in the transmission of Yoruba movies to every nook and cranny of the Nigerian society and the world at large. It can thus be affirmed that, Yoruba movie is one of the factors that sustains Yoruba language and prevents it from extinction.

Yoruba language as one of the major languages in Nigeria needs be rescued from the same fate suffered by some Nigerian languages such as Fulani Ajawa, Gawo-Ningi, Kubi and Mava, Lere, Shau and Ziriya among others in Bauchi state. These tribes which also include the Dugiri, Dass and Giirwo in Alkaleri local government area, flourished in their uniqueness with the preservation of their heritage, traditions, folklore and knowledge of medicine embedded in their languages. The distinct elements in these languages became history with the reformations of the Jihadist who made Hausa language the language of commercial activities and administration. English language which upstaged the Hausa language,

being an official language also contributed to the extinction of these languages¹. Greg Ugbaja under the influence of language conservationists asserted that:

Languages are now becoming extinct faster than birds, mammals, fish or plants. Of the estimated 7,000 unique languages spoken in the world today, nearly half are likely to disappear this century with an average of one lost every two weeks².

He observed that in less than 50 years from now, even some major Nigerian languages, if not encouraged can become extinct³.

In order not to suffer the same fate as those tribes mentioned above, Yoruba language has been firmly attached to the development brought upon it by Yoruba movies, which significantly promotes culture, folklore among others. This paper is set out to discuss the development of Yoruba language through Yoruba movies and the influence of religious faiths in its sustainability.

Yoruba movies in Nigeria

Movie which first came in form of a moving flick was introduced to Nigeria by a Spanish firm in 1903 under the name of Balboa and Company. This moving flick otherwise known as motion picture and later referred to as celluloid stock was first operated in Lagos where it later spread to other parts of Western Nigeria. It spread to Ibadan in 1921 and to Ijebu Ode in 1929⁴.

This period witnessed the era of the colonial masters who exploited the introduction of movies in Nigeria by establishing the Colonial Film Unit (CFU). This unit was used as a means of consolidation of their power, spread and imposition of their culture on the masses. In addition, the missionaries used it as a means to evangelise; and therefore worked hand-in-hand with the colonial masters⁵. The colonial masters encouraged movies that served their interest in enforcing their power and influence in the name of civilisation. The church on the other hand, manipulated the movie industry to enforce Christianity on the people with subtle persuasions to abandon their religion⁶.

In Yorubaland, the annual traditional festivals serve as catalyst for the development of *Eegun Alare* which transformed to the travelling theatre groups. The travelling theatre groups became prominent with the efforts of artists like Hubert Ogunde, Duro Ladipo, Ade Afolayan (Adelove), Moses Olaiya (Babasala) and others, which was displayed as stage plays

across Yorubaland. The stage plays and cinema metamorphosed into the bulk of Yoruba movies at the later period. Adedeji and Ekwuazi commented that the Yoruba theatre has made an indelible impression on the whole of the country. The travelling theatre group has taken the theatre to the people and entertained a vast audience throughout the country. Their entertainment does not earn them any subsidies from the government or financial support from any foundation, yet they progressively managed to survive by drawing their income from stage shows, television shows, music and plays on discs, printing their plays as photoplays and literature⁷. Some of these plays include, *Aiye* (1979) and *Jaiyesinni* (1980) by Hubert Ogunde; *Efunsetan Aniwura* (1982) by Isola Oguniola; *Kadara* (1981) and *Taxi Driver* (1983) by Ade Afolayan; *Orun Mooru* and *Are Agbaye* (1983) by Moses Olaiya⁸.

Unfortunately, at a later period, the cost of running a movie on the celluloid became unbearable and the door to Yoruba movie extinction was thrown open. The intervention of the videographer who brought video format to Nigeria salvaged the movie industry. Olayiwola asserted that video production evolved through the creative ingenuity of popular culture and entertainment in the urban Yoruba environment in response to the wholesome gap created by a crippling economic condition that engulfed Nigeria, and eventually the entire arts community, making motion-picture movie production a tall dream. Nevertheless, to reinvent the nostalgic popular theatre era, they took advantage of the newly evolving video format and brought themselves back to business⁹. Olayiwola further quoted the late Muhideen Aromire, who affirmed that he was the first producer of movies on video cassette with *Ekun* in 1986, *Omije* and *Asiko* were also produced before 1990¹⁰. This was in response to the argument that evolved over the first production in the video format. Some people argued that "Living in Bondage" (1992) by Kenneth Nnebe, was the first production; Muhideen's argument thus nullified it.

