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Benin Traditional vs. The Holy Aruosa Religions: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract. This work is a critical evaluation of the traditional religion (worship of God through deities) vis-a-vis the emergent Holy Aruosa religion (direct worship of God, without intermediary) among the Benin of Nigeria. The work traces the histories of both religious approaches and argues that the Benin people were exposed to Western cultural influences and civilization which in turn necessitated a mixture of traditional religion and Christianity known as the Holy Aruosa. The literary research work is conducted among Benin people of Edo state, looking into written records and conducting oral tradition. The work examines the interaction between Holy Aruosa and Benin traditional religion. It gives insight into the traditional and religious lives of the people as a means of unification, identification, socialization, social stratification and ways of appreciating God (Osanobua) and posits that Holy Aruosa best represents this channel. It argues that the Holy Aruosa emerged as a response to new alignments in the social structure. The works indicates that the Benin elite-introducers of the new religion also achieved another purpose being able to modify one aspect of the indigenous religious system: the ritual approach to Osanobua. The research therefore concludes that the Benin traditional religion is the matrix for the Holy Aruosa institution; hence, Holy Aruosa religion is an offshoot of Benin traditional religion, noting, however, that the adherents of Benin traditional religion remain undaunted in their worship of Ogun, Olokun, the ancestors and the hero-divinities.

Keywords: Holy Aruosa, Benin Traditional Religion, Deities

1. Introduction

The importance of religion in any human community cannot be over emphasized. Man's need to reach out to the Divine Being, higher and mightier than himself appears to be both basic and universal. According to Banton (Kehinde, 2013, 52), "from the beginning, man felt this need when mystified by the forces of nature, threatened by ferocious wild beasts and perplexed by death and the hereafter." This, they say, coupled with the fear of the unknown, brought about the birth of religion. The affirmation of transcendental beings is the core of religion. In line with this statement, Kalu (1998) asserts that hardly did any human civilization row in early times without giving due recognition to religion.

Awolalu and Dopamu (1979) contend that before the advent of foreign religions there had been the indigenous religion upheld by our fore-fathers and passed on from them to succeeding generations. This was the religion whose founder cannot be traced no matter how far back we go into history. We may not be wrong to assert that religion is as old as the first man who ever lived. This was the religion which emerged from the sustaining faith held by the forebears of the present generation of Africans and which is being practiced today in various forms and intensities by a good number of Nigerians, openly or surreptitiously.

Mbiti (1991) acknowledged that religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it. Also, his subsequent remark that a study of the religious systems is, therefore, ultimately a study of the people themselves in all complexities, lends credence to the close connection between indigenous Benin traditional religion, Holy Aruosa and Benin culture. More importantly, the African situation is one in which life is not divided artificially into the sacred and the secular, one in which reality is regarded as one, and in which the things of

earth (material things and man's daily doings and involvements) have meaning only in terms of the spiritual reckoning with the material (Idowu, 1973). So, even though Benins conceptualize a dualistic cosmos – the material and the spiritual – the two realms often overlap; and without one the other will not be fully realized. For this reason, in traditional Benin, beings in this world have their spiritual equivalents, of which their material expression is but a manifestation. Achebe in Nwoga (1998, 33) poetically captures it thus: "Wherever something stands, something stands beside it."

Thus, in Benin, the traditional religion provides a model for interpreting natural phenomena and features of the environment, as well as understanding and legitimization of socio-economic and religio-political institutions. In this way, the indigenous religion exercises a moderating influence through taboos and a complex network of rituals, to define man's relationship with nature. So in Benin, the indigenous religion is an inevitable tool and a necessary gate-way into understanding and appreciating the aesthetic values of nature and the work of arts generally.

In traditional Benin Kingdom, religion has been an important aspect of culture. It was in line with this statement, that in 1945 the Oba Akenzua II and the titled chiefs of Benin Kingdom met to re-establish the Holy Aruosa, which was their forefathers' simple way of worshipping the Supreme Divinity. They claimed that Osanobua (God) heard and spoke to the ancient Benins; that the Christian way of worshipping "God" does not really bring any new information to the Benin. They also claimed that the ancient Benins actually worshipped God before the white man came (Akenzua, 1946). The general purpose for the re-establishment of the Holy Aruosa are threefold. First, to worship *Osanobua* in a simple, practical and undogmatic way. Second, to make known to the world the meaning and significance of Benin national festivals and lastly, to preserve Benin customs, traditions and tribal identity. The Holy Aruosa founders used the Christian churches as models for its ritual framework, but reject the Christian content. They have a church, a hierarchical priesthood, their own creed, a catechism, scriptures, hymns and a choir. The founders emptied the Christian church of its content and substituted its content taken from their own religious system. For example, the Holy Aruosa church is really only a modernization of the ritual approach to *Osanobua.* They did not ask for a radical break with the traditional religious system. Thus worship at the Aruosa shrine (church) falls within the Benin traditional religious system.

