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## African Traditional Religion and Ethics: A Case Study of the Yorùbá of Southwestern Nigeria

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### Abstract

The deteriorating level of societal morals has been a thing of serious concern for decades now. To worsen the situation, most African countries now operate on democratic system of government based on a constitution which can rightly be described as corruption initiator/promoter. There is no doubt that the Nigerian constitution for example, encourages open display of corruption especially in the high places. Unfortunately, the adoption of foreign religions (Christianity and Islam), rather than maintaining and improving the status-quo of moral sanity experienced in the past, they further introduce a high level of corruption among the people and in the words of Chinua Achebe, things have fallen apart, and it is not certain if the center can hold again. This paper examines the roles African Traditional Religions can play in molding the people's behaviour using the Yorùbá Traditional Religions as example. Our aim is to attempt at finding a lasting solution to the issue of moral decadence level in African societies in general and the Yorùbá societies of Southwestern Nigeria in particular.

### Introduction

It would not be an overstatement to say that Africans in general attach much importance to maintaining good ethics all the time. This had been the situation before the coming of the Whiteman to the shores of Africa. It is an established fact that the people's religions go a long way to determine and control their ethics. It is also an established fact that the high rate of moral degeneration level in African societies in general have gone to the maximum.

Several reasons are given for the lapses, the most common being colonialism and the two religions which brought new and deviant moral ways of life. Ìsòlá, (2009, p.96) attests to this claim when he opines that:

Colonialism completely took over the African mind through an unsuitable system of education. In schools, the Yorùbá child was not allowed to speak the mother tongue. The poor children were made to learn foreign lullabies such as "Bah, bah black sheep, have you my wool? This lack of competence in the mother tongue has led to the loss of some valuable literary genres and other precious 'souvenirs' of language. The mother tongue was enthusiastically degraded, and English was moved to the center stage. It became the pride of anyone who could stammer some innocuous to the envy of the stupefied illiterates.

He goes further to say that:

Religion is intended to water culture, sanitize it to make cultural life more stable. You can change your religion and espouse a foreign one, but you cannot change your culture. The truth is that if your culture has not socialized you into acceptable standard of right and wrong, if you have not internalized those humane qualities of integrity, honesty, transparency, accountability through your own culture, there will be no foundation on which any religion can build. Being born again really means going back to your God-given culture to learn how to be a good person. (p. 96).

From the above, it is evident that culture plays a vital role in the achievements of a people or a nation. A people that dump her culture for a foreign one is not likely to have a headway in the areas of politics, economy and social advancement. This implies that no nation can prosper on false pretense. Bánjo (2009, p.135) opines that:

Indiscriminate cultural borrowing may produce deleterious effects, and the degree of impersonality which results from lack of diverse cultures may subtly encourage disloyalty to one's own culture, when little is done to reinforce that culture.

Today however, the situation has changed. In most quarters, the changes are attributed to the adoption of foreign religions namely Christianity and Islamic religions and their attendant civilization which no doubt have severe negative effects on the people's mores.

This paper critically and objectively examines the roles African Traditional Religion can play in upholding the ethics of the society using the Yorùbá societies of Southwestern Nigeria as a yardstick. Our argument is based on the way African religions are practiced, the teaching and the seriousness attached to its total observance or

otherwise, the place of the Yorùbá gods in worships, the belief of the Yorùbá about the gods, to mention just a few.

### Religion and Ethics

Religion is the belief in the existence of a god or gods and the activities that relate to their worship. It is one of the systems of faith that are based on the belief in the existence of a god or gods.

Ethics on the other hand, have been variously defined. For instance, the Oxford Advanced Learners English Dictionary defines Ethics as "moral principles that control or influence a person's behavior". It is a system of moral principle or rules of behaviour.

Akanmidu (1995, p.6) defines ethics as:

The scientific enquiry into and evaluation of human conduct, normative systems and values both at the individual and corporate levels.

