

AFRICAN PANTHEON IN A WORLD OF CHANGE

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Abstract

In the African world, there is only one God, who is high and is expected to be reached through intermediaries. These intermediaries are called divinities and share aspects of the divine status. They are the off-springs of the Supreme Being, and are responsible to God for whatever act they perform in their relationship with human beings. They are, therefore, not an end in themselves but a means to an end. They are functionaries in the theocratic governance of God, sometimes referred to as the executive heads of various divine departments in the Supreme Being's monarchical government. In the face of globalization, this piece studies the relevance of these divinities in African contemporary societies and beyond. In our world of change, engineered by the advent of Christianity and Western civilization, this work raises questions as regards the possibility of the perpetuation of the reverence given to these African divinities. For the purpose of this research, the hermeneutic and descriptive phenomenological methods of investigation would be patronized. This piece submits that, rather than speak of the end of the relevance of the African pantheon, relationship with them have been repackaged.

Keywords: African, Traditional, Religion, Pantheon, World, Change, Christianity.

Introduction

Heraclitus of Ephesus said that change is the basic law of nature and the condition of all things. 'All things are in a state of flux. You cannot step twice into the same river', for just as water in a river is ceaselessly changing so are all things in a state of flux. A cursory glance at the

historical development of Africa reveals that Africa's recent history has been marked by some dramatic but significant developments. These developments have been as varied as they have been contradictory. They have also constituted a major source of challenge to scholars as different schools of thought grapple with them in terms of their weight and meaning. As can be imagined, there is no consensus on the most appropriate approach for interpreting the changes that are taking place in the structure, content and dynamics of African life.

Indeed, efforts at conceptualizing these changes have produced a veritable Tower of Babel, with commentators not only speaking in different tongues but frequently past one another (Mkandawire 2002). The contradictoriness of the changes, at once inspiring hope and generating despair, has polarized the scholarly and policy communities into Afro-optimist and Afro-pessimist camps. But for all the insights which they may offer into the problems and prospects of progressive change in Africa, both the Afro-pessimist and Afro-optimist frames are far too simplistic and subjective to serve as an enduring basis for capturing the dialectics of the multifaceted change and transformation in Africa (Olukoshi 2004).

These changes taking place in Africa have not only affected the political and social parameters of the African life, it has also infiltrated into the lines of the development of African religious elements. It is in this regard that this piece focuses on the impact of change on the African pantheon. This would encompass thoughts as regards how African pantheon has been affected by the missionary enterprise in Africa, the force of migration and also the issue of death. This notwithstanding, what is the meaning of the African Pantheon?

African pantheon

Pantheon is a concept that is associated with religious worldviews that are considered polytheistic, usually to capture their gods and goddesses. The relation of pantheon with polytheistic religions may not always be right, as it does not always refer to polytheistic religions. This perspective is rather the result of the misunderstanding of traditional religions. Very popular pantheons include the Sumerian gods, the Egyptian gods, the ancient Greek gods and Roman gods. However, according to Christopher (2004):

A pantheon is an overview of a given culture's gods and goddesses and reflects not only the society's values but also its sense of itself.

A pantheon directed by a thunder bolt wielding autocrat might suggest a patriarchy and the valuing of warrior skills. A pantheon headed by a great-mother goddess could suggest a village-based agricultural society. To confront the pantheon of the Egyptians is to confront a worldview marked by a sense of death and resurrection and the agricultural importance of the cycles of nature. The Greek pantheon is a metaphor for a pragmatic view of life that values art, beauty, and the power of the individual, and that is somewhat skeptical about human nature. (p. 13).

By African pantheons, it is meant the overview of the African gods and goddesses, in which one cannot but discover the African life and philosophy. Studies on African pantheons have always focused on pantheons of Egypt, neglecting the pantheons of black African regions. This work would focus on the pantheons of Africa, West of the continent.

