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THE STUDY OF YORUBA RELIGIOUS TRADITION IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE*

JACOB K. OLUPONA

Summary

This essay presents an overview of past and recent scholarship in Yoruba religion. The earliest studies of Yoruba religious traditions were carried out by missionaries, travellers and explorers who were concerned with writing about the so called "pagan" practices and "animist" beliefs of the African peoples. In the first quarter of the 20th century professional ethnologists committed to documenting the Yoruba religion and culture were, among other things, concerned with theories about cosmology, belief-systems, and organizations of *Òrìṣà* cults. Indigenous authors, especially the Reverend gentlemen of the Church Missionary Society, responded to these early works by proposing the Egyptian origin of Yoruba religion and by conducting research into *Ifá* divination system as a *preparatio evangelica*. The paper also examines the contributions of scholars in the arts and the social sciences to the interpretation and analysis of Yoruba religion, especially those areas neglected in previous scholarship. This essay further explores the study of Yoruba religion in the Americas, as a way of providing useful comparison with the Nigerian situation. It demonstrates the strong influence of Yoruba religion and culture on world religions among African diaspora. In the past ten years, significant works on the phenomenology and history of religions have been produced by indigenous scholars trained in philosophy and *Religionswissenschaft* in Europe and America and more recently in Nigeria. Lastly, the essay examines some neglected aspects of Yoruba religious studies and suggests that future research should focus on developing new theories and uncovering existing ones in indigenous Yoruba discourses.

Introduction

The study of African religions is gradually undergoing a new phase, characterized by a departure from general continental surveys to more emphasis on regional, national, and ethnic studies. Indeed, it is becoming increasingly fashionable to depart from the general survey and acknowledge the diversity and plurality of Africa's cultural mosaic. In this paper I intend to present a detailed survey of the state of scholarship in the indigenous religious traditions of one such group, the Yoruba of Nigeria. The Yoruba, who number more than 30 million people and inhabit South-Western

Nigeria, Togo, and Benin, are one of the three major ethnic groups of Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation. They are also the most studied ethnic group in Africa. Indeed, the prominence of Yoruba Studies in scholarly work is underscored by the prominence of their arts, music, religion and oral literature, all of which have received adequate scholarly investigation.

A survey of the entire breadth of scholarship on Yoruba religion would require a vastness and breadth that cannot be achieved in the context of this paper. My purpose here, therefore, is to attempt an outline of major trends in the study of Yoruba religion, to present a summary and critique of essential works, discussing theoretical and methodological issues as they arise, and to assess the contextual significance of the works. I would also map out neglected areas of study for future research.

Two preliminary observations. First, the study of Yoruba religion has concerned African and Western scholars alike, and any survey of this scholarship must attempt to integrate both. Second, in Yoruba society and culture, as in many other African societies, religion and culture are linked so much so that there cannot be a pure history of religions (*Religionswissenschaft*) approach or perspective without due consideration to cognate disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. Scholars in Yoruba studies from the disciplines of art history, literature, sociology, anthropology and political science have contributed to our understanding of Yoruba religious worldview and its relations to the Yoruba culture and society as much as those within the regular religious studies fields.

The Beginnings: Missionaries, Travellers and Explorers

We begin our survey in the late 19th century. The earliest accounts of Yoruba religious beliefs and practices were produced by missionaries, travellers and explorers. Some of these people proceeded to Yoruba country to confirm their previously held accounts about "pagan" worship and animist beliefs among the African peoples. Whatever their motives, they came, observed and wrote their memoirs, which testified to the glamor of the ancient Yoruba kingdom. Among such earlier writings were Robert A. Stone's *In African Forest and Jungle or Six Years Among The Yorubas*.¹ Also Miss

Tucker's² and M. A. S. Barber's³ works were travellers' accounts of the Yoruba people. They gave edifying descriptions and reports of Yoruba cultural life. However, of all these various accounts, four authors deserve particular mention because of the significance of their work to the modern study of Yoruba religion. They are Alfred Ellis,⁴ Leo Frobenius,⁵ W. H. Clarke⁶ and T. J. Bowen.⁷ Ellis was a British officer, Frobenius a German explorer/anthropologist and W. H. Clarke and T. J. Bowen were Baptist missionaries.

Leo Frobenius is often cited as the first anthropologist who drew the attention of the scholarly world to the ancient Ilé-Ifẹ (terra-cotta) art. When he made his visit to Ilé-Ifẹ the sacred city of the Yoruba people in 1910, he informed the German press of his discovery of traces of a Greek colony on the Atlantic coast of Africa. The Ifẹ arts were of such superb quality, that Frobenius thought they could not have been the creation of the Black race. However, the subsequent works of Frobenius contain several interesting accounts of prehistoric Yoruba religious culture. These works contain myths, legends and tales of Yoruba gods and goddesses. Some of the most profound narratives in these works—such as myths and proverbs about the origin of death—are no longer available to us in oral forms. If we could divest the Westerner's biases and errors from their interpretations of the accounts which they otherwise recorded so faithfully, it seems to me that we could make a historical reconstruction of the state of Yoruba religion in the 19th century.

The 19th century was certainly a crucial period, it witnessed the Muslim Jihadists' invasion of Yoruba country, the collapse of old Ọyọ empire, and indeed a noticeable interaction between Islam and traditional religion. It seems to me that a crucial question for us is to what extent were the accounts of these early observers based on informants' testimony which had already been influenced by Islamic beliefs and practices. This is important to us in clarifying the debate that would later ensue between indigenous authors and their critics. The indigenous authors, such as J. Olumide Lucas and Bọlajì Idowu, who wrote the first set of scholarly works on Yoruba religion were accused of presenting a christocentric version of Yoruba religion with an overblown conception of Olódùmarè (the Supreme Being).

We are indebted to Profs. Ayandele and Atanda for editing the works of two American Baptist missionaries who were undoubtedly superb students of Yoruba culture, Clarke and Bowen. Clarke was fascinated by Yoruba culture. He devoted his entire memoirs to documenting it. As he himself noted this work was primarily to produce “narrations and descriptions of the [Yoruba] people”⁸ and only passing references to mission works would be made. Like other writers around this period, he was perplexed about and concerned with the relationship between the Supreme Being and the myriads of *Òrìṣà* (deities). As such Clarke remarked that the Yoruba people “are rather a peculiar heathen”.⁹ He also characterized them as “refined heathens” for they have knowledge of a Supreme God who is approached through “a number of inferior deities who bear the relation of mediator between the creature and God.”¹⁰

In the first quarter of the 20th century more ethnologists continued to write about Yoruba religion. Like the previous works, the relationship between the *Òrìṣà* cults and the Supreme Being dominated their discussions. Three authors should be mentioned here, R. E. Dennett (1910),¹¹ P. A. Talbot (1936)¹² and S. S. Farrow (1926).¹³ J. Omoṣade Awolalu¹⁴ has written a fine critique of this early scholarship especially concerning their theories about theistic beliefs among Yoruba people. Perhaps what is significant about these works was that they were all interested in producing a general ethnography of Yoruba people in which religion was obviously central.

