

Olódumare and Esu in Yorubá Religious Thought

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Abstract

Theological and philosophical debates on deities do not end easily; rather they open new vistas of understanding and further argumentation. In a previous work, I argued that there are two pairs of Olódumare and Esu in contemporary Yorubá religious thought and praxis. This conclusion was to navigate the extreme position that Olódumare and the Christian God have nothing in common. Although Segun Ogungbemi recently maintained the strict theological and moral differences between Olódumare and God using existential lens, he has not addressed the practical reality instantiated by the contemporary Yorubá diverse worshippers. Danoye Ogúntólá-Láguda's position on Olódumare and Esu is also slightly different from Ogúngbemi's, although the former maintains a more practical posture. From their arguments I propose, in addition to my earlier two-pair argument that contemporary Yorubá may have four pairs of Olódumare and Esu: the first pair is autochthonous to the Yorubá, the second is Christian, the third Islamic, and the fourth, philosophical.

Introduction

In the field of Religious Studies, especially in African Traditional Religion, in many African universities and beyond, Bołájí Idowu's *Olódumare: God in Yorubá Belief* is a standard text, especially when discussing God. Like any good book, it has been reviewed, eulogized and criticized by scholars of different

persuasions.¹ One of the areas of strength attributed to Idowu, is that he astutely rose up to the challenge thrown to his generation to provide intellectual and theological arguments to establish the claim that Africa or the Yorubá have an idea of “God” apart from what the Europeans brought to Africa. The challenge was stupendous against the backdrop of Europeans’ long-standing wrong conception of Africa. For instance, Akínwumí unravels the spiritual undertone of the 1884/85 Berlin Conference. He asserts that it was a “spiritual partition” of Africa, not just a political partition that has become popular with the conference.² A foreground to Akínwumí’s argument is Bonk’s x-ray of the medieval mind-set about the world depicted in global cartography. It was a map that sees the world in the physicality and spatiality of European and Mediterranean cosmologies. “It is onto this familiar terrain that all of the significant historical and theological events are projected – the fall of man, the crucifixion and the apocalypse. As for the rest of the world, the greater part of Africa and Asia blurs into margins featuring elaborately grotesque illustrations of prevailing myths and savage demonic forces.”³ The worst is yet revealed by Whitfield who, after studying the map, which the Europeans construed as representing the world, says that it is a clear demonstration of “European ignorance” because “the strangest geographical feature is the shape of Africa.... No place-names appear on it.”⁴ Crisply put, the map was “a powerful, dramatic but not a logical, coherent picture of the world.”⁵ With such mind-set, the colonialists and even the missionaries were wont not to see any good spirit coming from Africa. Anyone that thinks otherwise has to prove it. That is what Idowu and others attempted to do.

One of the most caustic criticisms against Idowu and his book is that his ideas are coloured by Eurocentric and Christian scholarship and theology, and that he Christianized the Yorubá Olódumare. Being a priest himself in the Methodist Church Nigeria, his faith in God, like that of St. Anselm, must have influenced how he perceived Olódumare and God; and diligently argued to a conclusion that they are similar. But we will argue in furtherance of Olúpo-na’s position that he did not do so actually. That is, he did not Christianize the Yorubá Olódumare fully but projected him as the Yorubá conceived him.

1 E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, London: Longman, 1962.

2 Olayemi Akinwumi, “Political or Spiritual Partition: The Impact of the 1884/85 Berlin Conference on Christian Missions in Africa.” In *Christianity in Africa and African Diaspora: The Appropriation of a Scattered Heritage*, Afe Adogame, Roswith and Klaus Hock, eds., London: Continuum, 2011, 9ff.

3 Jonathan O. Bonk, “Ecclesiastical Cartography and the Invisible Continent.” In *Christianity in Africa and African Diaspora*, 20.

4 Cited in Bonk, 20.

5 *ibid*

It will be imperative for anyone contesting against Idowu's claims to generate extensive ethnographic and phenomenological data to dislodge his thesis. But one has to be sure too that such data are not colored by modern, globalization and pluralistic tendencies.⁶ According to Olúpoṅa, it has become imperative in contemporary scholarship to "rescue [Idowu] from the accusation that he Christianises African religion."⁷ The thrust of this article is on Olódumare and Èṣu within the religious pluralistic space of the Yorubá.

Ṣégún Ogúngbemí argues that though Olódumare and God share some similarities, such similarities are not enough to conclude that they are the same. I will argue that Ogúngbemí may have some good reasons to arrive at that conclusion but the method utilized is almost entirely subjective and normative. On the other hand, Èṣu has more divergent opinions than Olódumare in scholarship. Although the popular position is that Èṣu is not Satan in Judeo-Christian and Arabo-Islamic thoughts, we will argue that there is also a sense in which these conceptions are practically helpful in meaning-making within the religious pluralist Yorubá milieu. I will argue further that if we insist that these religious personalities are different, they must form pairs, each pair representing a religious tradition. Consequently, we will demonstrate that there are not less than four pairs of Olódumare and Èṣu depending on the religious and philosophical persuasions of those engaged in the arguments, and religious praxis.

The Olódumare Arguments: The Traditional Olódumare

In this section, we will deliberately leave out Idowu's discussion on Olódumare and rely on other sources to determine if Olódumare still retains those attributes with which Idowu portrayed Him. This is because some have argued that Idowu was too Eurocentric in approach and indeed Christianized Olódumare. In the course of our argument here, we will distinguish four manifestations of Olódumare among the present Yorubá people. The first is the traditional Olódumare. I borrow the phrase "the traditional Olódumare" from McKenzie.⁸ From archival materials at the Birmingham University Library, McKenzie examined letters and journals that covered the period between 1842 and 1879 and made a profile of the traditional Olódumare. By "traditional Olódumare," he refers to that pre-missionary and pre-colonial belief

6 Benson O. Igboin, "Is Olodumare, God in Yoruba Belief, God?" *Kanz Philosophia*, 4/2 (December 2014): 189-208.

7 Jacob K. Olupona, "Reinterpreting Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief." In *Under the Shelter of Olodumare: Essays in Memory of Professor E. Bolaji Idowu*, S. O. Abogunrin and I. D. Ayegboyin, eds. Ibadan: John Archers, 2014, 19.

8 P. R. McKenzie, "Olodumare and the Orisa in the Mid-nineteenth Century." In *Under the Shelter of Olodumare*, 27.

in Olódumare by the Yorubá. According to him, there is indeed an undiluted conception of Olódumare before the advent of Christianity and Islam. That belief in and conception of Olódumare clearly depict that the Yorubá did not borrow the idea of a Supreme Being from the west or Arab. In order to substantiate the position of ‘the traditional Olódumare,’ McKenzie analyses traditional Yorubá religious sayings and deeds that correspond with Christian and Islamic religions and yet remained autochthonous to them. For instance, he analyses the story of the rich man and Ehuru, a great bird that hatched on a tree used by the man to build his barn. The man spoke aloud that he was going to cut down the tree the following morning but did not add God willing. The nestlings, on hearing it, called the attention of their mother and suggested she carry them away since they could not fly yet. But their mother was not budged; she confidently told the nestlings that the man would not be able to do it since he relied on his power. That night, his wife died, and he could not cut the tree the following morning. As long as he boasted, mysterious things happened that prevented him from cutting the tree. One evening, he said, God willing, he would cut the tree the following morning, Ehuru told her nestling that it was time to go; and at that time, the nestlings were already strong enough to fly.⁹ He argues that “God willing” which is also popular among Christians and Muslims is traditional to the Yorubá as far as the records can ascertain. In traditional Yorubá theology, the belief is that if anyone believes he or she can do anything without Olódumare, such humanly planned action may not come to fruition. Stories and metaphors abound to drive home this belief. But the thrust is that what a believer proposes without recognizing Olódumare may not be accomplished.

