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**YORUBA RELIGION AND GLOBALIZATION:
SOME REFLECTIONS**

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Discourses on globalization are undergoing an inflation in academic and non academic circles alike. Perhaps the combined effect of the consequences of a unipolar world imposed on humanity since the disappearance of the Soviet camp, coupled with *fin de siècle* or, indeed, *fin de millénaire* obsessions, provides the context, if not the explanation, for this inflation. The mere mention of the term **globalization** often triggers opposite reactions and manichean judgements, especially among intellectuals of the so called Third World, as is often the case with new critical concepts proposed by their peers or mentors in the first world, especially the West. Globalization no doubt has its enthusiasts, its passionate advocates as well as its crucifiers and its discontents. The expression “global village”, from which the notion of globalization is derived is, today, one of the most used clichés in the humanities and social sciences. The metaphorical nucleus of the expression is so removed from the life experience of most of its users, who have never lived in a village, that, in a sense, it has acquired a metaphorical status. For most writers, the notion of “global village” is a metaphor of a metaphor. Little wonder, therefore, if “globalization”, which is the

derivative and putative elaboration, has become a locus for controversies. What cannot be doubted is that so proteiform has so far been the general situation of our globe in recent times that any analysis of cultural life in the context of globalization should be conducted with prudence. These are times for conjectures, not for peremptory vaticinations. This call for prudence, however, is no synonym with laxism in the apprehension of things cultural. Our task, I'd like to conjecture, is to forge such conceptual tools as to enable us to think the most plausible scenarios or new configurations for Yoruba religious tradition in an era of globalization.

In this regard, perhaps our first and foremost task is to examine the very notion of **globalization** from an African perspective in order to ensure that we are not ensnared in concepts that engender issues and debates on which we have little control. The notion of **globalization**, in much contemporary discourse involving the term, refers to the spectacular and all pervading power of late, post cold war capitalism, especially its ubiquitous presence in the realm of finance, owing to radical changes in the communication technology and the variegated cultural consequences triggered by these processes. But there is a definite geographical bias that inheres in its etymologically derived definition. To be sure, the tentacular and spectacular aspects of globalization are fundamental to its definition, But fixation on them will not help us understand our "African-being – in-the-world". For each individual, group or community will interpret globalization in terms of their respective *globes* (=worlds) and of what is being globalized. And we do know that *world* has meant different things for different communities at different times and places. Hence the need to complete the contemporary spectacular-tentacular, ultimately geographical facets of the notion of globalization by a dimension that calls for a historical elucidation of current

manifestations. In other words there is an indispensable “history depth” dimension to globalization. Failure to envisage globalization issues in this historico-geographical perspective will result in incomplete and superficial appraisals that would have us deserve the sentential Yoruba “**Awon le n wo , e o reegun**”.

At a seminar on “Globalization and Indigenous Cultures” in Tokyo some years back, I told an amazed and incredulous Japanese audience that we Africans have been very active in the globalization process before them. For while we have been somehow forcefully precipitated into the process through what Basil Davidson so aptly termed “*the curse of Columbus*” i.e. the Atlantic slave trade, Japan decided to open itself to the capitalist West only in 1868, with the Meiji Restoration¹. Adopting an historico-geographical approach, I’d like to suggest three stages and modalities in the globalization of Yoruba religious traditions, namely West African, Atlantic and post Atlantic. The three stages will be briefly summarized in the next section of this paper.

Yoruba religion became global by sharing its orisha with the immediate, West African neighbours of the people who have come to be collectively designated as Yoruba, and by adopting some of their deities. Thus, the Edo, Yagba, Itsekiri, Nupe, Ibariba, Igbo, Igala, Fon, Gun, Aja, Ewe, Akan...etc, belong in the same religious global village as the Yoruba. The case has been made for Ogun as the paradigmatic West African “globalizer” deity in Barnes (1989). But one could identify avatars of virtually any Yoruba orisha in the pantheon of the above mentioned ethnic groups. The Yoruba gave and freely took deities

¹ This by the way, suggests that modality and entry point – the “how” and “when” of the globalization process are important.