Indigenous Responses: Egyptologists and Ifá School

The publication of Venerable J. Olumide Lucas’ book *Religion of the Yorubas*¹⁵, marks another epoch in Yoruba religion scholarship. Lucas, the first indigene to write about Yoruba religion was an acclaimed Egyptologist in his life time, and perhaps the only intellectual among the Anglican clergy in his time. Through painstaking research, he wrote that the Yoruba religion had its origin in Ancient Egypt which he regarded as the center of World Civilization. The significance of Lucas’ work is not so much in the language affinity he proved to obtain between Ancient Egyptian religion and Yoruba culture, but more in the use to which the work

was put long after it was written. The book now belongs to a larger school of thought gaining ground in Africa and in the United States called variously “negritude”, “Afro-centricism” and “Africanism.” Afro-centricism, according to one of its chief proponents, Molefe Ashante, is an attempt to “reestablish the centrality of the ancient Kemetic (Egyptian) civilization and the Nile Valley cultural complex as points of reference for African perspective in much the same way as Greece and Rome serve as reference points for the European world.”¹⁶ Lucas has been criticized by several scholars including W. R. Westcott¹⁷ and Geoffrey Parrinder.¹⁸ The latter observed that Egyptian influence on Yoruba religion is probably impossible since “ancient Egyptians do not seem to have expanded their religious ideas even to nearby peoples.”¹⁹

As we observed earlier, the late 19th century and the early 20th century were important periods in the history of the West African coast. As more and more indigenous missionaries were trained to evangelize their own people, emphasis was laid on the literary and linguistic study of African culture. Yoruba language had a significant place in the scale of things around this period. Through the efforts of Samuel Ajayi Crowther, a Yoruba freed slave who was trained at Fourahbay college, Sierra Leone, and who later became the first African bishop from West Africa, Yoruba was reduced to writing and the Bible was also translated into Yoruba language. This period also witnessed a direct contact of missionaries with Yoruba traditional religion and its adherents. Before long the missionaries noticed the presence and significance of the *Babaláwo*, the priests diviners of *Ifá*, the Yoruba God of wisdom and also *Èṣù*, god of the gate keeper, the divine policeman and conveyor of sacrifices. For the missionaries to be successful they had to render implausible not only the structure of Yoruba religious worldview, but indeed, they had to destroy the entire basis for divination and sacrifices. The missionaries therefore engaged in polemical debates with traditional priest-diviners and their devotees. Popular songs and lyrics were composed to teach a Christian counter-position to traditional beliefs. For example, *Èṣù* was portrayed as a devil, whose house is the road-junction and the one who demands for the most prized possession of his clients for sacrifice (*Onílẹ̀ oríta, aṣo Ítélé àpótí*). In the

same vogue, *Ifá* as ‘a system of explanation, prediction and control’ of space-time events was particularly attacked. The claim of *Babaláwo* to resuscitate the dead was challenged; a popular Christian missionary lyric which says: *Ení kú kí òsòrò, ènyin onifá, ẹ lọ tuń fá ẹ, ẹnikú kí òsòrò* (the dead do not speak, the diviners should reexamine their claims of waking up the dead).²⁰

As a more relevant response to the social influence of the *Ifá* priests and their cults, some indigenous Christian priests decided to study the *Ifá* divination system and write about its theology and poetry as a *preparatio evangelica*. This response led to the publication of a body of local literature on *Ifá*, similar in popularity to the Nigerian Onitsha market literature. Examples of this form of literature are E. M. Lijadu’s two significant texts, *Ifá*²¹ and *Ọruń-mílà*.²² The purpose of Lijadu’s two books was to show how inadequate Yoruba religious ideas were to the would be converts. It was the first text in our field to use a comparative religion approach. Lijadu put side by side selected passages from the Bible and *Ifá* poetry. He wrote that unless research is made into Yoruba religion, its enduring influence on the “pagan” population would not be appreciated. He blamed mission workers for underestimating the power and influence of traditional priests (*Babaláwo*) just because they lack sacred literature (*Ìwé*), forgetting that it takes several years of training before a *Babaláwo* is ordained a priest. Rev. S. C. Phillips (later Bishop) wrote the foreword to this book and made some interesting remarks. Attributing the success of Paul to the Apostle’s prior training under Galiel and in Greek philosophy at Tarsus (sic, Paul studied with Galiel in Jerusalem), Phillips said that missionary work had not had the desired impact on the “pagans” because the clergy did not take the time to study the traditional religion of the people, an indication that the conversion rate to Christianity was low. Furthermore, he remarked that when the diviners discovered that *Ifá* divination poetry could be read from a textbook, such as Lijadu has just produced, they would be anxious to go to school and compare the *Ifá* thought system and poetry with the Bible. Following Lijadu’s lead, Rev. David Epega published his own book *Ifá Amòná Àwọ̀n Baba Wá, Jesu Kristi Amòná Wá*.²³ [Literally *Ifá* our forefathers’ Savior god and Jesus Christ our Savior], also an attempt to show the superiority of Christian salvation to traditional religion.

In response to these publications, some young energetic literate Yoruba trained in mission schools but apparently remaining faithful to Yoruba religious tradition, began to defend the *Ifá* system against the despisers of their culture. These religious nationalists recorded and compiled *Ifá* corpus, though in piecemeal fashion, from diviners. They interpreted these texts as the holy scripture of the Yoruba people at par with the Quran and the Bible. This new cultural revivalism led to the publication of several pamphlets and monographs on *Ifá*, mainly in Yoruba language. Indeed between 1920-1960, not less than twenty of such texts produced by local presses had appeared on the market. Among these authors are Fẹ́la Ṣowande,²⁴ Elisha Kenyo,²⁵ A. Fagbenro Beyioku²⁶ and T. A. J. Ogunbiyi.²⁷ These researches and publications opened up the way for the scholarly study of *Ifá* civilization championed by William Bascom and Wande Abimbọ́la a few years later.

