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African Indigenous Religions as a Catalyst for Social and Economic Development

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Abstract- African indigenous religion is the religion that sums up the total life of Africa in politics, economy, social life and medical system. Africa as a whole and Nigeria in particular is endowed with religious tourist centres and rich cultural heritage that could no doubt be centres of attraction for foreigners like Saudi Arabia and Jerusalem where people around the globe travel to for religious worship. Though Nigeria claims to be a secular state, religion permeates and plays significant roles in the citizens' social conduct and in choosing political leaders. Although much had been written on African indigenous religion, there have been scanty works on how religion can be used as a tool for the overall development and to engender good governance. Therefore, this study shall explore how indigenous religion can be used to curtail some of our social and political vices for the development of Nigeria. Given the vast size of Africa as a continent, specific attention is given to Nigeria and the scope limited to the Yorùbá nation. The study adopts qualitative method of research with oral interview as tool for data collection. Twenty priests of indigenous religion and 20 worshipers purposively selected were interviewed, given their vast knowledge as custodians of the religion. Findings of this study provided insights on how African indigenous religion can be used to stimulate social and economic development not only in Nigeria but also across Africa.

Keywords: *indigenous religion, social and economic development, secularism, the yorùbá nation.*

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African Indigenous Religions as a Catalyst for Social and Economic Development

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I. Introduction

African religion is an indigenous system of beliefs and practices which evolved from the culture and world views of the African peoples. According to Mwakabana[1], "African Religion is diverse in its local manifestations, but has common basic elements which testify to its unity regionally and at the central level''. Idowu[2] also confirmed that African Religion has five component elements that are common. These are belief in God, belief in the divinities, belief in spirits, belief in ancestors, and the practice of magic and medicine Mbiti[3] accepted that African religious beliefs are with topics such as God, spirits, human life, magic, the hereafter and so on.

Some of the world religions like Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism etc have founders who started them, but this is not the case with African Religion. It has evolved slowly through many centuries. As Africans responded to the situation of their life and experience, religious ideas and practices arose and took shape in the process of man 's search for solutions to problems confronting him in order to make human life safer and better. According to Mbiti[4], "There were no founders of African Religion. These days, however, there have been reformers, preachers or missionaries to changing it, improving it and they have even started taking the religion overseas to other continents, thus reminding us blacks lugubrious of African peoples carried away into slavery[5]." This sorry story (slave trade) however, is no longer tenable. The reverse, happily is the case. There are a lot of African missionaries who now travel abroad to propagate the religion, particularly the Yorùbá religion. This is cheering news

a) *African/Yorùbá Indigenous Religious Belief System*

African indigenous religion is the religion that sums up the total life of African in all its ramifications. It is a religion that permeates every aspect of African life. Religion itself is a fundamental and most relevant influence in the life of Africans. Sadly its essential principles are too often unknown to western scholars who make themselves constantly prone to misunderstand African worldviews and beliefs. These arm-chair scholars have forgotten that Africa has never at any time in life been left in a spiritual vacuum as to knowledge and idea about God (Supreme Being) before the arrival. The religion permeates every aspect of African life, and therefore cannot be studied in isolation. This is the reason why Mbiti[6]asserted that Africans are notoriously religious. Wherever African is, there you find his religion. Idowu[7]also has this to say about Africa and her religion that right from the womb, through birth,

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[1] Adams C. (ed) The Encyclopedia of Religion. Vol 3, New York: Macmillan Publishing Co. 21

[2] E. B. Idowu, 1973,*African Traditional Religion (A definition)* London: SCM Press Ltd,139

[3] John S. Mbiti, 1967, *African Religions and Philosophy,* London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 11

[4] John S. Mbiti, 1967, *African Religions and Philosophy,* London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd,151

[5] Migene Gonzalez Wippler, 1981, *Santeria: African Magic in Latin America,* USA: Original Products Div. of Jamil Products Corp. 3

[6] John S. Mbiti, 1967, *African Religions and Philosophy,* London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1

[7] E.B.Idowu, 1982, *Olodumare God in Yoruba belief,* Nigeria: Longman Nigeria Limited, 5

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infancy, puberty initiation, marriage and funeral, many African societies have religious rituals for each phase of life. Each day begins with prayer, offering of kola nut and pouring of libation. Each major step in the life of any given traditional communities involves certain consultation of diviners to ascertain the will of God and the spirits. It is rare to find any act, human or otherwise, without some religious explanation for it. Africans never lose the consciousness of the divine presence and intervention in their daily affairs. Their strong religious education has assured them that neither the advancement of science nor mere human endeavour is sufficient to solve the existential problems of man today and to guide his decision in daily understandings or still to guarantee happiness, peace and progress in the world.