He goes further to say that the scope of ethics includes philosophical inquiry about 'norms' or 'values', about ideas of right and wrong, and indeed any aspect of human conduct that can be studied and evaluated including the basis of moral judgement. Religious believers and scholars have not only strongly argued that religion and morality are one and the same phenomenon, but also that religious believers are indeed the exclusive guidance of morality. But the Humanist Philosophers argue that there is no necessary connection between religion and morality, that we do not need one to explain the other. They argued that it is perfectly possible to be moral without being religious whatsoever and that moral conviction can be correct and proper without depending on any religious conviction or practice. (Adéríbigbé, 1993).

This argument may be true to some extent; however, it is also evident that the influence of religion on the behaviour of individual goes a long way to determine the sort of moral life he lives. The Yorùbá traditional religious worships for example have morality as one of the major themes as we shall see later in this paper. However, Oígunbelmil (2017, p315) asserts that:

The Biblical narratives of love of God and His forgiveness of sin no matter the circumstances gave a psychological succor to a disturbed mind. The idea of freedom from fear and the courage to be oneself without dependence on the gods and other spiritual forces became a liberating proposition that led to the abandonment of indigenous religion.

In fact, African religion is totally opposed to the idea that morality and religion are two separate entities. They believe that God (*Elédàá*) and the divinities (*òrìsàs*) have set the moral standard for man. Egudu (1972), one of the loyalists of African Religion opines that:

Since good attitude or behaviour towards fellow man is one of the very necessary condition for religion, it must follow naturally and logically too that there couldn't be any morally good attitude or act which does not to that extent, share in the nature of religion.

In like manner, Ìdòwú (1962, p.145) opines that:

Man's concept of the Deity has everything to do with what is taken to be the norm or morality. God made man and it is He who implants in him the sense of right and wrong.

To buttress African religion's position of inseparable relationship between morality and religion is demonstrated in the Yorùbá belief that when a devotee decides to venerate a divinity, he must necessarily enter a covenant with the divinity. This no doubt subjects the devotee to a moral process of enjoying the favours of the divinity where he faithfully carries out the wishes of the divinity going against which he must be prepared to face sanction. Adébòwálé, (1999, p. 70) points out that: "The ethics of Yorùbá (indeed all Africans) from one to another is religious". In summary therefore, we can say that as far as A

frican religion is concerned, morality arouse because of man's consciousness of belonging to the Divine Being. Consequently, moral values are seen as offspring of religion.

### The Yorùbá Traditional Religion

Speaking on the origin of religion, Idowu (1977, p.107), opines that religious worship originated from man's understanding of his environment and the need to be in constant contact with the superior power for achieving authentic existence. To the Yorùbá, worship has something to do with their perception of human existence, the existence of the Supreme Being, deities and ancestor who are essential to their spiritual, social and cultural life. Abimboòla argues that "Yorùbá Religion has a practical purpose. It is not merely concerned with faith and afterlife, but also with practical guidelines on how to live together in a diverse, multicultural, global and cosmopolitan world. The Yorùbá traditional religion is firmly rooted in their belief in the Supreme Being (God) who is the Creator (*Elédàá*). He is the Supreme Being who sets agenda for all the created beings. He is surrounded by a plethora of

divinities who serve as his lieutenants/agents. The divinities (*òrìsàs*) also known as "*ìbò*", which are grouped into three different categories, after which we have the Ancestors and others such as the work of nature, customs and traditions.

God, is known to be the creator of heaven and earth (*Elédàá ayé àti òrun*). Nothing existed before Him. He is the Alfa and Omega in all things. The several names given to Him by the Yorùbá testifies to His Supremacy. He is called *Olódùmare* (the mighty one who doesn't go anywhere), *Oba Mímò* (the pure king), *Oba pípèi* (the perfect king), *Oba àikú*, *àidibàjèò* (the mortal king who neither dies nor rotten), *Atéreòrekáyé* (the one who spreads around the world), *ègbè léyìn omo òrùkàn* (defender of the orphan), *onidájó òdodo* (the impartial judge), *adúkédájó* (the silent judge), *a-kò-má-tikà-léyìn* (the one who refuses to back/support the wicked), *arinúróde*, *olùmòràn okàn* (the one who sees the inside and outside of man) and the likes.