in this area. In the realm of religion, Akinjogbin's ebi social theory is certainly an historical fact (Akinjogbin 1967). Sango and Oya are as Nupe as they are Yoruba. Nana Buukuu is most likely Akan in origin, before it was adopted by Pre-Oduduwa Yoruba and subsequently travelled throughout Yorubaland. Oduduwa, Orisa, yeye Mowo, Ogun, Elegba, Sanpanna, clearly Yoruba orisha, have become Fon deities or vodun under the following audibly recognizable names respectively: Duduwa, Lisa, Mawu, Gun, Legba, Sakpata. In their new locale they are both Fon and Yoruba, issues of origin and nationality being of little interest to practitioners, even as they may preoccupy academics. A case in point is precisely Sanpanna, who is believed in parts of Yorubaland to be of Fon origin while the Fon themselves emphatically affirm its Yorubanness by calling his devotees Anagonu i.e. Anago (Yoruba citizens).

This apparent contradiction is indicative of a general trend in the area and can be explained as follows: the spread of Sanpanna, like that many of Yoruba deities has undergone a pendular movement in the area. In all likelihood, Sanpanna must have become so popular and strong in the Fon area as to attract Yoruba devotees who now come to Fonland to acquire a surplus of ase in this deity. In back and forth movement of deities over a long period in the West African area, a place of rebirth can easily be mistaken as the original birthplace. (Yai 1996).

The Yoruba deity Orunmila, and its system of divination Ifa, is arguably the most "globalized" indigenous religious tradition in West Africa. The deity and its system are known from Igboland in the East to Eweland in the West. The linguistic evidence of the globalization of this aspect of Yoruba religious tradition is undeniable, although it calls for

urgent comparative studies. Yoruba thus became the language of religious and intellectual discourse in the area (Sandoval 1627, Yai 1992). Conversely, many verses in various languages of the area occur in the Yoruba corpus of *odus*, as is attested in most collected texts (Maupoil 1943, Abimbola 1968).

An important dimension of the globalization of Yoruba religious traditions in West Africa is their first encounter with an abrahamic religion, i.e. Islam, through transaharan trade. Yoruba intellectual tradition itself has deemed this encounter as fundamental as to record its modalities and peripeties within a single *Odu*, namely *Otua*, which has come to be known as *Odu Imale* (*Odu about Islam*). Globalization here, consisted not only in making Islam known to the Yoruba, but in syncretizing it with Yoruba religious traditions. It also consisted in absorbing aspects of the cultures of the people who brought Islam into Yorubaland, namely the Mande, the Songhai, the Dendi, and the Hausa, and in making aspects of Yoruba religious traditions known in the same cultural areas.

The Atlantic globalization of Yoruba religious traditions as a consequence of the slave trade has enjoyed an extensive / intensive treatment from the pioneering works of Nina Rodrigues, Fernando Ortiz, Roger Bastide, Lydia Cabrera, Pierre Verger to those of younger generations researchers, some of whom are present in this gathering. We are all familiar with the literature on the topic and no further elaboration is needed. Central to the debates through generations of scholars is the issue of syncretism.

The definition and treatment of this important phenomenon depends and will depend on the often unconscious or unconfessed bias and ideology of the writer, or on circumstantial

situations. In an assessment of syncretism as a historical phenomenon what cannot be denied though is the African initiative (Yai 1976, Mason 1991). Agency, as a problématique, has received little serious attention from students of syncretism did not result from equal contributions by catholic thinkers and their African counterparts in the serenity of religious conclaves. The (unsung) theologians of Afro-Christian syncretism are diaspora African intellectuals, i.e. priestesses and priests in Brazil, Cuba, Haïti, Trinidad and elsewhere who are usually recognized in their ilé, casa, and péristyles through religious lineage praise songs. Their invisibility in official anthropological literature is a serious scientific blind spot.

But, there is a hidden face of the globalization of Yoruba religious tradition that needs to be more exposed. This is the encounter between Yoruba religion and other African, mostly Central African, as well as with Native American, religious traditions.

Because students of Yoruba religious traditions in the Americas almost exclusively originated from the Judeo-Christian world, they have tended to “naturally” emphasize the mixture of some Yoruba religious features with those of the religious traditions they are most familiar with, i.e. theirs.

