

CULTURAL INTERACTION AND YORÙBÁ TRADITIONAL EPISTEME

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Abstract

Culture defines the peculiarities of a people. It consists of a people's total way of life as embedded and expressed in their worldview, political organizations, social interactions, religious beliefs and practices. This explains the reason for the claim that culture is complex. It is therefore dynamic in nature. The dynamics of culture reveal that it is not static; it changes as human development and interactions occur. Human interactions across different cultures are the basis for cultural interaction. Evidently, cultural interactions affect the totality of a people's way of life. This is also the case in Yorùbá culture. Descriptive method will be used to describe how Ifa divination has enhanced the symbolic role among the Yoruba. A historical analysis revealed that various sectors such as epistemic activities, religion, political organizations and so on in the Yorùbá modern society have been gravely affected by cultural interaction. This is identified as the effect of uncritical openness and delusion of priding imported models of human cultural orientations as superior to what is indigenous. It is argued that such tendency has resulted in a structural disconnect between Yorùbá traditional and modern episteme, and consequently renders any meaningful advancement difficult. It is therefore imperative that Yorùbá episteme as it is been construed, be reconstructed and given a place of importance. This will necessarily include the consciousness of the fact that the epistemological basis of Yorùbá tradition as embedded in Ifa Corpus is the guiding principle of every sector of Yorùbá tradition. This will be a panacea for the plethora of issues that confront the contemporary Yorùbá.

Keywords: Culture; Cultural interaction; Episteme; Ifa Corpus; Structural Disconnect

Introduction

The reality of contemporary Yorùbá is that he is a product of a hybrid culture. The strive to fully acquire what is imported from the foreign cultures has left him to be disconnected from what is authentically African, carrying out daily concerns with little or no consideration of what is traditional to his cultural heritage. In certain instance, the contemporary Yorùbá live in the delusion that what is African is necessarily inferior to

what is Western. This has led to a strife to fully acquire all that is Western, characterized by continuous foreign importation of cultural practices. Consequently, this practice has resulted in a disconnection from what is authentically African on the one hand, and unconscious synthetic and syncretic outlook and conception of reality. This tendency, which is an aftermath of the European imperialism and colonization, is evident in all spheres of life. In religion, for instance, there are Yorùbá who abhor what is traditional on the ground that traditional religion is fetish and 'does not lead anyone to the light'. However, this does not suggest that those who harbor such opinion are not ignorant of the doctrines of the foreign religions. Hence, this paper attempts to analyze the causes and consequences of such self-misconception particularly in the aspect of religion. It strongly argues that a proper appreciation of African religion and its pure elements would lead to an improved moral standard among the people and the reduction of immoral acts in every sphere of the continent. However, conscious of the true picture of the 21st century experience of Africans as deeply involved in western tradition, the paper canvasses for a reconstructive complementarity of epistemics, a sincere mutual respect for the values entrenched in both Western belief and African religious worldview as grounded in Yorùbá traditional episteme.

Culture

Culture is popularly defined as the totality of a people's way of life. The definition indicates the centrality of culture in understanding of the peculiarities that distinguish a group of people of common descent from another. Culture is the unique characteristic of a social group; the values and norms shared by its members set it apart from other social groups and is influenced by conscious beliefs. When talking of culture, the focus is basically on the collectivity of persons within a group than particular persons. Hence, culture refers to a society and its way of life. The society's way of life finds expression in her members who are carriers of their cultural heritage. Due to the emphasis it places on collective values, culture is defined as a set of values and beliefs, or a cluster of learned behaviours that are shared people in a particular society, giving them a sense of belongingness and identity.

As a matter of interest to different fields of study, 'culture' is a multidimensional concept that has surfaced in several disciplines and studies such as sociology, psychology, political sciences, religion, anthropology, business and cross-cultural studies. Each of these disciplines focuses on culture from the perspective or interest geared towards the understanding of humans and the society. This is an indication that culture is a viable tool for understanding man and the society. Simply, "culture is the entirety of what is passed down by humans except its biology: language and technology, laws and customs, beliefs and moral standards (Peil, 1977).

Edward Tylor defines "culture as that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired... as a member of society" (Tylor 1871, 1). It covers activities of a people in a society. Without negligence of the immaterial aspect of culture, it is evident that individuals within a group are the carriers, perpetuators and promoters of culture. They maintain and enforce

compliance within their domain. Culture in itself is an abstract nontangible concept that finds expression in the way and manner persons live and act in the society. It is expressed in the meals, dances, dresses, festivities, religious practices and observances etc. These are activities pointing to the fact that culture is an indicator of what is unique to a group of people in their ethnicity. This means that there is hardly any ethnic group without certain cultural elements. As such, culture constitutes a unique identity for humans. In addition to being rational, humans are also cultural. It can then be said that humans are as much cultural as they are rational.

