

# Christianity in Ile-Ife, 1899-1980: Religious Encounter and Social Change

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## **Abstract**

*In the 1890s, the longstanding dominance of the Yoruba Religion in Ile-Ife was confronted by new phenomena introduced under Pax Britannica, including new crops and farming practices, colonial administration, and Christianity. Of these 19th-century developments, Christianity seemed to have led the way in penetrating the ancient city. Consequently, it set off a chain of responses among the people of Ile-Ife who, following the Yoruba internecine wars, had relapsed into what can be referred to as religious sterility and insipidity. Existing studies on Christianity in Ile-Ife have attempted to suggest early dates for the religion's origin, describe the origins of different Christian denominations, and highlight historiographical problems. While these contributions have advanced the understanding of the history of Christianity in Ile-Ife, a notable gap persists concerning the comprehensive narrative surrounding the advent, growth, and development of Christianity in the city. This study, therefore, examines the history of Christianity in Ile-Ife—the center of Yoruba Religion—between 1899 and 1980. Using the historical method, this descriptive and analytical study interrogates, through primary and secondary sources, the nature of Christianity's advent in Ile-Ife, the nature of its encounter with Yoruba Religion, and the subsequent process of establishing concord. The study discovered that the interaction between Yoruba Religion and Christianity in Ile-Ife oscillated between adaptation, resistance, and concord. The study concludes that this religious interaction has profoundly contributed to the redefinition of the city's religious landscape and identity.*

**Keywords:** Christianity, Yoruba Religion, Ile-Ife, Social Change, Religious Contest

## Introduction

Emmanuel A. Ayandele, in *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria 1842-1914*<sup>1</sup>, remarked that the history of Nigeria between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was primarily that of the responses of the locals to the presence and activities of missionaries, administrators, and traders whom he regarded as intruders. He further stated that in the spaces where these three groups mentioned above operated, the first group, the missionaries, were the most important due to the social transformations they initiated. Similarly, while the presence of the missionary forms a critical epoch in the history of Ile-Ife, the socio-cultural and socio-political structures of the city remained deeply rooted in Yoruba Religion. As shown in existing studies, the Yoruba Religion permeated and monopolised the socio-political and socio-cultural space in the town. This was such that, in Ile-Ife, natural phenomena, including birth, death, and infectious diseases<sup>2</sup>, were understood and interpreted through the paradigm of the otherworldly<sup>3</sup> and expressed in the form of an extensive network of deified culture heroes situated at the centre of rituals, rites, and festivals superintended by numerous chiefs cutting across the administrative structure of the city.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, from the smallest unit of the society, the family, each stratum of the indigenous political system played significant religious roles in the complex system of the Yoruba Religion in Ile-Ife. It is perhaps no wonder that, as the subsequent sections of this study will show, the introduction of Christianity took several endeavours in the 16<sup>th</sup> century through Portuguese missionaries<sup>5</sup> and in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by David Hinderer.<sup>6</sup> In both instances, the people of Ife proved impervious to the introduction of the religion, which was regarded as strange.

In the 1890s, the absolute dominance of Yoruba Religion in the city was brought into contact with several new phenomena introduced by the establishment of pax-Britannica. These include new crops and practices, colonialism, Islam, and Christianity, among others. Of these 19<sup>th</sup>-century developments in Ile-Ife, Christianity seemed to have led the way in the penetration of the ancient city by local agencies. As a result, it set off a chain of responses among the people of Ile-Ife, who, after the Yoruba internecine wars<sup>7</sup>, had, according to Frobenius, relapsed into "...religious sterility and insipidity" in which he found the town during his visit.<sup>8</sup> Several studies on the

precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial history of Ile-Ife have examined several aspects of the nature of religious practices in the town, such as festivals<sup>9</sup>, rituals<sup>10</sup>, and the advent of introduced religions.<sup>11</sup> Existing studies on Christianity in Ile-Ife have tried to suggest distant dates for the origin of the religion in the city<sup>12</sup>, detailing the origins of different Christian denominations<sup>13</sup> and highlighting the historiographical problems associated with previous studies.<sup>14</sup> While these publications have contributed to the investigation of the history of Christianity in Ile-Ife, there remains a gap in the extensive research of the narratives surrounding the advent, growth, and development of Christianity in the city between 1899, when the religion was established in Ile-Ife and 1980, when its spread through the quarter and socio-political system reached its peak. Therefore, this study, which adopts the historical method and is descriptive and analytical, interrogates, through the use of primary and secondary sources, the nature of the advent of Christianity in Ile-Ife, the nature of the encounter it had with Yoruba Religion and the social transformations that followed.

