

# The Transition from Yorùbá Metaphysics to Islamic Aesthetics in Ọlánrewájú Adéṣòjù's Poetry

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## Abstract

This paper explores the poetry of Ọlánrewájú Adéṣòjù, a major contemporary Yorùbá poet, based in Ibadan, southwestern Nigeria. Much of the scholarship on the poet focuses purely on his sociopolitical interest, but the development of his craft has been largely ignored. This paper examines peculiar features of Adéṣòjù's poetry based on its fusion of Yorùbá cultural and Islamic religious values with the view to theoretically characterizing his practice. It draws on purposefully selected, recorded audio poetic compositions of Adéṣòjù produced between 1974 and 2012 in order to yield a comprehensive view of his poetics. It employs hybridity, an aspect of postcolonial theory advanced by Homi Bhabha, as a theoretical framework to analyze the texts. The essay reveals that Adéṣòjù's poetry grows from the simple narration of the Yorùbá traditional worldview, identity, and *òrìṣà* pantheon to become an instrument of radical Islamic ideology. It concludes that the integration of the indigenous and the Islamic cultural values in the work of Adéṣòjù results in a unique poetic idiom in Yorùbá poetry.

## Introduction

Adéṣòjù's work represents an important phase in the development of modern Yorùbá poetry because of his pioneering role in the dissemination of Yorùbá poetry through audio recordings. He is one of the most prolific and influential practitioners of modern Yorùbá poetry. Adéṣòjù's poetry is also unique because of the complexity of his immersion in Yorùbá artistic conventions and Islamic values. This confluence has resulted in a variant of

Yorùbá poetry that is uniquely his. His corpus includes a published Yorùbá poetry collection, two dramatic texts, and eighty-nine recorded performances on phonograph records, cassettes, and compact discs. Although Adéṣòjù is best known to the Yorùbá-speaking public as a radio poet and one who circulates modern Yorùbá poetry on discs, the impact of his poetry spreads to the larger Nigerian context on account of its social relevance. He creatively adapts his practice to changing modes in media usage and technological innovations.

Despite being the most articulate promoter of modern Yorùbá poetry, Adéṣòju has been largely marginalized by scholars. A holistic and comprehensive engagement of Ọlánrewájù Adéṣòju's poetry, emphasizing the hybrid nature, has not been done. Paying attention to this unexplored area enhances the understanding of the complex dynamics in Adéṣòju's poetry and broadens its recognition within the context of the larger Yorùbá poetic tradition. This paper, therefore, pays attention to what he has produced, how his poetry has evolved, and his idea of a poet.

The first effort that brought attention to Adéṣòju's poetry is a study of another Yorùbá poet, *Adéḃáyò Fálétí: A Study of His Poems*, by Olatunde Olatunji. He identifies Ọlánrewájù Adéṣòjù as an example of a commercial poet and also portrays him as lacking originality in his compositions. Adéyínká Fọlọrunṣọ adopts a similar outlook, degrading the significance of Adéṣòju's poetry and assailing his adherence to sociopolitical engagements and praise-singing. A considerable amount of literature has also investigated Adéṣòju's contribution alongside other Yorùbá cultural producers regarding the popular struggle against military rule in Nigeria (Williams 1996, Haynes 2001, Olúkòtún 2002, Adágúnodò 2003, and Ojọ 2007). More recent studies demonstrate that there is more to Adéṣòju's poetry than many critical studies have recognized (Nnodim 2002, Okunoye 2010). The present essay provides a distinctive approach from previous attempts through its reading of Adéṣòju's poetry based on its hybrid constitution. This perspective explains why the notion of hybridity, emanating from a postcolonial theoretical perspective associated with Homi Bhabha, is appropriate for the engagement of Adéṣòju's work. The concept of hybridity in the context of the essay is a modification of the original conception in Bhabha's thought in the sense that its conventional insertion within postcolonial theory did not necessarily anticipate its application beyond the colonial context. The collision of Islam and the Yorùbá tradition in shaping Adéṣòju's unique poetic idiom lends itself to this reading and only reveals how the idea of hybridity operates beyond the spheres of conventional postcolonial studies.

The notion of hybridity has been broadened from its manifestation in relation to object, plant, or person of mixed origins to include 'anything of

heterogeneous origins or incongruous parts.<sup>1</sup> Postcolonial hybridity as proposed by Homi Bhabha explores the collision and fusion of two hitherto relatively distinct cultures, identities, forms, styles, or ideas. The location of the representation of identity in Bhabha's work is the 'threshold of the border,' an 'in-between,' 'beyond,' and a newly constructed space.<sup>2</sup> Bhabha's conceptualization of hybridity as "the borderline work of culture" suggests the possibility of utilizing available resources for double perspectives, juxtaposition, and integration. The cultural interactions may not necessarily be smooth, as hybridity is a cold war, involving intricate processes of cultural contact, intrusion, fusion, and disjunction. The question of the identity of the artist/poet/intellectual frequently arises as one negotiates the intersection of an art that speaks from 'two places at once' in a rapidly changing society.

Apart from Bhabha's theory of hybridity, this essay also finds relevant Ali Mazrui's attribution of the nature of African cultural influence to a 'triple heritage'—the traditional, the Islamic, and the Western.<sup>3</sup> Mazrui's perspective exposes the theoretical apprehension of the postcolonial identity and creates a basis for our discussion in the sense of admitting that the influence of foreign culture significantly defines identities in a postcolonial context. Mazrui's work on the triple heritage is complemented by Edward Said's argument that, because of imperialism, 'all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid.'<sup>4</sup> Hybridity, therefore, constitutes an essential aspect of postcolonial context, as it rejects cultural confinement and reaches out to forms of expression and experiences beyond established boundaries.