There is the belief that God gives wisdom and He determines man's existence or non-existence on earth, however, man's character not only determines his life in the world but also in the life after. He (*Elédàá*) is the first judge. He watches and controls man's behaviour through His assistants (the divinities). Quoting Oluipónna, Ogungbemi asserts that there are 201 gods in Ile-Ife alone. One wonders how large their number would be in the whole of Yorùbáland. Nevertheless, it is not their number that matters but their functions in human affairs.

As earlier mentioned, the divinities are God's assistants in the administration of the universe. They are divided into three categories namely: the primordial divinities who are believed to have been with the Creator (*Elédàá*) and partook in the creation exercise. These include *Òòrúnmílà* who was sent to create a dry land out of the water that covers the earth, *Òrìsàálá/Òbátálá* who moulded man's physical body before God injected breath into it. He is also believed to have witnessed man's choice of destiny in heaven. Hence, he is called *Eléríi Ìpín*. He is concerned with rituals and ethical purity. The devotees are expected to demonstrate a high level of morality.

Adérìbigbé (1995, p.297) says:

This is why African Religionists have always desisted from crimes to avoid incurring the wrath of the divinities that will not leave the breaking of covenant unpunished. To the African Religionists, being moral would be the expressed fulfilment of the covenant relationship between man and the creator.

The second category is the deified ancestors. These are people who after their death are deified and worshipped as gods in remembrance of their good deeds on earth. They include Ògún (god of iron), the divinity who is believed to have provided the route for other divinities on their way to the earth. He presides over oath and covenant making. Sàngó who is said to be the fourth Aláàfin (King) of Òyó who punishes by thunder, Sànpónná, who discharge the wrath of Olódùmarè on those who are disobedient and dishonest. He punishes with smallpox, Òrìsànlá or Obàtálá, the arch divinity, is concerned with rituals and ethical purity. Yemoja is the river goddess. Devotees therefore have to demonstrate a high degree of holiness. They are regarded as the invisible guardians of man's morality. They keenly watch how the family they left behind conducts their day-to-day living especially in terms of their morals.

They discharge the Creator's wrath on those who disobey or are dishonest. The third category is the nature divinities. These are in recognition of God's work on the earth. They include the sun, the moon, the stars and the likes. People appropriate them in appreciation of the Creator's work. The belief of the Yorùbá is that the divinities are designated by the Creator (*Eleidan*) to be in charge of monitoring human behaviour and they do not take side. They punish erring individuals instantly. Hence, they are feared by most people. For instance, most people would run away from swearing in the names of the divinities. No wonder why Adérìbigbé (1993) suggests that religious belief must be seen as the foundation of moral belief. To separate the two is neither acceptable nor desirable.

Apart from the above, the communities also serve as custodian of morality by enforcing or compelling strict adherence to laid down rules and regulations of their communities and according to the customs and traditions of the people. Agents of sanctions in the community include the traditional rulers, priests/priestesses of the divinities, chiefs and elders in the clan, the family and public opinion. This implies that just as the Yorùbá would say: *enikan ní bí'mò, gbogbo ènìyàn ní tó o* meaning "only one person gives birth to a child, everybody trains the child", it is the duty of everybody to ensure strict adherence to the ethical rules of their various communities. Violation leads to grave consequences not only for the individuals who violates but for the whole community. This is borne out of the belief that the behaviour of individual determines what happens to all.

### Yorùbá Traditional Religion and Ethics

Wilson (1995) explains that the society's moral ideas control people's behaviour. The society, according to him, is the source of moral constraints, the source of everything that makes man more than an animal. Every member of the society walks within the moral standard set by his or her society. He writes:

To different degree among different people and to some important degree in almost all the people, the moral sense shapes human behaviour and the judgement people make of the behaviour of others. Wilson (1995, p.2)

Adébòwálé, (1999 p.xvii) identifies three principal standards or criteria of conduct. According to him, each of them has been proposed as the highest good. They include:

- i **Happiness or pleasure:** This refers to any conduct or behaviour that gives happiness to the person as the moral good. He however states that opinions differ as to what constitutes happiness itself.
- ii **Perfection:** It refers to the fullest harmonious development of human potentials. It states that man should strive for the fullest possible development of all his capacities, be it physical perfection or perfection in terms of his cultural, intellectual and spiritual development.
- iii **Duty, Virtue and Obligation:** These deals with the moral good to be embraced. The criterion holds that a person should follow the dictates of his conscience instead of giving primary consideration to the consequence of the conduct.

