

SANGO: THE RELIGIO-MYTHICAL EXAMINATION OF A YORUBA DEITY

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Abstract:

This paper considered the notion of whether Sango the king is the same as the mythical Sango. Available materials used for this study showed that both are different entities and personalities subsumed into a deity. Three areas of study emphasis were used in the elucidation of this work. The first is myth which served as a form of oral literature. The second is the veneration accorded to Sango and thirdly, the annual festival Sango worshippers observed every year. Earlier researches on Sango either limited themselves to Sango the mythical or Sango, the King while many scholars mix both together as Sango the King. The methodology applied in this study is the descriptive structural approach which covers myths and religion. The researcher for also used the participant observation method in the course of study where he observed the festival for three years and consulted Sango priests. The findings suggested that Sango Cult has come to stay in spite of virulent attacks from other religions at the home base. The implication for this study is that the mythical values of Sango should not be ignored if African cultural values are to be cherished.

Key words: African Religion, African Myth, Sango, Yoruba Pantheon, African divinities

Introduction

The Divinities are the objective phenomena of the African Indigenous religious landscape. These divinities are of three categories. The primordial divinities occupy the first category. They are emanations of Olodumare. The second category is the deified ancestors. These are individuals who have impacted their world while they were alive and at death, they became elevated to the position of the gods above the ancestors. The third category is that occupied by the divinities inhabiting natural phenomena like mountains and rivers to mention only a few. Across Africa, these divinities vary in number. Among the Yoruba of South western Nigeria, their population number over a thousand. One of

the interesting things about the divinities is the divinities that were formerly human beings but at death, they became gods. These had the opportunity of sharing the world of mortals and that of the immortals. One of these enigmatic figures is Sango. He was a king while he was alive. As a powerful king, he expanded the territory of Oyo Empire and gained a lot of respect for the people of Oyo. In addition to this, Sango was reputed to have married three wives who were also divinities in their own rights. These include Obba, Osun and Oya. These women were riverine divinities who control major rivers in Yoruba land. Obba is the divinity that turned into Obba River situated in Oyo State. Osun divinity became the river Osun that is found in Osun State. The third wife, Oya is attached to the river Niger that runs into the Atlantic Ocean. A combination of his endearments and fear of the mysterious power that he possessed culminated into the cult of Sango that began in Koso. This cult has expanded among the Yoruba, to West Africa and then across the Atlantic to the new world. Today, the cult has spread to the diaspora in places like Cuba, Mexico, America and a host of other countries. This present effort sought to engage the historical Sango as it affects the religion and the myth that surrounds his personality. Secondly, the work sought to determine the factors requisite for the expansion of the cult that arose after Sango became a ~~fact~~ ^{force} to reckon with in the diaspora. The researcher employed a multi-disciplinary approach in the work. The approaches include history, theology and mythology. Interviews and participant observation formed the primary source used in this engagement and secondary sources were obtained in libraries and internet sources.

Religion and Myth

Different opinions have been expressed with regards to the enigmatic word of myth. Many have concluded that myths are false stories peddled by primitive people to explicate the basis and purpose for existence of some people. Others have held a contrary opinion that myths are sacred stories transmitted from one generation to other generations detailing the great acts of people of old. Myth differs from false stories in many ways. The word myth comes from the Greek word "mythos meaning 'word, tale'" which is a story meant to be told aloud (Bremmer, 1986:4). He goes further to say that when studying myth one must always bear in mind the essential triad of "Narrator - Mythos - Audience." The narrators, or poets as they were called, were always playing to their audience and "new myths or unacceptable versions of old ones would be rejected by the public and, surely, not repeated in further performances." (Bremmer,

1986:4). The term myth a shortened form of mythology is a very difficult word to define. In an attempt to define the subject matter, Honko insists that myth encompasses everything from a simple-minded, fictitious, even mendacious impression to an absolutely true and sacred account, the very reality of which far outweighs anything that ordinary everyday life can offer. In a bid to understand the term myth, various theories have emanated from disciplines that have to study myths. Some of the theories include historical, psychological, sociological and structural perspectives (Cohen, 1964: 338ff).

Adams (1993, 120-121) captures the essence of myths and religion when he posits *inter alia*:

... a myth is one story in a mythology – a system of hereditary stories which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group and which served to explain (in terms of the intentions and actions of deities and other supernatural beings) why the world is as it is and things happen as they do to provide a rationale for social customs and observances and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which the people conduct their lives."

