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## Orature: A Strategy for Socio-Religious Harmony in Yorùbáland

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**Abstract-** Before the advent of Christian and Islamic religions, African Traditional Religion was solely practised among the Yorùbá without any interference or hindrance. However, in the 19th century, when Christian and Islamic religions emerged, there was a marriage of inconvenience initially, but later, these religious practitioners found a way of peaceful co-existence among one another. In this paper, we evaluate the importance and use of Yorùbá orature in relation to the spread and peaceful co-existence of Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion in the Yorùbá society and argue that one of the ways adopted to ensure peace and unity among the three groups is the use of Yorùbá orature and that during the advent of Christianity and Islam, the Yorùbá manipulate proverbs in various degrees to also enhance the spread of the two religions in the Yorùbá society. We further argue that, since all the adherents of the three religions have the same cultural background, they find it very easy to adjust to the prevailing religious situations. It is also observed that the deadly wave of westernization has not been able to do any havoc to the socio-cultural unity, peaceful co-existence and religious harmony in the Yorùbá society but instead, it has helped to boost the use of Yorùbá orature and the effect is that socio-religious harmony is noticeably waxing stronger and stronger among the adherents of the different religions in the society. Finally, we conclude that the use of the Yorùbá orature in churches, mosques and shrines has paved way for the socio-cultural unity, peaceful co-existence and religious harmony in the Yorùbá society.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Some scholars have written on religious practices among the Yorùbá people of Southwestern Nigeria. Such scholars include Abdullahi (1922), Idòwú (1962), Webster (1968), Peel (1968), Ọmọyáǝwó (1971), Awólálú (1981), Fálolá (1982), Ọláyíwólá (1989), Adéǝmò (1989), Babalólá (1991), Adéǝǝ (2002) and Adéníǝ (2002). For example, although Abdullahi (1922) writes on Islam in Yorùbá land he does not discuss the place of Yorùbá oral literature in the co-existence of Christian, Islam and traditional religions. In the work of Idòwú (1962) titled "Olódùmarè in Yorùbá belief" also, Idòwú (ibid.) only explains in full the concept of Olódùmarè in Yorùbá culture he does not discuss the relevance and importance of orature in the promotion of Christianity and Islam vis-à-vis the Traditional religion.

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While Webster (1964) bases his work on the Christian churches in Africa only Peel (1968) concentrates on the activities and spread of Aláǝúǝrá movement among the Yorùbá people. However, none of the two discusses the functions of Yorùbá oral literature in the harmony of the three religions. Ọmọyáǝwó (1971) deals with Cherubim and Seraphim in Nigeria only at the exclusion of Islam and traditional religions while the focus of Awólálú's (1979) work is traditional religion in West Africa without discussing the relationship between traditional religion, Islam and Christian religions. Besides, Fálolá (1982) bases his work on religion, rituals and the Yorùbá pre-colonial domestic economy without discussing the impact of Yorùbá oral literature as a means of harmonizing Christian, Islam and traditional religions in Yorùbá society.

Similarly, Ọláyíwólá (1989) concentrates on the social impact of new religious movements on contemporary Yorùbá life using the Aláǝúǝrá as an example. The main thrust of Adéǝmò's (1989) work is Ọṣun festival and fertility without discussing the issue of Islam and Christian religions. Babalólá (1991) also discusses the economic impact of indigenous religions on the Yorùbá society at the exclusion of the place of Yorùbá orature in the co-existence of Christian and Islamic religions. Adéǝǝ (2002) too bases his work on the impact of acculturation on African music, using Yorùbá music to buttress his explanation while Adéníǝ (2002) concentrates on Islamic values in relation to the political and socio-religious systems of the traditional Yorùbá community at the exclusion of Christian and traditional religions. Agbájé (1995) focuses on the literary study of the folksongs of the Eǝtǝ people of Nigeria without relating it to any religion while Ọmóǝ (1998) concentrates on the collection of African proverbs and usages not minding the impact it has on the harmony of Christian, Islam and Traditional religions in Yorùbá society. From the foregoing, none of the authors discusses Yorùbá orature as a means of good relationship among the practitioners of Christian, Islamic and traditional religions. Therefore, this work sets to fill the academic vacuum created by the previous works or reseachers. In this paper, the use of orature as a means of promoting peace, unity and cultural co-existence among the Yorùbá people who share different religious beliefs is our concern. We will show that the use of orature among the adherents of Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion has helped immensely in

promoting a good understanding and harmony among the adherents of the three religions in the Yorubá society.