Simply put, what Adébòwálé is saying here is that from one society to another, there are some factors that determine what is virtuous or what is vicious. In as much as we agree that moral standard is set by each society namely the parents and the peer groups, we want to state here as well that the political, economic and religious situations of a society determine the response of the people to their society's moral demands. A situation whereby people are forced to behave morally means that the society has failed to provide suitable conditions that will make people willingly behave morally. If, when and where this situation exists, there is bound to be moral laxity.

The objectives of this paper include the following:

1. To proof and establish the fact that traditional religion is promorality. It encourages and promotes moral diligence.

2. To determine the extent to which foreign religions and ideas affect the moral standard already set by the African societies using the Yoruba society as the yardstick.
3. To determine the effects of this interference on the more of the African people in general and the Yoruba people in particular.
4. To suggest the way forward.

In the Yorùbá culture, ethics is synonymous with morality or good character and some people would call it 'good morals'. For this work, we shall refer to ethics as morality, good character or '*omolúàbí*' as the Yorùbá would call it, all referring to a laid down pattern of behaviour among the people of a community.

Morality is from the Latin word, '*moralital*' meaning manner, character, proper behaviour etc. It has three principal meanings namely:

- 1 A code of conduct or belief concerning what is moral or immoral.
- 2 An ideal code of belief and conduct which would be preferred by the same 'moral' person under specified conditions.
- 3 Synonymous with ethics. Ethics is the systematic study of the moral domain. It seeks to address questions such as how a moral outcome can be achieved in a specific situation? How moral values should be determined (normative ethics), what moral people actually abide by (descriptive ethics). (<http://wikipedia.org/wiki/moralphilosophy>)

The statement goes further to say that:

Morality can be seen as the collection of beliefs as to what constitute a good life. Since throughout most human history, religions have provided both visions and regulations for the ideal life.

Nygren (1996) defines morality as: "the system of controlling our actions and our thoughts in order to operate in a community". Morality is a behavioural pattern by classification that qualifies to be considered moral, fulfill some rewarding purpose for the people who sit together to draw some corporate judgment over such behavioural pattern.

Akanmidu (1995, p.6) classifies morality into three different perspectives namely:

- i pattern of the sense of fairness of a people.
- ii the attitudinal differences between people of different cultural background and
- iii the accepted standard for the determination of the right from the wrong.

He concludes that: "Morality is essentially the effort to distinguish between the set of behaviours acceptable to people of the same ethnic cultural background from those unacceptable". (p.10).

The Yorùbá have what they call 'ethical' or 'moral' codes based on the training of good character, ('*omolúàbí*'). Before the introduction of formal (school) education, they had their own method of education which Awóniyi, (1978) refers to as Traditional or Indigenous System of Education (*Ilana ètò èkó*) *ibílẹ̀* which according to Awóniyi had the main objective of making the individuals an '*omolúàbí*'. This however, is not our focus in this paper. Yorùbá people have their own moral standards already set. These may differ from those of other races. The Yorùbá cherish good morals and anyone who is morally bankrupt has no place in the society. This implies that such a person is not accorded any respect from the people. The morally upright persons are called '*omolúàbí*'. Oyèrindé, (1985, p.43) says that: "the person who exhibits the right character at the appropriate time is the one we may call an '*omolúàbí*'". In the same vein, Yòlòyè (2009, p.31) describes, an '*omolúàbí*' as "a person born and raised by someone with good character, and by implication, a person with good character himself or herself". This is not different from Awóniyi's (1978, p.2) assertion that: "an '*omolúàbí*' is a person who combines all good character and is regarded as good by everybody in his society". He asserts that:

To be an '*omolúàbí*' is to be of good character in all its ramification. Good character in the Yorùbá sense, includes: respect for old age, loyalty to ones parents and local traditions, honesty in all public and private dealings, devotion to duty, readiness to assist the needy and the infirm, sympathy, sociability, courage, an itching desire for work, and many other desirable qualities.