His comment situates myths in the realms of religion. Usually, before being reduced into writing, myths often exist in oral

According to Honko, four criteria are necessary for a full understanding of myth. These four criteria are form, content, function and context. As a form, myths come in form of narrative. It is in this form that archetypal myths exist whereby most myths have similar storylines. Lyle considers the structure of the narrative form of myth and concluded that myths can be structured in various forms. The character and heroic performances of individuals who have done well while on earth are orally passed on from generations to generations in form of storytelling. By extension, myths can be brought to live through the medium of religious drama that is enacted myth, liturgical recitation that is narrated myth whereby verbal and nonverbal media of hymns, prayers, religious music and dances can be used. In addition to this, images can also form part of the myth. While it is true that myths vary in content but it is clear that myths contain ideas of creative events at the period of creation. Here, cosmogonic content are embedded in most myths. Here most myths especially in Africa exhibit cosmogonic content of the creation of the world, how death came into the world, how rain became a gift from God and a host of other cosmogonic information. The next criterion according to Honko is the fact that myths

have functional role they play. In this sense, myths function as models for the people who own or believe in the myth. Myths make it possible to arrive at a uniform explanation of the world since the gods and heroes have a role to play in the theocratic function of the universe. It can therefore be noted that myths have a dual functions that they play in the culture of a people. These functions can be both cognitive and practical, making it possible to incorporate the myths in the people's world view. The context of myth is ritual. It is as a result of this that it provides content for religious usage. People reenact this ritual in form of festival with the hope that these mythical figures can be consulted for favours.

From the foregoing, myths can be said to play some vital functions in the lives of the people who believe in the myths. It has a mystical function. This speaks of the fact that myths answer questions bothering on why human beings are here and for what purpose we are created. A second function of cosmological, this is an area that is devoted to the basis of how things are here and for what purpose. Myths also serve the function of teaching people something that is, it has a pedagogical function. Myths have a sociological function they serve. They teach us how a particular phenomenon appears in nature and the purpose of such phenomenon.

The Yoruba and their Traditional Beliefs (African Religion) in Oyo

Much has been written about the history and religious consciousness of the Yoruba people in the Southwestern part of Nigeria such that a detailed study may not be necessary in this paper. The seminal works of such people like Abimbola(1976;1977), Johnson(2010), Lucas, Idowu(1973), Mbiti, Parrinder (1974), Ray(1976), Tempels and a host of others too numerous to mention have shown that Africans are not so intellectually impoverished. Bewaji (1998) succinctly captures their effort to scholarship when he said:

Their works have provided starting points for further research and discussion, but most students of religions have been wont to ignore this aspect of their worthy contribution to scholarship, and have rather taken their works as definitive and beyond question. Even when contrary views are aired, the pioneering works of these first African theologians, religious scholars, and anthropologists are often cited as authorities to uphold a point of view that was fast losing credibility.

Several theories have been advanced about the Yoruba and the place they have found themselves. This paper will not dissipate energy on these since it is not part of the scope of the engagement of its aim. It will

assume a mythological story of the creation of the world according to Yoruba. In his theocratic governance of the world, Olodumare assigned responsibilities to the primordial divinities to create the world. Yoruba posit a world that was made up of the sky and an earth that was filled with water. Obatala was saddled with the responsibilities of creating the land from this earth. In his bid to create the land, he came down from the sky via a chain holding a cockerel and a snail shell containing sand. When he descended to the top of the water, he poured the sand on the water and released the cockerel on the sand. The cockerel scattered all the sand over the water. The spread was uneven explicating the basis for the creation of valleys, lakes, mountains and so on. Other primordial divinities like Orunmila, Sango, Esu, Ogun and a host of others came down to live on earth. The place where they arrived was said to be Ile-Ife. As a result of this, Ile-Ife became the birthplace of the Yoruba. It is from here that the Yoruba spread all over the Southwestern part of Nigeria and beyond.

Worthy of mention is the foundation of Oyo, a town which grew to become a city and then an empire. In addition to this is the fact that the person of Sango is directly connected to boundary expansion of the territorial integrity of Oyo. The myth has it that Oranyan (Oranmiyan) son of Oduduwa in his exploratory move and on disagreement with his siblings left Ife and moved to start the first town of Oyo near the Nupe country. It was here that he gave birth to Sango from a Nupe wife, thus linking the Yoruba to Nupe via Elenpe. Sango lived in Nupeland until he was invited to rescue his brother, Ajaka the reigning king of Oyo. Ajaka was sent on exile because of his peace loving posture that was interpreted as weakness to install his brother Sango. After the departure of Sango, however, he was reinstated to his throne.