Moreover, the Nigeria movie industry adopted the name of Nollywood in 2002, considering the power wielded by the cinema to boost the economic force in the nation next to Hollywood and Bollywood in the United States and India respectively¹¹. Haynes, who objected to the adoption of Nollywood argued that, since popular movie in Nigeria developed without external influence in terms of finance and distribution, it should not be tethered to the apron string of Hollywood¹².

The Nigerian movie industry, with the adoption of Nollywood as its operating name, has three categories of movies which are; English/Igbo language movies, Yoruba and Hausa movies¹³. This paper focuses on the Yoruba movies in relation to religious propagation.

Religions in Yorubaland

Religion as a concept has different meanings to different people. Without consideration to various definitions on religion by various scholars, it will suffice to admit that religion serves as the link between man and his Creator. In other words, it is the absolute belief, faith and hope in the Supreme Being. Religion in Yorubaland is not a strange phenomenon; in fact, it becomes almost impossible to see a typical Yoruba man who would reject this concept in the name of atheism. Awolalu observed that:

...the indigenous Yoruba people believed in the existence of the Supreme Being and anyone who opposed it has been exposed to non-African cultural influences¹⁴.

It can thus be affirmed that the relevance of religion to the Yoruba can be likened to the mouth and the tongue, both cannot go separately but glued together in order to function properly. Bolaji Idowu added that the keynote of life of the Yoruba is neither in their noble ancestry nor in the past deeds of their heroes but in their religion¹⁵.

In order to properly comprehend religion in Yorubaland, this paper focuses on the three main religions which are African Traditional Religion, Islam and Christianity. A brief synopsis of these religious faiths will be given to enhance our understanding and observe the areas of similarities and common ground of unity in Yorubaland.

African Traditional Religion

This concept represents the traditional belief of the Africans especially the Yoruba people. The foundation of this religion is built on the belief that there is a Supreme Being who created the heaven and the earth and all its inhabitants including the divinities and spirits. These divinities and spirits are believed by the Yoruba to serve as His ministers as well as intermediaries between Him and human beings¹⁶. This shows the relevance of religious belief to the Yoruba. The divinities that play a central role in the Yoruba belief include *Obatala*, *Orunmila*, *Oduduwa*, *Esu*, *Ogun*, *Sango* and others. Some of these mentioned divinities would be discussed in the light of their contributions to the making of humanity in accordance with the decree of *Olodumare* - the Supreme Being.

OBATALA

This divinity also referred to as *Orisa nla*. *Olodumare* is believed to have given *Obatala* the privilege of solidifying the earth by giving him a leaf, packet of loose earth, five toed hen and a pigeon as tools¹⁷. Although, he failed to successfully carry out the mission, *Olodumare* later gave him the grace to mould human forms¹⁸.

ORUNMILA

The Yoruba believed that *Orunmila* was present when people were receiving destiny from *Olodumare*. He was also said to be present when *Olodumare* was creating the universe. He was thus regarded as the most important of all the divinities. While on earth he had eight children namely Alara, Ajero, *Oloymoyin*, Alakeji, Ejigbomekun, Elejelumope, Owarangun-aga and *Olowo*. *Orunmila* who is also known as *ifa* was said to have angrily left the earth to permanently reside in heaven because of his last son's (*Olowo*) rudeness to him on a day he intended to proudly present all of them for self glorification. The continuous pleading of the people softened his mind and he gave them *ikin* (sacred palmmuts of divination) to represent his absence and at the same time to serve as a link between them and him in seeking guidance on earth¹⁹.

ODUDUWA

This divinity completes the work of solidifying the earth according to the belief inherent in Yoruba tradition. *Obatala* was found drunk, and this made *Olodumare* to order *Oduduwa* to go ahead and fulfill the mission²⁰.

ESU

Some people believed that *Esu* taught *Orunmila* the oracle. *Esu* is believed by the Yoruba to be a special official between heaven and earth. The Yoruba traditional worshipper believed that there is a close relationship between *Esu* and *Orunmila* because whenever *Ifa* speaks, sacrifice is prescribed with a portion for *Esu*. While receiving his own portion, it becomes obligatory for him to carry the message to the spiritual world. On the contrary, where the sacrifice prescribed is neglected, *Esu* will make life uncomfortable for the party involved. *Esu* can be used in both good and evil ways to accomplish a mission²¹.