What interests the researcher in carrying out this research work is the conflicting arguments between Holy Arousa and Benin traditional religion. For instance, some people believe that Holy Aruosa is an offshoot of Benin traditional religion while others see it as a denomination in the Christian church; others believe that it is a cult. It is on this premise that the researcher is poised for a better explanation. We shall do this, by making apparent the dialectic of the problem (by bringing to the fore the phenomenological appraisal of Benin traditional religion and Holy Aruosa Cult) and in our evaluation, we shall argue for what we take to be their proper resolution. It is envisaged that the study will bring to the fore the major tenets of Holy Arousa and Benin traditional religion and reasons why one can possibly say that Holy Aruosa is an offshoot of Benin traditional religion.

2. Benin Traditional Religion

The various divinities in the Benin Cosmology are not simply refractions of the attributes of a universal spirit. They are categories of being having a separate existence who can be differentiated from each other. The Benin world is bipartite. Osanobua is believed to be the founder of the divinity-order (*erimwin*) and the creator of the world of man and nature (*agbon*). All of the divinities live in *erimwin* and communicate with man who lives in *agbon*. The Benin cosmology is hierarchically structured. The status and role of the divinities is believed to have been set by Osanobua who has created all things. He has delegated varying degrees of power to the divinities, giving them particular spheres of influence in *agbon*. Each of the divinities has his allotted place in the cosmology.

2.1 Four categories of Benin Cosmology

According to Bradbury (1957) there are four categories of being in the Benin cosmology.

Divinities who have never been incarnated as human beings

Spirits of the departed

Hero-divinities associated with natural features of the environment.

Personal spirits and powers

1. Divinities who have never been incarnated as human beings: Osanobua, Olokun, Ogun, Ogiuwu, Obiemwen, Osun and Esu. Although none of these divinities has ever been incarnated as human beings, we need a further means of differentiating them. *Olokun* and *Ogun* are two of the most important divinities in the Benin traditional religion. Both of these beings could be differentiated from the others by virtue of their ability to possess the priest (*Ohen*). Osanobua has never been known to possess any man.

Osanobua, Olokun, Ogun and Osun are all served by *ohen*. *Esu* is not. Yet of the four divinities just mentioned, only *Osun* is limited to a domestic sphere. *Osun* has not become the centre of cults appealing to a wide audience. *Osanobua* and *Olokun* are associated with everything that promotes harmony in the Benin Culture. In contrast to the nature of *Osanobua* and *Olokun, Ogun* is temperamental and destructive. *Olokun* is never linked with anything associated with evil or death. And *Esu* is never linked with anything good. Thus, though all the divinities in category one have in common the fact that they were never human, their natures and attributes differ considerably.

2. Spirit of the departed: This classification is useful and Bradbury makes the distinction between the collective ancestors (*Edion*) and the individual ancestors (*Erha*). Bradbury (1997), distinguishes six collectivities: the collective ancestors of a group, a ward, an extended family, past worshippers of the divinity, a place associated and the *edion* of all Benin people.

3. Hero-divinities: By heroic is meant demonstration of supernatural characteristics during life lived in *agbon* (the world of man and nature). The hero-divinities were recognized by the Benin but were not acclaimed. They were incarnated because of their supernatural powers. *Ovia, Okhaube, Ake, Odiggi* are a few of such transformed spirits.

4. Personal spirits and powers: This category is the most difficult in any analysis of the Benin religious system. The concept of spiritual counter part (*Ehi*) is common to a number of cultures in West Africa.

Uchendu (1995) mentions the concept of *Ehi*. The Benin belief in *Ehi* can only be understood in the light of other data on the Benin concepts of the personality. Essentially every individual is thought of as having two parts: the living person in *agbon* and the spiritual counterpart *Ehi* who is in *erimwin*. An *Ehi* is believed by the Benin to intercede on their behalf before Osanobua. Sacrifices are offered to an *Ehi* as the Benin try to influence the direction of their life.

The Benin also offer sacrifices to their head (*uhun*). The head is recognized by the Benin to be the seat judgment. A man is spoken of as having a "good head" or a "bad head" according to his fate or fortune in life.

The Benin also have another unusual sacrifice. The term (*obo*) is believed to be the seat of the power of accomplishing things (*etin*). Bradbury states that its "worship is particularly characteristic of warriors but is also practiced by other wealth and high-ranking persons. In practice the Benin seem to be sacrificing to their *uhun*, but when I questioned informants I found that there is an actual entity in *erimwin* who is the recipient of the sacrifice. Of all the sacrifices made to the various divinities, those offered to an *uhun* and an *obo* are the most ambiguous.