Twenty years earlier than in 1873 when the story of the rich man and Ehuru was told, a town in Ibadan had a theophoric name: “*Bí Olórun ti ñ bẹ pelú mi bí n ko kú*” – “If God be with me and I don’t die.”¹⁰ This name simply emphasizes the belief that Olódumare has the power of life and death with him. Of course, the name of this town was not influenced by external religious persuasion. It was a product of their belief in the existence and supremacy of Olódumare as well as a relationship that exists between him and the Yorubá.

It has also been well established that prayer for long life and prosperity has always been made to Olódumare. The notion of sin and forgiveness had been recognized among the Yorubá long before their interaction with missionaries and colonialism. Here, it is important to add that the Yorubá understood the eschatological implications of unforgiven sins. Apart from the general communal thinking that sin could negatively affect the community as a whole

9 McKenzie, 27-28.

10 McKenzie, 28.

unless it was propitiated, the belief in punishment in afterlife was widespread. That is why many elders, at their dying bed, would make confession of their sins, seek forgiveness and also forgive those who had sinned against them. Dying with a clear conscience is not an imported belief; it is a human phenomenon that cannot be arrogated to any particular faith exclusively. In the same vein, prayers to Olódumare are also said by many dying persons; they do not just invoke the blessings of the ancestors but specially request Olódumare to preserve, protect and prosper the children they are leaving behind.¹¹

Now on the nature and attributes of Olódumare, sources independent of Idowu have asserted that “traditionally conceived, Olódumare is above all ultimate and primordial.”¹² James White, in 1855 had concluded that Olódumare is a Supreme Being. Not only is Olódumare believed to be the ultimate creator of the universe, he also ensures that it runs. The orisa function in accordance with their portfolios and ensure that things are in order.¹³ In the Yorubá theology of Olódumare we have a perfect moral Deity who cannot be associated with impiety as seen in the Christian God. We have a Universalist Deity who is concerned with a democratic structure of the universe depicting the way humans should relate with one another and be happy. Of course, considering Olódumare’s activities in the cosmos of humans and the mode of his operations in the theocratic pantheon as we have seen, it is morally and logically improper to equate him with the Christian God.¹⁴

Furthermore, Ogúngbemi accuses the Judeo-Christian God of genocide, arguing that the killing in war of the Amalekites limits his likelihood of a God. According to him, “God in the OT made the Israelites to be warmongers rather than peace lovers of their neighbours. It is also true that when Israelites disobeyed him they were punished and on different occasions taken into captivity. Such action in human history cannot be traced to Olódumare.”¹⁵ He concludes that Olódumare and God are “not necessarily the same. I have identified areas of authentic sameness but also dissimilarities, which make it compelling to reject the notion that the two Deities are the same.”¹⁶

11 Benson O. Igboin, “A Philosophical and Comparative Analysis of Deathbed Words in Jewish and African Milieux.” In *Decolonisation of Biblical Interpretation in Africa*, S. O. Abogunrin, et. al., eds., Ibadan: NABIS, 220-234; Benson O. Igboin, “When I Die: The Politics of the Metaphysics of Death” presented at the conference organised by the School of General Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka on the theme: Dying, Death and the Politics of After-death in the African World held between 22nd and 25th April, 2013.

12 McKenzie, 30.

13 McKenzie, 30-31.

14 Segun Ogungbemi, “A Comparative Study of Olodumare, the Yoruba Supreme Being and the Judeo-Christian God,” *Yoruba Studies Review*, 1/1 (Fall 2016): 62.

15 Ogungbemi, “A Comparative Study of Olodumare, 61-62.

16 Ogungbemi, “A Comparative Study of Olodumare, 62.

Kazeem describes Olódumare as “one who has the fullness or superlative greatness; the everlasting majesty upon whom man depends.”¹⁷ Although Olódumare possesses these attributes, he is not the same deity with the Christian God as such other attributes as omnipotence, omniscience and so forth cannot be attributed to him. Abimbola also agrees that Olódumare is not a supreme being in the sense that it is now commonly understood. He disagrees with Bolájí Idowú and others who argue that Olódumare is a supreme being. Olódumare, he argues, is a High Deity rather than a supreme being. Olódumare is eternally co-existent with other deities like Esù, Obatalá and Ifá. Olódumare can only be regarded as supreme in terms of political administration of the universe.¹⁸ Abimbólá adds: “In issues of political administration of the cosmos, Olódumare is supreme. In issues of knowledge and wisdom, Ifá is supreme. In issues of creation and corporeality, Obatalá is supreme.”¹⁹ For Olúpona, Olódumare cannot be localized to the Yorubá worldview alone; ‘he’ (Abimbola argues that Olódumare should not be thought in gender form) is a universal God “Olódumare, the Supreme Being, decided to create the world in the sacred city of Ile-Ife.... The same Ile-Ife is the city of 201 Gods...the great city of Ile-Ife, the Yorubá world opens out in the four directions of the universe.”²⁰

The Yorubá Christian Olódumare

The Christian believes in a personal God who is the creator of the universe. He is also conceived as king and judge of the universe. He revealed himself to the patriarchs of Israel in different ways just as he regarded Israel as his chosen nation. He is absolute in power and reigns forever in heaven: “From everlasting to everlasting you are God” (Ps. 90:2). God is also described as one beside whom there is no other god: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord, our God, the Lord is One” (Deut. 6:4); “See now that, I, even I, am he, and there is no God beside me” (Deut. 32:39). God is omnipotent and omniscient, eternal good.²¹ In the New Testament, God is understood in trinitarian way – God the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit – which depicts an active relationship of the

17 Fayemi Kazeem, “The Concept of ‘Olodumare’ in Yoruba Language: An Exercise in Conceptual Decolonisation.” In *Philosophy, Democracy and Conflicts in Africa*, ed. Ike Odimegwu, Godalex Ezeani and Fidelis Aghamelu, Akwa: Department of Philosophy, 2007, 304.

18 Kola Abimbola, *Yoruba Culture: A Philosophical Account*, Birmingham: Iroko Academic Publishers, 2006, 51-52.

19 Abimbola, 72.

20 Jacob Olupona, *City of 201 Gods: Ile-Ile in Time, Space, and the Imagination*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011, 7, 29, 30.

21 Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *Judaism: History, Belief and Practice*, London and New York: Routledge, 2003, 343-359.