Culture can be grouped into two: material and non-material. The material aspects of culture refer to the tangible entities which in most cases are created by the people. Such physical materials usually enjoy strong attachment from the people. They are tangible and concrete; they form concrete referent within the society. Things in this category are but not limited to tools furniture, implements and dams. On the other hand, non-material culture refers to abstract ideas with a cultural group. These are in the forms of principles that underline the acceptable behaviours within the group. Examples of these include; tradition, manners, attitude, worldview, political ideology, taboo, religious beliefs, law and language. Both aspects of culture occur within and around humans who constitute the essential propellers of cultural activities and context that within which specific cultures are defined. Accordingly, humans are at the center of Cultural Interaction.

Cultural Interaction

Cultural interaction is defined by Ghadami, Mohsen et.al (2022) as “a reciprocal influence of a person from one national or organizational culture on another person or people from different national or organizational culture(s)”. It refers to the relationship between two groups of people with differing customs, traditions, ideas, and practices. As social process, people crossbreed both material and immaterial aspects of culture leading to the development of a synthesis of cultural practice. For example, during the period of colonization, as a result of interaction some aspects of foreign cultures such as language, education, religion and dress were brought to some nations in Africa. Cultural interaction brings about acculturation and significant improvement in the value system and the quality of human life and ideas about their environment. For instance, through linguistic contact interact with one another, there is transfer of linguistic features among each other that will enhance relationship. This is a sense in which cultural interaction limits the barriers of cultural relativity and the influence is visible in politics, economy, education, religion, family life, material products, habits, customs, rituals, beliefs, values and thought system.

There is a long history of human interactions through trade and commerce. Cultural ideas and artifacts certainly did flow across borders in all directions, especially through trade and diplomacy. As trade, transportation and communication developed through history, different groups formed unique relationships. People go outside their immediate cultural environment in search or knowledge, experience, civilization and innovation. They traveled from their home lands to acquire goods and service that would improve the quality of their lives. The process of interaction is essential since human

beings are not self-sufficient in getting their needs. There were avenues for people to meet and share their produces. In some sense, this accounts for the beginning of markets as a center for such exchange. According to Victoria Fryer, “in the early centuries of trade, markets functioned as a new meeting place. Where people used to coexist within their already determined familial, religious, and/or social communities, trade brought people (and wares) together from far and wide. This exposure to new cultures, 'products,' and ideas - all the tangible and intangible results of the act of trading - compounded the benefits of trade itself, creating its own unique etching on the rock of history” (Fryer, 2022).

Interactions between cultures bring about cultural influences in politics, economy, education, religion, family life, material products, habits, customs, rituals, beliefs, values and thoughts etc. This is evident in the records of various ancient civilizations. As an instance, the visit of Makeda, the Queen Sheba to King Solomon was to acquire wisdom on governance and administration characteristic of Solomon's private and public life. She became influenced and adopted Solomon's religion. Her dispositions prior to visiting Solomon are not quite known. The various traditions describe her as worshipping the Sun and other celestial objects. However, she is said to have begun believing in the God of Solomon after her visit. This is a testimony to her disposition to allow the influence of the Jewish culture in her kingdom. This was not the first of cultural interaction in the Christian Scripture.

An episode of human movements for commercial purposes that would eventually lead to a long period of cultural interaction and acquisition is recorded in Genesis 37:18-36. It is important to note that around the time of the story, commercial activities have recorded a significant development and trade was carried out from one location to another through the then “incense route”. Trade movement was aided by the domestication of camel for the transportation of commodities that began in southeastern Arabia during the third millennium BCE and spread to Levant, Mesopotamia and Egypt (Römer, Schmid and Bühler (2012).

The caravan of camels of the Ishmaelite traders who were Midianite merchants taking a load of gum, balm, and aromatic resin from Gilead were heading to Egypt. Along their way, they acquired Joseph for twenty shekels of silver, and arrived in Egypt, sold him off to Potiphar, the captain of the palace guard of Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. It goes on to mention that the experience and position of Joseph in Egypt necessarily required him to acquire the Egyptian culture. Immediately, his name was changed; Pharaoh gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-Paneah (Genesis 41:45). Moreover, Joseph in due course learned and acquired the Egyptian culture, customs, and language as perquisite for effect discharge of his duties and responsibilities while he served under Potiphar.

