

## **MIGRATION, GLOBALIZATION AND THE LIQUIDITY OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION**

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### **Abstract**

*In the face of migration and globalization, the question that continues to emerge in the discourses of African scholars and beyond, borders on the survival of African Traditional Religion. Some scholars in reaction to this have argued that with Western education and medicine, the wake of urbanization and industrialization, the huge movement of the young from village life to urban areas in the search for survival, African Traditional Religion would pass away with history through extinction as in the case of the religions of ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome that have faded away. This paper is written as an antithesis to the above perspective. It argues that rather than death, African Traditional Religion has gone global through migration and globalization. The Trans-Atlantic slave trade led to the growth of African-inspired traditions in the Americas such as Candomblé in Brazil, Santería in Cuba and Vodun in Haiti. Furthermore, many in places like the US and the UK have converted to various traditional African religions, and the importance of the diaspora for these religions is growing rapidly. African religions have also become a major attraction for those in the diaspora who travel to Africa on pilgrimages because of the global reach of these traditions. The method of research employed in this paper is the historical and hermeneutic methods of investigation.*

**Keywords:** African Traditional Religion, Migration, Globalization, Westernization.

### **Introduction**

The end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the decline of the Trans-Sahara slave trade run by the Arabs, and the emergence of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade which shifted attention from the desert to the coasts. This was the beginning of European slave trade. The Arabs were primarily concerned with the selling of slaves to Arab buyers who used slaves for domestic purposes. Whatever, the intensity of the Arab slave trade, its consequences are not “matchable” with the massive, involuntary movement of people out of western and west central Africa to Europe between 1440 and 1880.

In about the middle of the 15th century, with the dawn of the Industrial Revolution in the Western hemisphere, the European expanding empires lacked manpower to work on new plantations that produced sugar cane for Europe, and other products such as coffee, cocoa, rice, indigo, tobacco, and cotton. This is because, on the one hand, the native Americans who were enslaved by the Europeans proved unfit as a result of the ingenious tropical diseases that they suffered, diseases like smallpox, mumps, and measles, which the Europeans introduced into the region and to which the Native Americans lacked immunity. Africans, on the other hand, were excellent workers: they often had experience of agriculture and keeping cattle, they were used to a tropical climate, resistant to tropical diseases, and they could work very hard on plantations or in mines, and so the Atlantic slave trade became an integral part of an international trading system which was then guarded by international laws, and Africans became the best economic solution for plantation owners seeking inexpensive labour (Kanu 2012).

The trans-Atlantic slave trade involved the largest intercontinental migration of people in world history prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century as millions were severed from their homelands. This period of carnage went on for about five hundred years during which an estimate of 12 million viable Africans were enslaved from their home lands to locations around the Atlantic. The vast majority went to Brazil, the Caribbean, and other Spanish-speaking regions of South America and Central America. Smaller numbers were taken to Atlantic islands, continental Europe, and English-speaking areas of the North American mainland. The Portuguese began the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in 1441, and for about 200 years they dominated in this trade. Ashun (2004) avers that it all began when Atam Goncalves, an explorer of Prince Henry of Portugal, captured 10 African men from Senegambia to serve as a proof that the Portuguese had finally reached the black man's land and found people truly living there. Since then, Europeans began the tradition of returning with African captives. It is such that as far back as 1454, before the building of the Elmina Castle, about 250 Africans were taken to Spain every year. In 1518, Emperor Charles V of Spain authorized the shipment of 15,000 Africans to Santo Domingo to work on the plantations. This marked the beginning of the unfortunate story of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade (Kanu 2013).

The Portuguese were not long after joined by the Spanish, French, Dutch, after 1560 the English also joined in the trade and merchants from Liverpool were not exempted. As you can see, it was a big trade and of huge interest, at least from

the fact that it brought the world powers to Africa. It is estimated that during the five centuries of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, Portugal was responsible for transporting over 4.5 million Africans, which is about 40% of the total. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the slave trade accounted for the transport of a staggering 6 million Africans.