Father-Son. This relationship has been bequeathed to humanity through faith in Christ such that Christians pray to God the Father in the name of Jesus.²² Kierkegaard states that “God... is ... so infinitely exalted” that nothing can be compared with him.²³ The Christian also understands evil as opposed to God. The devil is outright opposed to God, and Christ is ‘manifested to destroy the works of the devil.’

In order to conceive God in Yorubá (and generally in African communities), western anthropologists and Christian missionaries had to undermine the traditional Olódumare by reducing him to an ‘under-god.’ It is a racist and missionary strategy to also undermine the people. Unfortunately, many Yorubá fell for it. The idea that God is a philosophical concept that Africans were not capable of intellectually formulating has been debunked.²⁴ But the philosophical myth worked very practically in conversion that took place and continues to take place today. That strategy was extended to name-calling in which African God(s) and belief system were disparaged. Idowu and Mbiti, among others, have adequately reacted to such labelling.²⁵ The missionaries had no alternative than to adopt Olódumare of the Yorubá and insert it into their missionary endeavors in order to communicate meaningfully to and with the people. With the adoption of Olódumare as God and translation of the English Bible into Yorubá, an Olódumare that is not autochthonous to the Yorubá, but true to Christianity was created. This assumption is premised on the argument that though there are several similarities between Olódumare and God, yet they are essentially different.²⁶ The point being made here is that the Yorubá Christian Olódumare is the God of the Bible rather than that of the traditional Yorubá Olódumare.

Bewají argues that adoption of local names of God to reflect the natures of missionary religions’ Gods is a strategy for survival. According to him, organized religions like Christianity and Islam are an expression of survivalist rationality; this is so because contrary to the view that religion arose as a consequence of emotion or senses, “it is reason.”²⁷ In this sense, religion is a reasoned and reasonable instrument for survival. He says:

22 Ted Peters, *God – The World’s Future: Systematic Theology for a New World*, 2nd ed., Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000, 102-104.

23 Cited in Anthony C. Thiselton, *Doubt, Faith and Certainty*, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2017, 66.

24 M. Y. Nabofa, “The Image of God in Urhobo Contemporary Thought.” In *Under the Shelter of Olodumare*, 73-75.

25 E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*, London: SCM, 1973 and John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, London: Macmillan, 1969.

26 Ogungbemi, “A Comparative Study of Olodumare,” 62.

27 John A. I. Bewaji, *Narratives of Struggle: The Philosophy and Politics of Development*, Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2012, 155.

I have come to believe that religion is primarily, fundamentally, and intrinsically all about human stomach (crudely and blatantly expressed without any intellectual window dressing); religion is simply and totally about human welfare; and especially, it is about the sustenance of self (self-interest) and, when it becomes organized, it is hijacked by leadership of religion and is totally and primarily about the welfare of the leadership of organized religions, while being only incidentally or secondarily about the welfare of those who are led.²⁸

Béwají is obviously latching on Christianity and Islam in Africa, using contentious absolutized terms that do not provide avenues to navigate their metaphysical or spiritual tenor. By reducing them to mere 'stomach infrastructure,' he has succeeded in derogating these religions as existential disposables. It could be argued that since these missionary religions are able to meet the existential need of their adherents they survive more than other religions which are not. However, in favour of African indigenous religious, he argues that there are no records of wars fought in the name of any African God. That to him is existentially important because it is the hallmark of a religion to be tolerant in a multicultural setting. This plus to African indigenous religion is a ground for the evaluation of the usefulness of the foreign religions. But he also recognizes the fact that there were attempts at supplanting one superstition with another. One effective way of doing so is through indigenizing Christianity using local theological symbols for its survival.²⁹ This strategy has in no way changed the autochthonous conception of "Yorubá Olódumare."³⁰ In reality, the Yorubá Christian Olódumare bears all the nature of God in the Bible.

The Yorubá Muslim Olódumare

The Allah, the name of God in Islam, is traditional to the Arabs. Prophet Muhammad presents God as a monotheistic being, who created the universe. "Read, he who created and made man from an embryo." Allah's oneness, attributes and creative works are made more manifest in Súra 59: 23-24: "He is Allah, besides whom there is no other god. He is the sovereign Lord, the Holy One, the giver of peace, the keeper of faith; the guardian. He is Allah the creator, the originator, the modeller.... All that is in heaven and earth gives glory to Him."

The third form of Olódumare, is the Yorubá Muslim Olódumare. Not theoretically different from the Christian Olódumare in terms of their foreignness

28 Bewaji, *Narratives of Struggle*, 167.

29 Bewaji, *Narratives of Struggle*, 402.

30 John A. I. Bewaji, "Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief and the Theistic Problem of Evil," *African Studies Quarterly*, *The Online Journal of African Studies*, 4 (1998).

to the traditional Olódumare, but theologically and cosmologically different from traditional Olódumare. Bewaji argues that the Muslim God is theologically different from Yorubá Olódumare. According to him, just like the case of Christianity, the concept of God among the Arabians cannot be inserted into the Yorubá theology, because of the character of both Gods. He makes the point that Olódumare is not a warlike God. For him, Olódumare is so accommodating that other ethical monotheistic religions like Islam and Christianity can co-habit within the Yorubá space without corresponding magnanimity and tolerance from them.³¹

Like with Christian missionaries, in order to be able to create a sense of Yorubá Muslim Olódumare, Yorubá Muslims had to demonise traditional Olódumare and all gods in the pantheon. They held and still hold that practices of Yorubá religion that are nonagreeable with Islam are evil and superstitious. Because such practices are believed to be connected with the power of darkness, Islam came as a liberating force. Thus, the Muslims believe that conversion to Islam is not only civilizing but also spiritually liberating. Balogun drives home this point forcefully by condemning even Muslims that are sympathetic to the Yorubá indigenous practices as unbelievers and refers to Olódumare as a 'god' or 'divinity' (in small letters throughout his thesis) which emphasizes the non-recognition of traditional Olódumare as a Supreme Being. He never indeed mentions Olódumare to refer to Yorubá supreme deity probably because doing so would undermine the essence of the name in reference to Islam. If mention must be made of Olódumare, one can speculate, it will be in total reference to Islamic sense. He further argues that rather than refer to the Yorubá as polytheistic, they are indeed henotheistic, that is, choosing a particular deity for reverence in the midst of gamut of other co-existing deities.³² Consequently, Balogun holds the view that Yorubá Muslims who subscribe to Yorubá indigenous practices that are in contra to Islam are syncretic; a belief that Islam condemns. Syncretism, he argues, is "an irrational belief in things that do not have any effect except in psychological or traditional culture."³³

In addition, Oḷádití argues that Muslim missionaries "compelled" Yorubá people to learn and adopt Arabic as the official language of the Qur'an. By adopting Arabic, it would be unnecessary to speak of Olódumare but Allah, the Arabic name for God. Thus, wherever and whenever Olódumare would be mentioned it would be Allah. This does not mean that Olódumare and

31 Bewaji, *Narratives of Struggles*, 166.

32 Muhsin A. Balogun, "Syncretic Beliefs and Practices among Muslims in Lagos State Nigeria; with Special Reference to the Yoruba Speaking People of Epe," An Unpublished PhD Thesis submitted to the University of Birmingham, UK, January 2011, 129.