But what we know of the habitat and mode of socialization of slaves in the New World should incline us to believe that Yoruba religion is likely to be first globalized with religious traditions of the Congo and Volta river basins. And it actually did. Deities which did not exist in central Africa emerged in the candomblé Angola in Brazil, and are, on analysis, “translations” of Yoruba orisa into Kongo culture and idiom. Similarly in what is

described as the most “pure” or “authentic” Yoruba religious house (Opo Afonja), mae Aninha, a Yoruba iyalorisha of Gurunsi ancestry, introduced Gurunsi deities that are now part and parcel of the Brazilian Yoruba pantheon (Santos, Yaï 1999).

Trinidadian Shango is another globalization of Yoruba religious traditions through a re-encounter with West African religious, mostly Fon and Ewe (Senah 1999).

An in-depth study of this Yoruba-African syncretism is urgently needed as an important aspect of Yoruba globalization. This, of course will require a necessary linguistic turn in Yoruba and African diaspora studies.

In order to better conceptualize and characterize the post Atlantic stage of Yoruba religious traditions, it is not unimportant to briefly compare the contexts of the stages that preceded it.

West Africans were the sole actors of the globalization of Yoruba religious traditions in Africa. Even in the case of globalization through Yoruba-Islam syncretism, non-Africans never came physically in contact with the Yoruba. Also, orality was the main medium of globalization, even as Islam remained the “religion of the book” and despite the emergence of a tiny group of Yoruba literate scholars in Arabic (Abubakre 1986). As a consequence rituals prevailed on doctrine.

The Atlantic slave trade, triggered by capitalism provided the context for what we term “Atlantic globalization of Yoruba religious traditions”. The main actors here are the

Yoruba, other Africans and, peripherally European descendants of popular extraction. The existence of libretas in certain areas notwithstanding, orality remained the medium of globalization par excellence at this stage too.

Post Atlantic Globalization

In the last 30 years or so, Yoruba religion has been experiencing a new form of internationalization that is currently dovetailing in modern globalization proper. The following historical events provide the background for this new internationalization-globalization:

- The appearance on the international scene of new independent nations in Africa, with the attendant interest in African cultures and the homeland-diaspora exchanges. (cg. “The Roots syndrome” triggered by Alex Haley’s book and film).
- The civil rights movement in the USA, black nationalism, and the search for an “authentic”, African religion radically different from the three abrahamic religions, all of which were historically implicated in the Atlantic or/and transaharan slave trade. In this regard, the creation of Oyotunji African village in South Carolina, with its restoraion of features of the precolonial Yoruba Kingdom takes on a paradigmatic significance, even as, from the standpoint of Yoruba philosophical traditions, its tenets rest on methodologically shaky grounds.

- Population dynamics in the Western hemisphere (Caribbean to USA), especially the Mariel boatlift and the massive transfer of Cubans to Miami, with their religion, santeria.
- The emergence, among Yoruba religion practitioners worldwide of a new consciousness of the universality of the orisa tradition coupled with the promotion of appropriate fora and organizations.

The combined effects of all these events significantly widened the constituency of the orisa tradition. We now have a much broader spectrum of worshippers of all races with tremendous diversity in educational background, cultural exposure, including especially exposure to Yoruba and African culture, professional experience and skills. For the convenience, we can distinguish three broad categories or actors in the new political economy of Yoruba religion:

1. Africans in the homeland. They still make up the bulk of orisa worshippers. They live in villages, towns and cities in Nigeria, Benin Republic, Togo, and Sierra Leone. Most are hardly educated in Western system of education and are vaguely, if any, aware of the international dimensions of their religious traditions. A few intellectuals more or less integrated in the tradition act as brokers between this group and the two other. This is a non homogenous group comprising Yoruba cultural nationalists, cultural entrepreneurs, bona fide priests, honoris causa uninitiated and self appointed priests and even some charlatans.

2. Africans in the diaspora. They constitute the second largest group of worshippers, in villages towns and cities of Brazil, Cuba, Haiti, Trinidad, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, the USA. They belong to lower classes and lower middle classes of these countries.