According to Akanmidu, (1995, p.10) Noonan's view that morality is "the goodness or badness, the rightness or wrongness of human act", is not acceptable. He argues that "the task of moral inquiry must be seen and comprehended in terms of principles of right conduct and not bad conduct". In our opinion, both Akanmidu and Noonan are saying the same thing but differently. In any society, rightness or wrongness of behaviour determines which moral is good or bad. To assess any form of behaviour, the society's moral standard must be considered as this determines what is moral or what is immoral. This is because the set of acceptable or unacceptable behaviour is essentially the making and formulation of the people. Consequently, the concept of morality does not exist where there are no people or persons to set

the concept. There must be a motivating factor to behave morally and one of such factors is people's expectation.

African traditional religion in general and the Yorùbá religion in particular do not support transgression. *Ìwà* (character) is the center theme of all preaching of the four hundred and one (401) divinities in Yorùbá society. They are intermediaries between Olódùmarè (God) and man. The Yorùbá are guided by the moral tenets of the divinities. Here we can see the connection between Yorùbá ethics and Yorùbá religious ethics.

Some divinities are regarded as guardian of public morality. These divinities are always prepared to punish those who are recalcitrant in the society. They include Ògún (god of iron) who presides over oath and covenant making. Sàngó and Sànpónná, who discharge the wrath of Olódùmarè on those who are disobedient and dishonest. Òrìsànlá or Obàtálá, the arch divinity, is concerned with rituals and ethical purity. Devotees therefore must demonstrate a high degree of holiness. As earlier mentioned, the divinities are Olódùmarè's agents who watch over man's behaviour. They are empowered to punish any form of immorality. In the past, if anybody did anything contrary to the society's moral law, such a person was taken to the shrine of any of these divinities to swear. This created a lot of fear in people because no guilty person would go scot free. Therefore, for fear of being disgraced, people endeavored to be morally upright.

The Yorùbá people are highly devoted. In their worships, they preach faithfulness to God, the divinities and to humanity, hospitality and love to fellow men. During festivals, they give all they have in terms of time, money and property. The festivals are full of entertainments and funfairs. They make vows which they must fulfil. During *egúngún* festivals, the masquerades compose and render songs intended to teach good morals (*omolúàbí*) and to condemn anti-social behaviours. Poets and Chanters were free to run commentary on public morality, thus, a saying: "*Máa wí, oba kan kii pòkorin*", meaning: "Please continue to talk, no king kills the poet/singer". They sing to condemn anybody who is morally blameworthy the position of such a person in the society notwithstanding. Such morals include stealing, murder, backbiting, backsliding, laziness, wickedness of all forms and the like.

Examples of such songs are many and varied. For instance, to a thief, the masquerade can sing:

Oba agbéran /2ce.  
 Ò ó rèwòn olósù méfà  
 Oba agbéran.

(The king of goat snatchers/2 times  
 You will spend six months behind the bar.  
 The king of goat snatchers).

To a lazy man they sing:

Alapa mai sisei - the one who get hands but failed to work  
 Baba oku oleò - the father of the lazy one  
 Akiisa re jingbin - your rags are strikingly plenty  
 Nii'lei Alaro - in the dyer's house/shop

There is no doubt that such songs have serious positive impact on the mores of the people. During festivals, people with one problem or the other visit the shrines to seek solutions to their problems with pledges made in most cases. This is accomplished in the form of oath taking. To the Yorùbá, it is better not to take any oath or make any pledge than to make a vow or to pledge and fail to fulfill it. They hold the belief that such a person has no place in the hereafter. As earlier said, the divinity called *ògún* oversees oath and covenant taken. In order to ensure that any oath taken is fulfilled, people involved in oath taken use the *ògún* symbols (images) to swear. They believe that whosoever failed to fulfill the oath earlier taken will be severely punished by *ògún* the god of thunder. They also believe that culprits of oath taken have no place in heaven. Hence, the song:

Ajéjèè máa mú un se - he who promises but fails to fulfill it  
 Oní'nú funfun - the one with white/plain belly  
 Ònà wo lo maa gbà - which way /road will you follow  
 K'ó o tó wo ìjoba òrun - to enter heavenly kingdom

Olátúnjì, (1979, p.2) asserts that:

In most traditional African societies, the kind of dichotomy of divorce of religion and literature does not exist. Among the Yorùbá, for example, literature enshrines the theology and cosmology of the people and reflects their ethics and morale.

What Olátúnjì is saying here is that literature reflects the moral state of a society and that within the Yorùbá society; religion has many roles to play in determining people's behaviour. In as much as we believe that religion shapes people's moral, it is also evident that a person who cannot be regarded as being religious can be morally good. It is also possible for a person who claims to be religious to be morally bankrupt. This opinion, according to Adéríbigbé, (1993, p.293) is in

line with the Humanist Philosophers such as Soyínká, who believe that:

It is perfectly possible to be moral without being religious whatsoever. This is because moral convictions can be correct and proper without depending on any religious conviction or practice.

This idea is borne out of the fact that some people who are supposed to use their positions in the society to improve the moral standard of the people, use them to commit evil. It means that one's position in the society does not determine his moral state. No wonder, the Yorùbá will say "*aso nílá kó ní dèyàn nílá*" meaning the size or quality of one's dress does not determine his greatness. This is what the Humanists like the late Tai Solarin believed. He is quoted as saying:

The more we see religious heat being turned on in Nigeria, the more we see corruption, nepotism, of man's inhumanity to man, spreading across our horizon and making the firmament thicker still. (*Sunday Tribune*, November 11, 1990, p. 4).

It is evident that rather than changing, the situation is getting worsened by the day. This accounts for why people are clamoring that political leaders are mandated to swear by the name of the gods whenever they are about to take their oaths of office. To such people, the God worshipped by Christians and Muslims is too 'gentle' for the kind of political leaders the society now breeds and so there is the need to refer to the 'no nonsense' Yorùbá gods (divinities) especially when it comes to moral issues. It is also evident that the corrupt leaders also believe this as none of them would want to swear by Sàngó, (god of thunder), Ògún (god of iron) or Sànpònná, who punishes by pestilence. There had been cases where an item was stolen and when the culprit was not ready to confess, Sòàngó's spirit was evoked and the person was struck to death. There had also been cases where calamity of diseases was traced to the god(s) who is/are annoyed over his people's level of moral decadence. In most cases, sacrifices are made to appease the god(s) before normalcy returns.

In Yorùbá tradition and culture, Òrúnmìlà, one of the primordial divinities is believed to be the most morally inclined. It is Òrúnmìlà, who witnessed man's choice of destiny. He was sent by the Creator (*Elédàà*) to the earth to come and use his wealth of wisdom to 'repair' the world. He is called and addressed as "*Akéré finú sogbón, akóni-lórò bí iyèkan eni*" literally meaning "the little one full of wisdom, the one who

teaches like one's relation". He was known to have exhibited all Yorùbá virtues such as selflessness, forgiveness, hospitality, to mention just a few and he admonishes his followers to emulate him.