Joseph's life and events became a iconic in the history of the Jews because of the severe famine and food shortage that made Egypt a safe haven for other surrounding nations. This led to the migration of Joseph's father and his brothers to Egypt. As time went by, there were series of cultural interactions between the Jews and the Egyptians

particularly in the place they settled. Their buildings, ceramics and graves were typically Canaan. Rachel Hallote points out that these pieces of material evidence—the ceramics, the temple architecture, and the burial customs—make it clear that there were people from southern Canaan living and ruling in Egypt in the Second Intermediate Period. Hallote (2022) avers that the Hyksos were certainly Canaanites, who brought their southern Canaanite material culture with them.

Another instance of cultural interactions and of particular interest to this paper is European colonial exploits in Africa. This is an event that has both positive and negative impact on African Culture. According to Clifford Sibani, “African native culture give way to the European culture. Either by design or accident, Africans have imbibed the Western culture and have appropriated it so much that it now becomes almost part and parcel of their lives... Obviously, the culture of African people is still undergoing contacts and conflicts which results to a healthier life of the society resulting in an improved social system” (Sibani (2018)). However, some have argued that this should not in any way undermine the material exploitative motif of such encounters.

Apart from material exploitation of Africa, colonialism also impoverished immaterial cultural heritage of Africans. It made a caricature of Africa and considered her as culturally naïve, intellectually passive and rationally incompetent and unable to contribute to world civilization. According to Igwe, “the outcome of this is the internationalization of western culture, as Africans and other indigenous values were trampled upon as irrelevant, unprogressive, backward primitive, conservation, traditional and unscientific; compared to the assumed modern, civilized dynamic and scientific values of the Europeans and her allies” (Igwe 2010). This idea created negative episteme about Africa as a continent that needed to be salvaged from her “barbaric” or “savage” state.

In this sense, the colonialists were acting in the best benefits of those whose lands and peoples they exploited (Blakemore 2022). Unfortunately, many Africans welcome this wrong idea about them in favour of European identity, thought system, life style and western perception of reality. While some were able to liberate themselves from the shackles of cultural bias and prejudiced conception, there are still those who continue to romanticize the impoverishing Western perspective of African culture. According to Pitts (2019), when Western European nations such as Belgium and France began colonizing Africa, they viewed indigenous religions as pagan at best, demonic at worst, and responded by spreading a triumphalist form of Christianity that powerfully eroded traditional practices.

Religious beliefs and practices are rich avenues of cultural expression. Religion reveals a people's identity, self-understanding and conception of reality. In Africa, it provides answers and meaning to fundamental issues of life such as the origin and finality of man, and Africans use religion as a window to understand reality and find stability in the face of life-challenges. Religion is so fundamental that it will not be wrong to say that African religion is a gateway to understanding Africa. Michael Ndemanu (2018) points out, “any attempt at learning about the African peoples and their cultures without

considering religions, the bedrock of those cultures, would be shallow and futile.”

However, this has been affected by western religion and its concomitant cultural baggage particularly since the mid-19th century when ex-slaves began to be repatriated to Africa. Subsequently, there was an end to the monolatric religious system that operated in the traditional African societies (Ibenwa, 2014). This signals the weakness in the tenets of genuine African Traditional Religion which is erroneously considered as archaic, paganism, animism, heathen and idolatry. These are misrepresentations of African Traditional Religion because of the shallow understanding of African Traditional episteme. To appreciate African Traditional episteme, this paper focuses on the Yorùbá culture as a case study.

Yorùbá Traditional Episteme

Yorùbá is a West African ethnic group most found in the southwest of Nigeria. They are also found in eastern Republic of Benin, Togo, Brazil, Cuba, the Caribbean and the United States of America. Horton (1979) remarks that, as a people, Yorùbá is made up of about twenty kingdoms that are traditionally connected to Ile-Ife which is regarded as their ancestral place and their spiritual capital founded by their fore bearer, Oduduwa. They have a long history of civilization which developed from simple agrarian society to a complex city state. They practiced a form of democratic political system that manifest profound culture heritage and traditional values. These cultural and traditional values are products of the people's attempt to proffer solutions to the wonders and the challenges of their reality. The attempt at forming a worldview and conception of reality develop into a fundamental body of knowledge that is unique to them from which the form a principled way of understanding their world or in simple term their traditional episteme.