## II. PROVERBS

In Yorubá culture the value of proverb is immeasurable. It helps in the process of expressing ideas such that when an elder wants to capture the mood of a prevailing situation clearly and sufficiently, he takes recourse to an appropriate proverb. For example, a Yorubá proverb which says '*Ojú òrun téyè é tò láifara gbára*' (The sky is wide enough for birds to fly without any obstruction) when used shows that the world is big enough to accommodate everybody. Therefore, the significance of proverbs in the process of socialization among Yorubá cannot be over-emphasized. The Yorubá child is exposed to proverbs from the early age and throughout life he comes across and masters their use. When he is old, he would have become a repertoire of proverbs and collective wisdom of the people expressed in orature. In addition to the above, Idowú (1966:10) says,

*There are those gems of Yorubá language- the proverbs adage, and epigrams-which have become the sine quo non of Yoruba speech and often convey deep theological or metaphysical meaning.*

During the advent of Christianity and Islam, the Yorubá manipulate proverbs in various degrees to enhance the spread of the religions in the society. The use of proverbs among the adherents of Christianity, Islam and Africa Traditional religion has helped immensely to promote a good understanding and harmony in the society as will be discussed below:

- Bí Olórún bá páni lórí yòò firùgbòn dí i (If God makes you a bald headed man,*
- it will be compensated with heard)*
- Olórún àdàbà nàà ló dá eyelẹ́ (God that created dove also created pigeon)*

The above proverbs are frequently used by the Christians to sink religious ideas into the hearts of their followers. For instance, the first proverb indicates that God is a God of compensation while the second proverb connotes that God is the creator of all things. Some proverbs are also commonly used by the Muslims to enhance their religious practice, thus;

- Ìmọ̀lẹ̀ sọ̀rọ̀ tán ọ̀jọ̀ kù, ó ní Olórún jẹ́íí sọ̀rọ̀ òun (After a Muslim's speech, the rain rumbles, he then confirms God's sanction of his speech).*
- Bí Olórún bá fẹ̀ ẹ̀ ṣe ìdájọ̀ Lẹ̀mọ̀mù, kò ní sojú ọ̀mọ̀ ilé kẹ̀wú (If God wants to judge an Iman, it is not going to be in the presence of Quranic students).*

Going by the above proverbs, the first one simply means that Islam is a true religion from God. The

second proverb indicates that God will judge individuals accordingly no matter the status.

The adherents of African traditional religion are not left out in the use of proverbs. For example;

- Òrìsà bí ò bá lẹ̀ gbẹ̀ mí, fi mí sílẹ̀ bí o se bá mí (Divinity if you cannot help me, leave me as you met me)*
- Ení bá ran ara rẹ̀ lówọ̀ ní Òrìsà òkè n ràn lẹ̀rù (The divinity helps those who help themselves)*

From the foregoing, the first proverb says that 'Òrìsà' (divinity) can render some help or do otherwise. While the second proverb connotes that, if you want any assistance, you then have to help yourself first. Generally speaking, all the above proverbs are coined around the three religions. The totality of the aforementioned proverbs is socially, religiously and culturally used to enhance good morals and peaceful co-existence among the religious practitioners in the society.