### **The Advent of Christianity in Ile-Ife**

The advent of Christianity in Ile-Ife can be traced back to the opening of a trade route in the eastern section of Yorubaland, specifically, connecting Ondo and Lagos, due to the effects of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Yoruba internecine wars.<sup>15</sup> In addition to facilitating the flow of trade and commercial activities between Lagos and the hinterland, it also initiated the movement of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) agents into the eastern part of Yorubaland, specifically Ode-Ondo.<sup>16</sup> The emergence of missionary activities in Ode-Ondo began with the mission station established by David Hinderer in Ode-Ondo in 1875<sup>17</sup>, which he would hand over to Reverend Charles Phillips in 1877<sup>18</sup> due to old age and retirement.<sup>19</sup> The life and activities of Reverend Charles Phillips as a student in Abeokuta and as a missionary in Ode-Ondo have been well documented.<sup>20</sup> However, an aspect of his activities as a missionary agent that directly impacted the introduction of Christianity in Ile-Ife partly included the implementation of commerce and Christianity policy in Ode-Ondo through his introduction of cocoa seeds to Ode-Ondo, which he experimented with and encouraged local farmers to cultivate. This attracted

farmers, including Christians and those who would soon be converted, from other parts of Yorubaland to Ode-Ondo.<sup>21</sup> The increase in population led to the search for new spaces for cocoa farming and, subsequently, the migration of people, including farmers who were Christians, to prospective cocoa cultivation areas such as Oke-Igbo.<sup>22</sup> The centrality of the Ife people to the growth and development of Oke-Igbo has been extensively discussed elsewhere.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, it is essential to state here that it witnessed the emergence of extensive plantations dedicated to cocoa cultivation and an increase in the Christian population, several of whom were indigenous to Ife.<sup>24</sup> Oke-Igbo formed one of the areas where Ife people sought refuge during the 19<sup>th</sup>-century wars, when Ile-Ife became one of the battlegrounds that led to its eventual collapse and the exile of its population.<sup>25</sup> However, the intervention of the colonial government in Lagos, which brought the different parties to the war to an agreement<sup>26</sup>, led to the resettlement, reconstruction, and restoration of the city. As a result, the Ifè population in places such as Isoya and Oke-Igbo returned, thus facilitating the introduction of cocoa farming and Christianity through many of the townspeople who had been exposed to them in their years of exile. In the same decade of resettlement, several Ife individuals who had converted to Christianity in the years of exile began to undertake missionary activities within the city, thus marking the gradual introduction of the religion in Ile-Ife. The emergence of Christianity in Ile-Ife has been ascribed to the activities of John Adelaja, Daniel Lawani Ologbenla, Chief Efunluyi Onile-Aran, among others, who made an effort to preach publicly and conduct services.<sup>27</sup> This was met with opposition by the larger Ife population, who sometimes persecuted the missionaries. In response, they relocated to the farmsteads on the outskirts of the city.<sup>28</sup> Here, the missionaries introduced Christianity to farmers and the members of their families who resided at the farms to tend to the cultivation and safety of plants and crops.<sup>29</sup> It was further reported that the influx and settlement of the missionaries at the farmsteads created new settlements where early miniature churches and schools were constructed, many of which still exist today, although moribund.<sup>30</sup> It would appear the effort of the missionaries yielded fruits in that not only did the construction of miniature churches emerge in the farmsteads, but they were also able to record the conversion of about 140 individuals.<sup>31</sup>