Holy Aruosa in Benin Kingdom

In 1945 the Oba Akenzua II and the titled chiefs met to re-establish their forefathers simple way of worshipping the supreme divinity. They claimed that Osanobua heard and spoke to the ancient Benins; that the Christian way of worshipping "God" does not really bring any new information to the Benin. They also claimed that the ancient Benins actually worshipped God before the white man came in the manner which has been stated above (Akenzua, 1946).

The Benin people have always had an altar to *Osanobua*. It was placed in a central place in the city. Everything was done in white. All that was required to represent Him were the *ukhure, uwenrhiontan* with a parrot tail feather on one end, a small pot containing water, chalk, *ada, eben* and some pieces of white and red cloth (*ododo*). It was at this altar that *Osanobua* was believed to have descended in times past. The *Ohensa* (priest of Osanobua) made sacrifices under the instruction of the Oba at the Aruosa. The Oba was the sole custodian of the Aruosa appointing the *ohensa* and seeing about the sacrifices.

The purpose of sacrifice was for the general protection of the Benin nation. Every year via

the sacrifice-media the *ohensa* on behalf of the Benin people, communicated the Benin thankfulness for the blessings of the past year. But the sacrifice had a dual meaning as the Benin also sought for protection in the coming year. In times of serious epidemic the *ohensa* would try and communicate with *Osanobua* in order to avert the coming epidemic which might have been foretold by one of the Oba's court diviners. In Benin City, from September, 1966 to August, 1967, there were a number of occasions when directives came from the palace that an epidemic was coming. This led to the sacrifice of a number of items at the Ikpoba River (Okao, personal communication, 19 February, 2017))

According to Akenzua (1946), the traditional leaders of Benin claimed in 1945 that the Holy Aruosa or Benin national church of God began in the reign of Oba Esigie in the early 1500. It is said that the Portuguese Catholics came to Benin in the reign of the warriors Oba, Ozulua in 1481. He refused to allow them to stay. But in the reign of Esigie, the Catholics were permitted to establish a church, traditionally believed to have been at the present site of the Aruosa church on Akpavkpava Street. The churches were left in the hands of the native Reverend Fathers who, as tradition has it, introduced some indigenous practices into the services. Roman Catholicism was thus corrupted, eventually being replaced by a state altar at the location of the old church. On December 11, 1945 Oba Akenzua II of Benin decided to re-establish the Aruosa. According to Akenzua II (1946), the Benin have always worshipped Osanobua (who is identified with the Christian God) long before the coming of the white man. He states that the forefathers' way of approaching Osanobua was in need of modernization. He further stated that, it was not the content of their belief in Osanobua that needed change, but the ritual approach to Him. He said that there was now no need to sacrifice animals to the supreme Divinity, nor to represent Osanobua symbolically.

Benin traditional Divinities represented in some traditional stories in the Book of Holy Aruosa

In book 1, page 7 we learn that Osanobua received prayers and sacrifices. The king went to Aruosa at once with four kola nuts and made a sacrifice to Osanobua. He prayed in this manner. "Osanobua, grant that I should have the upper hand over the rebel". He broke the kolanuts and placed one piece on the altar.

In the story of Ogbeide (Book I, p. 8-11) we read of one Ogbeide who had exceptional knowledge of medicines. One day he went to the king's palace and spoke to the king in this manner. "O king, live forever! Osanobua has asked me to give you and your people the following commandments. This is a typical example of the Benin belief that some indivduals have special knowledge of Osanobua.

Included in Book 1 is a story of the creation of man and woman. The story seems to follow the Christian account of creation excepting that Osanobua consults his council of spirits (*Obiemwen and Olokun*) before creating man. Man is to be created to glorify and adore Osanobua even as the spirits. Although it is difficult to separate the Christian influences from the story there is a distinctly Benin belief in the myth. After creating the creatures, all the spirits beseech Osanobua: "they and their children's children must revisit and re-inhabit the earth again and again fourteen times. At the end of the sojourn they must return to the abode of the spirits and stay forever in peace and happiness among the spirits. Then they shall become immortal and take their position among the spirits glorifying me forever. I shall assign a place for them in the abode of the spirits according to their good works and degree of purity, holiness, excellence and love for me and for one another while they lived on the earth. Each generation shall bring forth children, who have never visited the earth before, so that the world shall remain populated forever. The Benin belief in reincarnation is found in this myth.