Adépo`jù is a complex and multifaceted personality. He is an author, poet, Islamic preacher, and founder of an Islamic sect. He is the most self-conscious propagator of *ewi* (modern Yorùbá poetry), a vibrant and dynamic form that he enlists for the articulation of Yorùbá values, cultural nationalism, and identity. In recognition of his contribution to Yorùbá culture, he has been conferred with the traditional title of *Ààrẹ̀ Aláṣà* (custodian of culture) of Ibadan in southwestern Nigeria in 1984 by the 37<sup>th</sup> Olubadan of Ibadan, the late Oba Yesufu Asanike.

Studying the many different shades of Adépo`jù's artistic influence is vital for understanding the development of his identity. A proper comprehension of his art must recognize the influences of the Yorùbá socio-culture, his interaction with Western literacy and media, and the interaction with Wahhabi-inspired Islam. His birth and early life in the very traditional and cultural environment of the Yorùbá has become a feature that resonates in his works.

1 Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 1.

2 *Ibid.*, 217.

3 Ali Mazrui, *The Africans: A Triple Heritage* (New York: Little Brown and Co, 1986), 13.

4 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993).

He frequently declares, self-assuredly, 'I grew up independently of any one as a poet.'<sup>5</sup> His parents did not send him to school because they were illiterates and did not value Western education. But he learned to read and write in both Yorùbá and English through self-effort. His participation in communal celebrations and traditional festivals contributed to his mastery of the verses of Yorùbá divinities, including Ifá Ọ̀rúnmilà (divination deity), Ọ̀gún (deity of Iron), Şàngó (deity of thunder), and the ancestral cult at an early stage. This traditional link is evident in his only poetry collection, *Ìrònú Akéwì*, which is framed in the idiom of an accomplished oral poet.

Although Adépòjù is a 'local intellectual,' his contact with Western literacy is highly significant to his identity formation. His successful attempt at overcoming the limitation of illiteracy and the attainment of the position of an accomplished modern Yorùbá poet, testify to a life of resilience and sheer determination. The acquisition of Western literacy enables him to strengthen his self-conscious identity as a 'modern' Yorùbá poet. The interaction of the oral and the written makes *ewì* 'modern' because only those poets who can read and write in Yorùbá practice it.<sup>6</sup> Adépòjù's exposure to functional literacy granted him the opportunity to interact with the first generation of modern Yorùbá poets and the first elite cluster of university-educated people in Yorùbaland. The poetry group *Egbé Ìkéwì Yorùbá*, which was established in Ibadan in 1958, and which later became *Egbé Ìjìnlẹ̀ Yorùbá* (Yorùbá Renaissance Society), fostered creative efflorescence through reading sessions, discussions, and the publication of a literary magazine, *Olókun*, which defined the character of modern Yorùbá poetry. It was this environment that nourished Adépòjù to early maturity as a poet, after he had worked with Adéagbo Akínjògbìn, one of the co-founders of the Yorùbá poetry society, as a houseboy.

New opportunities for creative development emerged through Adépòjù's position as a freelance presenter at the Western Nigeria Broadcasting Service/Television (WNBS/TV) in 1964. His interaction with Adébáyò Fálétí, an 'elder poet,' provided Adépòjù the best opportunity to exhibit his talent. The poet dexterously appropriated the broadcasting media outlets of radio and television to strengthen his art and to gain public recognition. Adépòjù left broadcasting in 1974 and established a recording studio and a record label, Lanrad Records. The decision enabled him to appropriate the technology of broadcasting media to the practice of reading *ewì* on cassettes and discs, which represented a quick adeptness in knowledge transfer by the poet. He effectively

5 Stephen Ogundipe, Interview with Chief Olanrewaju Adepoju, in "Hybridity and the Construction of Olanrewaju Adepoju's Poetry," PhD diss., Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, 2015), 270–75.

6 Adeagbo Akinjogbin, *Ewi Iwoyi*. Glasgow: Collins, 1969.

employed a peculiar form of address and creatively adapted a commercial model for his practice of *ewi* as testimonies of his link with modernity. He also created a wider scope of sociopolitical engagement for his poetry, which was impossible at the government-controlled media establishment. In addition, the relatively inexpensive technology of records, cassettes, and CDs made his poetry to be more accessible to many people, and this action inevitably popularized Yorùbá poetry. The dissemination of commercially produced *ewi* on LPs provided an alternative channel to the audience, who could intersperse *ewi* and music in their listening enjoyment.

The most distinct expression of the character of Adéṣòju's poetry came through the change of religion from Christianity to Islam in 1985. Following his acceptance of Islam, there has been a considerable change in his religious perspective. His exposure to Islamic fundamentalism resulted in changes in religious values, attitudes, and expressive modes, and in his understanding of the function of poetry. This outlook is reflected in the transformation of his poetry from mostly Yorùbá myths and spirituality (lyrics of the Ifa oracle) to Islamic sermon (*nàsià*). His establishment of an Islamic sect, the Universal Muslim Brotherhood (*Jam'iyyatil-Ukwatil-Islamitil Aalamiyah*), was inspired by the religious fundamentalist precepts and teachings of the Wahhabis, the official religious group of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The Wahhabis are a movement of Islamic thought that was inaugurated by Ibn Hanbal (780–855) with the aim of establishing a new social movement in which Islam holds a prominent place.<sup>7</sup> The Wahhabis also operate under the rubric of the Salafis,<sup>8</sup> in view of their call for a 'return of Islam to the standard of the Prophet.'<sup>9</sup>

The conventional understanding of Islam among Muslims often invokes the religion as a timeless, unchanging, and universal faith. The common identity as Muslims is fostered through the Arabic language, the Holy Quran, the Hadith, and the five pillars of Islam. In spite of this transnational identity as Muslims, several scholars agree that the assumption of roots in a uniform, singularly orthodox form of Islam is incapable of accounting for the wide range of conflicting cultural practices and viewpoints (see Gellner 1981, Asad 1986, Starrett 1997, Soares and Otayele 2007, and Loimeier 2013). An alternative proposition is the paradigm of multiple cultures and societies in which elements of Islamic religion and cultures are integrated into a plurality

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7 Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, *The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam* (Plainfield: American Trust, 1994).