In the religion of Africa, particularly the Yorùbá on which this paper centred, there are five distinct beliefs. These five beliefs sum up their total life mentioned above earlier. They are belief in Olódùmarè- God the Creator, beliefin divinities, belief in spirits,belief in ancestors and belief in mysterious powers that manifested in magic and medicine. Olódùmarè is believed to be the creator of all things both on earth and in heaven. He is the holy one and the one that will judge individuals and the world at large at eschatology.

The Yorùbá as well as the whole of Africans hold the belief that as Olódùmarè created heaven and earth and all the inhabitants; so also did He bring into being the divinities (generally called *Òrìṣà*in Yorùbáto serve His theocratic world. Divinities are little gods. They are part of divine status, because they were brought forth by Him. Therefore, they have all the attributes of the Supreme Being. According to the myth and information gathered from informants of their coming to the world, there is a place called *Ìkòlé* in *Èkìtì* state[8]. It was a route for every being from*Ìkòlé ọ̀run* to *Ìkòléayé.* (i.e. from *Ìkọ̀le*heaven to *Ìkọ̀le* earth) Divinities were the first inhabitants of the earthly world. Therefore, man met them on earth, and because of the spectacular roles that many of them played on earth, they became small gods to be worshipped, or, better still, they became errand boys and girls that men can send with their petitions to Olódùmare since they realized their closeness to Him, Olódùmare. The actual number of the divinities cannot easily be determined, it has variously been estimated for instance in Yorùbáland to be 200, 201, 400, 401, 600, 601, 1,700 or even more. Some are widely worshipped, some locally worshipped, while some are individually worshipped. There are at least four different categories of spirits in Africa namely, primordial divinities, lesser divinities like historical figures that were defied e.g. Sàngó, Ọya, Ọ̀ṃìránand Odùduwà who some writers like Johnson[9] claimed came from Mecca. So also are environmental spirits, that is, the natural phenomena. Spirits from the practice of magic and medicine also abound.

Spirits are common spiritual beings that are below the status of divinities and above the status of men. Although, divinities and ancestors are spirits, they are different from the spirits we are talking about here. The reason for their difference is that divinities and ancestors have shrines or temples dedicated to them. These are called domesticated spirits. The one we are talking about here are the undomesticated spirits that move from place to place. Sometimes they can create a place for themselves as an abode for rest. From there, they wonder about and come back later to rest. These type of spirits are very common and could either be dangerous or harmless, depending upon the mood and spot where they were confronted. The origin of a particular spirit depends on the group to which it belongs. Some spirits are considered to have been created as a race by themselves. According to Mbiti[10] these spirits, like other living creatures, continued to reproduce themselves and add to their numbers. Some believe that spirits are the remains of men after their death. Spirits are believed to be invisible, but they can make themselves visible to human being at will. (D. O. Fágúnwàin his books[11,12,13] talked much about these spirits). The general belief is that spirits are more powerful than men. This could be so because their power cannot be accessed because of the fact that they are most of the time invisible. However, these spirits are of various categories, the major ones are the ghosts, *emèrè, àbíkú,* nature spirits, spirits of witchcraft and guardian spirits.

The Yorùbá, like any other Africans, believe in the active existence of the deceased ancestors, they are called the living dead. Almost all the religions in the world try to explain man in its totality. They believe that, besides the physical body of man that grow old and ultimately expires at the end of the day, there is another component of man that is intangible and indestructible that outlives the physical death. This is the soul. The Yorùbá identify five compounds parts that make up a man. These are *Ara*- the physical body of man, *òjìji*-the human shadow. The third part of man identified by the Yorùbá is the *ọkàn*. It is the heart that can be physically seen if man's body is opened through surgical

[8] Chief Olawale Ajongolo, an Ifa Priest,June 2016, *Oral Interview,*Itapa Ekiti.