33 Balogun, 247.

Allah are the same. It is indeed a cautious way of emphasizing the superiority of Allah over Olódumare hence the forceful adoption of Arabic language. He says: "Islam injected the culture and language of the Arabs into Yorubá society. The Arabic language was effectively imposed as the language of Islam on the Muslim. There was a remarkable degree of forced acculturation of Islamic belief system on the Yorubá people who embraced Islam."³⁴ Through zealous preaching, polemics, and active iconoclasm, Muslims were able to penetrate the Yorubá indigenous society. For instance, shrines, emblems, art works were physically attacked. In fact, a masquerade was cut down to pieces with machete by a Muslim, arguing that it was offensive to the dictate of Islam.³⁵ All these were geared towards reducing "the level of local participation in Yorubá religious activity."³⁶ Oládítí posits further that "the impact of this on the stability of Islam shows that there were attempts to destroy the cultural practices of the Yorubá to the margin with an interest to promote Islamic ideology."³⁷

While Ológundúdí agrees that Islam has negatively affected Yorubá religion as a whole, he nonetheless insists that it is not true that the Yorubá were compelled to accept Islam as many Muslims now believe. He argues that it was because of the tolerant nature of the people that was responsible for the establishment of Islam and Christianity. Islam, he posits, is called *imoḷe* – believing by force – by the Yorubá because of its attitude to conversion. But when the Fulani thought that they could impose Islam on the Yorubá by dint of force, they were beaten back by the Yorubá warriors. This, he maintains, is a demonstration of the fact that the Yorubá were not cowards but only tolerant, and in some way betrayed their indigenous religion.³⁸ The main contention of Ológundúdí is that the Yorubá Olódumare remains sacrosanct despite the incursion of foreign religion into Yorubá space. Peel corroborated the point that the Yorubá are naturally and religiously tolerant; "it is an outlook that has roots in their traditional religion.... The tolerant spirit was supported by a pragmatic and provisional attitude towards religious allegiance."³⁹ It is because of tolerance which derived from Yorubá communal and religious spirit that makes for a long time "Christianity and Islam in their Yorubá forms" to

34 Akeem A. Oladiti, "Reconsidering the Influence of Islam on Yoruba Cultural Heritage, 1930-1987," *American International Journal of Social Science*, 3/6 (November 2014): 41.

35 Oladiti, 41.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 Adedayo Ologundudu, *Yoruba Religion, USA: Center for Spoken Words/Institute of Yoruba Culture*, 2014, 4-5.

39 J.D.Y. Peel, "Religion and the Future of Nigeria: Lessons from the Yoruba Case," *Yoruba Studies Review*, 1/1 (Fall 2016): 2.

manage possible tension that has erupted in other parts of the country, particularly northern Nigeria.⁴⁰

The Philosophical Olódumare

The final form of Olódumare is the metaphysical or philosophical. Prince recognizes the fact that there are divinities that work with Olódumare. According to him, “by metaphysical divinities, we mean the Yoruba divinities that philosophically concern themselves with the knowledge of the causes and the nature of things, affecting the corporal and the spiritual universe.... All of them have contributed to Yoruba philosophy from the proto-history to this day. Each one of them had played a philosophical role before combining that role with religion for which philosophy is antecedent to.”⁴¹ He describes Olódumare as a “Creator-Philosopher;”⁴² “Creator-Philosopher or Olorun... is the custodian of philosophy in Yoruba language [which] means *imo* or *ogbon*.”⁴³ He argues that the fact the divinities exist also means that Olódumare is real: “Oduduwa is a reality as far as Olódumare is a reality.” Olódumare as a Creator-Philosopher, Awosan also argues, is in tandem with other religious traditions: “the assumption by Oduduwa and his contemporaries that Olódumare was also the creator of the contents of the world is in line with the belief system of other religions.”⁴⁴ Atoyebi adds that it is impossible to think philosophically about Olódumare without his creative powers. According to him, it is not just a common understanding among the Yoruba that Olódumare created the universe, it is also true that by that creative process and act, he displays omnipotence.⁴⁵ “Olódumare is the cosmic order under girding all things.... Olódumare is in the category of infinity.... Olódumare is the first cause.”⁴⁶ Destiny elucidates further: “The Infinite State is said to exist since there is the finite State. This can be proved by using the argument for the existence of first principles.”⁴⁷ According to him, human beings are in finite state

40 Peel, 3.

41 Yemi D. Prince, *Yorubá Philosophy and the Seeds of Enlightenment*, Delaware: Vernon Press, 2018, 33.

42 Prince, 35.

43 Prince, 36.

44 Joshua A. Awosan, “Preface.” In *Yorubá Philosophy and the Seeds of Enlightenment*, xxiii.

45 Stephen O. Atoyebi, “Relevance of the Shema to Afro-Christian Concept of God: Implications for the Yoruba Pluralistic Context.” In *African Christianity in Local and Global Context*, ed. Samson A. Fatokun, et al. Ibadan: Department of Religious Studies, 2019, 286-296.

46 Oswald Eckles, Jr., *The Philosophy of Olodumare and Shango*, New York: iUniverse, Inc., 2005.

47 Jonny Destiny, “The Metaphysics of Shango and the Philosophy of Olodumare,” <https://www.africanamerica.org/topic/the-metaphysics-of-shango-and-the-philosophy-of-olodumare>

while Olódumare is in infinite state. If we say that Olódumare does not exist, it would mean that the finite state is greater than the infinite state. But since this is not so, Olódumare who is an infinite being exists.

Like the arguments about the existence of God in Christianity, Olódumare's existence is called into question. For the indigenous Yorubá people, the existence of Olódumare might be a given; but that is not completely true. A simple examination of the cosmology seems not to be too appealing to some Yorubá people. A representative of them is *Şégun Ogúngbemí*. We will espouse how he has directly and indirectly argued against the existence of Olódumare. In doing so, it is pertinent to distinguish between his no-Olódumare and anti-Olódumare positions, which extend to *Esu* as well. In the no-Olódumare argument, *Ogúngbemí* restrains belief in his existence on the basis of existential and scientific or verification principles while in the anti-Olódumare argument, he deploys anthropomorphic and moral principles to deny him existence thus creating an abstract or non-existent being.

In an attempt to deny the existence of the Christian God or present him as morally reprehensible being, *Ogungbemi* inadvertently applied the same principles to invalidate the existence of Olódumare. *Ogúngbemí* believes that one's belief in God must necessarily be based on or proportionate to evidence. Evidence, according to him, negates faith because it portends rationality. To be a God, there must therefore be sufficient scientific evidence without which his existence must be doubted. In philosophical theology or philosophy of religion, evidential argument does not always logically lead to the non-existence of God. Of course, evidence is open to scrutiny.