8 The Salafis were the first three generations that represented the golden age of Islam. They were often referred to as Islamic 'predecessors,' 'pious ancestors,' 'pious successors' of the Holy Prophet.

9 This is the idiom of those who venerate the Salafis. It derives from the idea of weaving a future out of a distant past.

of local contexts, suggesting local adaptation of Islam (Geertz 1968, El-Zein 1977, Harrow 1991, and Loimeier 2013). According to Loimeier, Islam is too diverse to support the idea of a single expression.<sup>10</sup> He, therefore argues for the localization of Islam within specific communities such as ‘Hausa Islam’ or ‘Yoruba Islam,’ suggesting multiple faces of Islam. While the ‘localized’ Islam is assimilative in character, the ‘orthodox’ Islam assumes a pure form canvassed through the ideology of various Islamic reformist movements, including the Wahhabis, the Salafis, and other Islamic fundamentalists. The tension between the two sets of polarities is central to the understanding of Adépòjù’s ambiguous relationship between Yorùbá culture and Islam.

Adépòjù considers himself as a professional Yorùbá poet and claims the self-conscious title of ‘king of Yorùbá poets.’ His contemporaries and critics refer to him either as a commercial poet or a scavenger poet. Adépòjù has been left out of serious consideration of Yorùbá creative practice because of his commercialization of Yorùbá poetry. His being a ‘professional’ poet is contrary to the dispositions of the first generation of modern Yorùbá poets, who are scholar-poets, including Adéagbo Akínjògbìn, Adébóyè Babalólá, Adébáyò Fálétí, Láwuyí Ogúnníran, Afólábí Olábímtán, and Olatúnbòsún Oládàpò. The first generation of modern Yorùbá poets was the first elite cluster of university-educated people, who stirred up a wave of creative activity through the Yorùbá poetry group *Egbé Ìkéwì Yorùbá*. The poetry group fostered and developed a new guild of Yorùbá poets through reading sessions, discussions, and the publishing of a literary magazine, *Olókun* and *Ewì Ìwòyí*, the Yorùbá anthology of poetry.

The ambivalent relationship of Adépòjù’s vocation of a professional Yorùbá poet with his Islamic fundamentalist identity constitutes another source of pressure on the development of his practice. Several forceful Islamic theologians, including Hajar al-Haythami and Al Qaradawi consider poetry as *haram* (prohibited). These scholars completely reject the acceptability of poetry in Islam, warning of its hidden dangers. Al Qaradawi, for example, expresses a strong disapproval of poetry, describing it as ‘an effeminate occupation, not fitting to virile characters; a game and a diversion unbecoming of religious and serious men.’<sup>11</sup> Haythami similarly connects practicing poetry to moral and social vices, suggesting that composing panegyrics with poetic figures of speech and living as a professional poet are unacceptable in Islam.<sup>12</sup>

10 Roman Loimeier, *Muslim Societies in Africa; A Historical Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

11 Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, *The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam* (Plainfield: American Trust, 1994), 2.

12 Islamic fundamentalism is generally averse to music, poetry, and artistic works.

Considering the fact that Adéṣòjù earns his living from poetry and composes panegyrics with poetic figures of speech, there is a contradiction between his engagement of Yorùbá poetry and Islamic fundamentalism. Muslims generally believe that faith and work are inseparable; being a Muslim is part of daily life. Adéṣòjù's self-definition, therefore, constantly navigates between the Yorùbá and Islamic frames of reference. Moreover, his claim of being a 'Yorùbá' poet has been largely questioned by his admirers because of his extremist Islamic ideology. This reservation has been reflected in his poor album sales recently. His upbraiding of Yorùbá Muslim clerics for commoditizing religion equally alienates him from the mainstream Muslims. He is, therefore, too deep in Islam to be a Yorùbá poet. His experience vividly illustrates the interstices of a postcolonial identity.

Adéṣòjù, however, justifies his practice as a Yorùbá poet, declaring, 'as long as *ewi* is not against God, there is nothing wrong with it'.<sup>13</sup> He envisions Yorùbá poetry as an instrument of preaching in such a way to impart understanding of religion. His position is informed by the dynamics of Yorùbá society, which is remarkably tolerant and liberal in religious matters. Yorùbá society encourages the co-existence of traditional beliefs and other religions. And this prospect invariably makes Islam in Yorùbáland to be unique, compared to other places. Perhaps, this is why it is frequently said that *bó ti wu ni làá se imàle ẹni* (people are free to practice Islam the way they want).

Although Adéṣòjù's engagement of the very medium of poetry is problematic, his decision to communicate his Islamic spirituality in expressive terms through what he calls 'jihad poetry' is another vexatious matter. This genre suggests his double identity as a Yorùbá poet and Islamic preacher. 'Jihad poetry,' according to the poet, is 'making poetry in line with the wishes of Almighty Allah.'<sup>14</sup> The poet vividly demonstrates the outlook of a poet-preacher through the rendering of several poems promoting many aspects of the Islamic faith such as Sharia law, equity, humility, submission to authority, and social justice. He also speaks on Muslims beliefs, the oneness of God, names and attributes of God, last days, destiny, predestination, and the revelation of the Quran.