[9] Samuel Johnson, 1969, *The History of the Yorubas,* London: Lowe &Braydon (Printers) Ltd, 3

[10] John S. Mbiti, 1967, *African Religions and Philosophy,* London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 80

[11] D. O. Fagunwa, 1965, *Igbo Olodumare,* London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, 39

[12] D. O. Fagunwa, 2008,*Adiitu Olodumare,* Nigeria: Evans Brothers (Nigeria Publishers) Limited, 14-17

[13] D. O. Fagunwa, 2008,*Irinkerindo Ninu Igbo Elegbeje,*Nigeria: Evans Brothers (Nigeria Publishers) Limited,55

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operation. There is also *ẹ̀mí*, the seat of life. It is closely associated with breathing. When one dies, the *ẹ̀mí* will cease to function. Finally there is the real essence of being, the personality soul that guides and helps a person before he is born. This is what the Yorùbá called*orí inú*. When a man is born he is endowed with all the components parts of man. When he dies, the soul does not die. It goes to Olódùmarè the source who disposes the soul as he pleases. It is this soul that the Yorùbá religion believe reincarnates and continues to live in the hereafter. This is the reason why the Yorùbá view death not as an extinction but as a change from one life to another. When the Yorùbá speak of the ancestors, therefore, it is the departed spirits of their forebears who live in the land of the spirits that the living still maintain relationship with. However, it is not every one who died that is qualified to be called the ancestor. To become an ancestor, the person must have lived well, attained an enviable old age, before he died and left behind good children. The ancestors are both male and female that attained all the qualifications mentioned above with a befitting burial.

Belief in mysterious powers which can alter the course of nature is very common, real and prevalent among the Yorùbá. Almost every Yorùbá who grew up in the village and town would understand this concept that manifests itself in the form of incantations, medicine, magic, sorcery and witchcraft. Incantation is interpreted in Yorùbá to mean *Ọfọ̀, Àyajọ́*or *Ògèdè*. It involves the chanting or uttering of words with magical power which sometime goes with some medicinal preparation that is carried inform of ring, armlet, gourd or needle. According to Dopamu[14], incantation works more swiftly than any medicinal preparation. It is a matter between the physical world and the world of the spirit. Ogunba[15] said incantation is an attempt by man to control the word by the use of assertions which manifest themselves in positive or negative affirmation with supernatural connections. Olatunji[16] is of the view that, to control both the natural and the supernatural world, and subject them to do his bid, man uses incantation. Medicine is the use of available natural materials in treating and preventing disease or illness. Therefore, a good medicine man must be able first of all, to determine the etiology of a disease; then to cure or alleviate and prevent the disease. A medicine man can be a diviner, a priest and a manufacturer of charms. Sometimes he could be a professional herbalist who knows little about divination. Magic is defined by *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* as the secret power of appearing to make impossible things happen by saying special words or doing special things, something that seems too wonderful to be real. It is a human art which involves the manipulation of certain objects which are believed to have power to cause a supernatural being to produce or prevent a particular result, which are considered not obtainable by natural means. It is a means of bending natural forces to obey the will of man. This is peculiar with the religion and life of the Yorùbá in particular and Africans in general.

Witches are called *Àjẹ́* in Yorùbá. They are said to operate in groups. They can also operate individually. It is believed also that they operate through animals. They are mostly women. But few men can be found among their guild and they are (men) called *Abẹsẹ̀* and are equally called*ọ̀só.* Some witches are inherited, while some are purchased with some money while some are born with it. It can be passed on through food. Witches, we hear operate at night at spiritual meetings only their souls are actively there; with their bodies at home. This is contrary to the ways Nollywood artists, particularly YekiniAjileye in his films *OpaAje*[17]*, Koto-Orun*[18] *and Koto-Aye*[19] portrayed them in their plays where they are physically seen with their physical bodies in a role moving round the town to wreak havoc.