On a similar vein, a summary of the religious consciousness of the Yoruba will be apposite here as much has been written on the subject matter. The people's religious consciousness is based on five pillars of faith. These are their beliefs in the Supreme Being, in Divinities, Ancestors in Spirits and their faith in mysterious powers. This structure holds all the encomiums of their religious consciousness such as their worldview, their myths, liturgical precepts and culture. The people, while agreeing on a two division of the world, that is the physical and the spirit world, believe that both are inseparably connected to one another. It is in the light of this that they are inseparable from their religion. Assessing their penchant for religion, Idowu concludes that they are incurably religious.

Appraisal of Sango: The man and the myth

Sango is the name of an enigmatic historical character that was associated with the royal house of Oranmiyan in Ile-Ife. He was the fourth Oyo king who reigned after Ajaka, his elder brother, and was succeeded by Bolajildowu.

The interesting story of his apotheosis can only be reconstructed from the various legendary versions. He was a strong man; powerful hunter; both of which mean primarily that he was versed in various magical arts. But he was also self-willed, cruel and tyrannical, and passionately devoted to his subjects.

Sango was a very wicked ruler whose authority became detested by his subjects. His highhandedness made two of his lieutenants challenge his authority. He tried to destroy the two by subtlety setting them against each other in the battle. One of them was killed while the other decided to fight him. The only way out for him was to commit suicide by hanging on a tree.

The opponents of Sango taunted his supporters, action which culminated into the procurement of charms from Ibariba. These charms have the efficacy of attracting lightning and thunder. The skill use of this charm led to the conflagration of various houses of the opponents and the loss of lives and property. The people of Oyo were then told that Sango did not commit suicide, rather he ascended into heaven. Hence the term Oba Ko so 'the king did not hang himself.' This led to the worship of Sango in Oyo town which eventually spread all over Yoruba kingdom and beyond. The worship is based on an act of confession and submission. The enemies paid fines of rams, sheep, fowls, kola nuts and palm-oil. With the passage of time, there developed a cult, an elaborate liturgy and a temple on the spot believed to be the place of his transition.

According to Idowu (1996:88-93) and Abimbola (1986: 14), the above story is not acceptable to the worshippers of Sango. He went further to narrate their side of the story. They maintained that due to series of quarrels among the three wives of Sango and the accusation of tyranny, Sango became angry with situations around him and went into the forest. After an interval of time, his subjects went in search of Sango in the forest, only to find his horse but he was nowhere to be found. On enquiry, he spoke to them without their seeing him, that since he was tired of the problem of the court, he has decided to rule his subjects unseen, but that

he did not commit suicide. It was at this juncture that he ascended unto heaven through a chain on the tree, from where he will continue to rule them. Whichever version is accepted, the ultimate is that it is clear that the people have accepted the fact that he went to heaven, where he rules through the agencies of lightning and thunder.

Yoruba folk belief has it that Sango had three wives, Oba, Osun and Oya who all turned into rivers after the death of their husband. Incidentally these are the names of popular rivers strategically located across Yoruba land. Oba River is in Oyo state, Osun River is in Osun state while Oya River (River Niger) is found in the Kwara state, close to the former habitation of the Sango whose mother hailed from the Nupe people. Though these personalities were related to him by marriage, they are in their own rights riverine divinities venerated by the Yoruba and recognized and worshipped throughout the world. Apart from the above, Sango at deification, Sango took over the attributes of Jakuta another Yoruba divinity who is reputed to be represent the wrath of Olodumare. It was at death that he became apotheosized and associated with the solar deity.

Sango shrines abound in Yoruba towns and villages. He is represented by a carved image of a man surrounded by three smaller images representing his three wives. He is often depicted as having a double-headed axe (*Osee Sango*). Items offered him include bitter kola which is also used in divination, palm oil, and ram. One of the ceremonies in the worship of Sango is the ceremony where Sango is believed to mount a person in spirit possession. The person's consciousness is taken over and the person prophecies. The priests use red and white colours and also braid their hair. Often times they also wear skirts for part of the paraphernalia of the divinity.

Conclusion

The foregoing has been an attempt at examining the religio-mythical examination of Sango as a Deity among the Yoruba. He is a divinity that is venerated across the length and breadth of Yoruba land and even beyond. His myth is understood within the circumference of the vitality of the culture immanent in among the people, the data collected and analyzed is within the context of the Yoruba of Oyo. Thus no researcher can collect and analyze myths out of context. Sango myths have been known to influence the socio-religious lives of the people as seen in the annual festival dedicated to Sango in Oyo municipality. Sango's popularity

among the diaspora demonstrates permanence of the myths surrounding him both in literary culture of literate across the American continent and in exclusively oral tradition of illiterate communities that produced the myth.

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