One of the numerous evidences to deny the existence of God, according to *Ogúngbemí*, is a narration of thefts in his hometown, *Yagba*, *Kogi State*, *Nigeria* some years back. Two generating sets of a church were successfully stolen; neither the police nor the God of the church could stop the theft or recover the property. Not long after, the costumes of the *Yagba* deity were stolen and within a short time after some rituals were carried out, the thieves returned the costumes. Here, he argues that either the Christian God does not exist or he is impotent, incapable of protecting what belongs to him. On the other hand, the traditional 'Olódumare had to quickly intervene to restore his property thereby restoring peace and harmony to the community on the one hand and demonstrating his existence on the other.⁴⁸ This warrant of certainty or justification for the existence of Olódumare and the non-existence of the Christian God is fraught with isolated, subjective and partial preference. In fact, *Thiselton* argues that it is bad logic to isolate propositions in order to be certain

48 *Şégun Ogúngbemí, A Critique of African Cultural Beliefs, Lagos: Pumark Educational Publishers, 1997.*

or justify a reality. He says: “certainty or justification does not depend on isolated propositions offering inferences on which to base justified belief.”⁴⁹ If Ogúngbemí claims that the Christian God does not exist because he did not prevent the thieves from stealing the generating sets, does it not also imply that Olódumare does not exist because he too did not prevent the stealing of the costumes in the first place?

That one set of thieves did not return the stolen items and the other returned them after lightning and thunderbolts is open to scrutiny. Here, Ogúngbemí does not justify empirically how lightning and thunderbolts could be responsible for the repentance and restitution of the stolen items. It could be that the church prayed for forgiveness for the thieves. But stealing is a moral act carried out by morally responsible agents who exercised their will in taking possession of what belongs to others. What Ogúngbemí takes as his evidential basis is the returning of the stolen items rather than the morally reprehensible act of stealing, from which he establishes the existence and potency of Olódumare. The defence of Olódumare is squarely a theodicy – justification of the goodness or righteousness of Olódumare in the face of evil. As Tierno rightly asserts, presenting a theodicy is “to endeavor a rationally convincing explanation of evil, or a particular evil,” in this case stealing.⁵⁰ But such defense cannot be substantiated except within the remit of the problem of evil, a problem that most Yorubá believe does not arise in their theology.⁵¹

Another argument Ogúngbemí has put forward to deny the existence of Olódumare borders on the existence and nature of witches among the Yorubá. According to him, the Yorubá believe in the existence and operations of witches. Despite the avalanche of negative effects of witchcraft among the Yorubá, he argues that it has some positive contributions to the community – particularly in the area of morality. The witches in this sense are not evil in their entirety. Further, the witches are not independent in their existence and operations; they are created by Olódumare and also derive their powers from him. As such it would be wrong to conceive of them as evil forces. His words are apposite to elucidate this point: “The Ground of being of witches in Yorubá thought is Olódumare or Olorún, the Supreme Being. It is from Olódumare that witches derive their power to protect or inflict punishment on

49 Anthony C. Thiselton, *Doubt, Faith & Certainty*, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2017, 119.

50 J. T. Tierno, “On Defense as Opposed to Theodicy,” *International Journal of Philosophy of Religion*, 59/3 (June 2006): 167.

51 See Bewaji, “Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief and the Theistic Problem of Evil;” Igboin, “Is Olodumare, God in Yoruba Belief, God?” Benson Ohihon Igboin, “Esu and the Problem of Evil.” In *Esu: Yoruba God, Power, and the Imaginative Frontiers*, Toyin Falola, ed. Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2013, 101-114.

their victims. The reason why Olódumare created them is primarily to make the Yorubá have implicit loyalty to him.”⁵²

Ogúngbemi wonders why Olódumare would be involved in using witchcraft as an instrument to compel the Yorubá to serve. This very act of creating witches repudiates the belief that Olódumare is a self-sufficient being. A self-sufficient being does not need anything apart from himself to be what he wishes to be. Since he is not a contingent being, it stands to reason that it is also self-existing. Olódumare does not only call to question his self-sufficiency but also become morally reprehensible by creating witches to stimulate loyalty from a people he had created. Because they derive their power and possibly take instruction from Olódumare, “witches are not morally responsible” for the evils they cause in Yorubá society.⁵³ He then goes further to deny the existence of witches as mere figment of the Yorubá’s imagination. According to him, “scientifically, it has not been demonstrated anywhere in the world that a human being can change from his biological form to a bird, snake and any other lower animal.... It has not happened.”⁵⁴ The belief in the existence and activities of witches are a product of imagination derived actually from fear of the unknown, and therefore superstitious. What is real and actual about witches is their fear because “no witch exists in reality.”⁵⁵

Ali criticizes Ogúngbemi’s premise that Olódumare is necessarily a self-sufficient being. To maintain that proposition is to clad Olódumare in Christian robe, a position that Ogúngbemi himself argues against. Ali holds that Olódumare cannot be thought of in terms of absolute responsibility in relation to causality. To insist on that is to deny him altogether. He says that “Olódumare is not absolutely the genesis and ultimate explanation to all things in Yorubá metaphysics as there are other causal impersonal agents like ‘*ori*’ (destiny), divinities, ancestors, and witches, etc., whose roles cannot be fundamentally suppressed.”⁵⁶ But it would be necessary to assert how these other impersonal agents came into existence independent of Olódumare. In other words, there must be sufficient reason to hold that ultimately the existence of these being cannot be traced to Olódumare given that Olódumare is generally thought of as the creator of all things. Ali does not deny the existence of witches, but that they are independent of Olódumare. Ogúngbemi maintains that they “do not

52 Ogungbemi, *A Critique of African Cultural Beliefs*, 57.

53 *Ibid.*, 66.

54 *Ibid.*

55 *Ibid.*, 67.

56 S. Ade Ali, “Philosophy, African Philosophical Template and the Question of Man,” 56th Inaugural Lecture, Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, 2012, 15.

have separate existence, neither are they independent outside the purview of the Supreme Deity.”⁵⁷

Ogúntólá-Láguda opposes Ali’s position that these agents are independent of Olódumare. He argues that Olódumare created everything both good and bad and even Esu, who is the head of many other spirits. All of them own their existences and their natures to Olódumare, and cannot be otherwise.⁵⁸ However, what is implicated in Ogúngbemí’s argument is that if witches are believed to exist by the warrant of Olódumare and operate at his order, it would mean that both Olódumare and witches exist. But Ogúngbemí denies witches existence; they are a figment of the Yorubá’s imagination. What is real is the fear and not the reality of witches. If witches do not exist, they necessarily cannot derive their existence and power from Olódumare, and Olódumare could not have transmitted power to them. But if the Yorubá believe that witches exist, then there is a conflict of belief – between Ogúngbemí and the Yorubá at large. In conclusion, he believes that the only relevance of deities and other metaphysical agents is the moral, philosophical and theological debate they generate.⁵⁹ How acceptable this conclusion is to the Yorubá is a matter of contention, but it is also a hallmark of pluralism, which we will later explore. In the meantime, we examine the four forms of Esu in Yorubá society.

