

The Relationship Between People and Supernatural Beings in Yoruba Traditional Culture

By

Joseph Adyinka Olanrewaju

The Yoruba Traditional Religion (YTR) which is vibrant and influential among the Yoruba speaking people of Western Nigeria has had a deep influence on the culture of the people. The influence of the religion seems to have gone beyond the geographical boundary of the Yoruba in Nigeria, for though the religion originates from Western Nigeria, it claims millions of adherents throughout the world. It is practiced in one form or the other in the Republic of Benin and Togo in West Africa, and its presence is felt in Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guyana, Jamaica, Grenada, Trinidad and Tobago,



Joseph Adyinka Olanrewaju is senior lecturer in Systematic Theology at the Religious Studies Department of Babcock University, Nigeria.

and St. Vincent (Emeagwali 1999:1, 2).

The Yoruba believe that the universe consists of two planes of existence, the visible and the invisible planes. Based on their view, while supernatural beings such as the Supreme Being, deities, and ancestors inhabit the invisible plane, other living beings like humans and animals inhabit the visible plane. Moreover, the two planes are constantly interacting with each other in ongoing relationships (Gbadesin 1991:85-88). The main focus of this article deals with the relationship between humans who inhabit the visible plane and the supernatural beings who inhabit the invisible plane with an emphasis on the relationship of the Yoruba Supreme Being with people. However, in order to show the significance of divinities and ancestors among the Yoruba, the article will also briefly discuss the relationship between humans and the lesser deities by seeking answers to the following questions: What kinds of relationships exist between humans and the supernatural beings? What effect do these relationships have on people? What

are the implications of these relationships on mission?

Relationship Between People and the Supreme Being

Thomas Lawson has suggested that the Yoruba believe that every being in the universe owes its origin, being, and form to the Supreme Being who is austere, remote, and difficult to approach. Lawson goes on to assert that in spite of the fact that the Supreme Being can be prayed to, the Yoruba erect no temples or shrines to him (Lawson 1985:58). Bolaji Idowu suggests that the Yoruba believe that God is only concerned with his own welfare and his own greatness, and has no interest in the affairs of the world he created (Idowu 1973:144). These concepts seem to suggest that there is no functional relationship between God and human beings.

Are these scholars correct or not? The answer to this question can be ascertained as one looks into the culture of the Yoruba people. Cornelius Abiodun Olowola strongly suggests that the Yoruba maintain a vital relationship with the Supreme Being (Olowola 1983:218). In Yoruba traditional belief there was a time when heaven was close to earth. During that period, the closeness was enhanced by “uninhibited communication between the two” (Idowu 1973:162). The implication of this belief is that there was a time when people freely and directly communicated with the

Supreme Being. A logical question that follows is why is there no longer such free and direct communication and relationship between human beings and the Supreme God today? A Yoruba myth relates that there was a greedy man who selfishly appropriated food from heaven. As a result of his action a barrier was created between heaven and earth, and heaven moved farther away from human beings. Another Yoruba myth says that a woman slapped the face of heaven, which is often seen as the symbol of God’s face. As a result a vast distance was created between heaven and earth (Babalola 1992:209; Aderibigbe 1999:331). The two myths suggest that the Yoruba believe that it was misbehavior on the part of human beings which led to the separation between them and God.

Although the Yoruba believe that there is no longer face to face communication between people and God, there is an indication in their belief system that people can still have a relationship with the Supreme God. While it is true that sacrifices to the Supreme Being in the Yoruba culture are rare, it seems that the Yoruba people freely worship God and are dependent on him (Dopamu 1999:5). The worship Yoruba people render to the Supreme Being is often informal in nature, but they do believe that the Supreme Being is fully involved in human affairs (Johnson and Oyinade 2004:6).

Why is it that the Yoruba worship God rather than offer sacrifices to him? Dopamu answers that question by suggesting that

the truth is that the Yoruba have brought sociological interpretation to theological thinking. Within the traditional Yoruba society, fathers are expected to take care of their children without expecting any gift or maintenance from their children. *Olorun* [the Yoruba name for God] is to the Yoruba as fathers are to their children. (Dopamu 1999:5, 6)

The Supreme Being, like a father to his children, takes care of human beings. In return, God's action engenders responses of

God and freely dance to show their gratitude to him.