Ibadan School: 1949 Onward

In the meantime, the University College of Ibadan, a campus of London University was established in Ibadan city. It is to the credit of the founding fathers that a degree in religious studies rather than divinity was established, the first in the British Commonwealth.²⁸ The emphasis on religious studies was an attempt to give emphasis to the study of African traditional religion rather than to a pure theology program. The pioneering works of Geoffrey Parrinder at the new department of religious studies remained unsurpassed. Although his research and writing covered the entire continent, his focus nevertheless was on Yoruba religion²⁹ to a greater extent than any scholar of comparative religion today. However, it was Bọ́laji Idowu who laid the foundation for what we may now call the Ibadan school, whose primary research emphasis was on beliefs, and theistic conceptions which gained wide influence on the study of Yoruba religion down to the present time. Idowu's *Olódùmarè, God in Yoruba Beliefs*³⁰ is perhaps the most weighty work on Yoruba traditional religion accessible to us today. It was written at a time when Africans were claimed not to have a knowledge of God as is often reflected in the widely quoted phrase "how can the untutored Africans believe in God."³¹ Idowu draws heavily on oral traditions,

proverbs, myths, oral poetry and the *Ifá* divination corpus to establish his position that Olódùmarè, the Yoruba supreme God, is far from being a remote God, rather, he is the one essential factor by which the life, and beliefs of the Yoruba people were centered.³² Idowu equally emphasizes the concept of *Òrìṣà* (divinities) that occupy the world of the living and to whom daily rituals of sacrifice are offered. He regards them as manifestations of the Supreme Being. On the basis of the above, Idowu came to the conclusion that Yoruba traditional religion can best be described as “diffused monotheism”. Idowu’s interpretation is highly theological for he emphasizes beliefs and very often clothes the Yoruba worldview in Christian garments. Idowu’s work and other similar works have been criticized for this interpretation,³³ and some scholars have also come to their defense.³⁴ As the University of Ibadan became the center of religious studies in Nigeria, Bolaji Idowu’s students spread to other centers of academic learning in Nigeria. Several excellent ethnographic Ph.D. theses on different aspects of Yoruba religion were produced by these students at Ibadan University. Unfortunately most of these works are inaccessible to us because they were never published.³⁵ The enduring influence of this school on Yoruba religious studies can still be felt and here one must mention the works of J. Omoṣade Awolalu who inherited Idowu’s chair and whose book³⁶ is an important addition to the existing literature and Samuel A. Adewale’s general survey of Yoruba religion.³⁷

Yoruba Religion and Oral Literature

The study of Yoruba oral literature, which was already gaining ground in Nigerian universities since independence, brought about a decisive influence on the study and understanding of Yoruba religious culture. There is virtually no other ethnic group in Africa that has enjoyed such in-depth research into its oral literature as the Yoruba people. Although the primary focus of these works by and large has been the linguistic and literary features of the various genres of oral poetry, nevertheless, sizeable numbers of the materials have religious motifs. Of the various genres of Yoruba oral poetry, those that have had the most impact on Yoruba religion are *Oríkì* (praise poetry) *Eṣẹ Ifá* (*Ifá* divination poetry), *Ìjálá* (the

poetry of hunters and devotees of *Òguń*, god of iron and war), *Iwì* (the poetry of Eguńguń ancestors masquerades), *Ọfọ* or *Ohuń* (magical incantation poetry). I will discuss the relevant works in each category.

Iwì, Eguńguń chants, are the verbal arts connected with the cult of the dead ancestors (*Eguńguń*) believed to have descended to the world of the living in order to celebrate with their descendants. The two most authoritative scholars on *Iwì* oral poetry, are Oludare Ọlajubu³⁸ and Ọlatunde Ọlatunji.³⁹ *Iwì* poetry contains salutations “to the sacred power in the Yoruba cosmos,”⁴⁰ such as *Olódùmarè*, the Supreme Being, principal deities, leaders of the Eguńguń cults, medicine men and witches. The poetry also contains significant information on prayers, songs, proverbs and incantations,⁴¹ which obviously have relevant religious references. *Oríkì*, praise epithets of individuals, lineages and deities have been better researched than *Iwì*, and indeed their relevance to the study of Yoruba religion has enjoyed some treatment. Among important authors on *Oríkì* are Ulli Beier,⁴² and Karin Barber. In an article, Karin Barber⁴³ discusses the significance of *Oríkì Ọrìṣà* (praise poetry of the gods) for the understanding of Yoruba religion. Indeed she noted that *Ọríkì* is “the principal oral genre involved in propitiation and characterization of Ọrìṣà”, prior, in her view, to *Ìtań*, narrations or myths about the deity. Barber is of the view that *Oríkì*, unlike other genres, “capture and evoke the essential characteristics of the subjects...and have the most profound and intimate access to its inner nature.”⁴⁴ However, the most valuable research on *Oríkì* is Barber’s recently published book,⁴⁵ which provides an anthropological and literary study of *Oríkì* in Ọkukù, a Yoruba town.

Research into the *Ifá* divination system and its literature has had a noteworthy effect on Yoruba studies. The works of William Bascom⁴⁶ and Wande Abimbọla⁴⁷ can be cited here as providing an enduring legacy to Yoruba religious studies. As we observed earlier in this paper, *Ifá* study dates back to the 19th century. *Ifá* divination is a highly complex system of geomancy. With a divining chain (*òpèlẹ*) or with sixteen sacred nuts (*ikin*) the diviner arrives at a specific signature (*Odu*) for his clients. Each *Odu* contained hundreds of verses (*esẹ Ifá*) which made up the entire corpus of *Ifá* oral

poetry. *Èsẹ Ifá* is the most detailed form of Yoruba religious texts. It has been described as the storehouse of information about Yoruba mythology and cosmology. For one thing research into *Ifá* texts has provided a possible alternative view to the theological works produced by *Ìbàdàṅ* school. Although there is a tendency by *Ifá* scholars to privilege it over other aspects of *Òrìṣà* tradition and indeed to see it as governing and regulating the life of the other Yoruba deities. Nevertheless, the *Ifá* corpus is unsurpassed by any other *Òrìṣà* literary corpus. In addition to the works of Abimbọla and Bascom other significant but less known works on *Ifá* divination are Raymond Prince, Judith Gleason,⁴⁸ and E. M. McClelland.

Ìjálá, the poetry devoted to *Òguní's* worship by hunters and his devotees, is also an important source of Yoruba religions. Because of *Òguní's* significance as a god of war and hunting, he has the largest number of devotees. His annual festivals are occasions when hunters, warriors, and other devotees engage in *Ìjálá* chanting as a source of entertainment and devotion to the deity. Adeboye Babalọla,⁴⁹ whose works have influenced several other younger scholars, has devoted his entire research to *Ìjálá* genre of oral poetry. Several of his publications attest to the nature and popularity of the *Òguní* deity in Yoruba religious life and culture. Closely related to *Ìjálá* is *Òguní's* Iremoje, oral poems chanted at funeral ceremonies to honor deceased hunters. These chants not only focus on the devotees ideas about *Òguní*, medicine, and hunting, but also about the ancestor world. Bade Ajuwọn's works⁵⁰ on Iremoje among the *Ọyọ-Yorùbá* provide us with insight into their religious and social significance.

The last genre of oral poetry relevant to the interpretation of Yoruba religious studies is *Ọfọ* (incantations). Also called *Ògèdè* or *Ohun* (the spoken powerful words or "performative utterances") they are words which make things come to pass. They invoke immediate action, negative or positive, depending on their usage. They are of restrictive use and as such they are the most difficult form of poetry to investigate. However, their importance in Yoruba cultural life has been recognized by Pierre Verger and Olatunde Olatunji. Verger has examined the use of *Ọfọ* in Yoruba medicine making. His monograph *Àwọn Ewé Ọsanyin* (literally,

Ọsanyìṅ's herbal leaves but which he translated as *Yoruba medicinal plants*) remains a useful reference text until today. Verger noted that in traditional medicine, the knowledge of *Ọfọ* is essential and not just the knowledge of the scientific name of the leaves used and their pharmacological characteristics. In those *Ọfọ* transmitted orally, we find "definition of the action expressed of each of the plants entering in the composition of the recipe."⁵¹ Also Ọlatunji noted that *Ọfọ* is more than just a source of Yoruba religious literature. It is indeed an aspect worthy of further investigation.⁵² He further observed that as "the verbal" aspect of magical action, they go hand in hand with rituals and medicines.