The intercultural tension is reflected further in the poet's advocacy for the destruction of artworks and sculptures erected in Nigerian cities. There are numerous statues of legendary warriors erected in several Yorùbá cities. The call for the destruction of these artworks contradicts the cultural rights of a people. The video footage demonstrating the continuous destruction of

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13 Ogundipe, 279.

14 Ogundipe, 280.



heritage sites in Iraq by Islamists provides a remarkable insight into the possibilities inherent in the anti-arts and crafts disposition of Olánrewájú Adéṣòjù. Although what is regarded as an artwork could be a result of a dominant discourse establishing its values; artefacts, creative works, festivals, and expressive arts constitute important aspects of a people's cultural heritage, of which oral poetry is also a vital part. Adéṣòjù apparently fails to recognize the link between creativity/culture and religion.

Olánrewájú Adéṣòjù takes very seriously the sociopolitical complexities of contemporary Nigerian society. He claims to be a public intellectual as a poet, 'speaking the truth to those in power,'<sup>15</sup> and exhibiting an uncanny passion for the well-being of the poor and the less-privileged. His poetry transcends any private emotion as he consciously addresses his works to trend within his immediate Yorùbá society and at the national level, providing a national character to his artistic imagination. Adéṣòjù appears to recognize *ewi* as a vehicle to propagate a creed. According to him, 'constructive and stout defense of social good form [is] the primary mandate of my poetry.'<sup>16</sup> But this altruism is hardly the case at all time.

Adéṣòjù's poetry is also characterized by ambivalences, inconsistencies in sociopolitical and human rights commentaries. He reinforces a narrow, minimal perspective on human rights that derives ultimately from his fundamentalist Islamic ideas. The poet also supports the restriction of women from the public sphere and of the freedom of religion of *òrìsà* worshippers. In *Òfin Olórún* (God's Commandment) Adéṣòjù declares:

*Òfin tí Olúwa mí ẹ̀ ẹ̀ lóri àwọn obìnrin  
Nínlá ni, ó tóbi yéye  
Èwò ò ní lá ni  
Kí obìnrin máa bá wa sòrò l'áwùjọ  
Èni tó bá fẹ́  
Kó gbó, kó ẹ̀ ẹ̀ oríire*

God's law regarding women  
It is unusual and very firm  
It is a forbidden thing  
For a woman to address men in public  
If you like  
Do listen and be blessed

15 Edward Said, *Representation of the Public Intellectual* (New York: Random House, 1994), 85.

16 Ogundipe, 277.



His call for the enforcement of Sharia as a legal alternative similarly negates freedom of religion and human rights that he eloquently promotes. His public display of Islamic piety and fundamentalist ethos considerably affects his vision of the poet as public spokesperson with respect to social justice and good governance. His initial aversion to religious extremism in *Má Gba wèrè Mésin* (Do Not Be a Religious Extremist) has been replaced with religious intolerance through his condemnation of other religions. The interaction of indigenous poetic conventions and received religious ideology has resulted in split identities and contradictions in his artistic engagement. The effect of such a decision has continued to affect the criticism of Adépòjù's poetry. The emergence of the foregoing trends in the artistic development of Adépòjù is vividly illustrated in the subsequent paragraphs as we engage the two phases of his practice.

### Early Poetry: Yorùbá Metaphysics

The early poetry of Adépòjù encompasses the period 1972–1985. The period saw the publication of the poetry collection *Ìrònú Akéwì* in 1972 and the first decade of his production of audio recordings of his poetry. It was a time of experimentation with traditional oral forms and musical instruments. The experimentation largely derived from the adaptation of Yorùbá oral poetic forms such as *Ifá* (divination poetry), *ràrà* (chanting), *ofò* (incantation), and *ṣàngó pípè* (praise chants to Ṣàngo) to his poetry. These oral forms were largely mixed with ideas drawn from the Yorùbá traditional worldview, identity, and *òrìsà* pantheon.

The 1972 collection *Ìrònú Akéwì* reveals how the values that drive Adépòjù's poetry are closely tied to Yorùbá religion. The poet demonstrates the value of identifying with the Yorùbá pantheon in several ways. The various forms include panegyric performed for Ṣàngó, the Yorùbá divinity of thunder and lightning, in the collection. In *Mo Fẹ̀sùn Kàn Ó* (I Accuse You), the poet addresses the manner of rendering his poetry as 'expelling fire' like Ṣàngó, declaring (I am desirous of expelling fire like Oya's husband). The reference to Ṣàngó's attributes is probably meant to appropriate the power of the *òrìsà* through the expression of its authority (*àṣẹ*). The interaction of the poet with Yorùbá religion and philosophy is also evident in the frequent allusions to the *Ifá* corpus in several poems, including *Má Mọ̀bùn Sàya* (Never Marry a Dirty Woman), *Àgbà Ọ̀rọ̀* (Mature Counsel), and *Tèmi Yé Mi* (I Have My Reasons). In *Tèmi Yé Mi*, for example, Adépòjù claims '*mo forin difá / Ifá ẹ̀*' (I rendered my song as an Ifa oracle, it came to pass). The idea of connecting his poetry with *Ifá* metaphysics suggests that he lays claim to esoteric knowledge. There

is also an enthusiastic appeal to children to practice the traditional religion in *Ìgbà Ló Dé* (Times Change). He publicly acknowledges the society of women mediums (witches), *Ìyà mi Òṣòròngà*, in the poem *Tèmi Ní Bẹ́ Lára Mi* (I Am Not Infallible). The following verse taken from *Ìgbà Ló Dé* (Times Change) illustrates the Yorùbá religious outlook:

*Ìgbà ló dé, ìgbà ló dé.  
 Ọmọ burú tíítí,  
 Ọmọ kò níran iṣẹ́ tí baba wọ́n n' ẹ.  
 Ọmọ gò, gò, gò,  
 Ọmọ kò mọ̀rìṣà tí baba rẹ́ n' sìn.  
 Ọmọ n' bọ egúngún elégúngún,  
 Ọmọ pa tilé wọ́n run.  
 Ọmọ n' pabì fọ̀rìṣà àjẹ̀jì.  
 Òrìṣà onílẹ̀ kùí sùí gbobì lẹ́wọ̀ àrẹ̀.  
 Egúngún ilé baba ẹ̀ni ní í gbe ni.  
 Òrìṣà idílẹ̀ ẹ̀ni là á sìn.*

Times change, times change  
 A child is so perverse,  
 He does not recall his father's vocation.  
 A child is so stupid,  
 He fails to recognize the deity of his father.  
 A child is worshipping another person's masquerade,  
 The child destroys the lineage's masquerade.  
 A child is consulting for a strange deity.  
 The divinity of a native does not demand for a sacrifice from a stranger.  
 Worshipping one's ancestral masquerade only attracts blessing.  
 You worship only your family divinity.

The appeal to the younger generation to worship the *òrìṣà* and masquerades of their forebears is characteristic of the poet's disposition in his early poetry. The commentary on the people's attitude to traditional culture raises the age-old conflict between the old and the new, between tradition and modernity.

The Yorùbá religious outlook additionally finds expression in the invocation of several deities, culture heroes/heroines or ancestors in Yorùbáland in the poem *Òtító Korò* (Truth Is Bitter):

*Èyin alágbára nílẹ̀ Yorùbá!  
 Tíẹ́ ti débùgbé òótọ́  
 E má sùn lórùn*

*Eni pé ki n kú*  
*Gbogbo wọn pátá*  
*Kó fowó ara wọn şera wọn*  
*Oòduà Olofin, Qbátálá*  
*Başorun Àjàká Ajèngè-tí-è-lẹ̀-*  
*Efúufù kò fẹ̀rì*  
*È wá gbè mi lékè*  
*Gbogbo àwọn abínúẹ̀ni*  
*Òkè Ibadan, Àşàké oloímú orù*  
*Má sùn*  
*Ọ̀rányàn, Olúorogbo,*  
*Şàngó, Lákáayé*  
*È jẹ kásákòkó*  
*Kó máa bá kòkòé gbẹ*  
*Bí a ti rọ́jú pe orí akoni*  
*Gààràgà la fidà lalẹ̀.*  
*Èyin Oba aládé méré̀rèrindínlogún*  
*Ilẹ̀ Èkiti*  
*È wá gbè mí níjà*  
*Agemọ kii kú ni màjèsì n*  
*O dijó tó bá fọ́pá rìn.*

All renowned ancestors in Yorùbáland!  
 Those who have reached the habitation of truth  
 Do not be asleep in heaven  
 Anyone who says I should die  
 Let everyone  
 Face the backlash of their actions  
 Oòduà, Olofin, Qbátálá  
 Başorun Àjàká a man of peaceful disposition<sup>17</sup>  
 The wind does not befriend a drizzle  
 Come and deliver me  
 from the plot of the envious.  
 Ibadan Hill, Àşàké, the o with large breasts  
 Do not sleep.  
 Ọ̀rányàn, Olúorogbo,  
 Şàngó, Lákáayé  
 Let the one drying cocoa seed

17 Odùduwà, Ọ̀ránmíyàn, Àjàká, and Şàngó were the first four Yorùbá rulers who were deified.

Dry in the sun with it  
 As we invoke the names of heroes  
 We drag the sword on the floor  
 You sixteen kings  
 of Ekiti land  
 Come and fight for me  
*Agemo* does not die young<sup>18</sup>  
 Until he uses a walking stick.

The above poem was a response to the threat that Adepaju received following his unequivocal endorsement of Chief Obafemi Awolowo's candidacy in the poem 'Obafemi Awolowo' in 1979. Awolowo was the presidential candidate of Unity Party of Nigeria during the 1979 general elections in Nigeria.

The address to the Yorùbá divinities and culture heroes is a self-identification of the poet with their dynamic nature and absolute reliance on their protective powers. The fact that several divinities are enumerated suggests attempting to harness the range of their traits, mythical origins, and powers as *la force vitale*. The departed ancestors are recognized as great by the Yorùbá for their exemplary deeds, which qualified them for ancestral worship. Among those mentioned in the poem include Odùduwà, the deity of Ilé-Ifè regarded as the progenitor of the Yorùbá; Sàngó, the deity of thunder and lightning; and Qbátálá, the creator-divinity. Lákááyé refers to Ògún, the ambivalent deity of iron and smiths. Òkè Ìbádàn was the deified ancestor of Ibadan people. Olúorogbo was the only son of Mọ̀rèmi, whose life was offered to save the people of Ile-Ife.<sup>19</sup> Q́rányàn was the first king of Q́yó, while Qba Àjàkà succeeded Q́rányàn. By mentioning the names of the deities and mythic ancestors, the poet unconsciously provides a platform for their celebration in a culturally meaningful way. In other words, there is a fascination with Yorùbá mythic and legendary figures, whose actions and achievements speak of heroism in Adépoju's poetry. These heroes and heroines provide a platform to judge the character of the political class, and assess their performance. Due to their past roles in shaping the course of events, the heroic figures seem to be what Toyin Falola refers to as 'veritable symbols of the national life.'<sup>20</sup>

In spite of the seemingly Yorùbá identity in content and form, there is evidence of a pluralistic religious vision in his early poetry. This ambivalent theistic outlook is demonstrated through the poet's rendering of panegyrics