Another vital point in this matter of the relationship between people and God among the traditional Yoruba is the recognition that God, who is the judge, is the ultimate source of ethical and moral value. In order to guide people in the right way of living, God places a conscience in each of them. Idowu suggests that

in order to aid man in ethical living, Olodumare [God] has put in him *ifa aya*—"the oracle of the heart" or "the oracle which is in the heart." It is this "oracle of the heart" that determines his ethical life. One is a good or bad person in accordance as he responds

Fathers are expected to take care of their children without expecting any gift or maintenance from their children.

praise, expressions of joy, and spontaneous prayers from people to their God. The Yoruba go further and give theophoric names to their children in recognition of God's goodness to them (Dopamu 1999:6). Omosade Awolalu also observes that "adoration, praise and thanksgiving are offered to the Deity. The mind is fixed upon what the Supreme Being is and what He is able to do for man. His attributes and acts of kindness are recalled and enumerated" (Awolalu 1978:102). This seems to be the reason why the Yoruba in their songs and prayers profusely mention the attributes of

to, or disobeys the guidance of his inner "oracle." (Idowu 1973:154; see also Ikenga-Metuh 1987:234; Sarpang 1989:361-62; Quarcoopome 1987:163)

Whereas the Supreme Being does not leave people without the aid of developing a good character, people are responsible for making use of their conscience to behave in the right way. If people fail they face the unavoidable wrath of the Supreme Being who is the impartial judge (Quarcoopome 1987:163). The Yoruba believe that though direct communication between people and God is no longer what it used to be

because of human disobedience, God is still like a father to them. God cares for and blesses people. In return, there is a response of praise and worship from human beings (Olowola 1983:218).

Relationship Between People and the Divinities

It is difficult to understand the relationship between people and the Supreme Being without discussing the significance of the divinities among the Yoruba. People in YTR do not only believe in the divinities, but they also believe in a vibrant interaction between people and them. They see the divinities as intermediar-

ensure that before they embark on any important journey, they consult with a divination oracle for the probable outcome. They may be asked to offer sacrifice to *Ogun*, the god of iron for protection. A typical Yoruba will not leave his or her house until that sacrifice has been offered. They also offer various kinds of sacrifices to all the recognized gods for protection and provision of needs. (Gbadegesin 1991:93; see also Awolalu 1978:25; Idowu 1962:112, 113; Quarcoopome 1987:73)

In gratitude for the help they receive from the divinities, the Yoruba offer them sacrifices and worship. Some Yoruba go even further, giving theophoric names to their children as testimonies

People in YTR do not only believe in the divinities, but they also believe in a vibrant interaction between people and them.

ies between the Supreme Being and human beings (Olowola 1983:72, 73; Dopamu 1999:5; Braswell 1994:145; Johnson and Oyinade 2004:2), and believe that the role of the divinities in respect to the welfare of society is indispensable (Quarcoopome 1987:73, 196). Recognizing the vital roles of the divinities in the society, traditional Yoruba express their dependence on one or more divinities by approaching them for different kinds of help like protection, healing, prosperity, and direction. Yoruba

to the help they have received from their gods (Quarcoopome 1987:73).

Aside from the relationships of dependence and benevolence that exists between people and the divinities in Yoruba culture, the divinities are also recognized as the guardians of morality in society (Quarcoopome 1987:73). As in any other culture, there are rules and norms to be obeyed in Yorubaland in order to enhance the welfare and peaceful coexistence of the people. On one hand, Yoruba believe that

whenever someone disobeys the norms of the society, the divinities punish the person by bringing calamity and misfortune on him or her. On the other hand, the divinities bestow blessings on those who are obedient to the rules and norms of the land (Quarcoopome 1987:73, 61; Johnson and Oyinade 2004:2). The fear of punishment and the desire for blessing from the divinities motivates people to avoid evil practices in the society; “thus the divinities are cohesive factors of society, helping to maintain law and order” (Quarcoopome 1987:73).

Therefore, in Yoruba culture there is a relationship between people and the divinities. The divinities are intermediaries between humans and the Supreme Being. This relationship is dominated by peoples’ need for different kinds of help from the divinities and the realization which leads to responses of worship and offering of sacrifices to the divinities. It is a relationship that enhances law and order in the society as people attempt to avoid disobedience to societal norms and the resulting punishment from the divinities. People choose obedience because of their desire for blessing.

Relationship Between People and Their Ancestors

If it is imperative to be acquainted with the significance of the divinities among the Yoruba, it is also important to understand the relationship between

the ancestors and the people. The ancestors, like the divinities, are intermediaries between the Supreme God and people. It is the ancestors who afford a connection between the past, present, and the future (Braswell 1994:145). This means that YTR sees the ancestors as an important and integral component of the society (Braswell 1994:145; Quarcoopome 1987:128; Idowu 1973:184); they are believed to form a symbiotic union between the community of the living and the living dead (Oesthuzen 1991:41). Commenting on the relationship between the living and the ancestors, Awolalu states that

in Yoruba belief, the family is made up of both the living members and ancestors. The ancestors constitute the closest link between the world of men and the spirit-world and they are believed to be keenly interested in the welfare of their living descendants. (Awolalu 1978:61)