3. Non Africans. Mostly in Brazil, Cuba, the USA. A relatively small or big minority, depending on the country and the definition of whiteness, usually belonging to upper middle classes of these countries. The tripartite division is as simplistic as it is necessary for the purpose of a preliminary analysis of a relatively new and proteiform phenomenon. Each of the three identified groups is at once homogenous and heterogenous. The three are also traversed by contradictions and affinities based on language, hidden or (un)official religion of the countries of origin or settlement, pervasiveness and age of the African religion in the culture and, above all, class.

What needs to be emphasized is the increasing role of the orisa “community” of the USA in the new political economy of the orisa tradition, which seems to reflect the unipolar scheme of the ongoing economic globalization. The increasing pauperisation of the élites in West Africa and some Latin American states has prompted orisa worshippers or their often self appointed representatives to target the USA as the new haven for the survival of the tradition. New axes are taking shape between Nigeria, Haiti, Cuba, Brazil as one end of the pole and several cities in the USA as the other pole. Consciousness of this new globalization of the orisa tradition has generated the need for coordination and standardization initiatives.

Proselytizing, dogma and orthodoxy are not features of orisa tradition. Therefore, there is no central organ of decision or diffusion of behaviour, information or religious knowledge.

Mostly informal bridges have been built between the three arms identified above. The World Congress of Orisa Tradition and Culture, whose first meeting took place in Ile-Ife in 1981, has intermittently functioned as a coordinating entity. It can be said that orisa tradition has its foot in Africa and its head in the Americas.

As is to be expected, the orisa tradition is being affected by consumerism and the new technologies of the information age. Books and pamphlets of the “do it yourself” or “teach yourself” type are being published about rituals by generally uninformed and unscrupulous people who know that the religion is marketable, particularly in the USA.

Films and videocassettes showing orisa ceremonies and rituals are broadcast and commercialised, despite the disapproval and condemnation of such practices by the most authoritative priests. More important orisa is now in the Internet. Discussions and debates about ritual practices, myths, prayers, divination issues, medicinal plants and preparations, the “right way of doing things”, the religiously correct”, are being daily held on the web (Doris 1996; Capone 1999, Argyriadis 1999).

This new development brings with it new issues, new stakes, new challenges. It is certainly pregnant with new, perhaps unprecedented, forms of cultural and religious engagements and syncretism.

The first feature of the new situation is the disjunction of the three groups of actors and their radically unequal access to the information age instruments and process of globalization. They are situated at different points from the center of the globalization

galaxy. Africans on the continent are at the periphery of globalization. Most orisa practitioners have no access to television, an instrument that is taken for granted in the globalization galaxy centres. They are no participants in the debates about their religion on the internet, these being limited to select members of groups 2 and 3. Yet, Africa is the matrix of the religion and Yorubaland is universally acknowledged as the source and ultimate reference for authenticity, knowledge, authority, credibility and legitimacy. While, with respect to religious knowledge and authority, most practitioners will rank the three groups identified above in order of occurrence, i.e. 1, 2 and 3, the ranking would be reversed i.e. 3,2,1, should access to information technology and integration in the new globalization process be the criteria. One is tempted to conjecture that the orisa tradition has its foot in Africa and its head in America. This formula could meaningfully be turned upside down, if “foot” and “head” are given the deep meaning of the Yoruba concepts of “ese” and “ori” respectively. And therein lies the paradox and predicament of globalization, the resolution of which is hard to precisely predict at this initial stage of the process. Yet, it is necessary and possible to adumbrate the contours of a few possible scenarios, directions and orientations of the globalization process.