It could be deduced easily that proverbs are universal phenomena because Jesus Christ spoke to his followers in proverbs. Even there is a section of the Holy Bible devoted mainly to biblical proverbs. Proverbial sayings are very common also in the Holy Qur'an. It has been known from the time immemorial that great people of the world including the religious people, spoke in proverbs to plant their socio-religious and cultural ideas into the minds of their followers. In Yorubáland also, Ifá is well known with proverb use. Ifá as a divine divinity in Yorubá society often speaks in parables for the consumption of wise adherents. Therefore, the Yorubá are always at home with the use of proverbs in socio-religious and cultural environments they find themselves. In short, proverbs could be regarded as a means of promoting harmony among the religious adherents in the society.

## III. FOLKSONGS

Folksong is a universal phenomenon which cuts across cultures. Folksong permeates the Yorubá life. That is, folksong is made use of in everyday life in the society. Folksong is socially, religiously and culturally relevant in the contemporary Yorubá life. Any talented person can compose folksongs which can easily get disseminated in the society. Like other African folksongs that are effectively used by the adherents of religions in Yorubá society to enhance socio-religious and cultural harmony, Idowú (1966:10) has rightly said;

*The Yorubá are a singing people in their singing, which comprises song, lyrics, ballads and minstrelsy they tell stories of their past, the circumstances of their present and their hopes and fears of the future. If all that a Yoruba clan has ever sung could be collected, there is no doubt that a fairly accurate history of the clan could be built up. And their songs are permeated with their beliefs.*

What *Idòwú* is saying in essence is that folksongs of the Yorubá serve as a reservoir for their socio-cultural and religious practices. Let us see the exemplifications below:

1) *Mo dé yá sọpé (2ce)*

*Oni kàn-an ẹ lórire kẹ è mọ, olubi oni*  
*Enikan-an ẹ lórire kọ mọ ọn, déyá sọpé ò e e.*  
*(I come to show appreciation (2ce)*  
*He who does not appreciate good deeds is a*  
*wicked person*  
*I appreciate good deeds*  
*I come to show appreciation)*

The above song is a Yorubá lyric specially used by the religion adherents in Christian churches to show appreciation to God for the good He has bestowed on them.

But initially, the above song is used socially and culturally among the traditional people before the advent of Christianity. When this religion was established in Yorubá society, the above song was acceptable to the Christians and it is being used in their churches up to day. The adoption of the above song was due to its non-connection with any divinity. Also, the Christians often use the above song to woo the adherents of the traditional religion to their fold.

2) *Aso tó dára ni ma rà fómọ mi (2ce)*

*Bí mo lógún ẹrú*  
*Bí mo ní iwọfà ọgbọn*  
*Ọjó tá bá kú o ọmọ làdèlé,*  
*Orí jẹ ká rọmọ selé dè wá*  
*Nítorí ọmọ laṣo, ọmọ laṣo,*  
*Ọmọ laṣo ọ ayé, ọmọ laṣo*

*I will buy good cloth for my child (2ce)*  
*If I have twenty slaves, If I have thirty maids/servants,*  
*The day we die, child is our survival*  
*Creator grant us children that will succeed us*  
*Because children are clothes, children are clothes,*  
*Children are clothes in life, children are clothes*

The foregoing is another Yorubá lyric often used by Christians during children thanksgiving service in appreciation of God's protection and affection over the children. It is to be noted that the above song was inherited from the traditionalists and later coined around Christian worship. The above song like song (1) above is used as strategy to conquer the minds of the indigenous people. These then show that they are well at home since some of their songs are well acceptable in the Christian churches without any alterations. This means that their (indigenous) cultural interest is not being jeopardized being members of the Christian body.