The kind of relationship that exists between people and the ancestors in Yoruba culture is similar to the relationship between people and the divinities. The only difference is that a person’s relationship with the ancestors is closer and more cordial than the relationship with the divinities. It is not uncommon for a traditional Yoruba person who is in trouble to address his ancestor as *my father* (Awolalu 1978:61; Idowu 1962:192). “The protective relationship which exists between parents and their children here

on earth is not terminated at death. The ancestors continue to protect their offspring from all misfortunes” (Gbadegesin 1991:88). Because of the confidence that the typical Yoruba have in their ancestors and the belief that they are interested in the welfare of their offspring, they approach the ancestors for protection from malevolent agents and for other aid and assistance (Gbadegesin 1991:88, 89; Awolalu 1978:61-63; Quarcoopome 1987:130, 131).

The role of the ancestors goes beyond benevolence in terms of protection and granting of different aid and assistance. The ancestors are the guardians of family affairs, tribal norms, and ethics in the society. As guardians, they bring calamity on anyone who breaks the taboos of the community and reward those who keep them with blessings (Awolalu 1978:61; Quarcoopome 1987:130; Green 1983:9).

While it is the role of the ancestors to protect their descendants and guard the family affairs and tribal norms, their living descendants have the duty of maintaining fellowship with them. This seems to be the basis for ancestor worship in Yoruba culture. Both annual and daily worship and sacrifices are directed to them (Olowola 1993:52). The yearly worship of ancestors in Yorubaland, which is often associated with a big festival, is what Noel Q. King refers to as Yoruba All Souls Day or Halloween. They believe that the spirits

of the dead may revisit their relations through the medium of masquerades (King 1986:16; see also Awolalu 1978:65-67). It is the duty of the living to keep their ancestors happy by obeying the community taboos, so if any of the aforementioned duties are neglected, the result is wrath and misfortune from the ancestors (Awolalu 1978:61; Braswell 1994:145; Quarcoopome 1987:162). “Ancestors elicit both attitudes of awe and dread” (Braswell 1994:145; Lawson 1985:62). As a result, the following patterns developed: (1) in recognition of the interest of the ancestors in the welfare of the community, Yoruba people look to them for protection and the bestowal of other kinds of aid and assistance; (2) as the ancestors protect and bestow blessings upon the people they seek to maintain a close relationship with them through offerings, worship, and sacrifice; (3) the ancestors, as guardians of morality in the society, punish offenders and reward those who abide by the tribal taboos and traditions; and (4) in order to avoid wrath and misfortune from the ancestors, people keep the taboos and traditions of the community.

The Implications for Mission

The relationships between people and supernatural beings in Yoruba culture have several basic implications for the spreading of the gospel. First, it may be wrong to approach typical and

traditional Yoruba people with the gospel as if they are ignorant of God. In Yoruba culture, the Supreme Being is distinct from and superior to other deities. A traditional Yoruba never makes the mistake of “putting God, *Olodumare*, on the same pedestal with divinities (*orisa*) and the ancestor. In their belief, *Olodumare* is unique, incomparable” (Adelowo 1990:168). Apart from a Yoruba seeing God as their Father, their idea of God is very close to the biblical idea. For instance, the titles for God in YTR include the following: the greatest One, the One who

mon to see a traditional Yoruba bowing, prostrating, and rolling on the ground in worship of the Supreme Being, a biblical emphasis should be placed on reverential attitudes and postures like kneeling down during worship in congregations that are largely composed of Yoruba people.

Second, in appreciation of God’s fatherly care, the Yoruba worship him expressively (Dopamu 1999:6; Awolalu 1978:102). It is not enough to convert Yoruba traditional people into Christianity. They are better retained in the Christian faith

Moderate swaying of the body is also not seen as inappropriate among Yoruba Christian worshippers.

dwells in heaven, the Creator and source of life, the Owner of the spirit, the One who owns today (Awolalu 1978:9-11). In addition, God’s creatorship, incomparability, immortality, omnipotence, omniscience, kingship, transcendence, and holiness are emphasized in the Yoruba attributes of God (Awolalu 1978:12-16). This common ground between the YTR and the Christian religion can be utilized to introduce the gospel to a traditional Yoruba person.

Because of the high esteem Yoruba people have for God, all acts of irreverence should be avoided. Since it is not uncom-

mon where worship is expressive and vibrant and where worship is accompanied with music during the singing. Moderate swaying of the body is also not seen as inappropriate among Yoruba Christian worshippers. This is probably one of the reasons why the Christian groups that give sufficient room for expressive worship in their services witness a better membership retention rate among the Yoruba.