The Four Forms of Esu in Yorubá Society

In this section, we shall treat the four types of Esu together. This is because the arguments above concerning Olódumare necessarily apply to Esu. In fact, they help us to neatly pair them as: traditional Olódumare and traditional Esu, Christian Olódumare and Christian Esu, Muslim Olódumare and Muslim Esu and philosophical Olódumare and philosophical Esu. The traditional Esu is not difficult to describe among the Yorubá. There is a large body of literature on Esu as a phenomenon and reality. The nature of Esu cannot be bagged in a single profile and his protocol is difficult to predict. That traditional Esu is the inspector general of rituals is a universal belief; that he blesses and also punishes is undeniable. That he is feared by both humanity and other deities of his category is an established belief. Venerating traditional Esu therefore is not as a result of his ability or willingness to bless or show favor but more often than not the fear of what his capriciousness might cause one. The traditional Esu is not opposed to traditional Olódumare. This is because the traditional Esu is not contesting or contending with the traditional Olódumare. The dualism of

57 Ogungbemi, “A Comparative Study of Olodumare, 48.

58 Danoye Oguntola-Laguda, *Esu, the Individual, and the Society*,” 57th Inaugural Lecture, Lagos State University, Lagos, 31st January, 2017, 8-9.

59 Ogungbemi, “A Comparative Study of Olodumare,” 54.

the western categories does not arise where binary forces are in strict opposition one to another. The traditional Eṣu is not a binary being to traditional Olódumare; the cyclical nature of existence does not allow it unlike the linear conception of life, which suggests parallelism and oppositionality. There is, therefore, no structural opposition in Yorubá conception of life, hence traditional Eṣu cannot be in structural opposition to traditional Olódumare⁶⁰

Ogúntolá-Láguda consistently maintains the positive sides of the traditional Eṣu. He argues that despite the fact that the traditional Eṣu can be bad at times, on average, his good deeds are more, which naturally make people to venerate him above all deities of his class. He avers that traditional Olódumare, being a good Being could not have entrusted so much to the traditional Eṣu if he was as bad as people believed he was. For instance, part of being notoriously religious is offering sacrifices. This important aspect of worship is inspected by the traditional Eṣu, who must report to the traditional Olódumare if the sacrifices are properly done. “The fact remains that he [traditional Olódumare] is seen as a good and perfect Being who cannot create evil. Since he created Eṣu, thus, the divinity cannot be evil.”⁶¹ In addition, he argues that the evil attributed to the traditional Eṣu, if critically examined, can be found to be squarely human. The unwillingness of human beings to accept their faults and limitations results in scape-goating traditional Eṣu. In other words, the traditional Eṣu does not make human beings to commit evil; they commit evil as a result of their own volition. What the traditional Eṣu does is to ensure that once evil is committed appropriate sanctions are meted which can, in most occasions, involve sacrifices. He drives home the point thus:

I wish to submit that Eṣu is not evil personified nor can he be the cause of evil. He also cannot be the catalyst of the evil deeds (actions and inactions) of men. Eṣu as a divinity of Olódumare has the onerous task of assisting the Numinous in the democratic governance of the cosmos. His duties are determined by Olódumare and he has no option but to implement the directives of his creator. As the inspector of rituals and adjutant of sacrifices as well as worship, he may, in the course of his duties, incur the anger and displeasure of humanity as he punishes their ritual laxity and weaknesses. To blame Eṣu for the evil deeds of man is to create a paradox that may be

60 See the volume, Toyin Falola, ed. *Esu: Yoruba God, Power, and the Imaginative Frontiers*, Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2013. This volume is an excellent compendium of the various natures of Esu as traditional, Christian, Muslim and philosophical. The various misconceptions and reasons for they are also adequately articulated. See also Oguntola-Laguda, “Esu, the Individual and Society; and P. Ade Dopamu, *Esu: The Invisible Foe of Man*, rev. ed. Ijebu-Ode: Shebiotimo Publications, 2000.

61 Oguntola-Laguda, “Esu, the Individual and Society, 9.

difficult to explain in the face of a deterministic premise in Yorubá theology and ontology.⁶²

If as Ogúntólá-Láguda holds that the traditional Èṣu is an all-good deity is the whole truth, how did he become the devil among the Yorubá Christians? The reality is that the traditional Èṣu is a tricky deity and many evils could be traced to him. The Yorubá Christians must have considered that his evil aspects are more than his good deeds. In any case, being close to the traditional Olódumare and simultaneously enacts evil deeds, they conclude that he must be approximated to be the devil. This is a popular belief.⁶³ Idowu argued that the traditional Èṣu cannot be equated with the New Testament devil who is out and out evil and structurally opposed to God. The nearest figure of the traditional Èṣu would be Satan that was among the ministers of God when they went to present themselves to God where Satan had the permission to try Job. Thus Satan is not independent of God.⁶⁴ Given this insight, we can then begin to glean how the traditional Èṣu was transmuted into Èṣu. But the point is this: since it is generally agreed that the nature of the traditional Èṣu does not align with that of the devil or Satan, a being with the same name Èṣu was created, but whose personality and nature are intentionally different from those of the traditional Èṣu. In other words, the Christian Èṣu is a being who is, in all intent and purposes, the personality described in the Bible and believed as outright evil and opposed to God but shares the same name with the Yorubá deity called Èṣu. In praxis, two or more people who are namesake do not necessarily have to belong to the same family or exhibit the same character. A simple google of one's name will drive home this point. One may be shocked that one's full names are bore by persons one does not know or may never know. The other possibility is that religious adherents carry their religious sentiments and symbols as portable knowledge to wherever they go. As the Christian missionaries arrived the Yorubá land they upheld the tenets of their belief and thus contextualized it. The fact that devil was contextualized as the traditional Èṣu does not logically mean that they are cosmologically and spiritually the same.

The same argument above applies to the Yorubá Muslims' Shaytan who is also believed to have been translated as the Èṣu. According to the Quran, when Allah commanded the angels to pay obeisance to Adam, only Iblis, that is, the devil refused because he was proud, and therefore, became an unbeliever. Consequently, he was deposed for his crime of "arrogance, jealousy and

62 Danoye Oguntola-Laguda, "Esu, Determinism, and Evil in Yoruba Religion." In *Esu: Yoruba God, Power, and the Imaginative Frontiers*, 99.

63 Dopamu, 97.

64 E. B. Idowu, *Job – A Meditation of the Problem on Suffering*, Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1966, 24.

rebellion.”⁶⁵ Dopámú suggested that Iblis could have been one of the angels before he proudly disobeyed Allah. And since the sin of disobedience was a serious one, Iblis had to lose his status. Of importance is that only Iblis among the angels blatantly disobeyed Allah’s command. He posited: “Iblis was created by God, he was of the company of angels, he was proud and haughty, he was disobedient to Allah, because he was one of those who reject Faith, and he was one of the *Jinns*. The Qur’an further teaches that Iblis is an unbeliever and he causes havoc in the world and leads human beings astray by his suggestions.”⁶⁶

Again, we have not seen any record of the traditional Eṣu disobeying the traditional Olódumare and consequently deposed to the earth. Rather, the traditional Eṣu navigates the earth and heaven at will and regularly reports to the traditional Olódumare what goes on with the rituals being carried out by the worshippers. The cordiality of their relationship has not been smeared by arrogance despite the belief in his capricious and tricky nature. The Yorubá Muslims’ concept of Eṣu is, therefore, different from the traditional Eṣu. In addition, the traditional Eṣu is being worshiped by the traditional Yorubá. In Islam, to worship any other deity than Allah is to commit a capital offence. If the traditional Eṣu is thus venerated even till date, it is not justifiable to hold that Yorubá Muslims are referring to the traditional Eṣu as Shaytan. The names may just be adopted for convenience but they are theologically far apart. Therefore, the Yorubá Muslims are not referring to the traditional Eṣu but created their own Arab concept, and contextualized it within the Yorubá religious space.