3) *Ibi omi ti i sun*

*Àkùrò ni mọ ni*  
*Ibi oòrùn ti i ràn*  
*Èlùjù keríke*  
*Kí mè rólórí egbé ò*

*Eré mọ yá o kookò*

The source of water  
 It is called marshy ground,  
 Where the sun rises,  
 It is called a desert  
 If I don't see the group leader  
 The ceremony will not start

b) *Ọnà táyè fi yẹni*

*Ọnà iyè ni*  
*Ọnà t'ádúúrà fi i gbà*  
*Ọnà iyè ni*  
*Kí mọ bá ké pe Bàbá ò*  
*Á dá mi lóhùn ayọ o*

The way to success  
 Is the way to salvation  
 The way our prayer is granted  
 Is the way to salvation  
 If I call on Almighty God  
 He will answer me with happiness

Songs (3a) and (3b) above are known as acculturation of Yorubá folksongs into Christian churches. For instance, song (3a) is purely Yorubá folksong without any alteration. But song (3b) is the acculturated version of song (3a) to suit the Christian worship. The socio-cultural and religious messages as conveyed in both songs remain the same.

In song (3a) and (3b), it is clear that the acculturation is done line by line. For instance, (3a), line 1 and (3b), line 1 differs in meaning but have the same tune. The same occurs in (3a), lines 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6; and (3b) lines 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 respectively. The adaptation is in rhythm and not in meaning.

4) *Ebi i pa mi*

*Mo wí an yèyè mi*  
*Ọmọ i rẹ mí,*  
*Mo wí an ríṣà*  
*Ọjú mè i mọ kẹrun mọ jiyọ*  
*Ayé rẹ i rẹ mí Balójà Igèdè*  
 I feel hungry

I turn to my mother  
 I want children  
 I turn to Oríṣà (divinity)  
 There is no day that mouth will not taste salt,  
 I appreciate your life, Balójà Igèdè.

b) *Ebi i pa mi*

*Mo wí an 'lúwa*  
*Ọmọ i rẹ mí*  
*Mo wí an Jẹsù*  
*Ọjú mè i mọ kẹrun mọ jiyọ*  
*Ayé rẹ i rẹ mí Baba wa lókè*  
 I feel hungry,

I turn to God  
 I want children  
 I turn to Jesus  
 There is no day that mouth will not taste salt  
 I appreciate the way of Almighty



Song (4a) is purely Yorubá folksong, while song (4b) is the acculturated version of song (4a). It is often used by Christians in their churches to suit their religious purposes.

A cursory examination of songs (4a) and (4b) reveal that (4a) line 1 and (4b) line 1 have the same meaning and tune. In (4b) line 2, Olúwa is substituted for Yèyé in (4a) line 2. Both lines have the same tune but with different meaning. Also, (4a) line 3 and (4b) line 3 have the same tune and meaning respectively. But in (4b) line 4, Jesus is substituted for *Orìsà* in (4a) thus making them to have the same tune but different meaning. Lines 5 of (4a) and (4b) have the same meaning and tune while lines 6 of (4a) and (4b) have the same tune but differs in meaning because Baba wa lókè in (4b) line 6 is substituted for Balójà Igèdè in (4a) line 6.

It is worth of note that Islamic adherents are not left out of either adaptation of Yorubá folksongs into Islamic worship or Muslim social activities.

- 5) *Káàbò sé dáadáa lo dé?*  
*Káàbò sé dáadáa lo dé?*  
*Ó pé tá a ti ní retí re o*  
*Káàbò sé dáadáa lo dé?*  
 Welcome, do you arrive safely?  
 Welcome, do you arrive safely?  
 It is a long time we have been  
 awaiting you.  
 Welcome, do you arrive safely?

The above song is often used by adherents of Islam to welcome both Alhajis and Alhajas on their arrival from the Holy pilgrimage to Mecca every year.

- 6) *Báaríkà rẹ̀ ò e! (2ce)*  
*Alhaji tó re Mecca to o bọ̀*  
*Báaríkà rẹ̀ ò e*  
*Alhaja tó re Mecca to o bọ̀*  
*Báaríkà rẹ̀ ò e!*  
 Congratulations to you! (2ce)  
 Alhaji who has gone to Mecca  
 and returned  
 Congratulations to you!  
 Alhaja who has gone to Mecca  
 and returned.  
 Congratulations to you!)