In the early parts of 1899, this nascent community of Christians, whose activities were barred from the metropolis of the city, extended an invitation to Charles Phillips, the head of the Ondo C.M.S. mission, who, at the time, had become a Bishop. In response, he despatched Reverends R. S. Oyebo, E. M. Lijadu, T. Harding, and one Mr. Atandaolu to Ile-Ife, who, through a joint effort, contributed to the intensification of efforts to facilitate an extensive permeation of Christianity into several farmsteads across Ifeland.<sup>32</sup> In May of the same year, Bishop Charles Phillips sent Mr. Emmanuel Adelabi Kayode to Ile-Ife, who served as the catechist to the growing Christian community and gathered the converts across different farmsteads scattered across the city.<sup>33</sup> The presence of the catechist marked the beginning of an Anglican Christian community in Ile-Ife. Thus, the community led by Kayode and Bishop Phillips sought to secure a space within the city to establish a church, but this was rejected.<sup>34</sup> Instead, they were permitted to build a church within a section of town removed from the metropolis known as Iyekere, specifically at a site known as Ileru or Ago Elewure.<sup>35</sup> The construction of the church in 1899 contributed to the growth of Christianity through sermons, congregational activities, and baptisms.<sup>36</sup> This growth and development were disrupted by the brewing conflict between the Ifè and Modakeke, which engendered schism within the church.<sup>37</sup> However, not only was the division in the church successfully managed by Bishop Phillips<sup>38</sup>, but the demise of Ooni Adelekan Olubuse, who encouraged the persecution of Christians and banned their activities within the metropolis of the city, offered the Christian community an opportunity to extend another request for space within the metropolis to the newly installed Ooni, Ademiluyi Ajagun.<sup>39</sup> The approval of the request led to the construction of the first church building within the metropolis, the establishment of CMS churches across the different quarters of the Ife township, and the influx of varying church denominations between 1910 and 1930.

#### **Agents of Missionary Proselytisation in Ile-Ife**

The movement of the missionaries and local converts into the city of Ile-Ife engendered a direct encounter between Christianity and the Yoruba Religion. Ile-Ife has been described as "the seat of worship where all the idols of the

Yoruba people emanated from'<sup>40</sup> and the people of the town as "the priests of the deities who ruled the world."<sup>41</sup> These descriptions reflect the interconnectedness of the Yoruba Religion and the social structure of the city. To ensure the continued existence of Christianity through the acquisition of converts, the churches devised different proselytisation methods. Perhaps to reflect the magnitude of the risks encountered in establishing the presence of Christianity in the town, the continuous existence of churches in Ile-Ife is regarded as having been through the "miracles of the holy spirit."<sup>42</sup> Pa I. A. Otete, whose parents were part of the few early Christian converts in Ile-Ife and grew up under the tutelage of Pastor Latunde, the founder of Ife Christ Apostolic Church, described his experiences with the challenges and risks encountered in establishing Christianity in Ile-Ife as extraordinary, such that it must have taken a supernatural power to get them through it.<sup>43</sup> It is a common belief among the people of Ife that the lands allotted to the Christians for the construction of churches within the city were not only considered to be sacred sites associated with specific deified culture heroes but were also imagined as a hub for certain otherworldly powers deemed to have the capacity to be malevolent. In the course of the fieldwork, it was gathered that the intention behind the allocation of these spaces considered risky to the Christians was that the malignant forces domiciled within these sites would serve the purpose of exterminating the Christians whose presence within the city was considered a violation of native laws.<sup>44</sup>

Records in the National Museum, Ile-Ife, show that the Seventh Day Adventist Church was built on the site of the ancient Iwinrin grove where patients of leprosy, smallpox, and other infectious diseases were deposited for isolation or internment. Furthermore, the site of the St. Peter's Anglican Church at Ayegbaju was a dreaded forest known as *Igbo Iso* (forest of the hanged), and it was associated with Obameri, the god of suicides, particularly deaths resulting from hanging.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, the Christ Apostolic Church situated within the Moore section of the town was built in the grove of a deified figure known as Olose.<sup>46</sup> This forest was particularly dreaded, such that before the 1930s, the route along the forest was barely used due to a belief that anyone who went into the grove would suffer inevitable consequences, particularly death.<sup>47</sup> Cases of this nature abound in the history of the town, but

what is significant is that despite the dangers associated with these sites, individuals within the communities of these churches partook in the penetration and preparation of these spaces for the construction of churches.<sup>48</sup> Meanwhile, the failure to materialise the consequences associated with violating the law prohibiting the presence of profanity in the sacred forests contributed in part to the acquisition of converts among the locals.<sup>49</sup> For instance, the founding members of the Christ Apostolic Church have, through a song, memorialised the encounter they had with the sacred space upon which they built a church:

Ọ̀nà àrà ni Olúwa ń gbà ẹ̀ṣẹ́ o  
Ọ̀nà àrà ni Olúwa ń gbà ẹ̀ṣẹ́ o  
Igbó Ọ̀rìṣà ó di ilé ẹ̀ṣẹ̀gùn, o e  
Ọ̀nà àrà ni Olúwa ń gbà ẹ̀ṣẹ́ o.<sup>50</sup>

God worked in a miraculous way  
God worked in an extra-ordinary way  
The forest of deities has turned into a house of victory  
God worked in a supernatural way

In addition to improving the status of its adherents through appeasing deities to avert misfortunes, the Yoruba Religion is concerned with explaining and influencing the destiny of every person in the physical world.<sup>51</sup> In Ile-Ife, where this holds a strong followership, there exist daily propitiations and annual festivals conducted by different family compounds at various times to influence and explain the course of the destiny of people or individuals.<sup>52</sup> This philosophy of the Yoruba Religion provided a platform upon which the churches could proselytise. To be specific, churches held revivals in which the material needs of the people were captured in the activities of these spiritual moments. These spiritual needs included wealth, children, and restoration of health. A notable instance would be the case of the outbreak of a smallpox epidemic in Ile-Ife, which was reported not to have infected some members of the Christian community, particularly the members of the Christ Apostolic Church who proclaimed it to have been the reflection of the power of their religion and also proceeded to attempts to heal and inoculate the members of

the public using prayers and holy water.<sup>53</sup> Meanwhile, despite the efficacy ascribed to these methods of dealing with the epidemic, the colonial government considered the healing and inoculation methods unacceptable and a contributory factor to the intensification of the spread of the disease. Consequently, this would lead to the prosecution and eventual incarceration of some of the church leaders.<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, the reports made by the Christian community members that certain victims of the smallpox epidemic were healed and several others were insulated from the disease through prayers, and holy water contributed to the influx of people to the church and the eventual increase in church membership.<sup>55</sup>

Other methods explored by the Christian community to further conversion among the local population included education and healthcare. Upon the arrival of the agents sent by Bishop Phillip to Ile-Ife, the missionaries established miniature learning centres where rudimentary Western education was introduced. In addition to this, they introduced Western methods of healthcare practices.<sup>56</sup> Be that as it may, fieldwork shows that in the past, individuals infected with certain diseases, mainly those for which they lacked extensive knowledge of their diagnosis and treatments, such as the smallpox disease, were exiled to sacred groves to prevent an epidemic.<sup>57</sup> These infected persons were considered to have been afflicted by the gods and were abandoned to perish in these sacred groves, usually on the outskirts of the town.<sup>58</sup> Those infected with these diseases and abandoned in the forests as a result of the social policy were rescued and treated by the missionaries who, through the use of Western medicine, were assisted through a recovery process and sent back into town.<sup>59</sup> Due to the medical assistance provided by the missionaries, some of those infected and ostracised could recuperate and return to the city. As a result, the change in the expected outcome of the infected, which was usually death, initiated curiosity about the facts surrounding their recovery, which generally led to the interests developed in the gods of the missionary – the closest medium through which they could explain the survival and continued existence of the individuals hitherto condemned to death.<sup>60</sup>

Meanwhile, schools as agents of proselytisation mirrored the methods employed in drawing converts by the itinerant Arab preachers in Old Oyo,



where younger members of the society were targeted rather than adults.<sup>61</sup> While several churches in Ile-Ife would establish learning centres, the introduction of Western education began with the schools operated by the Anglican church, otherwise known as the Church Missionary Society. The schools owned by the Anglican church operated in the same buildings used for church services initially, within the farmsteads on the outskirts.<sup>62</sup> Initially, these schools had challenges finding students because many of the farmers used the assistance of their children on the farms. As such, they did not readily give their children to the missionaries to be taught in schools.<sup>63</sup> Eventually, this would change when the few children allowed to attend these schools exhibited certain qualities associated with the practices observed among the missionaries. These included the ability to read and speak, understand, and write the English language to a certain degree.<sup>64</sup> The visible changes triggered an increase in student enrolment population such that many children below a certain age considered suitable for farm work were handed over to the missionaries.<sup>65</sup> Several of these individuals would form the crop of the first people to be educated in Ile-Ife.<sup>66</sup> The eventual migration of the CMS churches from the outskirts into the town of Ile-Ife came with the construction of missionary schools.