18 Agemo is an ancestral deity commonly celebrated in Ijebu land.

19 Experts on Ifè religious traditions claim that Olúorogbo predates Mọ̀rèmi.

20 Toyin Falola, "Yoruba Writers and the Construction of Heroes," *History in Africa* 24 (1997), 2.

to Jesus Christ (*Oríki Jèsù*), the Prophet Muhammad (*Oríki Ànábì*), and Olódùmarè (*Oríki Olódùmarè*). In *Oríki Jèsù* (In Praise of Jesus), for example, the poet integrates both the Christians' and Muslims' conceptions of Jesus. The Muslims recognize Jesus only as a prophet and not as a Son of God. Contrary to Muslims' reactions to the Sonship of Jesus, Adéṣòjù affirms the Christian perception of Jesus as a Son of God in *Oríki Jèsù*. He makes provocative portrayals of Christian and Muslim founders of faith, depicting Jesus as a Prophet (*Àpeṣere Òjísé*), suggesting him to be a forerunner of Prophet Muhammad. This depiction of Jesus typically projects Islam's perception of Jesus, but Christians will definitely find such representation unacceptable. The Being that is eulogized in the poem 'In Praise of Jesus' seems to share both Christian and Islamic beliefs:

*Òkan soṣo tí Èdùmarè bí  
Tó ju egbèé dógbòn omọ lọ  
A -gbénú -ṣolá  
Omọ Ọga àgbà  
Omọ lójú Olúwa  
Omọ aláde àlàáfíà  
Àpeṣere Òjísé*

The only begotten of Edumare  
Greater than five thousand sons  
The one who richly dwells within  
Son of the Most High  
Beloved of the Lord  
Prince of peace  
An example of the Prophet

The construction of a mingled religious persona similarly finds expression in the poet's composition for Olódùmarè ('The Praise of Olódùmarè'). The poem aggregates creeds and *oríki* of several divinities in the Yorùbá pantheon, and of Islamic and Christian beliefs. Adéṣòjù ascribes the attributes of Ọrúnmilà, the custodian of oracular knowledge, to his idea of the Supreme Being. Specific examples include allusions such as *Elẹrì í Ìpín* (the witness of creation) and *Òpitàn tó mòdí ayé, mòdí ọrun* (the custodian of knowledge that knows the origin/history of heaven and earth). The poem 'The Praise of Olódùmarè' similarly contains attributes of Sàngó, the Yorùbá divinity of thunder and lightning. A number of allusions eulogizing the thunder-deity includes *Ò-ké-pàrá sọlọrọ di jinnijinni* (the one that exclaims and the person concerned is terrified), *sángiri, làgiri, òlàgiri* (the one that breaks the wall, one that splits

the wall, splitter of walls), and *Ọba à so* (the king did not hang). The breaking and ripping of walls is an allusion to thunder strikes and the spirit of fire linked with the Yorùbá thunder divinity.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to the cognomens of Yorùbá divinities in ‘The Praise of Olódùmarè,’ the poem contains allusions to the Islamic *Shahada* (the Oneness of God) such as *Ọkan soso pére ni Ọlórún* (God is one) and *Ọba Yáárábi* (the King who occupies heaven and earth), which portray an Islamic theistic vision. Adéṣòjù also alludes to the Christian idea of God, calling the Supreme Being *Olúwa* (Lord), *Ọlórún* (God) and *Ọba tí pe ra rẹ̀ ní àwa* (The King, who calls himself we), which gives an impression of the Christian idea of the Trinity. It then becomes clear that behind Adéṣòjù’s praises of Olódùmarè is an ambivalent theistic vision in his early poetry.

The fusion is also reflected in the manner of musical accompaniment to Adéṣòjù’s poetry. Musical accompaniment features prominently in much of Ọlánrewájú Adéṣòjù’s early poetry. He employed traditional instruments such as the hunter’s flute, *dùndún* drum, and *sẹ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀* (rattles). He started with a solo *dùndún* drum accompaniment and subsequently added the hunters’ flute regularly used in the performance of *ijálá* chanters. He later introduced guitars to his work, providing a sense of visionary response to the popular musical trend and the patronage system of the 1970s. The combination of Western and traditional musical instruments was a demonstration of his embrace of old and new forms.

He stopped using guitars and jùjú beat in 1981 but retained the traditional instruments. He removed the hunter’s flute after his return from Mecca in 1995 and experimented with *bẹ̀m̀bẹ̀* (similar to the largest of the European drum set) drum used by the Muslim Ajísààri groups to wake Muslims for the early morning meal during the month of Ramadan. The introduction of the instrument at the critical point in Adéṣòjù’s career probably signifies an awakening, having just returned from the holy pilgrimage to Mecca. He completely stopped drumming in *Ta ní ń Bínú* (Who Is Angry?), declaring that his new vision of *ewi* was irreconcilable with drumming:

*Ìwọ́ tóo m̀òwe,  
Àti àsàyàn ọ̀r̀òó gbó,  
Jẹ́ ki ń kéwì fún ọ.  
Fífetì sí  
Fífarabalẹ̀  
Lewiàsikò yínn fẹ́é.*

21 See Akintunde Akinyemi, “Myths, Legends and the Poetics of Heroism in Two Yoruba Historical Plays.” *Ife Journal of Languages and Literature*, 1, 1(2013): 1–15.