Like song (5) above, song (6) is also used to mark the safe arrival of adherents of Islam from holy land in Mecca. Holy pilgrimage to Mecca is one of the pillars of Islam that any good Muslim who can afford it must fulfill once in his or her lifetime. This is to say that the above songs serve a significant function in the religious life of Muslims in Yorubá society.

- 7) *Ohun méta là ní jẹ 'gbádùn láyẹ*  
*Ọkan lowó*  
*Ọkan lomọ*  
*Ọkan lààáfíà*  
*Eni tí ò lówó,*  
*Kò sẹni tí yóò mò*

- Eni tí ò bímọ*  
*Wón á fíwòsì lẹ̀ ọ*  
*Eni tí ò gbádùn,*  
*Ilé ayé á sun.*  
*Èlédàá mi jẹ n lóhun mètèètè*  
*Kí n rílé ayé se*  
*Jẹ n lóhun mètèètè*  
*Kí n rílé ayé se*  
 Three things are used to enjoy life  
 One is money  
 One is children  
 One is good health  
 Whoever is poor will not be recognized  
 Whoever is childless  
 They will make jest of him  
 Whoever is not healthy,  
 The life will be meaningless to him  
 My creator grant me those three things  
 that I may enjoy life let me have those three things  
 that I may enjoy life.)

From the foregoing song, one will see that the three major essential blessings important to Yorubá are embedded in the song. That is, the blessing of money, the blessing of children and the blessing of good health. The Yorubá usually or seem very comfortable wherever those three major blessings of life can be achieved.

- 8) *Bá mi gbádùrà mi gòkè lẹ̀ (2ce,)*  
*Okè tọwọ ọsọ ọ lẹ̀ tó*  
*Bá mi gbádùrà mi gòkè lẹ̀*  
 Help me carry my prayer high up (2ce)  
 The place where the hands of wizards and  
 witches will not reach  
 Help me carry my prayer high up

The song (8) above shows that the adherents of Islam believe that wizards and witches are enemies of progress. Therefore the Muslim pray to God not to allow these enemies of light to obstruct their prayer.

Just like Islam and Christianity, African religion has its own special songs for the purpose of ritual worship. These liturgical songs are strictly confined into the shrines. This is to say that there are taboos associated with their use. Below are few of such songs.

- 9) *Iwin igbó ewéle e e*  
*Ìrókò Ibòrìsà*  
*È mà pèlé o o*  
*Bá a bá sẹyí tán*  
*A ó sàmódún o*  
*Ire wa ti dóde ọgbèrì ò mò*  
*Tiwa n tiwa o, ti wa n tiwa*  
*Àmódún ká gbómọ bẹyí pòn o*  
*Ìrókò o igi re o*  
 Fairies of ewele bush  
 Írókò of the shrine  
 Greetings to you  
 Thank you very much  
 If we finish this year's celebration

We will do next year's celebration  
 Our fortune has come,  
 The uninitiated does not know  
 Ours is ours, we, we  
 Next year we will mount children like this  
 Írókò year we will mount children like this  
 Írókò the favourable tree

From the above song, it is shown that the worshippers are praying to their divinity to provide them with children before the next celebration. This major request of their indicates that the issue of child bearing is very paramount in minds of the adherents of the three major religions

- 10) *Lilé:* *Ọ́rín olúáyé ọ̀ mò dù mí o*  
*Ègbè:* *Ayé, Ayé mí ọ̀ mò dù*  
*Lilé:* *Líjọ mè ẹ̀ rájọ*  
*Líjọ mè ẹ̀ roko*  
*Ègbè:* *Ayé, ayé mí ọ̀ mò dù*  
*Lilé:* *Líjọ ọ̀tẹ̀, líjọ ogun*  
*Ègbè:* *Ayé, ayé mí ọ̀ mò dù*  
*Lilé:* *Ọ́rín olúáyé ọ̀ mò dù mí o*  
*Ègbè:* *Ayé, Ayé, mí ọ̀ mò dù*  
 (Solo) *Ọ́rín olúáyé* you must protect me  
 Chorus: It I my life that you must protect  
 Solo: When I', on a journey  
 When I'm on my way to the farm  
 Chorus: it is my life that you must protect  
 Solo: During revolt, during the war,  
 Chorus: it is my life that you must protect  
 Solo: Orin Oluaye you must protect me  
 Chorus: it is my life you must protect