OGUN

Ogun enjoyed the attribute of a great divinity who volunteered his service. He rendered the service of clearing the thicket with his sharp

cutlass thereby making way for the first coming of the divinities to inhabit the earth²².

The truth of the matter according to the Yoruba belief is the fact that these divinities are not worshipped as the Supreme Being but as intermediary. This is what made them refer to the divinities as small gods. They are worshipped in different ways and with different materials.

ISLAM

The emergence of Islam in Yorubaland is clouded with uncertainty. Abbas affirms that historians differ on it because of its non-formalisation as a result of lack of records then²³. Trans-Sahara trade routes have been identified as the major connections between the West and the North Africans, where Yoruba people got privileged with the learning of Arabic and Islamic knowledge. The dateline for Arabo-Islamic knowledge in Yorubaland can be traced to the event that surfaced during the reign of *Alaafin* (king) Ajiboyede in the 16th century. An Islamic teacher known as *Babakeu* was said to have remonstrated with *Alaafin* Ajiboyede for killing some of his chiefs whom he alleged had been unsympathetic over the death of his son; on account of the *ewedu* soup he smelt in their mouths as they prostrated themselves before him²⁴. In reference to the trade routes, they include the land between Bornu and Benue, the Kano-Badagry land and the Nigerian Benue waterways. Islam in Yorubaland was formed at different times under different circumstances²⁵.

Be that as it may, the message of Islam is universal, and this entails believing in the oneness of the Almighty God who has no partner or son and that Prophet Muhammad is the last Prophet and Messenger of Allah to all humanity. The adherents of Islam are known as Muslims who uphold the five pillars of the faith and are bound by its six articles. The five pillars are: *Iman* (faith), *Salat* (five daily prayers), *Sawm* (fasting in the month of Ramadan), *Zakat* (charity) and *Hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca). While the six articles of faith are belief in Allah (Almighty God), belief in His Angels, belief in all the Books He sent, belief in His Messengers, belief in the last Day, and belief in Destiny both good and evil²⁶.

CHRISTIANITY

Christianity is the religion professed by the Christians. It was so named at Antioch after the exit of Jesus Christ. The Christians uphold the belief in Trinity – the Father (God), the Son (Jesus Christ) and the Holy Spirit, which formed the nucleus of their faith. Although the three Godheads are acknowledged as one, it becomes logical according to various interpretations, to affirm that the Father controls the affairs of His

creatures from above, the Son came to earth to carry out His will, and the Holy Spirit was left behind to manifest the Son's presence with the Christians till the end of time.

The introduction of Christianity into Yorubaland came through the Europeans in the 19th century. The British as well as the French were engaged at this period with the quest for colonies²⁷. The missionaries were handy in this quest not for invasion but for evangelism to convert people to the Christian faith.

Roman Catholics were the first to establish their base in Yorubaland, followed by the Protestants who were then referred to as Church Missionary Society (CMS) in 1846 at Abeokuta. Methodist came up in Badagry (then known as Agbadarigi) in 1842. The Baptist missionaries also joined the race through the efforts of Bowen and Clarke and concentrated on Northern Yoruba axis (Ogbomoso and its environs)²⁸.

Ajayi Crowther, a freed slave from Sierra Leone reflected the impact of Christianity in Yorubaland in the 4th decade of the 19th century through his conversion to Christianity. Ajayi who studied Latin and Greek was motivated to write books on Yoruba grammar. This skill led him to translate parts of the Bible into Yoruba Language²⁹. The foundation of Christianity was built on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as a sign of salvation for all humanity. Jesus Christ who is perceived as the only son of God played a central role in the teaching, praise and worship of its adherents, whose message was interpreted by Paul, the Apostle.

In view of the synopsis given on the three major faiths, two things became common and this is recognition of one Supreme Being and the use of intermediaries by the Supreme Being. African Traditionalists call Him *Olodumare*, Muslims call Him *Allah* and the Christians call him God, *Yahweh* or Jehovah as the case may be. The Supreme Being also brought into being intermediaries between Him and His creatures. The divinities and spirits served this purpose in the traditional belief, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit functioned in this regard in Christianity and Prophet Muhammad was seen as the last Prophet to mankind in Islam.

Relationship between Cultures and Traditional Drama in Yoruba Land

The Yoruba Language is identified with the people living mainly in Nigeria's Southwestern States of Lagos, Oyo, Ogun, Oshun, Ondo, Ekiti, parts of Kwara and Kogi and also in some parts of Dahomey (Republic of Benin). The population of the Yoruba has been conservatively put at about 24 million³⁰.