We certainly cannot examine here all genres of Yoruba oral poetry related to religion. It is sufficient to say that nearly all the active *Ọrìṣà*⁵³ have their own genre which combines praise chants with mythical, ritualistic and symbolic references. The contribution of oral literature to the interpretation of Yoruba religions is vast, and it is hoped that students of religion would take active interest in the analysis of Yoruba oral traditions so that we could have a more composite image of the tradition.

The task of capturing the essence of Yoruba religious tradition in literature has also been undertaken by several authors. Yoruba literary authors seem to deal more with religious than with secular themes. The classic works of Daniel O. Fagunwa⁵⁴ and Wọle Ọyinka⁵⁵ portray deep understanding of Yoruba religious worldview which even some of the best works in religion cannot match. Regrettably students of religion shy away from these works. As an example of these texts, take Ọyinka's *Myth, Literature, and the African World* where he discussed the nature and functions of Yoruba myths about the *Ọrìṣà*. In this classic, Ọyinka protested against the violent, destructive image of *Ọguń* that forms the central theme of popular literature and even serious academic studies.⁵⁶ Based on the deity's praise-chants and other textual evidence, Ọyinka characterized *Ọguń* as "protector of orphans, roof over the homeless, terrible guardian of the sacred occult. *Ọguń* stands for transcendental, humane, but rigidly restorative, justice."⁵⁷ Wọle Ọyinka provides an interpretation that would make the deity more intelligible to the modern mind. Undoubtedly, *Ọguń* is a paragon of judicial virtues, an area in which he is most powerful among deities; he left

no one in doubt about the fearlessness of his judicial decisions, once taken. Whereas most scholars have viewed *Òguń* from the Judeo-Christian perspective in which justice and violence are mutually exclusive, the two exist together in Yoruba thought. Even among educated Yoruba, those who would easily swear a false oath upon the Bible or Quran would hesitate to swear a similar oath upon *Òguń*'s ritual objects, even a fountain pen, which is indicative of *Òguń*'s adaption to the contemporary work situation. They would hesitate to swear a false oath on such objects because they have not ceased to believe in the reality of *Òguń*, even though they now maintain a post-traditional religion or a Judeo-Christian or Islamic world view. There is a strong belief even among the educated Yoruba that while it takes the God of the Bible or Quran a long time to act against sinners and offenders (as both Gods suspend sentences pending a sinner's repentance), the judgement of *Òguń* is swift and certain.

Art History and Yoruba Religion

Next, I would like to examine the contribution of art historians to the interpretation of Yoruba religion. We shall be concerned here with what is often called visible religion, or iconography of religion. As we mentioned earlier on, the highly publicized fieldwork of Leo Frobenius in Ilé-Ifẹ set the stage for the beginning of a long tradition of excavation of artifacts and the study of Yoruba visual arts in general. Today, Yoruba artistic study has become one of the most developed art history disciplines in the entire continent. The available literature is vast, and it is impossible to provide a survey of the scholarship here. What I shall be concerned with are those specific works, especially in the past fifty years or so, which have most illuminated our knowledge of Yoruba religion. A central feature of these works is that their authors were as concerned with the style and aesthetic formal aspects of the arts as they were with their religious functions and symbolic meanings. I will be concerned with works relating to *Ifá* art objects, *Ère-Ìbejì*, sacred twins arts, *Egungun* and *Gèlèdè* masking traditions, *Ògbóni* secret society, ideology and rituals of kingship, and arts relating to death and immortality.

Three general works provide useful reference materials. Willet's work on Ilé-Ifẹ̀ sculpture,⁵⁸ Fagg and Pemberton⁵⁹ on *Yoruba Sculpture of West Africa*, and Drewal, Pemberton and Abiṣṣun's *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Arts and Thought*.⁶⁰ In addition to these three works, several catalogues produced in conjunction with museum exhibitions in different parts of Europe and America carry brief descriptive analyses of different aspects of art works related to Yoruba religion.

Ifá art objects are one of the enigmas of Yoruba artistic creativity. The chief emblems of the *Ifá* cult are the divination tray (*Ọpọ́n Ifá*), the tapper (*Ìròkẹ̀*) and the divining chain (*Ọpẹ̀lẹ̀*). Several of these *Ifá* art objects, produced over a period of many centuries, are scattered all over the world in private homes and public museums, and have become subjects of intense study and interpretation by art historians. Here should be mentioned the works of Roland Abiṣṣun,⁶¹ Elizabeth McClelland⁶² and Henry Drewal.⁶³ Abiṣṣun interprets *Ifá* art objects in the light of oral sources, proverbs, myths and most essentially *Ifá* verses. Drewal focused on the description and the symbolic interpretation of *Ifá* ritual objects. McClelland's book devotes some sections to examining the relationship between arts and religion in the *Ifá* cult. Margaret Drewal and Henry Drewal's joint essay attempts to focus on a diviner's sacred shrine in Ìjẹ̀bú in a detailed study.⁶⁴ In addition to *Ifá*, all the principal *Òrìṣà* have forms of artistic expressions mainly portrayed as ceremonial objects or objects depicting their power and essence. Through detailed analysis of these objects with a focus on their functions and meanings, scholars have been able to come to a better understanding of several *Òrìṣà* traditions. Here I should mention Roland Abiṣṣun's two essays⁶⁵ on *Orí*, a significant but less well-known Yoruba deity of destiny and self. The first is a descriptive interpretation of the worship of *Orí* and its artistic forms and the second attempts to use both verbal and visual metaphors to interpret the mythic and ritualistic dimensions of this deity. Babatunde Lawal's⁶⁶ essay also relates the importance of *Orí* to the general Yoruba sculptural tradition. The arts of *Ṣangó*, the Yoruba god of thunder and lightning have also been studied. Westcott and Morton-Williams⁶⁷ were perhaps the first scholars to examine in an article the symbolism and visual context of *Láábá-ṣangó*. Lawal's Ph.D.

thesis and subsequent essay also focused on the components and forms of *Ṣangó* sculpture.⁶⁸ Margaret Drewal⁶⁹ who has been concerned with the significance of arts in performance, examined the relationship between art and trance among a group of *Ṣangó* devotees. Pemberton's article on *Èshù-Èlégbá*⁷⁰ examined the role of this deity as a trickster.