The foregoing song simply connotes that the devotees of Ọ́rín olúáyé (divinity) pray for security of their lives. This shows that the above devotees are keenly interested in their life's security as it is also applicable to their other religious counterparts in the society.

Going through all the above songs, one will clearly see that individual religious sects are aiming at the same goal but in different ways. Since all the religious adherents have the same cultural background, they find it very easy to adjust themselves to the prevailing religious situations. The timely adjustment of those followers often helps immensely to achieve socio-religious and cultural co-existence in the society.

#### IV. SOCIAL CHANGES IN THE SOCIETY

It is worth to note that the wind of westernization known to blow heavily in the Yorubáland has not made any appreciable impact on the use of Yorubá orature in the Christian churches and mosques hitherto. According to Yorubá wise saying 'ìjì kì í jà kó gbé ọ̀mọ ọ̀dọ́' (No wave can blow a mortar). The deadly wave of westernization has not been able to do serious havoc but instead, it has helped to boost the use of Yorubá orature. The effect is that, socio-religious harmony is

noticed and waxing stronger and strong among the religious adherents in the society. It is often noticed that during the socio-political gathering in the society, series of songs are rendered to grace such occasions. Such gathering often encompasses members of the three religions. The songs rendered during such occasions have dual functions to enhance socio-political and socio-religious harmony.

Sometimes in the year 2000, at Ọ̀sogbo, Ọ̀sun State Capital, people of different religious categories converged to celebrate one year anniversary of democracy in the state. During the occasion, one religious personality each from Christianity, Islam and African traditional religion is called upon by the state Governor to offer prayers in accordance with the individual's religious leaning or camp. After the prayers, songs of grace that cut across the three major religions were rendered to mark and grace the remarkable occasion. Also, at Ibàdàn, Ọ̀yọ State capital, on the first of January, 2001 people of various religious statuses converged at the instance of the state governor to commemorate the New Year celebration. During this occasion prayers were offered by a religious personality each from the main religions to mark the occasion.

Religious songs and socio-cultural activities were rendered to boost the August ceremony. The crowd was seen socializing, marrying and jubilating together. Since such gathering usually has socio-religious undertone, hence, all these types of socio-political and religious gatherings are the order of the day across the Yorubá country. The main focus of such occasion is to foster unity, good understanding, peaceful co-existence and socio-religious harmony. Hitherto, the Yorubá orature is often employed as a strategy for socio-religious harmony in the society.

#### V. CONCLUSION

Our disquisition connotes that the application of the Yorubá orature in Christian churches, mosques and shrines has paved way for socio-cultural, unity, peaceful co-existence and religious harmony in Yoruba society. The Yorubá orature is well blended that it oscillates between the foreign religions and African traditional religion. An exploration into the Yorubá orature proves that the effective manipulation of proverbs among the adherents of the three major religions of Islam, Christianity and African Traditional Religions has helped immensely to enhance good understanding and harmony in the society. Also in this work, it is crystal clear that the folksongs are socially, culturally and religiously relevant in the contemporary Yorubá life. Hence, the appropriate manipulation of folksongs has helped to promote the needed socio-religious and cultural harmony in the society.

It is further observed that the Yorubá orature has developed a tough skin towards westernization. This is an attempt to sustain the culture of the people.

Besides, the Yorùbá orature which encompasses songs, lyrics, ballads and mitrels are used to tell stories of their past, the circumstances of their present and their hopes and fears of the future to achieve the needed unity, peace, understanding and religious co-existence in the Yorùbá country.

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