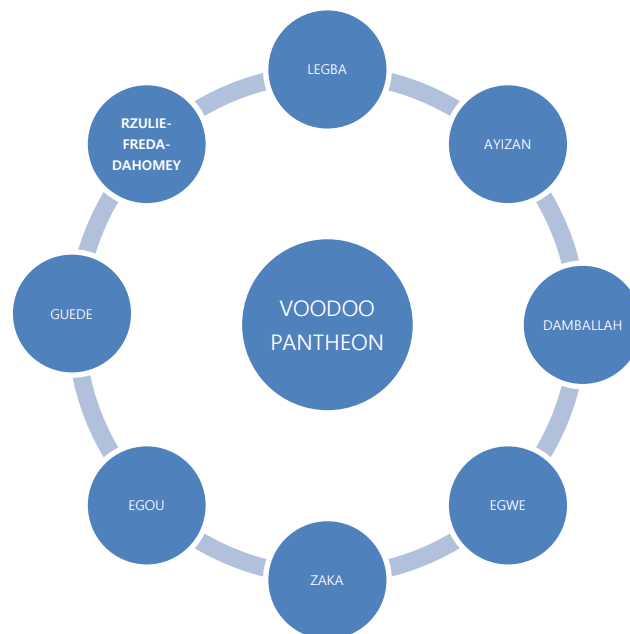


Figure 1: Voodoo Pantheon

Voodoo is not an ethnic group but a religion that began in Africa, most probably from western part of Africa of Dahomey. In the Fon language, voodoo means spirit. In the Americas and the Caribbean Island, voodoo religion is believed to be a combination of various African, Catholic and Native American traditions. It developed as a blending of the above religio-cultural traditions with the native African religious practices

(Moulton, 2018). Although it is practiced around the world, there is no accurate count of how many people are Voodooists (Haas 2011).

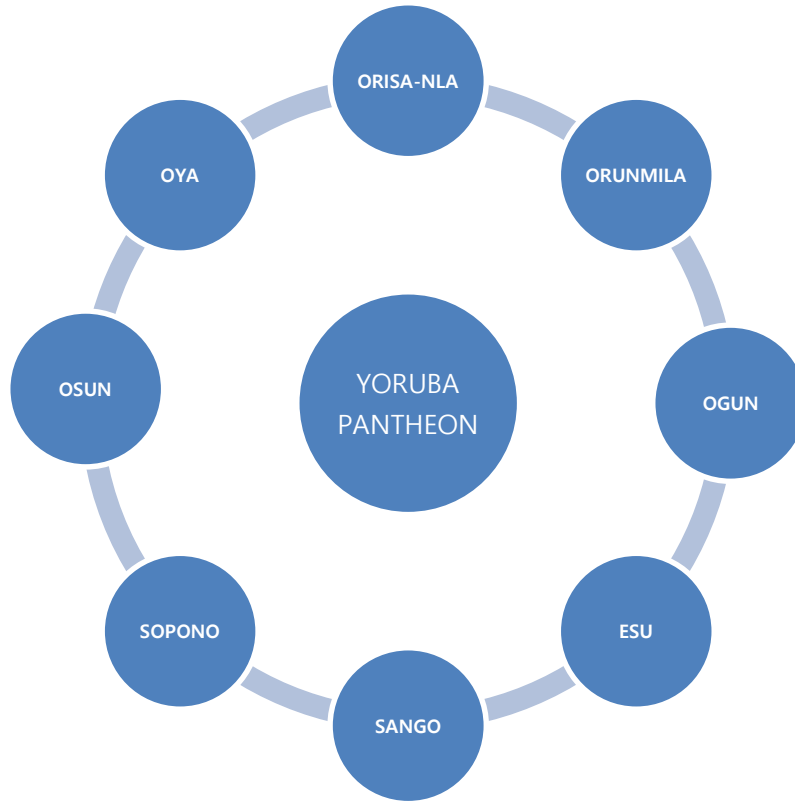


Figure 2: Yoruba Pantheon

The Yoruba are an ethnic group of south-western and north-central Nigeria as well as southern and central Benin. They constitute over 40 million people in total, and the majority of this population is from Nigeria. In Nigeria, they make up 21% of the country's population of 180 million, according to the (World Fact Book 2013), making them one of the largest ethnic groups in Africa (Bendor-Samuel2018).