Finally, we have seen from the above that there is somewhat a belief in the existence of Eṣu, either in his traditional, Christian or Muslim form. Plainly put, Eṣu must exist to be regarded as the inspector of rituals of capricious, opposed to God and disobeyed Allah. But this belief is put in the intellectual dock. Again, according to Ogúngbemí, despite all the notions of good and evil associated with the traditional Eṣu, it would be deceptive to believe that such a personality or deity exists in reality. What can be true about the traditional Eṣu is that ‘it’ is an imaginary being created by the Yorubá to fill some existential and moral vacuum, and nothing more. In reality, human beings are those who emplace and deploy the very characters attributed to the imaginary Eṣu. The very moment human beings cease to enact evil behavior, Eṣu will automatically fizzle out of their mind and consciousness. He says: “Eṣu exists only mythically for the purpose of explaining the Yorubá exigencies and vicissitudes of life. It is in this regard that Eṣu has become a phenomenon

65 See Dopamu, 130; Sura 2:34; 7:11-13.

66 Dopamu, 135.

of existence.”⁶⁷ In another breath, he insists: “Èsù, like all other divinities in Yorùbá belief, has no relevance outside the theological, moral, and philosophical propositions of humans.”⁶⁸ In plain words, traditional Èsù does not exist in reality, and as such, all the attributes, natures, activities ascribed to it are a projection of human mind. There is no reality outside human beings.

Implications of the Arguments for Yorubá Pluralistic Society

We may ask, what does the foregoing hold for the Yorubá? One way amongst others to engage this question is to explore the possibilities of plurality of religions. Religious plurality can be understood as a fact of difference in religions or proof of diverse religions coexisting within a space. But religious pluralism is not an easy concept to define even though some may hold that it is theoretical framework that evaluates the claims of plurality.⁶⁹ One of the problems associated with defining religious pluralism hinges on the taxonomic and semantic groupings of religions within a religiouscape. Thus, when religious pluralism is seen as a catchword to express “the wealth of contemporary religious expressions,” “the effort to create society in and out of these differences,” or “neither exclusion nor syncretism,” it should not be lost that its understanding must be within a defined context.^{70, 71, 72} In other words, a ‘universal perspective’ of pluralism cannot fit all cases; there is therefore a need for a ‘pluriversalist’ context, based more on empirical engagement.⁷³ Although Oḻáwoyìn follows John Hick’s ‘identist’ pluralism, which sees different religions as identical with different conceptions and interpretations, we may hold that what takes place in Yorubá religious universe is not a completely identical pluralism. On the other hand, differential/complementary pluralism emphasizes the point that different religions within a religious universe hold on to their uniqueness as their Ultimate Beings are essentially different as well. Again, this may not wholly depict the kind of plurality that exists

67 Ogungbemi, “Èsù: The Phenomenon of Existence,” 86.

68 Ogungbemi, “A Comparative Study of Olodumare,” 54.

69 See Olusegun N. Olawoyin, “John Hick’s Philosophy of Religious Pluralism in the Context of the Traditional Yoruba Religion,” *Thought and Practice: A Journal of the Philosophical Association of Kenya*, 7/2 (December 2015): 87-88.

70 Lars Ahlin, Jorn Borup, Marianne Q. Fibiger, Lene Kuhle, Viggo Mortensen and Rene D. Pedersen, “Religious Diversity and Pluralism: Empirical Data Reflections from the Danish Pluralism Project,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 27/3 (October 2012): 403.

71 Eck cited in Ahlin, et al, 405.

72 Ahlin, et al, 405.

73 Benson O. Igboin, “Secularisation of African Religious Space: From Perspective to Pluriversalism,” *Spectrum: Journal of Contemporary Christianity and Society*, 2/1 (April 2017): 60-79.

within the Yorubá ‘religioscape.’ However, in navigating between the identist and differential schools, we would suggest that both Christians and Muslims use them as what we call instrumentalist pluralism. We would then argue that what should be protected among the Yorubá is communal pluralism, which has ensured thus far a peaceful coexistence. Communal pluralism does not exclude discussion about identist and instrumental pluralism, but it holds on to the bond that exists among various adherents of the religions practiced within the religioscape.

Whitehead argues that there is nothing actually bad when there are clashes of doctrines among coexisting religions. In effect, it is an opportunity, which when harnessed would result in a robust and complementary interaction. For him, pluralism is a reality that we cannot run away from in contemporary society. Thus, embracing the opportunities that diversity offers will strengthen a society. The contradictions in doctrines could be a starting point of fruitful engagement among identist pluralists. Viewed from this perspective, differential pluralists conceive plurality in terms of soteriology – salvation – of individuals and society. The main thrust of their soteriology is the belief that the different religions offer valid ways of immediate and ultimate salvation for both individuals and society.⁷⁴ In what follows, we will briefly apply these frameworks to our discussions on Olódumare and Eṣu.

There certainly are some elements of identist notions amongst the religions in the Yorubá religioscape. The belief in Supreme Beings is a common denominator. But how this identist commonality is treated is problematic. This is obvious partly in the imposition of a lineal-cosmological and eschatological theologies of Christianity and Islam on the Yorubá Religion whose cosmology and eschatology are cyclical. In this case, there is a subtle rejection of the traditional Olódumare as a Supreme Being. In a more blatant way is the insistence on conversion of the traditional Yorubá into either of the two missionary religions and not vice versa. The act of conversion apodictically demonstrates that within the plurality a particular religion is holding an exclusive position.⁷⁵ This suggests that other religions apart from the one that holds exclusive tenet cannot and do not lead to salvation. This is also why we maintain that even the differential pluralism is problematic. Although it recognizes salvation of individuals and society, differential pluralism cannot be said to be completely in practice in Yorubá religious space. The different ways of salvation maintained distinctly by the different religions are in theology and praxis irreconcilable,

74 David R. Griffin, “Religious Pluralism, Generic, Identist and Deep.” In *Deep Religious Pluralism*, David R. Griffin, ed., Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005, 24.

