

***Irunmale* (Spiritual Entities) of Yoruba Traditional Religion**

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Abstract: The hierarchy inherent in Yoruba pantheon reflects the political ideals and structure of Yoruba. Hence, the Supreme Being (*Olodumare*) is supremely deferred and cannot be directly approached. Other Spiritual beings/entities/divinities (*Irunmale*), who are his lieutenants, are ministers, functioning as intermediaries between the Supreme Being and humans. This religious worldview has another significance for modern Yoruba studies: In spite of the domination of Islam and Christianity, this traditional worldview is still prevalent and even pervading the Abrahamic religion. To give a thorough analysis of this religious worldview, this paper examines the similarities and differences between the spiritual entities, the problem of their number, their ontological status and relationship to the Supreme Being (*Olodumare*). This study will give background knowledge not only to the religious worldview of Yoruba, including their forms of Christianity and Islam, it will also shed light on the political behaviour of an average Yoruba person.

Key words: *Irunmale*, Yoruba traditional religion, supreme, spiritual

INTRODUCTION

Yoruba traditional religion features the belief in the Supreme Being, the activities of Yoruba Traditional Religionists and the various intermediaries between the Supreme Being and themselves. The Supreme Being has the main names of *Olorun*, *Olodumare*, *Eleda*. Apart from these three main names, other attributive names are used. These include; *Alaaye* (living Spirit), *Kolegbe* (Unique), *Aiku* (Immortal), *Alewilese* (Omnipotent), *Oba Orun* (King of Heaven), *Oba-a-dakedajo* (The Wonderful Judge), *Atererekaye* (Transcendent). Scholars make use of any of the main names in their researches (Lucas, 1948). Johnson and Lucas choose *Olorun*, Idowu chooses *Olodumare* while Awolalu (1971) choose *Eleda*. The Yoruba popular names for the intermediaries are *Orisa*, *Imale*, *Irunmale* and *ebora*. The Yoruba traditional religionists believe in *Orisa* and they also call it *Imale*. The 2 are often used interchangeably and in a lot of cases, *Imale* is used. Observers and scholars of various fields have studied *Orisa/Imale* in different localities and therefore, gave various analysis and interpretations. Findings have shown that there is one important area of agreement which is the fact that they are many. It is the position of this paper. In an attempt to translate the names of the intermediaries into English language, foreign and African scholars have picked gods, spirit being, spiritual entities, deified and ancestral spirits, divinities, personified natural forces and so on. *Irunmale* is adopted in this paper because of its plurality and its synonymous use for *Orisa*. The English translations are examined and Spiritual

Entities is adopted. The choice on 2 main reasons. First there is no disagreement that all the words used for the intermediaries are 'Spiritual'-gods, spirit beings, personified forces, premodial divinities are spiritual. Entity (plural entities) is defined as something existing complete in itself, by its own right; a subject existence (The New Webster, 1995). *Orisa*, *Imale*, *Irunmale*, *Ebora* with various translations fits into this definition. So this study adopts *Irunmale* as Yoruba name while 'Spiritual Entities' is also adopted as its translation for the intermediaries (enuissanies ministers and ambassadors) believed to be operating between *Eleda* (The Creator) and the Yoruba traditional religionists (the created).

This study examines the issue of plurality of the spiritual entities, the reasons for such large number treats the unity in the diversity in such number. It also examines the issue of number and shows that there is no fixed number and that the spiritual entities are innumerable.

PROBLEM OF NUMBER OF SPIRITUAL ENTITIES (*Irunmale*)

How many are the spiritual entities (*Irunmale*)? This seems a difficult question to answer with exactitude because Yoruba traditional religionists talk of *okanlenirinwo imale* (401 spiritual entities), *Irunmale* (400 spiritual entities) *Igbamale* (200 spiritual entities) Idowu gives thought to this problem of number.

I have been variously informed by Yoruba elders and priests on the matter. In *Ile-Ife*, we are told that there

were originally 201 of them represented in the palace of the Ooni, The Ooni himself being the 2-hundred-and-first! The Odu corpus gives a confusing impression of the census of the pantheon: Sometimes they speak of Erunlojo-one thousand seven hundred divinities, often they speak of Oka-le-n 'irinwo imale-400 and one divinities".

We are also told that there are Igba-'male Ojukotun, Igba-'male Ojukosi-200 divinities of the right hand and 200 divinities of the left hand," making 400. During invocations, we sometimes hear.

Iba irun'-male Ojukotun,

Iba igba-'male Ojukosi;

Iba ota-le-n 'irinwo Irun-'male;

Ti o ja Atari ona orun gbangba.