As these Africans were moved in large numbers from their homelands, they carried with them their traditional religions- gods, symbols and culture. As their world quickly changed, a new world that was antagonistic to their religion and culture, this piece studies what they did with their religious cultures in foreign lands. African tribal kings, community and religious leaders were enslaved and taken to a foreign region of the world where they were no longer free people to worship as they saw fit. In the midst of all these, the questions looming at the horizon of this paper is: did African traditional religion die on arrival to Europe? If not, how did it survive the new environment and conditions? This brings us to a discussion on the new faces of African traditional religion.

### **New faces of African Traditional Religion**

As Africans arrived the lands of their slave masters, their religions were criminalized and were forced to become baptized and worship a god their ancestors had not known; now surrounded by a pantheon of Christian saints, the African slaves, like artists refashioned their traditional religion in such a way that it fitted into the new contexts without losing its fundamental African religious elements.

#### **a. Vodou in Haiti**

Haitian Vodou, also known as Vaudou, Voodoo, Vodun, Vodoun, Vodou or Vaudoux, is a religion of African origin practiced chiefly in Haiti and the Haitian diaspora. Practitioners are called 'Vodouists' or 'Servants of the Spirits'. It originated in what is now known as Benin Republic and spread to the French colonial empire in the 18th century among West African peoples who were enslaved, when African religious practice was actively suppressed by the missionaries and colonial powers. However, it was brought to Haiti by enslaved West Africans, specifically from the Ewe, Fon, Mina, Kabaye, and Nago groups. The idea of Vodou comes from the Ewe, Fon and Yoruba metaphysical understanding of the cosmos as consisting of two divine principles: the Creator God (Nana Buluku) and the Voduns or God-Actors, who are the sons and

daughters of the Creator's twin children, Mawu, who is the goddess of the sun and Lisa, who is the god of the moon.

Religious practices of contemporary Vodou is a combination of elements and symbolism from other African peoples including, like the Yoruba, Taino, Congo, European spirituality, Roman Catholicism, among others. Little wonder then that in most vodou homes, an altar covered white cloth is found with candles set for their ancestors and the spirits who are symbolized in statues. The statues of the saints, bottle of holy water, Catholic Calender, Hymn books, rosary, etc., are also place on such altars. On particular spirit days, a candle is lit, one Our Father and one Hail Mary are recited, and the particular spirit honoured is spoken to directly as though a family member since they are linked to family life and land.

Vodouists believe in a distant and unknowable Supreme Being, *Bondye*. They believe that Bondye is not reachable and does not intercede in human affairs, and thus they direct their worship toward spirits subservient to Bondye, called Loa. Every loa is responsible for a particular aspect of life, with the dynamic and changing personalities of each loa reflecting the many possibilities inherent to the aspects of life over which they preside; for instance, the Haiti have Papa Legba (guardian of the crossroads), Erzullie Freda (the spirit of love), Simbi (the spirit of rain and magicians), Kouzin (the spirit of agriculture), Marasa (divine twins considered to be the first children of Bondye), etc (Haas 2011; Rey 2013).

Vodou emphasizes the wholeness of reality, communion with the forces of nature in the universe which are interconnected with one another. Thus, love, support and generosity to the poor within the family of the Vodou society seem to be the most important considerations. One's blessings come through the community, and one should be willing to give back. It is a religion of songs and dancing. During worship the songs of the spirits are sung, one after the other. And during this singing, it is believed that the sprits come to take possession of the devotees during which the devotees are blessed by the spirits (Edmonds 2010).