*O kojá à n' lùlù sí*  
*Mo fẹ́ síná ogbòn bolẹ̀*  
*Bí ọwààwàrà òjò ní*  
*N ò ti ẹ̀ lùlù séwì mọ́*  
*O tọ́ ko yé wa*  
*Etí ò gbéjì*  
*Ilu maa gbelẹ̀*  
*N ò ní ijó ó jò*  
*Ká réti gbọ̀ nàsíà.*

You that have an understanding of proverbs,  
 And other carefully chosen words,  
 Let me render my poems to you.  
 Careful listening,  
 Being attentive,  
 These are the requirements for *ewì* of the moment.  
 It does not permit drumming  
 I want to throttle with words of wisdom  
 Like the showers of rain  
 I no longer drum to my poetry  
 It is fitting for you to know.  
 There is need for absolute concentration  
 Let drums be taken away  
 I am not willing to dance  
 So as to listen attentively to sermons.

The foregoing marks a turning point in Adéṣọ̀jù's poetry, representing the transition of his poetry from *Ifá orin* (lyric of Ifá oracle) to *nàsíà* (sermon). There is a sense of movement from the overtly Yorùbá-myth-informed poetry to that of Islamic aesthetics, a transition from indigenous aesthetics to a foreign one. In doing so, musical accompaniment, which signifies entertainment, was a serious impediment to the new perception and direction of *ewì* as an Islamic message.

### **Later Poetry and the Transition to Jihad Poetry**

The values that Adéṣọ̀jù propagates after his embrace of Islam are strictly driven by Islamic fundamentalism. He introduces Islamic preaching to Yorùbá poetry, suggesting an art that is concerned with the spiritual well-being of humankind, and individuals' usefulness in the service of their creator. The manner in which he voices disapproval of religious innovations and what



he calls 'syncretic' practices and innovative worship (*ẹ̀sìn àdádáá'lẹ̀*) of some Yorùbá Muslims attests to an outlook of religious extremism.

The fundamental Islamic vision becomes apparent through the poet's conception of a new identity for his poetry known as 'new jihad poetry' (*jiáàdì orin ewi tuntun*), suggesting 'a vision of implementing God's new society on earth' (Zeidan, 15). The outlook of a 'jihadist poet' effectively transforms him into an 'Islamist warlord.' His new self-conscious identity of *Ajagun Ní lá Mùsulùmí* (Commander of Muslims) could be interpreted as an alignment of his *ewi* with propagators of militant Islam. This identity is a striking departure from the earlier religious ecumenism and endorsement of traditional religion. The coming of the 'war commander' suggests a vision of a rampaging religious conqueror, whose task is to enforce perfection in the perceived imperfect Islamic practices in his society.

The foregoing outlook probably informs his calls for a reversal of the Sufi-inspired Islamic practices in Yorùbáland as declared in *Òfin Olorun* (God's Commandments):

*Aránnilétí dé!*  
*Olùkìlò tó hàn gbangba ni mo jẹ́ fàráyé*  
*Lánrewájú dé!*  
*Ajagun nílá de!*  
*Irọ́ pin.*  
*Àgò yà lónà fún gbogbo alábòòsí ẹ̀sìn*

The prompter is here!  
 I am a sure Messenger to the world.  
 Lanrewaju is here!  
 The war commander is here!  
 Deceit has ended.  
 Let religious charlatans give way.  
 The poet clarifies the nature of the warfare in *Tàkúté Olorun* (God's Trap):

*Ogun kùmò*  
*Ogun àdà kọ́ ni mọ̀n' wí*  
*Ogun wáàsígbàlà lán' wí*  
*Irọ́ la fẹ́ gbogun tí*  
*Íránnsẹ́ ẹ̀sù la fẹ́ bá jagun*  
*Èmi Àkànmú tí gbé wáàsí*  
*Ajagun nílá kálẹ̀ lórílẹ̀-èdè Nàìjíríà.*

It is not a war of the cudgel

Nor a war of cutlass that I am talking about  
 It is a spiritual war for salvation  
 We want to confront deception  
 We want to confront servants of Satan  
 I, Akanmu, have come with a mission  
 To propagate a militant message in Nigeria.

Unlike the militant Islamists such as Al Shabab or Boko Haram that frequently take to armed struggle in order to enforce their religious convictions, the poet interprets his Islamic mandate from a spiritual perspective. A similar call is made in the same poem, *Tàkúté Ọ̀ḷọ̀run* (God's Trap):

*Èyìn ọ̀mọ̀ ọ̀gun ìgbàlà  
 Isẹ̀ mi ti bèrẹ̀  
 Isẹ̀ tóó ẹ̀ Jànmáà  
 Ibo lẹ̀ ti rísẹ̀ ààfáà  
 Àsẹ̀ jìbiti lón' bẹ̀  
 Kò síhun tí n' jẹ̀sẹ̀ààfáà.  
 Inún' bí mi sí gbogbo èke,  
 Sí gbogbo aláábòòsí pátá poo.*

All you soldiers of salvation  
 My work has started  
 It is time to work *Jànmáà*.<sup>22</sup>  
 Where did you get the work of a cleric?  
 It is all deception  
 There is nothing like the work of a cleric.  
 I am angry with all liars.  
 I am angry with all deceivers.

The diatribe is towards professional Islamic clerics, whom he refers to as 'deceivers' and 'liars.' The poet rejects the idea of having professional clerics like Christian clergy, describing it as an Islamic aberration. He also challenges some practices of the Islamic clerics, like making talismans for people and preparing Quranic writings as medicine and divination, in *Tàkúté Ọ̀ḷọ̀run* (God's Trap):