Worship to the 400 divinities of the right hand;

Worship to the 200 divinities on the left hand;

Worship to the 400 and sixty divinities;

Who actually line up the very road of heaven.

"Here we have a suggestion that there are one thousand and sixty. There are still oji-le-le'egbeje ti nwon nlu edan fun, ti won nlu iwo fun-The 1060 divinities for whom metal rods are sounded, for whom horns are beaten:

Mbiti writes on the same issue.

"The Yoruba have 1700 divinities (orisa), this being obviously the largest collection of divinities in a single Africa people. These divinities are associated with natural phenomenon and objects, as well as with human activities and expenses. They are said to render to God annual tributes of their substance in acknowledgement of his Lordship. Paralled to Yoruba social-political structure, these divinities form a hierarchy".

With documentary evidence on the number of *Irunmale* so far, can we conclude that the Yoruba traditional religionist are inconsistent or they lack mathematical calculation? No, is the answer (Awosusi, 2006). *Olodumare, Eleda*, the Creator knows the number of the spiritual entities. He owns the heaven and sees the number that are emissaries of Yoruba to HIM. A convenient unit of 'igba' (200) is taken and if they file up in 2 units on both routes to heaven, they will be *irinwo* ($200 \times 2 = 400$). In view of the fact that the number that is prominently referred to is "*irinwo*" and "*igba*" the perceived figure is "*irinwo*".

If we recognise that *odu* corpus, another revered source of knowledge accepted by Yoruba, comes up with a number as high as one thousand and seven hundred, we can note that a deference could be given to *Ifa* while the real perception of Yoruba traditional religionist stands at four hundred. *Ifa* knows more, "*Eleda*" knows best. The Yoruba, a wise race that can be compared with the Jews and earliest wise men, sums up the number as simply many. The perceived figure is for postulated administrative convenience because they are capable of knowing little in comparison with their creator. In view of the fact that each and every god or spiritual entity is regarded as intermediary, the power of all of them are from time to time, involved in prayers. Hence, the saying-*O dowo Irunmale* meaning all are within the powers of the Spiritual Entities, or all is left to their adjudication. Some devotees questioned as to the number of spiritual entities in existence answered that they are many and added that as from their fore-fathers, there had been the talk of *Irunmale* (400 spritual entities). They admit that they know those worshipped in their areas (villages and towns) and that God knows all.

An allusion to the fact that *Irunmale* (spiritual entities) are many can be traced to the fact that nearly every object in nature, adjudged to be awful, above normal, natural phenomena or danger-inherent or danger implicit is attributed a spirit. It is in this light that the concept of spiritual entities becomes a reality.

UNITY IN DIVERSITY AMONG *IRUNMALE* (SPIRITUAL ENTITIES)

In spite of the many *Irunmale* (spiritual entities), there is unity in accounting for the social harmony among the people and the Creator. Explanations are not limited to the behaviours and acts of the living but extended to the dead hence the spirits of the dead are believed to be capable of overseeing the living. An evil done by the living could be punished by the spirit of the dead. The spirits of the ancestors are believed to be capable of giving protection and rewards and assistance at the time of need.

A sort of dual explanation is often given in respect of diseases, life-hazards, accidents, deaths and so on. The empirical and natural causes are accepted quite alright yet in order to ward off evil occurrences and do well in life, spiritual entities are worshipped. For example, the spirit of water is worshipped and appeased to ward off danger. The spirit of *Sonponna* is worshipped for curing small pox, the spirit of "*ejire*" is worshipped in order to give

protection to the twins, the spirit of “*Ogun*” is worshipped to prevent accidents in hunting, farming and use of iron implements and so on. It is in line with the causal explanation that various objects in nature deemed to have spirits. These include hills, rivers, trees, animals, earth, thunder, winds, rocks. If the nature of the explanation given about the observed phenomena is the same among the Yoruba, it accounts for the resemblances we have on the spiritual belief. Ojo states that: “The multiplicity of Yoruba gods is a logical consequence of their awareness of the associated problems and their determination to solve the problems in the ways they know best”.

In fact, Yoruba people including the offsprings of former slaves, now citizens of Cuba, Brazil and other European countries apply the basic tenets of the belief system.