A very good example of Òrúnmìlà's display of the act of forgiveness is found in *oḍù òtúrá-méjì* of the ifá literary corpus. Òrúnmìlà travelled, leaving his wife Onípupa behind. Soon after his departure, his close friends, the *Ìwàrèfàs* of his home town, disregarded the sacrosanct taboo and thus seduced his wife perfidiously and conspired to have affairs with her, boasting that Òrúnmìlà could not do anything against them notwithstanding Onípupa's resistance and the fact that Òrúnmìlà was a far more powerful potentiate than any of them. However, they later became afraid of their friend; they sold Onípupa away into slavery in a far off land and prepared a grave claiming that Onípupa was dead. They believed that this would cover up their perfidy whenever Òrúnmìlà arrived. They told Òrúnmìlà that his wife was dead. The wife later appeared and the secret was unveiled. The perfidious friends prostrated begging Òrúnmìlà to forgive them. Òrúnmìlà in a classically exemplary manner forgave them all, thus laying the foundation for forgiveness. Thus everybody is enjoined to emulate the virtues in 'Òrúnmìlà'. In the Yorùbá traditional religion, it is better not to err morally than to commit an offence and then appeal for forgiveness as it is in the foreign religions. The fear of being punished makes the devotees to be steadfast in their loyalty to the gods, to their fellow men and even to societal norms.

Furthermore, as intermediaries between their worshipers and the Creator (*Elédàà*), there was the belief that the gods would mediate for them before the Creator (*Elédàà*) the much they themselves appropriate the divinities. This implies that the divinities are not ends in themselves; rather, they are means to an end. For this reason, no one would want to incur the wrath of the divinities. Hence everybody tries to maintain and abide by the ethics of their society. They try to be morally upright all the time. In fact, mentioning the names of divinities such as Ògún, Sòàngó, Sànpònná create fear in the people.

It is important to say it that no Yorùbá divinity is associated with immorality. This accounts for why a morally bankrupt person has no place in the society. Everybody is often afraid of swearing before the gods. This is clearly illustrated in the Yorùbá folk story "*Àgbò gbewé mi je*". Meaning "sheep, take my leave and eat". In the story, a man travelled, leaving his two wives behind. He promised to be back in a month's time. The man did not return even after three years. When the food he left for the wives and children was exhausted, one of the wives

took to wood fetching and selling while the other took to fornication to get things going. This is against the Yorùbá spirit of 'omolúàbí'.

On his return, the man sensed that one of his wives had concubines but the woman was not ready to confess. They were taken to the family shrine with leaves in their hands. They were to feed the sheep with the leaves. Whosoever the sheep rejects her leaf is the culprit. The culprit was trembling with fear because she was sure the oracle will expose her guilt, but she had no option than to obey. As they attempted to feed the sheep, they rendered the following song:

Wife: Gbewé mi gbewé mi je - Take my leave and eat  
 Chorus: Àgbò gbewé mi je - Sheep, take my leave and eat.  
 Wife: Odún meta okó ti lo - Three years my husband had left  
 Chorus: Àgbò gbewé mi je - Sheep, take my leave and eat  
 Wife: N ò tení fókùnrin sùn rí - I never prepare a mat for any man to sleep  
 Chorus: Àgbò gbewé mi je - Sheep, take my leave and eat  
 Wife: N ò ròbà fókùnrin jẹfó - I never prepare 'Èbà' with vegetable for a man.  
 Chorus: Àgbò gbewé mi je - Sheep, take my leave and eat.

The sheep rejected the younger wife's leaf. She became a leper instantly and she was instantly ejected from the husband's house. The same goes with the rule that forbids physical combat among co-wives. In the Yorùbá tradition, any woman who engages in physical combat with her co-wife is taken to the shrine of the family god to perform some rights and if found guilty, the oracle punishes instantly. What we are saying is that Yorùbá people believe in the powers of the oracle to punish unethical people. This creates fear in the people and they do everything possible to maintain their good relationship with the gods. The *Àwòròs* would always remind people of the implications of being unethical in their day-to-day dealings with one another and even with the gods.

We would like to believe and stress that this is what makes the difference today. When people ignore the voice of the oracle and float societal rules, regulations and even taboos especially those related to the oracles, the result is what we have in our society today where the moral decadence level is at its maximum. Political leaders are not

bordered. They use their positions to inflict injuries on the populace. They deny people their rights. They care less about the sufferings of the masses who voted them into offices. Unfortunately, most of these political leaders are also religious leaders who are specially recognized in Churches and Mosques. This is not practicable in Yorùbá Traditional Religion where "*Òrúnmilà*" has to be consulted before somebody is elected into the position of leadership.