It would be interesting to note that Islam as a religion has the tendency to accommodate all cultural values around the globe being a universal religion. The accommodation of cultural values is encouraged in its teachings in as much as it does not affect its fundamental principles. The prevalent circumstance made it easy for Arabic writers such as Ahmad Baba (d. 1627) and Muhammad Bello (d. 1837) to have the credit of being the first to pronounce the term Yoruba. They were among the earliest writers to name this people 'Yarba'/ 'Yaruba'/ 'Yariba' from the root y-r-b, at a time when people were still referring to themselves by their diverse ethnic identities³¹. The colonialist at the early period referred to them as *akus* and *eyeo*³².

Islam has greatly influenced Yoruba Language and its people as a result of their contact through trade, thereby contributing to its sustenance up till present. This influence has been acknowledged in some scholarly literatures, and there are records of massive spread of Islam among the Yoruba from the second decade of the 19th century as a result of the emergence of Ilorin as a frontier state through which other western states benefit. These evidences can be found in Arabic sources and from the accounts of early European travelers and explorers in West Africa³³.

The contact of the Yoruba with Islam necessarily implies their contact with Arabic language. Arabic letters were also introduced in the writing of local languages otherwise known as *Ajanu*³⁴. It is important to indicate that Arabic loan-words feature significantly in the speech and writing of Yoruba regardless of religious affiliations and educational background even in the Yoruba Bible currently in use. Ogunbiyi quoted a quasi-technical publication by the Nigeria Educational Research and Development of Legislative terms, that many Arabic loan-words, especially for tools, implements and literacy such as *tanganran*, *alokamo*, *inṣo* and *Kalamu*, occur quite frequently³⁵.

In as much as the Islamic influence has been entrenched in the Yoruba language and culture, it serves as a medium for the development of the Yoruba cultural heritage largely promoted by Yoruba movies with the incorporation of the three major religions in Nigeria. The belief of the Yoruba in the traditional way is amply spread to instil its relevance in the mind of the contemporary generation of youths who had been influenced by western ideology. In a deliberate move to stem the level of westernization of the Yoruba speakers, which has largely affected its language and culture, Yoruba movie is dominated by ideas that rejuvenate and endear the almost lost ideology. Some of such films that project the Yoruba culture and belief include "Ti Oluwa Nile" by Kareem Adepoju, "Saworo Ide" by Mainframe production among others.

"Ti Oluwa Nile" reflects the anger of the gods with the killing of those who collaborated to sell a portion of land reserved for the gods to a stranger, while "Saworo Ide", which is a special traditional drum with an attached traditional rite connected to the king served as a means of checking the King. The film also exposed the corrupt chiefs, who assisted the incumbent king in syphoning the wealth of the state.

Both films were shot to project the traditional cultural belief. The sacred land sold in "Ti Oluwa Nile" was disrespect to the gods with the view that the gods can be harmless if some people were made to shut their mouth under the influence of corruption. The truth was revealed when the gods actually fought for themselves. This act shows that those who paid tribute to these gods knows with certainty what can come from their disobedience and the benefit they can reap from their loyalty to them. And the special drum in "Saworo Ide" was built using the traditional medicinal approach. This was based on their firm belief that attaching the fate of their Kingdom to the traditional rites prescribed by the herbalist will help to sustain their wellbeing and also protect the interest of the common man against the overindulgence of their King.

The Christians on their part used the movie industry to evangelise for Christ. It has been the major tools of evangelism right from the inception of movie in Nigeria through the missionaries. This is what brought Mount Zion Ministry (under the directive of Mike Bamiloye) to limelight. This ministry has to its credit more than twenty titles of evangelical Christian movies³⁶. "Agbara Nla", one of the movies produced by this ministry will be examined owing to its direct relation to this paper.

Agbara Nla (The Ultimate Power)

This movie was produced in four parts on video discs³⁷. The major characters are Iṣawuru (*Ifa* priest), *Aro M̄ta* (three powerful witches), brother K̄ḷa and his wife sister B̄ṣe, brother Kunle (Ḷaboye) and his wife sister Mary (Ḷlatomi), Pastor and Paulina (*Ayah Matanga*).

Part one of this movie featured Iṣawuru (the *Ifa* priest), who collaborates with the *Aro M̄ta* (the three powerful witches) and the *Olori Emere* in bringing calamities on the inhabitants of *Abule Muwoṅḷeru* and its environs. *Aro M̄ta* wore long robes that covered from their heads to toes with only their faces visible, an imitation of an ideal Islamic dressing of a female Muslim.