According to Markus Kornprobst (2020), “an episteme is a set of fundamental beliefs about what constitutes the world and about how the world works.” Episteme refers to the fundamental body of ideas and collective presuppositions that defines the nature and sets the bounds of what is accepted as true knowledge in a given epistemic epoch. According to Monica Jain (2021), “an episteme is a fundamental body of ideas and collective presuppositions that defines the nature and sets the bounds of what is accepted as true knowledge in a given epistemic epoch.” Foucault (1970) describes “episteme as implicit 'rules of formation' which govern what constitutes legitimate forms of knowledge for a particular cultural period. They are the underlying codes of a culture that govern every facet of the life of a people such as; language, logic, schemas of perception, values and techniques, etc.” Through divination by its experts, *Ifá* is believed to possess the secret of nature and the ability to predict to predict future occurrences, to provide remedy for certain situations and used to prevent certain events from occurring.

Burges (2001) defines Traditional Episteme as the conception of reality that warrant how people approach issues of life; 'a way of making sense of the world'. It is the guiding principle that is at the core of a people's worldview and the unwritten understanding of what things are and they work among a people. From the above, the

Yorùbá Traditional Episteme refers to the traditional belief that is unique to the Yorùbá. It is the foundation of the Yorùbá belief systems which are asserted in their worldviews and opinions about reality. In the Yorùbá tradition, these are entrenched in the *Ifa* corpus. This is because every aspect of the Yorùbá culture and tradition is rooted in *Ifa* Corpus.

***Ifa* Corpus as Epistemological Basis of Yorùbá Tradition**

Ifa is a vital element in Yorùbá religion, culture, and society, and it regarded as an important source for their knowledge, cosmology, and belief system. *Ifa* is a system of divination practiced among Yoruba of southwest Nigeria, Benin Republic and Togo in West Africa, and it is gaining popularity in the United States, including in Maryland, as some African-Americans seek a spiritual experience firmly grounded in their own cultural heritage (Wangare, 2021). *Ifa* is identified with the knowledge of all things, and it is described as an inexhaustible repository, and fundamental source of indubitable knowledge in the Yorùbá culture. It is believed that *Ifa* is an angel of God known as *Orunmila*, the deity of wisdom, knowledge and intellectual development. Hence, *Ifa* is considered as the custodian of true and adequate knowledge of human beings in particular, nature and existence in general. According Makinde (2017), through *Ifa*, *Orunmila* brought wisdom and knowledge into this world. Such knowledge consists of several branches: science of nature (physics), animals (biology), plants (botany), medicinal plants of nature (herbalism), oral incantations (*ofo*), and the sciences associated with healing of diseases (medicine). Furthermore, *Ifa* is held to be the controller of language, culture, philosophy and religion.

The rationale for such depth of trust and promise is based in Yorùbá cosmology and moral order, which entrusted the *Ifa* deity with the knowledge of all that exists in the universe. *Ifa* is personified as the all-knowing historian, storyteller, and intermediary between the gods and the people. It represents the people's intellectual deity and the public relations officer of the Yorùbá pantheon. *Ifa* consists of corpus texts and mathematical formulas. The literary corpus which are called *Odu* are 256 and they are references to all situations, circumstances, actions, and consequences. Through *Ifa*, the role of the diviner (known as a *babalawo*) is to help an individual or community to see what is in store for them in their day-to-day lives. The training to become a *babalawo* is an intense process. There are in principle 256 chapters in the divination process, called *Odu*, each one contains elaborative narratives of mythic stories related to history, events, ritual practices, etc... Importantly, the *Odu* is an oral tradition, and thus the *babalawo*-in-training must memorize all or most of the 256 *Odu* in order to be qualified to be a *babalawo*.

Furthermore, *Odu* has subdivisions known as *ese ifa* that indicate Yoruba history, language, beliefs, cosmivision and contemporary social issues. Every aspect of Yorùbá life, including religion, philosophy, science, ideology, recreation, literature and so on has one link or another with *Ifa* corpus. *Odu Ifa* represents an important form of oral traditions dating back to the ancient time and represent compilations of myths, legends, proverbs,

songs, and praise poetry. They also signify numerous themes, events, occasions, and places in Yorùbá culture and history, such as mythic and historical characters, migration stories, and biographies of cultural heroes, ancestors, animals, and such natural phenomena as trees, groves, and rivers. They also refer to ethical and aesthetic ideas, philosophy, and metaphors, and to sacred journeys carried out by famous ancient diviners. The Yorùbá themselves regard the *Ifa* verses as their primary source of instructions for daily life. The verses constitute the Yorùbá encyclopedia of knowledge through the interpretation of these texts, and scholars are now examining many deep-seated values and concerns in Yorùbá culture and society (Wande, 1976).