Third, YTR also provides common ground for teaching about the fall of the human race. As indicated earlier, in their myths the Yoruba hold that there was a time when people could relate

closely with God; this close relationship came to an end because of misbehavior on the part of people (Babalola 1992:209; Aderibigbe 1999:331). The biblical story of the fall of the human race maintains that it was Adam and Eve's misbehavior in disobeying God that caused the separation (Gen 3:1-19). Both Christianity and YTR have similar stories that show how human woe and problems began.

Fourth, it is important to stress morality and ethics in the process of witnessing to traditional Yoruba people. They believe that the origin of ethical

should be presented along with the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to help believers live in obedience.

Fifth, since the Yoruba "see the divinities as intermediaries between the Supreme Being and man (Olowola 1983:72, 73; Dopamu 1999:5; Braswell 1994:145; Johnson and Oyinate 2004:2), Jesus should be introduced to them as the mediator between God and human beings. People should be encouraged to bring their problems directly to God by praying through Jesus Christ.

It is important to stress morality and ethics in the process of witnessing to traditional Yoruba people.

values is beyond human origin, and is traceable to the Supreme Being and divinities. They also believe that God does not leave people without aid to live up to the moral standards he expects people to live by. God has given each person an inner "oracle" to help them achieve this. "To the Yoruba, man's character is of supreme importance and it is this which *Olodumare* judges" (Idowu 1962:154). Therefore, it is important to emphasize the importance of morality and the moral codes (e.g., the Ten Commandments) when reaching out to the Yoruba people with the gospel. Salvation by grace

Conclusion

Since the Yoruba have a strong relationship with supernatural beings, a successful presentation of the gospel should be based on the fact that (1) the Yoruba are not ignorant of God, (2) they respond to him with vibrant worship, (3) they have a concept of the Fall similar to the Christian one, (4) they perceive God as a caring father who does not need to be bribed for help, (5) they take morality and ethics seriously, and (6) they recognize the significance of intermediaries between humans and God. These characteristics of the Yoruba's relationship with the

supernatural should serve as a starting point for preaching the gospel to the people of Western Nigeria.

Works Cited

- Adelowo, E. Dadd. 1990. Rituals and symbolism in Yoruba traditional religious thought. *Asia Journal of Theology* 4, no. 1:456-471.
- Aderibigbe, Gbola. 1999. Yoruba cosmology as theory of creation: Limits and assets. *Asia Journal of Theology* 13, no. 2: 328-338.
- Awolalu, J. Omosade. 1978. *Yoruba beliefs and sacrificial rites*. Essex, UK: Longman.
- Babalola, E. O. 1992. Cosmogonic stories in the indigenous religions of the Yoruba and the Bible: A comparative investigation. *Bible Bhashyan: An India Biblical Quarterly* 21, no. 1:204-214.
- Braswell, George W. 1994. *Understanding world religions*. Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman.
- Dopamu, Ade. 1999. The Yoruba religious system. *Africa Update* 6, no. 3:2-17.
- Emeagwali, Gloria. 1999. Editorial: The Yoruba religious system. *Africa Update* 6, no. 3:1-2.
- Gbadegesin, Segun. 1991. *African philosophy: Traditional Yoruba philosophy and contemporary african realities*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Green, Ronald M. 1983. Religion and morality in traditional settings. *Journal of Religion in Africa* 14:1-23.
- Idowu, E. Bolaji. 1962. *Olodumare: God in Yoruba belief*. London: Longman.
- _____. 1973. *African traditional religion: A definition*. London: SCM.
- Ikenga-Metuh, Emeife. 1987. *Comparative studies of African traditional religion*. Onitsha, Nigeria: Imico.
- Johnson, Kofi, and Tunde Oyinade. 2004. Monotheism in traditional Yoruba religion. *Thinking about Religion* 3:1-8.
- King, Noel Q. 1986. *African cosmos: An introduction to religion in Africa*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Lawson, E. Thomas. 1985. *Religions of Africa: Traditions in transformation*. Cambridge: Harper & Row.
- Oesthuzen, Gerhardus Cornelis. 1991. The place of traditional religion in contemporary South Africa. In *African traditional contemporary society*, ed. Jacob K. Olupona, 35-50. St. Paul, MN: Paragon.
- Olowola, Cornelius Abiodun. 1983. *The Yoruba traditional religion: A critique*. ThD dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary.
- _____. 1993. *African traditional religion and Christian faith*. Achimota, Ghana: Africa Christian Press.
- Parrinder, E. G. 1978. *West African religion: A study of the beliefs and practices of Akan, Ewe, Yoruba, Ibo and kindred peoples*. London: Epworth.
- Quarcoopme, T. N. Q. 1987. *West African traditional religion*. Ibadan, Nigeria: University Press.
- Sarpong, Peter K. 1989. African traditional religion and peace: With reference to Ashanti. *Studia Missionalia* 38:351-370.