How do we account for the diversity in Yoruba traditional religion? The story of the ‘part-to-whole’ is applicable. In spite of the homogeneity of Yoruba cultural identities, there are sub-groups of the race that we refer to as ethnic groups. The Yoruba people predominantly inhabits the South Western Nigeria spreading across Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo, Ekiti, Kwara and Kogi States. They could be found in small groups in other parts of Nigeria, its neighbouring groups and overseas. The Yoruba race living in Nigeria have sub-groups of Oyo, Egba, Egbado, Awori, Ijebu, Igbomina, Ekiti, Ondo, Akoko, Owo, Ilaje, Yagba, Ijesa. Each sub-group has its distinct dialect and peculiarities through which it could be identified. These parts of the whole account for differences existing among the spiritual entities (*Irunmale*). The geographical locations of these sub-groups also account for the differences in the spiritual entities. These locations have various features namely forests-rain, deciduous, savannah; rivers of various lengths and breadths, highlands and hills including the stretch of Yoruba hills etc. It had been shown that environmental objects are believed to have spirits. If the objects of nature possess spirits, the geographical features account for some differences and similarities. For example, the people at Osogbo, Ede, Iwo and neighbours and communities near rivers worship *Osun*. Apart from *Yaa-gbo*, *Yaa-ju-Osun-Osogbo*, other communities worship other rivers including *Oni* (Ijesa). If we take rocks, hills and highlands, Egba worship *Olumo* rock, Ibadan worship *Oke-Ibadan*; Ikere-Ekiti worship *Olosunta* (*Olosunta*, *Orun Ikere*). Idanre people worship *Orosun* and *Olofi*, Yoruba living near the lagoon and the sea worship *Olosa* (goddess of the lagoon) and *Olokun* (goddess of the sea); those in forested areas worship the

spirits of the wood especially *Iroko* and those in the savannah worship the wondering spirits including *Aja* and *Ikale* people worship *Aiyelala*.

VARYING VIEWS ON IRUNMALE (SPIRITUAL ENTITIES)

The numbers of Spiritual entities of 200, 201, 400, 401, 460, 1,440 and 1,700 have been raised in this study. At this point, a few varying views, especially those from indigenous scholars and sources need some examination.

Lucas, a pioneer Yoruba scholar discusses 43 Spiritual Entities in his work. Idowu discusses seven namely *Esu*, *Orunmila*, *Orisanla*, *Sango*, *Ogun*, *Sonpona* and *Ela*. Only *Ela* is not in the list of Lucas. Awolalu and Dopamu (1979) list 10 Spiritual Entities namely *Esu*, *Orunmila*, *Orisanla*, *Sango*, *Ogun*, *Sonpona*, *Osun*, *Oya*, *Buruku*, *Ayelala*. Opoku (1978) in his research, lists the following eight-*Eshu*, *Oduduwa*, *Yemoja*, *Sango*, *Ogun*, *Orisa-oko*, *Olokun*, *Obalufon* Adewale (1988) has a list of 8 namely *Esu*, *Orunmila*, *Obatala*, *Sango*, *Sopona*, *Osun*, *Oya*, *Ogun* and an unspecified number of minor or family divinities. A list of 86 which the scope of this study cannot accommodate is contained in the work of Akinbobola (1986). Awosusi (2004) puts up cumulative list of the Spiritual Entities by the 6 scholars (Lucas, Idowu, Awolalu and Dopamu, Opoku, Adewale and Akinbobola) to stand at 117. After adding 64 to reach a cumulative list of 181, he states that 53 spiritual entities are being worshipped in only 2 communities.

NUMBER OF IRUNMALE

An important issue in considering the Yoruba intermediary *Irunmale* is the question asked by Professor Idowu-“How many are the divinities?” Knowing the number may help in relating the Yoruba traditional religion to a mono, di, triads, or poly-theism. Epega addressed the number issue thus:

Imales known in Yoruba sacred religion. We will only speak of the 400 or 401 *Imales*. The 401 *Imales* or *Orisas* called God of the ancient Yoruba people.

According to Epega (1971) the *Imales* cannot be summed up in number. This means they have different but unequal entities that made him say there are 200 and 400 *Imales* and not 600 *Imales*.

Awolalu (1978) addressing the number issue wrote: The actual number of the divinities is not easily

determinable; it has variously been estimated to be 200, 201, 400, 401, 460 600, 601, 1700, or even more. Yoruba land is very rich in these divine beings.

Awolalu shows that they are many and the problem of knowing exact numbers is definitely not as easy as it may appear. Oduyoye, approaching this issue from a philological angle asked, "... Does this mean 1444 divinities?" (In 1971) Oduyoye's question is used in an idiomatic form rather than as a simple number expression. Bascom definitely helped in answering the question when he wrote: The Yoruba believe in many deities (*Ebora, Ebura, Imales, Orisa*), the full number never having been recorded. Some say there are 500 or 401; other that there are 600 or 601; and some even more; but these numbers are only figurative.