This idea is explained by Akínwùmí Ìsòlá in his play text titled: "*Ayé Ye Wón Tán*". In the play, the oracle warned against the choice of Sinmisólá as the new Oba (king) of Ìpò town, but the kingmakers disregard the oracle's voice and they approve the election of Sinmisólá who is believed to have bribed them.

In the text, the author presents a society where truth is no more given prominence, a society where telling lies has eaten deep into the people's fabric. Prospective candidates into traditional positions now bribe their way; the leaders (chiefs) who are expected to uphold traditions prefer to take bribe, even when they are making the wrong choice. It is against the spirit of '*omolúàbí*' for people to disregard the society's ideals. The author however makes us understand that the society is not totally rid of truthful and faithful people. For instance, and as expected, the Diviner insists he would not play politics with the choice of the candidate. He strongly warns them over the choice of Sinmisólá who he assures will misbehave. The Diviner says:

Ifá wí báun, ó fi tì. Ní pé eni a dáfá fún yìi, yóó fé maa se nnlkan èèwò, bí nnlkan tó lè bayé je. Kí ó so) ra.....(o.i.15).

(Ifá oracle says so and concludes. That the person so divined for, would want to engage in bad habits, like those habits capable of destroying the people. We should be careful). (p.15).

The Diviner's action is an archetype of *Òrúnmilà*, the oracle who always insist on telling the truth. The *Aborè* insists on allowing the universal unconscious to prevail over his personal unconscious especially on moral issues. There is this strong belief that the divinities regarded as guardians of public morality are always there to punish those who are recalcitrant in the society. the *Aborè* is vindicated in the end as Sinmisola misbehaves. He runs a despotic, oppressive government and when he is to swear before the oracle, he makes frantic efforts to prevent the event from taken place. However, he fails and this leads to his disposition.

Most leaders today (especially the political leaders) are deviant to this belief. Hence, they engage in series of anti-moral behaviours such as oppression, cheating, denial of man's rights, murder and the likes. Most of them are self-centered. The most unfortunate aspect is the fact

that they hide under religion to perfect their evil deeds. They are the most highly respected in churches and mosques. As earlier mentioned, the divinities are Olódùmarè's agents who watch man's behaviour. They are empowered to punish any form of immorality. In the past, if anybody did anything contrary to the society's moral law, such a person was taken to the shrine of any of these divinities to swear. This created a lot of fear in people because no guilty person would go free. Therefore, for fear of being disgraced, people endeavoured to be morally upright.

### Findings, Recommendations and Conclusion

In this paper, we have been able to establish that:

- i Moral decadence level in our societies has increased to the maximum level.
- ii The foreign religions adopted in most African societies are not helping matters, instead they can be said to have further encourage moral bankruptcy.
- iii There is evidence that people still believe in the efficacy of the gods (divinities) in ensuring that the society is rid of moral bankruptcy especially among our leaders.

We would like to recommend that the people's religious beliefs should not be discarded and disrespected if the society is to move forward morally. Awóniyi (1975, p.365) writes:

If a man does away with his traditional way of living, and throws away his good customs, he had better first make certain that he has something of value to replace them.

It is doubtful however, if Africans in general and the Yorùbá society in particular are conscious of this fact. Sadly today, we have lost almost all the good customs but it is doubtful if the ones we have acquired to replace them have the proper value. The Yorùbá says "*bí a ti nì sòe ní'lé wa, èèwò ibimúràn ni*" literally meaning: every group of people has her own way of doing things. This difference should not be taken to mean that one is more original than the other. Before the coming of the European, Africa in general had their way of doing things. The present system would not help to move the society forward ethically. Therefore, going back to the people's traditional religions will serve as an antidote to the increase in the moral decadence level often experienced in most African societies today, the Yorùbá not excluded.

Finally, we believe that unless we go back to the drawing board and encourage the adoption of African Traditional System of Worship in our social, political, economic and religious dealings, in spite of the

challenges, the society's moral situation may not improve. In this circumstance, it will be extremely difficult to move the society forward.

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### Abstract

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