There are several taboos associated with the worship of the spirits. If the worshippers keep the taboos, the Loa would bless them with good health and peace in their life time, however, if one fails to keep the taboos, the Loas could visit the person with sickness, failures, and other kinds of misfortunes like death. In worshipping the Loa, sacrifices are offered, animal sacrifices of pigs, goats,

bull, chicken, etc. during this sacrifice, it is believed that the blood of the animal would restore the divine energy of the god in question, since flesh and blood are believed to be the essence of life and vigor. Apart from family homes and shrines where the spirits are worshipped on daily basis and on special occasions, cemeteries and many crossroads are meaningful places for worship: the cemetery acts as a repository of spirits and the crossroads acts as points of access to the world of the invisible. During worship, the priest or priestess presides. They are special to the people as they were chosen by the dead ancestors who reveal their choice through divination during worship.

The liquidity of the vodou religion is in its ability to survive through various limitations to the present time. It might not be the same Vodou carried from Africa, but its Africanness has not departed from it. In 1685, through the provisions of Code Noir, King Louis XIV of France forbade the open practice of all African religions and forced all slaveholders to convert their slaves to Catholicism within eight days of their arrival in Saint-Domingue. In spite of this law, Vodou has not failed to survive, which also ensured the survival of their traditional sense of community and heritages. When Catholicism was enforced, they preserved the Vodou religion within Catholicism itself through syncretism, in this way, they concealed the Africanness of their religion- Catholic saints were used as covers for their Oa. For instance, the Virgin Mary was used to symbolize Ezili, Saint Jacques as Ogou, and Saint Patrick as Dambala (Piquipn 2002; Michel 1996).

### **b. Santeria in Cuba**

Santería is a Spanish word which means 'worship the saints'. It is also known as Regla de Ocha, La Regla de Ifa or Lucumí. It is a religious tradition in Cuba, Colombia, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, Panama, Dominican Republic, United States of America, among others. It sprang from the Yoruba religious culture- brought to life by the African descendants in Cuba who were of Yoruba origin. Like Vodou, it was born out of a great syncretism of African worship, mainly Yoruba religion, the religion of the indigenous people in America, Cuban spiritism, with Catholicism.

During the trans-Atlantic slave trade, as the Yoruba people were moved from their homelands, they carried with them their various religious customs, including a trance and divination system for communicating with their ancestors and deities, animal sacrifice, and sacred drumming and dance. It was the need to

preserve their traditions and belief systems in a hostile cultural environment that prompted the enslaved Africans of various ethnic groups in Cuba, starting from as early as 1515, to merge their customs with aspects of Roman Catholicism, so that in the guise of Catholicism, their religion might survive. And to survive, it needed to evolve, and what it evolved to is what we now call Santería.

In order to preserve and mask their traditional beliefs, these Africans syncretized their *Orichás* with the saints of the Catholic Faith. Thus, the terms "saint" and "orichá" are commonly used interchangeably among practitioners. In this way they were able to cover up their religious practices under the cover of what seemed more acceptable. When the Spanish colonial planters saw the enslaved Africans, already forced to be baptized, celebrating the feasts of the saints, they did not know that they were actually performing rituals related to *Orichás*. They assumed that they were showing more interest in Catholic saints rather than in the Christian God, hence the origin of the term Santería (Johan 2004).

They had no central creed as such, but had unique religious practices that distinguished them. Rituals and ceremonies took place in temples, *ilé* or *casa de santos* (house of saints). Most of the temples were located in the homes of the initiated priests and priestesses, commonly known as *Santeros* or *Olorichas*. The priests and priestesses were specially prepared for the work through intensive initiation processes, teaching of ritual skills and moral behaviour and observation. After the initiation presided by a priest, the initiating priest ceases to be a *Santeros* and becomes known as *babalorichás* (fathers of *orichá*), and as *iyalorichás* (mothers of *orichá*) (for women) (David 2003; Brian 2001).