In Book II, p. 5 we find a story about *Esu* who was very harsh, unkind and ungrateful. In this myth the following lines are found. In those days mortals used to visit father God in the abode of spirits in the great beyond for consultation concerning their difficulties. It happened that these two men went to the abode of spirits in the great beyond one day for consultation with Osanobua, behold, there were scattered here and there excrements…. This nuisance was attributed to *Esu.* This corresponds with the Benin conceptualization of Esu today. It is also to be noted that the Benin once believed that certain individuals had the ability to go into the presence of Osanobua. Although there are none with this particular ability in contemporary Benin culture, the "prophetic" tradition is still very strong. It is widely

believed in Benin land that there are men with special spiritual insight. These men will be chosen by the various divinities.

Similarities and Dissimilarities of Holy Aruosa and Benin Traditional Religion

From the descriptions in the previous sections, one can possibly say that Holy Aruosa is an offshoot of Benin traditional religion. The Holy Aruosa church will rather be viewed as a response to new structural alignments in the social order. When Akenzua II was coronated in 1933, schools had been introduced for quite a few years, there were new economic opportunities and a growing intelligentsia of teachers, clerks and civil servants whose literacy gave them access to western political ideologies. Many Benin people had interests in timber and other commercial enterprises. The Oba himself belonged to the intelligentsia and so did some of his closest associates, but there were others who saw the growing power of the palace clique as an obstacle to their own interests (Bradbury 1967).

The Holy Aruosa emerged as a response to new alignments in the social structure. The Benin elite also achieved another purpose. They were able to modify one aspect of the indigenous religious system: the ritual approach to Osanobua. In no way did the Benin feel that their traditional religion was exhausted. They did recognize a need for change. Possibly they thought that Osanobua would assist them in upholding Benin values against these anti-Benin influences if they honour him in this new way. The Holy Aruosa illustrates an important theme in the Benin religious system. The system is able to adjust to new structural developments as well as new ideas resulting from culture contact.

The Benin Traditional Religious System has undergone significant changes over the last hundred years. Some divinities have died, or have receded into the twilight (For example, *Obiemwen* and *Ogiuwu*); others have adjusted to social change resulting from the encounter with western religious, economic and political ideas and behaviour patterns.

The Holy Aruosa founders used the Christian churches as models for its ritual framework, but reject the Christian content. They have a church, an hierarchical priesthood, their own creed, a catechism, scriptures, hymns and a choir. This is different from Benin traditional religion where there are no churches or house, no choir or creed and no scripture. Moreover, Benin Traditional Religion has no written documents while Holy Aruosa has scripture and books. But the founders have emptied the Christian church of its content and substituted its content taken from their own religious system for instance, they do not belief in Jesus Christ but the worshipers at Holy Aruosa still reverence the deities in Benin traditional religion. Therefore, one can reasonably say that Holy Aruosa church is really only a modernization of the Benin traditional religion. The adherents of Holy Aruosa did not ask for a radical break with the traditional religious system. Thus, worship at the Aruosa cult (church) falls within the Benin traditional religious system.

Their Similarities

- Both are meant to preserve the cultural heritage of Benin people
- Both have reverence to the deities and hero spirits
- Both Pray directly to Osanobua (God)

Their Dissimilarities

Holy Aruosa	**Benin Traditional Religion**
The Holy Aruosa founders used the Christian churches as models for its ritual framework	Benin traditional religion existed before Christianity in Benin, has its own model of rituals
Worship in the church	Worship in the Shrine
Hierarchical priesthood	Each deity has its own priest
Has scriptures, books and hymn books	Mostly oral tradition
No blood sacrifice	Still offer blood sacrifice

3. Conclusion

As we have seen, religion in Benin is not a mere contrast between the old and the new. The introduction of new ideas, beliefs and ritual patterns has led to the phenomenon of syncretism: the blending of two or more religious systems to form something that is neither, but related to both. It is easy to notice that the Benins have numerous /religions/cults to

choose from to help them solve their problems and relate to a changing society. However, the old people and the semi-educated still adhere to the traditional system in its modified form, and the professing of Christians cannot escape the influence of problem-solving divinities, the evil forces which are believed to disrupt and hinder progress and the responsibilities of the burial ceremony. The belief in witchcraft is still widespread, and a Christian does not find it contradictory to visit the diviner or seek some protection from the witches.

From what we have discussed so far, the Benin people were exposed to outside cultural influences and civilization which in turn introduced a congruence of traditional religion and Christianity known as the Holy Aruosa. However, the adherents of Benin traditional religion remain undaunted in their worship of *Ogun*, *Olokun*, the ancestors and the hero-divinities. The coming of Christianity has had little success in eradicating traditional religious practices. We therefore conclude that the Benin Traditional Religion was the matrix for the Holy Arauosa. Hence, it is difficult to predict the future of the Benin traditional religion, but I think that the system is far from declining, and that it will continue to be one of the options in the market-place of competing belief systems

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