Brother K̄ḷa (who is another major character) works with a bank; he had a dream to go to a village he is not familiar with, for evangelism in

reference to Acts 22: 21. The devil appeared to dissuade him from taking the dream seriously, especially at a time when he was expecting to be promoted in his work place. Sister Bọse, his wife opposed her husband when he related the dream to her. Her opposition was masterminded by the devil to confuse her husband.

The encouragement of the Pastor who also had the same dream concerning the mission of evangelism for brother Kọla referring to Acts 26: 18 was ignored, owing to a letter he received confirming his promotion as a branch manager in Abuja with enviable benefits. He resumed in Abuja and had a deal with one Alhaji Garuba who offered him bribe to get a contract from his company.

Brother Kunle (Ọlaboye) and sister Mary (Ọlatomi), who got married recently received the same message given to brother Kọla, they resolved in their minds to go to the place as soon as they get the direction to the village. They located the village through the support of a particular couple who had sought help from the *Ifá* priest sometimes ago, but had given their lives to Jesus Christ.

Part two featured the couples (Ọlaboye and Ọlatomi) as they relocated to *Abule Muwọnlẹru* for a full time evangelism with the intention of redeeming the inhabitants from the clutches of the witches, wizards and other evil spirits that have put them in bondage. Işawuru was not pleased with their presence, he tried to discourage them from staying in *Muwọnlẹru* but the couples stood their ground that they were sent by God and that no one can stop them. He then resolved to afflict them with charms that will destroy them. Işawuru was bent on carrying out his evil deed on them by all means but he did not succeed. In his confusion to avert the nemesis of the evil spirit he has invoked, he mistakenly destroyed the life of his only daughter Awofuntọ and her husband.

At Abuja, Bọse made an intimate friend with Paulina in the company she worked with. Paulina showered her with assorted gifts and money. She was also lured into drinking of alcohol, this worried her husband (Kọla) who was helpless. Paulina's generosity was meant to initiate Bọse into her occultic group. Bọse pleaded not to be initiated and was given the option to come back since she has been exposed to their secret. A covenant was thus reached between them with a sign placed on her forehead. The sign was made to look like what appears on the forehead of Muslims known as the sign of prostration. This sign was addressed in the Qur'an in the following way:

...thou wilt see them bow and prostrate themselves (in prayer), seeking grace from Allah

and (His) good pleasure. On their faces are marks, (being) the traces of their prostration...³⁸.

Işawuru (the *Ifá* priest), (in part three and four of this film) after several attempt to destroy the lives of the Christian couples failed, he personally discovered the identity of Jesus Christ and was saved. He then became fervent in the spread of the message of Christ to all and sundry.

The main goal of this movie is Christian evangelism but the producer pursued his goal by condemning other two major religions in Nigeria. Specifically, the theme of this movie is "Jesus is the only way to salvation". In the analysis of this movie, the producer, in the eyes of Muslims is considered guilty of the followings: open disregard for other two major religions in Nigeria, distortion of Islamic values, malign the image of Muslims and also creation of avenue for religious intolerance. The areas that affected the Muslims caused some reactions, which led some Muslim groups to the Broadcasting Corporation of Oyo State (BCCS) where the movie was aired to stop its transmission in 1993³⁹.

While many movies have been produced to further the cause of Christianity, very few have been done for the same purpose for Islam. However, among the few ones purposely produced to project and promote the teachings of Islam was "Iwa Lesin", a weekly television movie produced by Kareem Adepoju a.k.a. Baba Wande. The intention was to teach and enlighten the populace on the true picture of Islamic faith and correction of erroneous interpretations by those who are non Muslim⁴⁰.

Conclusion

Yoruba language is very unique and encourages intelligence and wisdom. Its relationship with other cultures especially Arabic language has helped to gain a solid ground through loan-words and expressions. The Yoruba movie industry in most cases has relied so much on the use of Muslim names to sell its product. This should be acknowledged rather than malign the Muslims as witnessed in the analysed movie in this paper. To promote harmony and peaceful coexistence, which are some of the objectives of movie production, corruption of names of a particular religion should be discouraged. The good work of the Nollywood should be sustained through decency and equal treatment of all. It is also recommended that Yoruba artists should endeavour to use Yoruba movies in facilitating unity among different religious groups in Yorubaland.

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