They are said to be meeting on top of trees, where they eat the flesh or suck the blood of their victims. We learn that victims of close relations among children are donated as meat. Once the soul of the victim is eaten, the victim dies physically. It is through the confessions of some of these witches that the scanty information people hear about witches come out. Whether a person is educated or not, he/she can be in witchcraft. Today, we learnt that there are a lot of educated women among them. This is evident in what Olukunle[20] claimed arose his interest in writing on witchcraft. According to him, the interest came as a result of a conversation between him and his classmate as undergraduate in the University of Ibadan. While there are bad witches, there are also good ones among them; benevolent ones claim claimed they protect their family with their witchcraft. They are however lone rangers, they don't belong to the groups. They are the set of witches that are bold to tell some close and very dear ones that they belong to such group. Although not to the level of revealing how they operate in their meetings.

They cannot be fought in the open. And it is *Ifá* oracle that can discover which particular witch is responsible for a victim's predicaments. This is the reason why many people wear charms, and make incisions to protect themselves from the activities of the

[14] Dopamu P. Adejumo,1977, *The Practice of Magic and Medicine in Yoruba Traditional Religion,* PhD Thesis, University of Ibadan, 555

[15] O. Ogunba, 1967, *Ritual Drama of the IjebuPeople: A Study of Indigenous Festivals;* PhD thesis, University of Ibadan, 187

[16] O.O. Olatunji, 1970, *Characteristic Features of Yoruba oral poetry*, PhD Thesis, University of Ibadan, 197

[17] Ajileye Films Industries, 1988, *Opa-Aje*

[18] Ajileye Films Industries, 1989, *Koto-Orun*

[19] Ajileye Films Industries, 1992, *Koto-Aye*

[20] OlusolaOlukunle, 1979, *Witchcraft: A Study in Yoruba Belief and Metaphysics*, A PhD Thesis, submitted to the department of religious studies, university of Ibadan, 185

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witches. These are what combine together to form African indigenous religion to which the Yorùbá religious belief also have its share. One may then wonder how all these belief system put together could be a catalyst for social and economic development. The answer is not far-fetched.

b) African/Yorùbá Indigenous Religion as a Catalyst for Social and Economic Development

Though Nigeria claims to be a secular state, yet hardly anything is done without the presence or reflection of religion. In choosing political leaders in Nigeria, religion plays significant roles. This is the reason why we see many would be political leaders trooping to religious centres and traditional rulers for their endorsements. However, among the Yorùbá , the *Ọba*is the monarch that wields the political authority and power, he is also the head of the religious life of the people. The king is therefore seen as holding power in trust for the Supreme Being, and he is usually greeted as *igbákejì Òrìṣà*- second in command to the gods. To date, despite the advent of western civilization that opens the way for other religions which eventually have their own adherents, one cannot talk of a dichotomy between religion and politics in Yorùbáland. The King as the monarch is still expected to be non-partisan. He is therefore regarded as belonging to all the religions practiced by all his subjects. This is a principle copied from indigenous practitioners. Indigenous practitioners do not display religious self-centeredness, superiority and the idea of "my own religion in better than yours" as we have in other religions being practiced in Nigeria today. There is no *Òrìṣà* that is better than another. Therefore, when an *Ọya* worshipper is celebrating, he invites *Ògún, Ṣàngó, Ọbàtálá* etc and they will all celebrate the festival together, thereby promoting love, unity, harmony and progress among them because of the fact that they believe that all these *Òrìṣà* are from the same source, Olódùmarè. This has helped the entire Yorùbá people to carry on with their social and religious life without any bitterness inspite of the encroachment of foreign religions into their land. Any misunderstanding is always from the foreign religions who are trying to establish sound footing among the local people.

This issue of economic development would be approached from two dimensions. One through Yorùbá traditional festivals and sacred places or natural phenomena that could be centre of attraction like Saudi Arabia and Jerusalem. As earlier said, there are about 401 gods in Yorùbáland alone, prominent among whom are *Ògún, Ṣàngó, Ọya, Ifá, Òrìṣànlá, Egúngún, Orò, Ẹlẹ́kú, Agẹmọ, Èṣù, Olókun, Ṣọ̀pọ̀nà*or *Ọbalúaye*[21] Many of these Òrìṣà found their ways to Brazil, Cuba, Haiti, and other parts of America through the slave trade and have remained celebrated there till date.[22]