In 1962 Professor Idowu's explanation on this seems to be most comprehensive and conclusive. However, he wrote;

We know that the number of the *Orisa* is legion, for they are many. The exact census of the pantheon no one is now able to tell. Whatever the original significance of the figures, therefore, they have now come to be no more than symbolic at the same time of the plurality of the *Orisa* and the indefiniteness of their numbers. So to quote any of the figures is now only "a manner of speaking."

This is important because it makes it clear that the gods are many but the actual may never be known-200, 400, 401, 600, 601 or 1700-are a manner of speaking. This interpretation has been followed by many. This interpretation has been followed by many Yoruba but some others insist on whatever number suits them. If the numbers are only a manner of speaking, the precise terms like mono, di, tri, triad or even poly become difficult in applying to Yoruba traditional religion *Irunmales*.

In 1977 Booth's discussion on polytheism or monotheism makes it clear that, whatever focus put on, that decides whether Yoruba God-gods is to be called polytheism or monotheism. The emphasis could be on concreteness or ultimacy, on God or *Orisa*, on the human level or on the level of God. It seems most of the early Christian interpreters of the Yoruba God-gods concept were ready to apply any term but monotheism to Yoruba traditional religion, while later Yoruba interpreters seem ready to apply no other term but monotheism to this same concept! Regardless of what is used in qualifying the term monotheism, the debate still stands.

One is prone to ask why the fuss on monotheism and

why the reluctance of the early Christians, or the eagerness of the later Yoruba interpreters of Yoruba traditional religion, to apply the term monotheism to the Yoruba God-gods concept? Idowu definitely reflected the high tension of whether it should be polytheism or monotheism, when he wrote:

African traditional religion cannot be described as polytheistic. Its appropriate description is monotheistic, however modified this may be. The modification is however, inevitable because of the presence of other divine beings within the structure of the religion.

This Idowu's position puts any interpretation of the Yoruba God-gods concept that makes it polytheistic a misinterpretation and a misrepresentation of the Yoruba God-gods concept.

While this is more of the "half filled or half empty glass," it could be said that the trend since 1950 seems to be a deflection from the use of the word polytheism and a more generous application of monotheism (in any modified form) to the Yoruba God-gods concept.

It will suffice here to be conscious of Yoruba usage of number for the *Irunmales* as figurative only. Also, this shows the relation of the *Irunmales* to the God is not in terms of literal number.

CONCLUSION

There are grounds for justifying that the spiritual entities in Yoruba traditional religion are innumerable with symbolic figure within a frame or manner of speaking.

- The history and origin on the *Irunmale* identified by scholars as mythical or pre-modial are not yet known and their numbers conclusively ascertained. Those in this category are only shown to be worshipped across the landscape of Yorubaland.
- Virtually, all natural phenomena, namely hills, mountains, rocks, rivers, trees, palms, lakes, forests, seas oceans and symbolic parts of the body (*ori, atampako*) symbolic objects of worship in varying dimensions.
- Families have *Irunmale* that they worship. All old *Akodi/Agboile* have *Irunmale* that are worshipped apart from the popular ones such as *Esu* and *Ogun*. It should be stressed that the types worshipped are basically related to natural phenomena and mythical personifications.
- Yoruba communities have *Irunmale* worshipped all across their various quarters. The larger the community, the higher the number of such *Irunmale*.
- Postulation on figures-On the basis of data in 4

above, if we take 1000 communities of an average size in Yoruba land and assume that averagely a minimum of ten *Irunmale* are worshipped, we would have a total of ten thousand *Irunmale*. With very many large cities span the landscape of Yorubaland the number of *Irunmale* will surely be a myriad hence a manner of speaking.

To round up, we humbly submit that the *Irunmale* worshipped in Yoruba traditional religion are very many and almost innumerable as at now. The term *Irunmale*, *Igbamale*, *Okanlenirunwo*, *Erunlojo* might not be a confusing impression as stated by Idowu. After all, research may determine that the numbers (200, 201, 400, 401, 1,700) are not false (In the preceding section of this study, it has been stated that 53 have been identified in two communities. Recently, the Elekole, Oba Adeleye Adetula stated that 360 spiritual entities were originally worshipped in Ikole-Ekiti and that the number may not be as high today. Ile-Ife, of old, was claimed to have two hundred plus one (200+1) *Irunmale* worshipped in the city. Each day had at least one *Irunmale* to be worshipped round the year). It is also submitted that there are areas for research to go further in compiling the figure(s).

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