The priest was not only a go between, between the people and the gods, he or she was also a healer, who combined elements of herbs, psychology, rituals that include animal sacrifice, offerings, altar building, music, dance, and possession trance.. The Santería traditional healing is just one of the many traditional healing practices used in Caribbean and Latin American cultures that has remained a matter of intrigue speculation and wonderment. This healing process did not just stop in the use of herbs, there was a strong spiritual dimension to it. The spiritual is not neglected because of the Santería's believe in holistic approach to reality, evident in their acknowledgement of the connection between the heart, mind, and body held together by a force called *aché* or growth, the force which wields reality toward completeness and divinity. Sickness is not just understood as a disfunction of the body, but as the result of the interference of

some negative force, and this gives divination a very special place, for it through divination that the cause of the problem is articulated. While seeking for healing for a patient, the *Regla de Ocha* invoke on the guidance of three foremost *orichás* that are predominantly concerned with folk-healing: *Osaín*, the *orichá* of the herbs; *Babalú-Ayé*, the *orichá* of contagious and epidemic diseases; and *Inle* the patron of physicians. *Osaín* is syncretized with Saint Joseph, Saint Benito, or Saint Jerome. *Babalú-Ayé* is syncretized with Saint Lazarus. *Inle* is the patron of physicians, known as a healer who favors scientific methods. *Inle* is ranked as one of the *orichás* that is approached for very specific health issues (Abiola 2010; Michael 1994).

### **c. Orisha in Trinidad and Tobago**

Orisha religion as practiced in Trinidad and Tobago is also known as Shango. In fact, the adherents are sometimes known as ‘Shango Baptists’, because of the place that baptism occupies in the religion. Just like other Afro-America religions, it is a religion that has combined several elements as a result of the new environment that was unfriendly. Its main origin is the Yoruba traditional religion from West Africa. As it developed, it incorporated elements of other religions like Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, Baha’I and Kabbalah (Houk 1995).

Like Santeria, Orisha showed preference for aspects of the Catholic faith. They have several spirits that were equated with various Catholic Saints. They are understood as messengers between humankind and Orisha kingdom. In relation to the Catholic saints, *Oya*, Shango’s wife, mistress of speed and tempestuous wind, is referred to as St Catherine; *Oshun*, goddess of water and beauty, to St Philomena; *Osaín*, Yoruba god of herbal medicine, healing and prophecy, to St Francis; *Shakpana*, also a healer particularly of children’s illnesses, to St Jerome; *Ogun*, the warrior god of iron and steel, to St Michael. This preference was necessary to help preserve their traditional religion, as they were used more as cover. As slaves from Africa, many of them were baptized and their traditional religion criminalized, thus, the Catholic faith became a camouflage behind which they hid their religion. It was not only a religion to those who practiced it, it was also a means for ideological self-expression and preserving their identity in a distant country.

It has a system of worship that gives an important place to singing and the playing of drums, which always go together. While the signing is framed in a call

and response style, the trio drums used are styled after the Yoruba Bembe drums. Rites, rituals and teachings were anchored on the African spirit of community, which provided support at such a difficult moment. Devotion to the saints restored hope, as there was always a saint to run to for every unique situation. Because of the absence of books, it was difficult to have a unified rite and ritual. However, a lot was transmitted through oral tradition (Warner-Lewis 1996).

In places of worship of Orisha, objects and symbols abound: candles burning in all four corners, bottles of olive oil, rum or water poured into the burning fire from time to time as offerings to the gods, Ogun's sword embedded in the earthen floor, lithographs of the saints, crucifixes, candles, pots of water, a double-bladed wooden axe, cutlasses, ceremonial brooms, chac-chacs and the shepherd's crook (Bazinet 2012).

#### **d. Candomble in Brazil**

Candomblé meaning a 'dance in honor of the gods' is an African Brazilian religious tradition practiced mainly in Brazil, which began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Salvador, Bahia, however, has spread to Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay and Venezuela. It is also called Macumba or Batuque, especially before the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The devotees are referred to as "the people of the saints". Like Orisha, Vodou and Santeria, Candomble developed from the religious practices of slaves who were brought to Portuguese to work on plantations from Africa, mainly from Yoruba, Igbo, Mbundu, Congo, Ewe, Fon and Bantu backgrounds. It is believed that Candomble and Batuque are names derived from a Bantu family language, mainly of the Kingdom of Congo. These slaves came with their religious traditions from West Africa and made them relevant to their present conditions and religious traditions of their new environment (Schmidt 2016).