In Ilé-Ifẹ̀, the sacred city of the Yorùbá, there are about 201 gods out of whom*Ọlọ́jọ́*festival, *Ifá*and new Yam festival, *Mọ́remí* in the festival of *Edì*and *Odùduwà,* the God-king festival are prominent among traditional festivals that are celebrated till today[23]. Findings revealed that *Òkèìtàṣẹ̀,*(*ọdún Ifáàgbáyé*)- an annual*Ifá* festival in *Ilé-Ifẹ̀* alone, (a festival that lasted for only one day)usually attractedmore than half of a millionpeople into Ilé-Ifẹ̀ annually from all over the world and from all walks of life. During this festival, income generation of agricultural products, arts and sculptures, hotel accommodation, transportation, purchase of traditional wears and attires, books, videos and audio CDs always triple what is often generated throughout the year. If this festival alone is well-organized, whereby each state is assigned a day to display traditional music and other talents to entertain guests, orare merged together to form groups that would spread across seven days of the week and make it a week-long festival where the last day which would be the 7th day of the festival, a general celebration when annual *Ifá* divination could be performed, it is estimated that more than 500 million Naira could be generated through (sales of artefacts, hotel and catering services, selling of traditional wears, transportation as mentioned above) this means. Thus bringing in the economic values of the festival beyond the religious benefit that made people troop into *Ilé-Ifẹ̀* annually for the festival[24]in the first place.

Other festivals that could generate income in such manner in Yorùbálandare *Ògún* festival that is celebrated throughout Yorùbáland, particularly in On do town (where 200 dogs must be killed to celebrate the festival),*Igogo* festival in Ọ̀wọ̀[25], *Òkè'bàdàn* in Ìbàdàn, *Ọ̀ṣunỌ̀ṣogbo*festival that already enjoys international recognition and patronage, *Ṣàngó* festival in Ọ̀yọ́ town, *Àsábarí*festival in Ṣakí, *Àmọ̀èkún,* an annual *Ifá*/new yam festival in Ìtàpá-Èkìtì and *Ùdìróko* festival in Adó-Èkìtì to mention but a few. In fact, it is a general assumption and belief that there is no town, no matter how small in Yorùbáland, where at least one or two traditional festivals are not celebrated in honour of either one of the prominent gods of the land or a deified personality like

[21] C.L. Adeoye, 1985*, IgbagboatiEsin Yoruba, Ibadan*: Evans Brothers (Nigeria Publishers), Limited, iii-iv

[22] Migene Gonzalez Wipper, 1981, *Santeria: African Magic in Latin America;* New York: Original products Div. of Jamal Products Corp. 103-123.

[23] Jacob, K. Olupona, 2001, *The City of 201 gods, Ile-Ife in Time, Space and the transformation, horizon*: University of Califonia Press Ltd. 111. 141, 174, 203, 224

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[25] Harold Courlander, 1974, Tales of Yoruba Gods and heroes USA: Crown Publishers Inc. 150

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Ìrẹ̀lẹ̀ in Ìkìrun,*Àwòrò-Ọ̀ṣẹ̀ in* Ìlá-Ọ̀ràgún and *Ọbalógun*in Ilésàamong others[26].

These traditional festivals that spread across villages, towns and cities of Yorùbáland are capable of turning in millions of Naira yearly if properly harnessed. Thus, they are other means of internally generating revenue for the government, job creation and means of improving the lives of the people living in those communities. However, it is unfortunate that these festivals that are sources of income for some groups of people and individuals.

Apart from festivals, there are sacred places of natural phenomena that could attract the attention of both local and foreigners that could be developed as tourist centers to generate money for the government and create employment opportunities for people far and near. In the ancient City of Ile-Ife alone, there are several shrines, grooves and sacred forests that could be of interest to tourists. Such places like the sacred hill of *Òràmfẹ̀* at *Ìtangunmodi, Oòduà* shrine, the shrine of *Olókun,* the favorite wife of *Oòduà,* and the wealthiest woman of her time, *Omitoto-ọ̀ṣẹ́* shrine, *Obàtálá* shrine at *igbó Ìtàpá, ÌtaYemoó* shrine, *Òrélúèrè* shrine, *Agírí òkè-Taṣẹ,* home of *IfáỌ̀rúnmìlà, Ògún* shrine, *Olúrogbo* shrine, *Ọ̀ràànmíyàn* shrine, *Aje*shrine and *Mọ́remí* Shrine,[27].Other places of interest in Ilé- Ifẹ̀ are *Ìwínrín-igbó Ùgbò* the homestead of the Ùgbò people who were raiding and tormenting the *Ifẹ̀* people before *Mọ́remí* discovered their secrets and were permanently subdued by *Ifẹ̀*people[28],*Òkèlèrí: Igbolítàpá, IgbóKúbọlajẹ́, and IgbóOdi.* These are sacred forests that have to do with the ceremonies in connection with the crowning, induction and burial of an *Ọ̀ọ̀ni* of *Ifẹ̀*[29].