Ifa worship is one defining of the Yoruba and is arguably one of the most extensive religions in West Africa. It has long been practiced before the arrival of Christianity and Islam. It is monotheistic faith like Christianity and Islam, but in addition, *Ifa's* and spiritual system is based on three distinct components; *Olodumare*, *Orisa* and ancestors. *Olodumare* is the supreme creative figure of heaven and earth. *Orisas* are the spirits and intermediaries between *Olodumare* and humans. They are also charged with the responsibility of particular part of the universe, such as: fire, rebirth, agriculture and the arts. They have access to the habits and occurrences in the upper world (*orun* [heaven]) and the underworld (*Ile*). *Orunmila*, the god of divination, is regarded as one of the numerous deities and *Ifa* is his divination process. The occurrences, events, and activities are revealed to humans through the elaborate divination process of *Ifa*. The ancestors exhibit somewhat less spiritual power than *Orisa*. They are those have lived an exemplary life without performing actions considered taboo.

Ifa divination a system of signs that are interpreted by a diviner, the *Ifa* priest or *babalawo*. As an avenue for people for meaning and solutions to their experiences, it is an act of interactive ritual involving the *Ifa* priest, the clients, and the social and cosmological order of the Yorùbá people aimed at producing sought after results to a client's quest and purpose for consultation. Consultation takes place when a client inquires of the supernatural order concerning problems or issues that are not quite clear to the client. Typically, clients inquire about illness, auspicious marriages, a planned journey, or choice of the succeeding king. No dilemma or issue is too small or complex in traditional Yorùbá society to lend itself to consulting *Ifa*. The *Ifa* divination system is applied whenever an important individual or collective decision has to be made (Wande, 2008). The outcome of the divination determines the next cause of action by the client which could be prayer, worship or sacrifice to appease the spirits.

However, a good number of Yorùbá in the 21st century do not know this, neither do they believe in the rich content of *Ifa*. They consider imported culture of the West as the best and the only way to go. This attitude is consequent to the pejorative conception of *Ifa* as idol worship or an ancient religious practice too remote to the issues of this era. Such negative conception has rippling effects on the individual and the general belief system of the Yorùbá.

Findings

This study has attempted to analyze that Yoruba culture, especially in the area of spirituality should not be seen as fetish. This is because, before the Western religion was brought to us, Yoruba's have their way of lives by consulting *Ifa* which is the intermediary between Olodumare and human being to give directions on how to live our lives in a better way. Therefore, the following findings were revealed in paper.

- that culture communicates and contributes to the development of our daily lives.
- that Yoruba's believed so much in predestination known as (Akosejaye, Ipin, Ayanmo or Kadara in the *Ifa* divination. This reveals what a child becomes in future.
- that culture should have an impact on the development of the society.

Therefore, this study recommends:

- that the Yoruba film producers can also preach the essence and importance of *Ifa* in their respective storylines. This is because film is also seen as a cultural ambassador that can reveal everything about a society to the world.
- Moreover, the teachings about *Ifa* should start from the elementary schools to higher institutions by incorporating it into the course curriculum. This will make everyone to be familiar with its essence, rather than having a doubtful mind of what *Ifa* can do.
- Traditional institute of traditional rulers should not shy away from the importance of *Ifa* in selection of KING who becomes a ruler of a community. This will prevent future calamities that may befall the land. It has been observed in recent times that king makers hardly follow *Ifa* instructions in choosing a ruler, but rather base their assessments on the social and influential status of whoever they choose.

Conclusion

Consequently, it is pertinent to reawaken the consciousness among the Yorùbá that meaningful understanding of issues in the Yorùbá milieu can only be possible with right understanding that the Yorùbá tradition devoid of *Ifa* Corpus can allegorically be compared to disrobing a king of his staff of office. In such case, he is just a title bearer. In the same manner, a Yorùbá cannot be authentically if he is ignorant of the centrality of *Ifa* to the race. Irrespective of the degree of the Yorùbá romance with foreign culture, it is imperative that *Ifa* Corpus is continuously regarded as the guiding principle of every sector of Yorùbá tradition. It is therefore important to eliminate all negative stereotypes and prejudices of foreign culture about *Ifa*. This will pave way for appreciating the epistemic inherent in Yorùbá culture even in the reality of sophisticated 21st century that uniquely scientific technological and media-driven. This reality calls for an appreciable blend of both imported Western idea and traditional episteme in the understanding of issues in all aspects.

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