75 Umejesi and Igboin, 126.

hence, the constant evangelistic crusades by Christianity and Islam. It would have been different if they believe in religious parallelism within the plurality.⁷⁶

But a greater failure rests with the issue of non-recognition of religious diversity, not plurality in the Yorubá setting. Religious diversity is more radically complex than religious plurality. Beckford's incisive conceptions are helpful, and can be roughly applied to the Yorubá setting. According to Beckford, religious diversity implies i) diversity of religious organizations, ii) diversity among individual adherents who belong to them iii) diversity of faith traditions iv) diversity as regards those who combine different religious identities v) intra-diversity within a religious tradition, consequent upon other factors.⁷⁷ These categories also influence how individuals and groups conceive of, and relate with, God; generate and maintain social capital; social and moral evaluations.⁷⁸ Two quick examples will drive home this position within the Yorubá milieu. The first one is the recent experience in Osun state, Nigeria where, following judgment of a court, female Muslim students worn hijab to a public school. The Christian students, in reaction worn choir gowns, while the traditionalist students worn regalia of masquerades. This was to result in vitriolic attacks that could have sparked off religious conflict.⁷⁹ But it was a pointer to the fact that religious diversity among Yorubá must be carefully handled rather than taken for granted. It calls into reminiscence the controversial secularity practiced in Nigeria as guaranteed in the Constitution.⁸⁰ The second is the experience narrated by Olaopa concerning interreligious marriage that also resulted in a bloody encounter. He frankly says this: "it isn't strange that difference and diversity would also take their toll on the constitution of peace that had to be wrestled from the epidemic of betrayal, rebellion, political intrigues, religious intolerance, and ethnic dissension, all stable crises of plural configurations."⁸¹ That mosaic that defines the Yorubá presents both challenges and "collective intelligence and the capacity for adaptability."⁸²

76 Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007, 462.

77 Beckford cited in Ahlin, et al, 405.

78 W. Matthew Henderson, Brittany Fitz, and F. Carlson Mencken, "Judgmental God Image, Social Embeddedness, and Social Trust among Highly Religious in the United States," *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 32/1 (January 2017):1-14.

79 Gbenga Olariwoye, "Hijab: Religious Crisis looms in Osun," *Vanguard*, June 14, 2016; Adekunle, "Averting Religious Crisis in Osun," *Vanguard*, June 22, 2016.

80 Benson O. Igboin, "'The President of Nigeria has no final say': Sharia law Controversies and Implications for Nigeria," *Politics and Religion*, 8/2 (Autumn 2014): 265-290.

81 Tunji Olaopa, "Yoruba Nation: (Dis)Unity, National Politics and the Republican Spirit," Keynote presented at the Conference on The Yoruba Nation and Politics Since the 19th Century: A Conference in Honour of Professor J.A. Atanda, Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, October 9-1, 2017, 13.

82 Olaopa, 13.

Instrumental pluralism as we conceive it has to do with an attitude of negative tolerance that a particular religion expresses towards other religions co-existing within a religious space. In this sense, other religions tolerate one another but do not essentially believe that they are equally valid ways of salvation. By accepting an abstract form of plurality, they use it as a tool to launch an evangelistic crusade. This starts from the point of similarity, which we have tried to show in the adoption of the names of deities in the Yorubá pantheon. But the fact of theological difference is practically not lost even though it may be downplayed strategically. That is why, for instance, Balogun calls Muslims who participate in Yorubá religious practices as syncretists in the pejorative sense, or more frankly, unbelievers.⁸³ Instrumental pluralism opposes communal pluralism that emphasizes cultural bond. The bond that exists and is maintained among the pluralistic Yorubá makes it difficult to experience religious conflict. So whether it is syncretic practices or cross-religious marriages, the sense of communal relations is strong and pushes violence out of immediate remit.

However, communal pluralism must not be stretched beyond the limits of decency especially as there seems to be a revival of Yorubá Religion at both local and global levels.⁸⁴ An attitude of exclusivism must be guided against in order to continue to avoid religious violence and sustain the peace which has largely defined the Yorubá space within the context of the Nigerian plurality that is truculent and volatile. In doing so, it becomes pertinent to understand that there are boundaries that must be respected as they all coexist in their community of interrelated persons. This does not undermine the differences in religious subscriptions, and it is not meant to be. But as it has been observed, “one ought to be very aware of context when speaking of meaning and, concomitantly, to be suspicious when claims seem to be made without addressing the complexities of context.”⁸⁵ This is why we have painstakingly differentiated the forms of the deities; Yorubá religious space is increasingly complex, and it should be carefully mediated through the communal pluralism, the strongest string it has developed over the centuries.

83 Balogun, “Syncretic Beliefs and Practices among Muslims in Lagos State Nigeria, 130ff.

84 Kamari M. Clarke, “Transnational Yoruba Revivalism and the Diasporic Politics of Heritage,” *American Ethnologist*, 34/4 (November 2007): 721-734.

85 Alexander van der Haven, “Comparison, Practice and Meaning, Martin Riesebrodt’s Theory of Religion.” In *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion: Working Papers from Hannover*, Steffen Fuhrding, ed., Leiden: Brill, 34.

Conclusion

We have argued that the Yorubá had had the concept of Olódumare, the Supreme Being before the incursion of missionaries and colonialists. Although Olódumare and Èsù have been adopted by Christianity and Islam in their translations of their texts into Yorubá language, we argued that the traditional Olódumare and traditional Èsù still maintain their distinctive natures theologically and cosmologically. One way to press home this claim is to engage practically with the various places of worship and worshipers. For example, in the shrine, when an Ifa expert speaks of Olódumare and Èsù to a non-Yorubá or westerner, the interpreter would most likely use God and Satan, and to an Arab, it would likely be Allah and Shaytan. It must not be lost that the Ifa is not speaking theologically and cosmologically about God and Allah or Satan and Shaytan. This was most recently demonstrated by the Alaafin of Oyo, Oba Lamídi Adeyemi III who prayed in the name of Olódumare and the people responded with an enthusiastic Aase.⁸⁶ The same can be said about the pastor and the imam: when Yorubá pastor and imam talk about Olódumare and Èsù within their texts, they are obviously referring to the concept of the Supreme Being within their religious cosmological and theological purviews. When the freethinker conceptualizes these deities, she or he thinks in the abstract form of their non-being. But the fact cannot be denied that such conceptualization must have been influenced by the reality of these beings in either of the three ways above. In this sense, we have thought about it, we have four pairs of Olódumare and Èsù within the Yorubá religious space.

We have also demonstrated that the four pairs of these deities, form part of the plurality being managed in Yorubá land. If their identist contours are what defined this plurality, it is only theoretical, for in practice, the emphasis of superiority of individual deities vitiates the claim. If differential pluralism is emphasized, it is only a strategy that also lacks practical correspondence. The communal pluralism helps us to understand the dynamics of engagement of the religions, which should be guided, so that it is not stretched to its elastic limits; taking into cognizance the active presence of religious diversity. If the analysis herein is unacceptable, it would be necessary, especially for Yorubá linguists, to begin a search for terms or names that can replace Olódumare and Èsù for other religions. And it would be a worthwhile search that, if found, is believed to 'permanently' close the chapter of Professor Emmanuel Bolaji Idowu and the accusation of Christianization of African religion in general

⁸⁶ This was at the Opening Ceremony of the Conference on The Yoruba Nation and Politics since the 19th Century: A Conference in Honour of Professor J.A. Atanda, Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, October 9-1, 2017.

and Olódumare and Eṣu in particular. In the meantime, Idowu's submission must be reinterpreted in light of plurality and diversity of religions that characterize the Yorubá religioscape.