The ideology and rituals of kingship were the most dominant theme in the works of earlier art historians in Yoruba studies. Several of these scholars focused on the interpretation of the deep symbolism imbedded in the king's insignia, especially the crown (*adé*) and swords (*idà*) of office. Ulli Beier⁷¹ discussed the sacred regalia of Òlokukù, the *Ọba* (King) of a Yoruba town in Ọyọ state. Susan Blier examined the Ọbàlùfọ̀n royal arts in Ilé-Ifẹ̀.⁷² More recently, Titi Euba⁷³ has examined the *Arè*, the sacred crown the Ọ̀nì of Ifẹ̀ wore ritually once a year during the Ọ̀lójọ̀ festival of *Ọ̀guń*, the Yoruba god of iron and war. John Pemberton's⁷⁴ research has focused on the *Ìgbómìnà* kingship system, while Roy Poyner⁷⁵ wrote a piece on the Ọ̀wò ivory sword, *Udàmalóre*. Robert Farris Thompson⁷⁶, has provided several works on Yoruba sacred kingship, which include beaded crowns and the symbolism of veiling and of sacred birds, two prominent features of Yoruba crowns.

Yoruba masking traditions have produced significant data for research into beliefs about the dead, the ancestors and witchcraft. *Eguńguń* masquerades for the ancestors constitute the most popular of these masking traditions. Poyner's⁷⁷ study on the *Eguńguń* of Ọ̀wò, Pemberton's⁷⁸ on the *Eguńguń* of Ìlá Ọ̀rańguń, and Margaret Drewal and Henry Drewal on those of Ègbádò⁷⁹ are some of the available studies that touch on religion. Also one should mention the Drewals'⁸⁰ insightful study on *Gèlèdè* masks. The masks celebrate the spiritual powers of "our mothers": elderly women and witches. From Drewals' studies, we now have a better understanding of witches and witchcraft among western Yoruba people. Witchcraft emerges not as something inherently evil but as a neutral force which can be used for both benevolent and malevolent ends. Another area of interest to art historians is the secret societies of which the most well-known is *Ọ̀gbóni* or *Ọ̀sùgbó*. Although, the iconography of these cult groups have been the main interest of

scholars; nevertheless our knowledge of the religious and social functions mainly come from these studies. Th. A. H. M. Dobbelmann's⁸¹ studies focus on the forms and function of the cult objects. Jerome R. O. Ojo⁸² has been concerned with the drums used in *Ògbóni* rituals. And Hans Witte⁸³ examined the conceptions of the earth deity and the ancestors in their relationship to *Ògbóni* iconography.

Focus on belief in life after death remains a central aspect of Yoruba religious studies. The city state of *Òwò* presents a unique tradition of second burial effigy *Ákó*, which has also been the focus of recent studies. Three studies have contributed to a lively discussion of this tradition, Willet,⁸⁴ Abiṣdun⁸⁵ and Poyner⁸⁶.

Research into *Ère Ìbejì* (sacred twins images) has also engaged the attention of art scholars. *Ère Ìbejì* are often commissioned by mothers of twins to serve as substitutes for their deceased children (death of twins was quite common). The Yoruba people have one of the highest twin birth rate in the world. Available statistics indicate that they have 45.1 births per 1,000.⁸⁷ Houlberg,⁸⁸ Robert Thompson⁸⁹ and several others have produced well illustrated articles on *Ìbejì* images and a conference on *Ère Ìbejì* organized by Ekpo Eyo in 1982 at the University of Maryland produced several fine papers on the significance of the myths, rituals and arts of these sacred beings. Lamide Fakeye,⁹⁰ for example, focused on the rituals and taboos relating to the commissioning and carvings of *Ìbejì* figures.

Lastly, representations of women in Yoruba religious arts have received attention lately. Abiṣdun⁹¹ has contributed two essays to the interpretation of the symbolism of the females in Yoruba arts and religion. Drewal and Drewal's works on *Gèlèdè* cited earlier (note 80) also focus on female power as shown in the *Gèlèdè* masking tradition. We may add here studies on rituals and performance. *Ọmọfọlabọ Soyinka-Ajayi* has examined dance in the rituals of the *Ọrìṣà*⁹² and is also preparing a book manuscript, a substantial part of which will focus on religious dances in *Ọbàtálá* and *Ṣanḡó* worship.⁹³ Margaret Drewal's recent book on performance in Yoruba rituals is a significant contribution to the field.⁹⁴

From the above we can see that the study of Yoruba visible religion by art historians has brought decisive changes in our

perspective on the study of Yoruba religion. Scholars in verbal and visual arts have covered some of the long neglected areas and aspects of Yoruba religious spirituality. Without these works, our knowledge about important aspects of Yoruba beliefs such as witchcraft, *Ògbóni* secret society, and *Ifá* mystical tradition would have been very scanty. Traditionally, students of religion in Nigeria consider these areas very difficult and, indeed, too sensitive to investigate. These are areas of field research where even the initiated fear to tread. The art historian's ability to study images related to these beliefs and practices, supplemented with interpretation of verbal oral narrations is a significant contribution to our field. As a result of the several works cited above we can now reexamine the development and growth of several *Òrìṣà* cults and account for the diffusion from their places of origin to other areas in Yoruba land.

Social Science and the Study of Yoruba Religion

A history of the study of Yoruba religious traditions must recognize the contribution of sociologists and anthropologists to the literature. Two periods mark the work of these scholars: the colonial period and the last ten years or so. The first period was characterized by ethnologists and anthropologists from Britain and America. Several of the British scholars were connected with the colonial government and had influenced the gathering of intelligence reports in the colonies. Perhaps I should state right here that these intelligence reports are not necessarily classified documents but that they contain very useful information about the cultural and social life of the people among whom the British investigators lived. They constitute useful secondary sources to students of Yoruba religion who are interested in reconstructing the history of the cults and religious groups in the different regions. Most of these scholars published their research in *Africa*, still the leading journal of African studies in Britain. Here we would cite the works of Peter Lloyd, William Bascom, and Peter Morton-Williams.

At first these scholars were mainly interested in writing general ethnographic monographs on the social structure, laws, kingship

system and economic life of the Yoruba. They ultimately worked on several cult organizations, such as *Ògbóni* society, and Eguíngu masquerades. Perhaps the leading figures among these ethnologists were William Bascom and Peter Lloyd. William Bascom produced a general survey titled *The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria*,⁹⁵ a book still cited today. It is a general ethnography examining various aspects of Yoruba life, kinship, and family life, economic, political and religious systems. Perhaps only Fadipe's *Sociology of the Yoruba*⁹⁶ and Eades' recent work *Yoruba Today*⁹⁷ would surpass it in breath and content. Bascom also published a monograph titled *Sociological Roles of the Yoruba Cult Groups*.⁹⁸ There he examined the role of the kinship system and the cult groups which were the focus of the peoples' religious life. Bascom's other contributions to the study of *Ifá* divination have been discussed earlier. Peter Lloyd, like Bascom, was interested in the Yoruba social system, especially the land law. But he wrote interesting articles on aspects of sociology of Yoruba religion. His article on sacred kingship⁹⁹ attempts to account for the historical origins of the institution of sacred kingship in the Benue Valley civilization. He also produced an interpretation of several varieties of Yoruba origin myths.¹⁰⁰ Another sociologist, Peter Morton-Williams¹⁰¹ did research into several cult groups, examining their organization, functions and rituals. Among such groups were Atinga, a witch-finding society, Egúngu Society, and *Ògbóni* cult. N. A. Fadipe's *Sociology of the Yoruba* cited above contains an important chapter on religion and morality including very advanced discussions, based on linguistic evidence, of *Ọlórún* *Olodumare* and the relationship between God and the *Orìṣà*. We should mention also the works of J. D. Y. Peel¹⁰² who has made the most significant contributions to Yoruba studies.