*Mo fẹ̀ rọ̀ra ẹ̀ ibèèrè kan sii:  
 Ibo ni kùràáni gbé wí pé*

---

22 Muslim faithful.

*Kẹ ẹ máa hànṣú ta.*  
*Èsì ọrọ la fẹ gbọ lẹnu yín o*  
*Àáfáà kí ló dé?*  
*Tẹ ẹ fi n' taja òkùnkùn.*  
*Tẹ ẹ fi n' wí pé*  
*Kí wọn kó mówòádúà wa*  
*Sé Oluwa n' gba ribá?*  
*Lórìbèèrèàwa wa ọmọ aráyé ni*  
*Ká han hànṣú*  
*Ká di tírà fún ni*  
*Ọjàòkùnkùn ló já sí*  
*Àáfáà onífá ló máa n' tẹ yerùpẹ̀*  
*Òdodo Mùsùlùmí kòntí se bẹ̀*  
*Ẹbọ ni*  
*Ílànà Èsù ló jẹ́*  
*Fún ẹni tí kò bá mọ̀*

I want to ask you another question:  
 Where do you have it in the Quran  
 That you should be selling *hantu*?<sup>23</sup>  
 We want to have a response from you  
*Alfa*, what is it?  
 Why do you engage in shady deals?  
 Why did you demand for money?  
 Why charge a fee for prayers?  
 Does the Lord demand for a bribe from human beings  
 For their prayer requests?  
 Drinking Koranic writings  
 Preparing talisman for people  
 These are unwholesome practices.  
 It is a cleric-diviner who practices sand divination  
 A true Muslim does not do so  
 It is a ritual practice  
 It is a pathway of Satan  
 For those who do not know.

Prayers for the departed (*fidau*), the drinking of Quranic writings (*hantu*), sand divination, the use of talismans and granting public voice to women,

---

23 Qur'an verses written in ink, washed and stored in a bottle like a syrup, taken as medicine.

among other practices, are very common among many Yorùbá Muslims. The aforementioned practices are considered acceptable in Yorùbá society, where Islam is indigenized. However, this verse categorically decries such practices as unacceptable to Islam, and a journey through the pathway of *Shaytan* (Satan). The debate regarding the lawful (*halal*) and the unlawful (*haram*) is a continual one in Islamic societies and cultures.

Along with this interest in condemning unwholesome Islamic practices, there are concurrent lawful practices he endorses and promotes through the life history of Prophet Muhammad in *Àseyorí Ànábì* (Achievement of the Prophet), *Èmí Òkùnkùn* (Evil Spirit), *Ìdájó Òdodo* (Righteous Judgement), *Ìtàn Ànábì* (Life History of the Prophet), and *Ìsípáyá* (Revelation). The representation of Islamic practices in Adéjòjù's later poems reflects the tension between syncretism (Islamic innovations) and accepted (orthodox/tradition) practices. It is also a pointer to the dynamics of Islam within the Yorùbá society. The advocacy of Islamic principles as a means of moral and societal reconstruction has serious consequences. It suggests Islamic reform as the only solution to socioeconomic problems in the society. This possibility of a fundamentalist ethos is unattractive to several Yorùbá Muslims. This divergence probably explains why religious extremism, which the poet's outlook seems to represent, is unattractive to many Yorùbá Muslims.

The tendency towards fundamentalism finds vivid expressions in *Ìdájó Òdodo* (Righteous Judgement), which evokes issues pertaining to the introduction of Sharia in Nigeria:

*Kò sèni tó fẹ́ fi sàrià da ilú rú o*  
*Ètò wa la bèèrè fún*  
*Tí aráyé n se gbèrùmí sò mí sí*  
*Iléjòsàrià la fẹ́ ní*  
*Só dáa kó dariwo?*  
*Àwa Mùsùlùmí ni a fẹ́ sàrià*  
*Kí ló wá kan ti kírísitẹ̀ni ní bẹ̀*

Demanding for Sharia is not for social unrest  
 We are demanding for our rights  
 Everyone is contesting our demand  
 The request for a Sharia court  
 Should it generate any controversy?  
 We, the Muslims, desire the practice of Sharia  
 What is the concern of Christians?

A call for the implementation of Sharia should be of interest to non-Muslims because it represents a visible character of an Islamic state and a possible threat to the secular state policy. The introduction of Sharia in a mostly non-Muslim dominated southern part of Nigeria has the tendency to aggravate the tense religious atmosphere. This position explains why the idea of a separate legal system for Muslims may be perceived as promoting religious identity in a secular society:

*Ohun tó ɾewà tó yẹ  
Tó kan ti Kírísítẹ̀nì ní ti wọ̀n?  
Ètọ̀ ti wọ̀n pàtọ̀ ló yẹ́  
Kí Kírísítẹ̀nì kó bèèrè fún  
Bí wọ̀n bá fẹ́ ká pín ilé eḡọ̀ sí méjì  
Ká kúkú pín in.*

What is pleasurable and proper  
That should concern Christians  
Is for Christians to demand  
for their rights  
If they desire a separate legal system  
Let it be so.

A people have the right to demand that they be governed in accordance with the moral-cum-legal precepts of their religion. However, the modern nation-state must be recognized as a secular construct to prevent a situation in which several judicial systems struggle for dominance in the country. Although the justice system inherited from the colonial authorities was based on the Western-Christian legal system, associating the prevailing system with conspiracy against the Muslims is an expression of the fundamentalist's potential for over-generalization. Such resentments have dangerous consequences, as they often lead to unprovoked attacks on innocent people. The call for the implementation of Sharia probably arises out of such resentment. Such prospect has its danger, as there is the probability of subverting diversity and individual rights, which may lead to sociopolitical tyranny.

### Conclusion

Much as the driving idiom of Adéṣọ̀jù's early years largely remained Yorùbá traditional religion, his interaction with the Islamic religion provided additional stimulation for his artistic imagination. The interaction with Islam resulted in the displacement of the Yorùbá traditional outlook. The collision of

the Islamic and Yorùbá knowledge systems resulted in a fusion, which is characterized by what Bhabha calls the 'beyond.' The 'beyond,' therefore, functions as a bridge of nexus between Islam and Yorùbá traditions in his poetry.

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