Like other African religious traditions, it had no written scriptures. Oral tradition was the means for preservation of moral and religious instructions. It taught that Olodumare was the Supreme Being who is served by other small deities as the deans of the Supreme Being. The small deities were created by Olodumare. These deities or servants of Olodumare are called Orishas and are believed to create a link between the spiritual world and world of humans. The Orishas are every important in the daily living of devotees, as everyone is believed to have his or her own Orisha that protects them and controls their destiny. No wonder, no matter the challenges of life, through the protection of one's Orisha, everyone

is expected to fulfill his or her destiny. Each deity represents a certain force in nature and is associated with certain foods, colors, animals, and days of the week. A person's character or personality is strongly linked to their deity. During worship, devotees present gifts of vegetables, animals, minerals, etc., to their Orisha as a way of expressing their participation in the ritual. Worship is characterized by singing, drumming and dancing, during which Orisha possesses devotees. The fact that Candomble means 'dance in honor of the gods' gives music and dance a central place in the religion (Sera 2018).

Candomble is a religion composed of several elements from several religious backgrounds. First the African traditional religious background from where they slaves had come, the traditional religious background of the Brazilian people, and adjoining towns, and the Catholic religion. As the slaves were brought to the plantations in Brazil, the slave owners felt that converting the slaves to Catholicism was necessary on three grounds- first, to ensure the loyalty of the slaves to their master through the teaching of Christian obedience, second, to fulfill their religious obligation to the slaves by bringing them to the true religion; third, to ensure the separation of the slaves from their past so as to ensure effectiveness in the present. In this way, traditional religion was abrogated. While they succeeded in converting a good number of the slaves to Catholicism, many only used Catholicism as a cover. Outwardly, they practiced Christianity but inwardly they worshipped their gods, ancestors and spirits. In fact, encounter with the Catholic faith led to syncretism as they began to see similarities between the Catholic devotion to the saints with their ancestor worship. Thus they concealed the sacred symbols of their deities inside figures of their Catholic saints. They created Catholic fraternities where slaves would meet with each other, providing an opportunity for Candomblé worship to be practiced and for feasts to be held on special religious days. Such fraternities were also opportunities for the slaves to gather and plan rebellions against their masters. There were also Islamic elements in Candomble. Some of the slaves from West Africa were from Muslim traditions. They were called the Malês. They set aside Fridays as the day to worship deities, as do the Muslims for prayer and meditation, and were the major instigators of many slave revolts in Brazil (Falola 2016).

## **Conclusion**

This piece has studied the liquidity of African traditional religion in the face of globalization and migration. The idea of the liquidity of African traditional

religion speaks of the ability of African religions to adjust to new circumstances or to change into new forms in order to perpetuate itself. There is a flower called 'Africa never die'. The flower survives the worst of weather conditions. Even if drought comes, it pipes low and continues to exist when the weather gets better. It speaks not just of itself but of the spirit of Africa, which includes African traditional religion. The substance of African traditional religion has survived even the worst of conditions of life, and its survival is based on its ability to take on new forms for its continuous existence. As Africans were moved from their home lands to Europe, it would have been expected that the religion would die on arrival to the new environment. The expectation of the death of African traditional religion was even more as the religion in Europe was banned and her adherents were forcefully baptized into Christianity. Rather than the death of African religion, it was adapted to the Catholic religion and the indigenous religion of the local people. It is not surprising that in Haiti it became Vodou, in Brazil it became Candomble, in Trinidad and Tobago it became Orisha, in Cuba it became Santeria. African traditional religion lives on.

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