At *Ọ̀ṣogbo,* there are*Ọ̀ṣun* groove and shrine, *Olúmo* rock is in *Abeokuta, Idanre*hill in *Idanre,Ondo* State, four headed palm tree at *Owu-ile* in a forest where *Ànlúgbúà* shrine is located[30], *Òkè'bàdàn* hill, *Ògún* forest in *Ìrè Èkìtì, Ikogosi* Warm Spring in *Èkìtì*. All these and many more are tourist centers in Yorùbáland alone. If other tribes in Nigeria are combined together, properly harnessed, given adequate attention and well-funded, it would surely boost the economy of the country. Besides, it will give Nigeria international recognition as a tourist, spiritual and religious country like Saudi Arabia and Jerusalem where thousands of people travel to every year as tourist and spiritual centers. Although efforts have been made by some state government to make some of these sacred places tourist attractions by decorating and equipping them with modern facilities to attract the tourists, yet these efforts are still in adequate.

However, there are criticisms as to the sanctity of these places as religious centers because to the majority of people visiting the sites, I mean those that had been provided with decorations and modern facilities see those places as relaxation centers as against religious centers. This made Olupona[31] argued that beautification of these sacred sites is alien are artificial to African cosmology as African aesthetic differs greatly from western aesthetic. While this may be true at the same time be a solution centers for spiritual problems that may be confronting individual groups, country and the entire country. This is so because Fagbemi[32] maintained that some of the shrines in Ile-Ife are under lock and key. As a result, visitors are not allowed to go inside unless sacrifices are made previously in the interest of the visitors and the custodians who will conduct them round the shrines. Through this means alone, unknown problems are revealed and solutions are found for them.

Since individuals, groups and governments, either at local, or at federal level, would be involved in the development of these sacred centers, they will not be alien to the potency of the spiritual energy of the sacred centres. This awareness alone is enough to guide the choosing of credible political leaders that can curtail some of our social and political vices for the overall development and engender good governance forward on truth, love and harmony as found in indigenous religions. After all Mecca and Jerusalem where Nigerians travels to for spiritual purposes, there are rules and regulations guiding their conducts there which the people should be advised to continue with after leaving the holy centres. A very good example in Yorùbáland was the case of ÀdùnníOlórìṣà who visited and remained behind atỌ̀ṣunOsogboshrine till she died.

II. Conclusion

It is evident that Nigeria has in abundance in the areas of religious festivals and sacred place that can improve the economy of this country and at the same time improve our social life that could otherwise curb some social and political vices. However, through emulation and imbibing the spiritual characters and guiding principles of these sacred centres, things would be better if the Yorùbáland alone with its numerous festivals and religious [places of interest could be of tourist attractions, how much more the whole Nigeria?

[26] N/A, 1977, *Yoruba Traditional Festivals,* Ibadan: Information Division of the Ministry of Local Government and Information, 15-19
[27] M.AFabunmi, 1969, *Ife Shrines,* Ile-Ife: University of Ife Press, 3-15
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[29] M.A.Fabunmi 1969, *Ife Shrines,* Ile-Ife: University of Ife Press, 25
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[32] M.A. Fagbemi, 1969, *Ife Shrines,* Ile-Ife: University of Ife Press, ix

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However, it is quite unfortunate that it is being neglected by the tiers of government in Nigeria, by not adequately catering for these countries thereby, missing the revenues we are supposed to be generating through the source.

It will therefore be good if government can do something about this, by starting from the local government level through the finance of some of these festivals to create an awareness for the state through which it will gain national recognition, and later develop to international standards. To achieve this, serious minded people who love culture should be invited to run the affairs by collaborating with the custodians of these festivals and sacred places. Through understanding, reasonable income will be generated by the government and the life of the country and people involved will be the better for it.

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