With independence and the departure of the colonialists' anthropologists, Nigerian scholars in the field of Social Sciences concentrated on secular aspects of society (politics, economy, family, etc.). Religious studies was not of any interest to them. However, in the past ten years or so younger scholars have taken very serious the social-scientific interpretations of different aspects of Yoruba religion and have therefore opened up a new frontier of research. They belong to different schools, and have adopted different theoretical frameworks such as social-functional approach,

structuralism, symbolic approach and semiotics which they often want to test with fieldwork materials, etc. Nevertheless, they are guided by one central concern: the structure, meaning and function of religion in society and culture. Some of these works are reductionistic, explaining some or all aspects of Yoruba beliefs and practices as social systems (a position that puts them in opposition to some history of religions scholars), nevertheless the results of this scholarship have enormously influenced the total picture of Yoruba religious tradition today. We would discuss only a few of these new sets of research: Karin Barber, Olatunde Lawuyi, Andrew Apter, and J. Lorand Matory. Karin Barber's research into *Oriki* (praise poetry) has been mentioned earlier on, but her works also belong to the social-functionalist perspective. Her article on "How Man Makes God in West Africa: Yoruba Attitudes towards *Òrìṣà*"¹⁰³ is a reinterpretation of *Òrìṣà* cult based on oral traditions. Rather than see the relationship of the *Òrìṣà* and their clients within a purely spiritual context, she argued that the *Òrìṣà* derive their power and existence from the structure of the Yoruba society. The relationship between the 'big men' and their supporters is analogous to the relationship between *Òrìṣà* and their clients. Andrew Apter's¹⁰⁴ book also adopts a similar approach. Here the nature and structure of *Òrìṣà* and their pantheon is portrayed as a reflection of conflict mediation in the Yoruba polity. He discussed the concept of *Òrìṣà*, the principles that govern their relations to each other and to the society at large. Also, Apter in a separate paper¹⁰⁵ provides a detailed theoretical interpretation of the relationship between myth and ritual in Yoruba Society. The significance of this essay lies in the interdisciplinary focus in which he combined both functional and historical approaches to the myth-ritual complex. As he himself has argued "Yoruba ritual provides an illuminating framework for interpreting the political and historical implications of Yoruba myths and their variant traditions."¹⁰⁶ Olatunde Lawuyi has written three stimulating essays on sociological interpretations of the roles, symbolisms and functions of three Yoruba deities namely: *Èṣù*, *Ògun* and *Ṣangó*.¹⁰⁷ Using primarily secondary sources he has interpreted the nature of these *Òrìṣà* in the light of new evidences and theoretical viewpoints. J. Lorand Matory also has several articles¹⁰⁸ on various aspects of the religion of the *Ọyó* Yoruba

people. His forthcoming book¹⁰⁹ on gender and the politics of metaphor will be a major contribution to the study of myth, rituals and symbols in Yoruba religion. P. J. Dixon¹¹⁰ wrote a recent article on “Politics, Economics and the Continuity of Belief” in which, following Ardener and Peel and French structuralism, he relates Yoruba beliefs to the political economy of contemporary Nigeria. Also Benjamin Ray¹¹¹ in an article has examined certain Yoruba religious ideas that motivate economic behavior. George Simpson’s¹¹² study of Yoruba religion and medicine fits into this broad category of scholarship.

Yoruba Religion in the New World

This essay will not be complete without a discussion of the study of Yoruba religion in the Americas. Research into Yoruba religion has been carried out since the second quarter of the century. In art history, two studies deserve our attention: Robert Farris Thompson’s *Flash of the Spirit*¹¹³ and Mikelle Omari’s, *From the Inside to the Outside: The Art and Ritual of Bahian Candomblé*.¹¹⁴ Thompson’s book centers on Africa and Afro-American art and philosophy, and especially the visual images and philosophical thought of African groups in the Americas. He devotes section one to the Yoruba whom he described as “the creators of one of the premier cultures of the world.” Thompson examined the impact which the worship of the *orisha* (divinities) has had on the population of key cities in Brazil, Cuba and the U.S.A. With great analytical skill, Thompson produces detailed descriptions of the forms, aesthetics and evocative power generated by Yoruba sacred arts as they cross the Atlantic to take permanent abode in the new urban cities of Havana, Salvador, Miami, and New York. He confessed, however, that this is just the tip of the iceberg in the visual arts of the Yoruba in the New World.

Mikelle Omari’s work is an ethnographic documentary of Yoruba Candomblé arts and rituals among the African descendants of Bahia, Brazil. She presents the symbolic use and meaning of arts in the context of *orisha* ritual worship. Though primarily on arts, both studies contain significant religious motifs.

Materials on Yoruba religion proper in the New World con-

stitute the most noteworthy evidence about the tenacity of Yoruba culture in the Americas. The pioneering work of Nina Rodrigues¹¹⁵ on Candomblé should be mentioned first. He was the first to give us an account of Yoruba religion in Brazil and to identify it as the model on which many other “cults” of other African ethnic groups are patterned in this part of the new world. An important researcher in Brazil, Edison Carneiro,¹¹⁶ suggests that at the time of his writing in 1948 the Candomblé cult would be as old as two hundred years. Although the cult has all the characteristic features of Yoruba religion in Nigeria, however, there is a strong emphasis on ancestor spirits who are consulted on a daily basis. A conspicuous place is given to female *orishas* who were in most places associated with water. Two equally significant works in these areas are Simpson’s *Black Religion in the New World*,¹¹⁷ and Bastide’s, *Afro-Brazilian Religions*.¹¹⁸ The key figure in the development of Yoruba religious study in Brazil is Pierre Fatunbi Verger. He opened up his study around the 1930’s with the publication in French of the classic, *Notes sur le culte des Orisa et Vodoun*.¹¹⁹ The main thrust of the work lies in the numerous oral materials which he collected from different parts of Yorubaland and the New World. The scope of our indebtedness to Verger’s research and scholarship is also evidenced in the several works that have followed since his pioneering efforts. Among such works are *The Status of Yoruba Religion in Brazil*,¹²⁰ *Retratos de Bahia 1946-1952*,¹²¹ *Orisha: Les Dieux Yorouba en Afrique et au Nouveau Monde*.¹²²

Scholars have also been concerned about the status and survival of Yoruba religion in Brazil, especially at a time when Western influence constitutes a big threat to its survival. Verger’s essay¹²³ and Russel Hamilton’s¹²⁴ work could be placed in the same context as Wande Abimbola’s¹²⁵ ethnographic fieldwork on how Yoruba religion has fared in contemporary Brazil.