Figure 3: Igbo Pantheon

The Igbo, formerly also known as *Iboe*, *Ebo*, *Eboe*, *Eboans*, *Heebo*, etc., (Isichei 1978; Hugh 1911; Cassidy and Brock 2002; Lovejoy, 2000; Olaudah 1837; Boniface 1982), is an ethnic group native to the present-day south-central and southeastern Nigeria. Geographically, their land is divided into two unequal sections by the River Niger. The Igbo are one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria (Chigere 2000 and Lizzie 2002).

Pantheons and the element of change

Wikipedia (2018) observes that in many civilizations, pantheons changed over time. These changes were based on certain historical factors. These factors include:

1. When deities that were first worshipped as the patrons of cities or places came to be collected together as the empires extended over larger territories.
2. There were times cities or empires expanded by conquering the next city, leading to the subordination of the subordinated culture's pantheon to a newer one.

3. Cultural exchange could lead to "the same" deity being renowned in two places under different names (Weber 1922).
4. There were times that national pantheons were consolidated or simplified into fewer gods, or into a single god with power over all of the areas originally assigned to a pantheon.
5. The domination of a pantheon by a particular god within that pantheon could lead to the devotees of the pantheon seeing it as "an international or universal deity, a transnational god of the entire world" (Weber 1922, p. 23).

These possible changes in pantheons have been observed from the evolution of the pantheons of the Egyptian, Greek, Etruscan, Syrian, Palestinian and Roman religions. And it is not a change that is peculiar to these religions; it is a change that is possible in all religious systems, including the African Traditional Religion.

African pantheons and the element of change

Three major factors have contributed to the issue of change in the status of African pantheons. These three issues include:

a. Death and the emergence of selected African pantheons

Death is the cessation of all biological functions that sustains the body. Its occurrence brings about a change in the history of the human person, as the person ceases to be a living person and becomes a dead person. In relation to some extraordinary human beings who have existed in Africa, death brings about a new beginning, as it raises pantheons from among men. Among the Yoruba, Sango is the Yoruba god of thunder and lightning, with his presence manifested in thunderbolts and lightning (Kanu 2015a). He was a human being, and in fact, one of the kings of Oyo kingdom, an Alafin of Oyo. And his reign was tyrannical and could spit out fire during fits of anger. When he was deposed as king, he committed suicide by hanging himself. After his death, he became a divinity. He is highly dreaded, and punishes offenders through thunderbolts. There is also Oya, a female divinity, referred to as the goddess of the River Niger. She was the first wife of Sango, who wept after his death, weeping so severely that her tears formed the River Niger. She could neutralize the anger of *Sango*. Whenever he spits fire during his fits of anger, *Oya* neutralizes his anger with rain (Kanu 2015b). Like *Osun*, she is also worshipped in rivers and streams. In the life of Sango and Oya, death

which is an element of change, in the case of Oya and Sango, becomes an element that transforms humans into divinities.

b. The missionary enterprise and the evolution of pantheons

In a conversation between Okonkwo and Obierika, Achebe (1958) in the *Things Fall Apart*, gives a picture of the misunderstanding of the African culture by the missionaries during the missionary enterprise.

Does the white man understand our custom about land?, asked Okonkwo, "How can he when he does not even speak our tongue?" responded Obierika, and then he continued, "But he says our customs are bad; and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers and our clan can no longer act as one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart" (pp. 124-125).