But before doing so, a few words of clarification are in order with respect to the notion of religious knowledge in the orisa tradition. Religious knowledge is acquired through initiation. In Africa, devotees used to go through several stages and levels in the initiation process which could take several months or years of partial or total seclusion. Priests and diviners’ initiation processes are even longer and more rigorous. Since orisa tradition is not a “religion of the book”, an extensive corpus of oral texts including praises, myths, stories, invocations, prayers, incantations, divination texts and their exegeses and interpretations,

medicinal recipes, etc. must be memorized in Yoruba. More important, there is an esoteric stage and dimension to the process referred to as deep knowledge. These texts are sacred, but not in the sense this term connotes in the scriptures of religions of the book like Islam, Judaism and Christianity. An increasing number of devotees in groups 2 and 3 rely on booklets (libretas) for their initiation, mostly as a complement to the oral tradition. These booklets even become central references for some. This is truer in Cuba and its diaspora in the USA. More and more practitioners in the diaspora, especially in the third group, heavily rely on books written by anthropologists on the tradition, with the inevitable misunderstandings, mistranslations and eurocentrism. There is no place for esoteric knowledge in these media. For practitioners in Africa as well as in the diaspora, book knowledge, not acquired through initiation by a master in the context of a sacred space does not qualify as religious knowledge because it is devoid of **ase**. The information age technology being the ultimate product of the “Gutenberg Galaxy”, globalization necessarily and gradually implies and imposes a **orality VS scripturality** divide in the world of the orisa tradition, a divide which will inevitably trigger an insiders VS outsiders debate and chasm. The ultimate implications of the new challenges that writing and its technological consequences impose on Yoruba religion as a religion based on oral traditions are as immense as to deserve a conference. Suffice it to indicate the increasing centrality of the book in the tradition will trigger modeling effects from the abrahamic religions which are “religions of the book” par excellence, with their doctrinaire and even dogmatic consequences. There is already an indication of this development in the emergence of “isms” in certain discourses and treatises (e.g. “**Ifism**”, claimed to be based on Ifa).

Given this general picture, what does globalization, which seems irreversible, hold for the orisa tradition? The second group, i.e. diaspora Africans, seem promised for a pivotal role in the process since its members, located as they are in the geographical, political, intellectual and technological heart of the globalization process are, and will by necessity more and more be, grounded in it, while being sentimentally and culturally strongly connected with the continental African matrix. The extent to which this group will play its role with efficiency largely depends on the degree of involvement in the process of the black media in the USA.

If the orisa tradition is globalized along the lines here delineated, there will be a boomerang effect on Africa itself. The tradition will acquire a new legitimacy, a new "*lettres de noblesse*" or credentials, a global, societal equivalent of the return of the repressed, or perhaps more in line with Yoruba philosophy, a return of the prodigal son. One consequence of such scenario is that the orisa tradition will now openly resist, engage and challenge Islam and Christianity in their missionary, fundamentalist and intolerant versions. Most likely, this boomerang effect will force African practitioners to now openly practice or revive a spirituality which will address issues of poverty, identity as well as environmental issues, and indeed to question the legitimacy of globalization itself by exposing its inconsistencies and paradoxes. This cannot be done without the absorption of some "global features" on the African continent. For instance a great amount of standardization will have to be achieved in training, rituals, etc... Most likely, a church like organization will be adopted, with a congregation, a temple or shrine with a priest catering for all orisa in lieu of one priest for one orisa as in the past. Yoruba language will remain

for a long time the sole language for rituals, but it will inevitably share with English, Spanish and Portuguese the function of language of knowledge and instruction.

One of the paradoxes of globalization is that it encourages or produces standardization as it creates multipolarity. In the age of globalization, a likely picture will be the emergence of multipolar regulatory organizations and fora. Similarly, globalization promotes individuality in creativity. This means that it will beget, not the end of religion as is generally feared and believed, but the rise of new forms of spirituality and religiosity, with people experimenting with the features of various religious traditions, resulting in a “quilt-like”, personalized and loosely organized religion. [Inoue’s “neo-syncretism” or “patch work” (Inoue 1997:89-90)].