In the last few decades there have been several articles and sizeable chapters on the contemporary situation of the Yoruba religion. Among these valuable works are Rainer Flasche,¹²⁶ Juana Elbein dos Santos and Descoredes M. dos Santos,¹²⁷ Michael J. Turner,¹²⁸ and Jacob Gordon.¹²⁹ Also Juana Elbein dos Santos wrote on the meaning of death among Bahian Yoruba. She also did an interesting study on ancestors’ cults (eegun)¹³⁰ as did Julia

Braga, the current Director of the Center for African Studies who, in addition did an analysis of the divination system (eerindinlogun) in Brazil.¹³¹

In Trinidad, Yoruba religion is found in the form of “*Shango* cult” and although it encompasses the core tenets of Yoruba religion as the name suggests, a substantial part of the retention centers on *Shango* deity, the god of thunder and lightning in Yoruba religion. Among the pioneering studies, one would mention Herskovits,¹³² Mitchell,¹³³ Simpson¹³⁴ and Elder.¹³⁵ A significant observation is that several of these writers have also endeavored to examine these works in comparison with their corresponding practices among the Yoruba people of Nigeria. Simpson’s work is a good illustration. A conspicuous difference in the structure and content of the “two types” of religion is perhaps the lack of *Ifá* divination system in Trinidad. Simpson has suggested that for the *Shango* (*Xango*) cult in Brazil, the province of Recife is probably the most important center. We are further informed that here the Yoruba sub-ethnic groups constituted distinct religious cults at the beginning of the twentieth century such as Ègbá, Bonina (perhaps Ìgbòmìnà), Ìjẹ̀shà, Ìlòrin, each having its own distinct pantheon of deities. Of importance is the work of Warner-Lewis¹³⁶, a Trinidadian who lived in Yorubaland for some time. Her book contains a whole chapter on Yoruba religion in Trinidad. An interesting essay by Stephen Glazier¹³⁷ on the interaction between the spiritual Baptist Church and the *Shango* cult exemplifies such studies. He observed four possible patterns of interaction between members of the two religious bodies but more significantly, he observed that the percentage of dual membership in both religious groups is quite high, a point also supported by a separate study carried out by Angelina Pollak-Eltz.¹³⁸

Today, a renewed interest in the subject is taking place. Several masters and doctoral theses have been devoted to significant themes in the area. One such central theme is the cult related theory of modernization and scientific studies. Two of such works, to the best of my knowledge unpublished, are written by Francis Mischel¹³⁹ and Dorothy C. Clement.¹⁴⁰

On the Cuban Island, one should mention the monumental work of Lydia Cabrera who dedicated her own life to the exposition,

analysis and understanding of Afro-Cuban culture, particularly the Santera. Her work, undoubtedly, stands unsurpassed in terms of volume and depth. She is in Cuban Yoruba religion the equivalent of Pierre Verger in Brasil. Of relevance are the following books by her *Koeko Iyawo*,¹⁴¹ on how the *Iyawo Òrìṣà* are initiated, *Otan Iyebiye*¹⁴² (precious stones) and more importantly *Yemoya y Ochun*.¹⁴³ Also her *El Monte*¹⁴⁴ is about medical plants (*ewe orisha*). Anthropologist Rogelio Martinez Fure worked on Ijesa-Yoruba religious traditions in Cuba, Natalia Bolivar Arostequi¹⁴⁵ did a survey of *orisha* religion in Cuba, and Lopes Valdes wrote on Afro-Cuban Yoruba religion and tried to account for its revival, despite official indifference or even repression. Unfortunately most of these works are unavailable to scholars interested in this tradition.

Since the 1980's several important works have appeared on African religion in the New World. A substantial part of this, of course, focuses on Yoruba religion. Here I should mention Joseph Murphy's, *Santeria: An African Religion in America*.¹⁴⁶ It is a case study of the *orisha* tradition in the Bronx, New York, first carried out as a Ph.D. thesis at Temple University under Leonard Barrett. The work describes the origin, development and transformation of Santeria in Cuba and the U.S.A. Also, Judith Gleason's *Oya: In Praise of the Goddess*,¹⁴⁷ interprets the mythology and symbolism of the black goddess *Oya*, a personification of the River Niger. Her transformations in her new environment in New York City, Brazil and the Caribbean are also discussed. Sandra T. Barnes (ed), *Africa's Ogun: Old World and New*,¹⁴⁸ is a collection of nine essays on different aspects of the deity in Africa and the New World. Among other publications of religious significance are Migene Gonzalez-Wippler,¹⁴⁹ Gary Edwards and John Mason.¹⁵⁰ John Gray's¹⁵¹ recent bibliographic work provides an up-to-date inventory of available published materials on Yoruba religion and culture in West Africa and the New World.

I have presented here some of the trends discernable in New World Yoruba culture and its attendant academic study. The most urgent need at this time is that major works, such as those of Verger and Carneiro, be translated into English so that English speaking scholars may have better access to them. In fact, it may be said that English is the minority language in the New World Yoruba

religious studies, and a knowledge of Romance languages is necessary for any prospective research. A few strategic translations would facilitate American scholars' access to this corpus.

Yoruba Religion and History of Religions

With those references to the contributions of art history, oral literature and anthropology to the study of Yoruba religion, and a review of the research into Yoruba religion in the New World, I would return to the main discipline of history of religions and examine what works on Yoruba religion have been done in this area. A major contribution to the phenomenology of Yoruba religion was made by Peter R. McKenzie, who, along with Geoffrey Parrinder, was part of the University of Ìbàdàn group in its early years. McKenzie wrote several essays on the cosmology and structure of *Òrìṣà* tradition.¹⁵² One important aspect of his research is his use of archival and secondary sources in writing history of Yoruba religious tradition.¹⁵³ We see very little of this kind of work in Yoruba religious studies in general. Recent studies of Yoruba religion in the past ten years have focused on what we often called *Religionswissenschaft*. By this we mean the historical and phenomenological study of religious phenomena in their cultural context. In the past fifteen years, religious studies and philosophy programs in Nigerian Universities, especially at *Ọbáfẹmi Awólówọ* University, Ilé-Ifẹ, have encouraged the application of this approach to the description and analysis of data. This revolution and departure from the Ibadan tradition began with the increase in scholars trained in Europe, America and subsequently at Ilé-Ifẹ. Most of them have been influenced by new approaches to the study of religion in these places. Here should be mentioned the work of Isiaaka Lalẹyẹ¹⁵⁴ a scholar from Benin Republic trained in France. His book *La Conception de la Personne dans la Pensée Traditionnelle Yoruba* is a phenomenological study of human life in relation to Yoruba religious worldview. While several scholars before him have taken the position that the Yoruba cosmos is two-tiered, *aiyé* earth and *òrun* the sky/heaven, Lalẹyẹ adds a third tier: *ilẹ* (the mother earth) which he describes as the source of vital power.