This misunderstanding extended to the African divinities. For instance, the Esu divinity among the Yoruba was misunderstood by missionaries and new converts to Christianity as the Biblical devil. However, before the missionaries came, Esu was the god of mischief and could make things difficult for people. He is always present as an inspector in matters of rituals and conduct, among divinities and human beings. Having inspected a ritual, his recommendation determines if the Supreme Being will accept the sacrifice or not; he stands before the Supreme Being accusing both human beings and divinities, especially when it is not properly fed with sacrifices; however, when he is given his due, he can be benevolent in terms of protection. He is feared by both men and divinities and could be unpredictable. Awolalu and Dopamu (1979) illustrate this fear thus: "Once Sango, the thunder divinity of Yorubaland, boasted that there was no divinity he could not subdue. But Esu asked him promptly whether he included him, and Sango immediately replied apologetically that he could not have been included" (p. 83).

This misunderstanding was not only limited to Esu, it also extended to the Igbo divinity called Ekwensu (god of warriors). When Western Missionaries came to Igboland, they wrongly identified *Ekwensu* with the Christian devil. However, according to Metuh (1991), *Ekwensu* is the spirit

of violence and patron of warriors and not the Christian devil. Isichie (1969) records that among the Igbo of Asaba, there was a festival called *Ekwensu* festival, and it constituted their major annual feast, during which they displayed their military prowess. The coming of the missionaries gave these divinities new images among the people.

c. Migration and the African pantheon

Migration all over the world is affecting perspectives, religious beliefs, language, etc. It has also affected the African pantheon in various ways, either as the people moved with them from one place to another, or as societies adopted them into new environments. For instance, Buruku, a Yoruba deity was brought from Sabe, in Dahomey. It was worshipped as a Supreme Being in Sabe, however, this migration changed its status, and was now worshipped as divinity among the Yoruba. It is referred to as *Buruku Omolu*, meaning “the child of the Supreme Being”. It is believed that it is responsible for deaths, illnesses, catastrophes and other human miseries; however, he is also capable of blessing and protecting worshippers. Migration also affected the status of the Yoruba divinity called Ayelala. According to Awolalu and Dopamu (1979), “She was originally a slave woman brought from Ekitiland to Kisoso in Okitipupa of Ondo State, and offered as a substitutionary sacrifice for peace between Ileja and Ijo who were at war with each other” (p. 90). Keko from Ileja slept with the wife of chief Temetan, and ran away to Ijo to avoid being killed. When the case was being settled, it was agreed that if Keko must live, a substitute is required to die for him; it was at this time that Ayelala, the slave woman was offered as a substitutionary sacrifice. Through her death she brought peace between the peoples of Ileja and Ijo, and so was worshipped by both Ijo and Ileja. There are many stories of how such movements have affected the status of pantheons in Africa.

Conclusion

This work has studied the issue of change within the parameters of African pantheons. This raises the question as regards the quality and dimension of change being considered herein. Change in relation to African pantheons refers changes that are sometimes ‘substantial’ and at other times ‘accidental’. Substantial when it affects the substance of a being, as in the case of the death of a human being bringing about the emergence of a divinity. At other times accidental as it concerns not the substance of the divinity but the human perception of them. However, in

any of these cases, there is a change.

This study has also shown that there is a very strong relationship between religion and society. This relationship is such that while religion changes society, society also changes religion as it provides the context that shapes her expression and relevance. This is a change that is mutual. While religion changes attitude and approaches, society shapes religion to be relevant to the particular context she has found herself. Social activities like the movement of people from one part of the world to another, as they moved with their divinities, also explains a lot about the differences and similarities in religious practices, especially in West Africa. For instance, among the Yoruba and the Igbo, there are similarities among their divinities, which can be explained through the theory of social change: a social change that brings about a religious change. The Igbo has the divinity Amadioha, and the Yoruba has the divinity Ogun; these two divinities have great similarities that their difference is mainly in the names. There is also a very strong similarity between the Yoruba divinity called Esu and the Igbo divinity called Ekwensu. These similarities are pointer to the possibility of migration and the cultural exchange that must have occurred as a result of the encounter between the two religious cultures. The understanding of these changes would go a long way in our understanding of the relationships, similarities and differences among African divinities.

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