With the increasing visibility of the Yoruba people in literature (Wole Soyinka a Yoruba writer, won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986, the first ever in Africa or indeed by a Black person, the visual and performing arts (Fela Amkulapokuti, Sunny Ade, Lamidi Fakeye, etc.), the orisa traditions, especially outside the Atlantic world, will be the partial, selective appropriations of its elements by individuals or small groups in the concoction of new, personalized forms of religious lifestyles. For example, an orisa, or some moral, behavioural, or aesthetic aspects of an orisa that are appealing to an individual or a community, may be selected as the base component or just one basic component, the idiosyncratic worldview or doctrine of the individual or the group, along with other features taken from say, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity, resulting in the formation of a new religion or a new sect. This is a likely scenario in the decades to come particularly in the third of the three identified main actors in the Atlantic world, and, perhaps more so,

among those outside it who have come in contact with the orisa tradition primarily through books and the newest techniques of the information age, as opposed to the conventional initiation under the instruction and guidance of a master. Acquisition of segments of orisa religion without the affective and “roots” dimension encourages detachment from other, related, aspects of the tradition and the grand philosophy which determines and unites them, thereby paving the way for “*patchwork*” or *quilt-like* reformulations.

Could such “quilt-like”, personalized religious practices still claim any legitimate filiation to the orisa tradition? Theoretically, the answer can only be in the affirmative, since the orisa tradition knows no orthodoxy or orthopraxis. The predilection for a metonymic approach to innovation in the Yoruba tradition reinforces this theoretical position (Yai 1993). But this question raises problems, not at the theoretical realm, but in real life. Absence of an orthodoxy is certainly NOT synonymous with “any thing goes”. Indeed, what guarantees both this absence of orthodoxy and individual creativity in the tradition, with no known history of sectarianism, is the structure of initiation that privileges strong interpersonal relationships between priest and initiate in the transmission of religious knowledge. The fact remains that the new forms of globalization confront the tradition with new, unprecedented situations and issues. Globalization brings cultures together and sets the context for their contact, but is unable to stimulate deep, serious engagement between them, as it is more a conquest over space than an apprehension of time depth. Time is one of the worst enemies of modernity. Hannah Arendt’s remark that “we have histories without a common past, [which] threatens to render all particular pasts irrelevant” is, unfortunately, sufficiently adequately descriptive of the cultural effects of modern globalization. The problem then is: without a thorough engagement with its **deep**

knowledge component can religious groups that use some aspect of the orisa tradition still lay legitimate claim to Yorubanness? On the surface of it and speaking from the point of view of Yoruba philosophical traditions, this interrogation is a false problem. Historically, the Yoruba have demonstrated that they are not afraid of “otherness” and change. Logically, they should be indifferent to claims of “Yorubanness” from religious practices only remotely connected with theirs. But perhaps it is too early to ask questions, since we are witnessing an incipient stage of a potentially unprecedented revolution.

Be it as it may, the minimal impact of the orisa tradition in the era of globalization will be to help usher in a new era in/of spirituality by recentering the attention of humankind around the following issues:

- The need for a new equilibrium among the components of our globe: nations and states, men and women, women, men and children, elderly people and younger generations.
- The urgency for a new balance between human beings and other creatures, who are NOT at our service.
- The need for a new equilibrium between man and the supernatural world (orisa, kami, etc).

Finally, I must emphasize a missing factor, an unknown, in the various scenarios I have endeavoured to foresee for the orisa tradition in the context of globalization, namely the specific role and contribution of women. This factor can alter the scenarios in ways that are

unpredictable. At this stage, it is unclear what position African women occupy, what role they play and are likely to play in the globalization process. If the past is anything to go by, African women's positions, roles and initiatives in the globalization process will largely determine the future of orisa tradition.

Historically, women have played a prominent role at all levels in Yoruba religion. In the last four hundred years their position has become **vital** as a result of the slave trade. From that period until today women have been at the forefront of religious maintenance and creativity in the African homeland, and more so in the African diaspora. The position of African women of the diaspora is even particularly critical in this respect, as they are closer to the decision centers of the globalization process. Much of the orientation of the orisa tradition, much of the tenor of the new syncretisms will largely depend on whether African women occupy the center of the process, or are relegated to its periphery; whether they assertively make use of what Aimé Césaire called "the right to initiative" or whether, on the contrary, they remain passive consumers in an assigned place in the global chain of consumers; whether they creatively invent new forms of solidarity and understanding with women and also men of other religious traditions, in an effort to collectively visualize and promote more humane forms of coexistence that transcend *homo economicus*'s dreams of material satisfaction, thereby aspiring to new forms of spirituality that are compatible and commensurable with true globalization, which cannot be synonymous with homogenization.

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