From a similar philosophical-hermeneutics tradition have arisen

the contributions of Akin Makinde on Yoruba philosophy and medicine,¹⁵⁵ Şegun Gbadegęsin on destiny and ultimate meaning,¹⁵⁶ and Barry Hallen on phenomenology and African thought.¹⁵⁷ Hallen and Şodipo published a book on witchcraft and medicine.¹⁵⁸ My work on religion and kingship among Ondo Yoruba people¹⁵⁹ adopts an interdisciplinary approach combining models in the history of religions and social science. In addition to this, we should mention the valuable contributions of John Pemberton's studies on the  gb m n -Yoruba.¹⁶⁰ In the African studies context, Pemberton is well known in art history circles, however, in religious studies his essays on  l   raņgu  festivals and kingship rituals have contributed greatly to the history of religions. Indeed his works have become models for younger scholars now exploring new areas of research in Yoruba religion. The work of the Scandinavian scholar Roland Hallgren on "The Good Things in Life: A Study of the Traditional Religious Culture of the Yoruba People"¹⁶¹ is also an important contribution to Yoruba studies.

Today scholars of Yoruba religion have realized the significance of interdisciplinary studies as an attempt to bypass the problems that often arise from a one-dimensional perspective. A religious anthropological study of aspects of Yoruba religion has been attempted by Lawuyi and Olupona.¹⁶² Our two joint essays on "Metaphoric Associations and the Conception of Death," and "Making Sense of the Aj  Festival" are new beginnings in this endeavor. It is also hoped that when Benjamin Ray completes his work on *If * divination ritual in Il -If , our knowledge of this important deity and divination system will be enhanced.

Finally, a few neglected areas of Yoruba religious studies. There is a general lack of interest in theoretical issues as they relate to the description and analysis of Yoruba religion. I agree that theoretical works that contain more arguments than ethnographic details may do no good to our scholarship, yet a knowledge of relevant theories of knowledge is essential. Students of Yoruba religion are generally not interested in historical problems and analysis. Yet in recent times we have seen the disappearance of several Yoruba cults which shows that they are subject to historical changes. For example, the cult of *Şon p n * (god of smallpox) has almost disappeared from most Yoruba cities due to the World Health Organization's program on

the eradication of small pox. It seems to me that students of Yoruba religion must take active interest in examining secondary sources: archival materials, missionary and travellers reports, intelligence reports, from which historians have written so much about Christianity and Islam in Yorubaland. Thirdly, the relationship between religion and women is still an unexplored area of research. Gleason's book on *Ọya* (cited earlier), and Deidre Badejo's¹⁶³ forthcoming book on *Ọsun* are indications that, through necessary painstaking research, the nature and functions of female *Ọriṣà* in the Yoruba pantheon and society can be fruitfully researched. Fourthly, it is important to relate our research in Nigeria to the study of Yoruba religion in the New World. Any student of Yoruba religion who visits Brazil, Cuba and the major cities of the U.S.A. would realize the influence of *orisha* tradition in the Americas. We urgently need works of a comparative nature, so that what has been retained from the West African coast and from new influences can be documented.

Another neglected area is comparative work involving Yoruba and crypto-yoruba religions i.e. the indigenous religions of peoples who are known to have borrowed heavily from the Yoruba, e.g. the Fon, the Ewe or Bini (Edo). Here I should mention a recent study of Bini and Yoruba traditions by Emmanuel Babatunde.¹⁶⁴ This comparison is the more necessary as these traditions blended with "purely" Yoruba religion in Brazil and Cuba. We can not really do justice to Yoruba religion across the Atlantic if we neglect its avatars and reinterpretation within the West African religions.¹⁶⁵

Lastly, there is a need for more in-depth studies of religion in Yoruba sub-ethnic groups rather than the general overview of Yoruba religion that is predominant in research. There are regional, cultural and geographical variations among Yoruba city states. It means that the scholar must be prepared to deal not only with Yoruba language, but with the local dialects. I noticed during my fieldwork among Ondo-Yoruba people, that whenever I insisted on my informants speaking Ondo dialects in interview, I obtained more detailed and accurate information than when proper Yoruba was the language of discourse. This leads me to another significant point. I believe no breakthrough can be expected in the field unless and until we pay close attention to Yoruba

hermeneutics and epistemologies, which means that we must be ready to inhabit the territory of Yoruba language and ask questions from therein and not as several scholars have done, position ourselves in the English medium and philosophy and ask questions about Yoruba culture and religion from that position of eminence. There needs to be a forum where theory oriented scholars, be they trained in anthropology, history of religions, semiotics, literary, or cultural studies, meet to start developing new theories or uncovering existing ones in indigenous Yoruba discourses.¹⁶⁶

It is hoped that this decade and the next century will witness new research findings in Yoruba religious culture.

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¹ Rev. Robert H. Stone, *In Africa’s Forest and Jungle or Six Years Among the Yorubans* (NY.: Fleming H. Revell, 1899).

² Miss Tucker, *Abbeokuta; Sunrise Within the Tropics* (London: James Nisbet & Co., 1853).

³ M.A.S. Barbers, *Village Life in the Yoruba Country* (London: James Nisbet, 1857).

⁴ Alfred B. Ellis, *The Yoruba Speaking Peoples of the Slave Coast of West Africa* [Reprinted, London: Chipman and Hall, 1970] 1894.

⁵ Leo Frobenius, *The Voice of Africa: being an account of the travels of the German Inner Africa Exploration Expedition in the years 1910-1912*. Vol. 1 (London: Hutchinson, 1913). Frobenius’ discoveries were made in the Olokun Grove at the outskirts of Ile-Ife. Frobenius thought that Olokun, Yoruba goddess of the sea on whose grove the terracotta were found, was the same as the Greek god of Poseidon. See Frank Willet *Ife in the History of West Africa sculpture* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967).

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¹⁶³ Deidre Badejo, *The Goddess Osun in Yoruba Cosmology* (New Brunswick: Transactions Books), forthcoming.

¹⁶⁴ Emmanuel D. Babatunde, *A Critical Study of Bini and Yoruba Value Systems of Nigeria in Change: Culture, Religion, and the Self* (Lewiston E. Mellen Press, 1992).

¹⁶⁵ Oral communication with Professor Olabiyi Yai, University of Florida, Gainesville, January 1993.

¹⁶⁶ In this regard, the pioneering works of Akinşola Akiwoşo deserve our attention, see his "Understanding Interpretive Sociology in light of the Oriki of Orunmila," *Journal of Culture and Ideas*, 1 (1983): 139-157; "Contributions to the Sociology of Knowledge from an African Oral Poetry," *International Sociology*, 1 (1983): 343-358.