#### **Traditional Chiefs and Christianity in Ile-Ife: Adaptation and Resistance**

The encounters between Christianity and the traditional administrative system of the town appear to be chequered. Before the establishment of Christian religious centres within the different sections of Ile-Ife, the indigenous administrative system controlled the religious affairs of the city. It ensured the adherents of foreign religions, such as Christianity, were restricted to the outskirts of the city.<sup>67</sup> This was such that this policy was enforced through persecution and the threats of death sentences by hanging at a site known as *Mesi Alukurin*, or through ritual murders during ritual processions conducted during festivals.<sup>68</sup> The exact details of how the Christians were persecuted before 1899 appear to have been forgotten, and while colonial records acknowledge the occurrence of persecution, further information about it was not provided.<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, the isolationist system practised in the town<sup>70</sup> contributed significantly to keeping the missionaries out of town until the

early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Despite the intolerant disposition of the Ifè people and their leaders to these groups of Christians, the missionaries recorded specific successes in terms of health, education, and economic improvements of the families of the cocoa farming groups who lived on the outskirts.<sup>71</sup> These phenomena were found to be favoured by some of the political and religious chiefs. As a result, they became interested in improving their political relevance and economic stature, primarily through the accumulation of wealth offered by cocoa farming, which the Christians seemed knowledgeable about.<sup>72</sup> This would prompt a change in the disposition of the Ooni and some of his chiefs towards the Christians.<sup>73</sup> For instance, the search for an improvement in the precarious position of the Ooni in the politico-religious system of Ile-Ife, which Frobenius observed during his visit in 1910<sup>74</sup>, was, perhaps, one of the factors responsible for the support he readily accorded to the relocation of the Christians to the metropolis of the city.

In addition to apportioning lands for the construction of church buildings, Ooni Ademiluyi attached a clause to the approval of the requests of the Christians through which he extracted certain benefits. This clause demanded that the relocation of the Christians into the city should begin with the construction of the first church building within a section of the land belonging to his family, which came along with the implementation of the missionary health and educational policies. On the one hand, certain benefits accrued to Ooni Ademiluyi due to his cordial relations with the Christians. Meanwhile, on the other hand, he encouraged the suspicion of the Christians by indicating to his chiefs that his decision to have the church build on his family land was for the purpose of monitoring the activities of the missionaries.<sup>75</sup> It may be suggested that Ooni Ademiluyi probably realized the benefit he was likely to extract and, therefore, settled them within his jurisdiction to monitor the Christians in the case of any breach of agreement. At any rate, his successor, Ooni Aderemi, would become an active member of the Christian community.<sup>76</sup> Thus, this contributed to the restructuring of the chieftaincy system to give less emphasis to Yoruba Religion in the political system of the town.<sup>77</sup> Be that as it may, missionary activities had permeated the city to such an extent that individuals who assumed traditional political and religious chieftaincy titles in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century had been exposed to

missionary education in the early decades of the century. Consequently, many of the individuals had been groomed in the religion and education of the missionaries. Ooni Adesoji Aderemi, in separate biographical studies<sup>78</sup>, was described as having attended missionary school, and like his predecessor, the extent of his participation in Christian activities was reflected in his membership of the St. Peter's Anglican Church Ìrémo, which became popularly known as *shooshi Oba* (the king's church).<sup>79</sup>

Perhaps due to the combination of the concentration of political power in the Ooni, as argued by Oyediran<sup>80</sup>, and the recognition of his extensive participation in Christian activities, some of his chiefs would become involved in church activities, and these include title holders, particularly the Agba-Ifè (town chiefs) and the Modéwá (palace chiefs).<sup>81</sup> Existing accounts suggested, for instance, that a certain Lowa, the head of the Modéwá, known as Lowa Alli Awoyera, actively participated in church activities alongside the Ooni despite being a Muslim.<sup>82</sup> This suggests that through the receptive disposition of Ooni Ademiluyi and Ooni Aderemi, religious change and, in some cases, syncretism emerged within the traditional administrative system of the city. However, despite the inroads recorded by Christianity in Ile-Ife, the *Isoro* (religious chiefs) offered a degree of resistance. This they did through the implementation of specific policies targeted at stifling the growth of Christianity in the city. This included a declaration of ritual processions on particular days associated with certain activities of the Christians, such as crusades or open-air services, to prevent church members and potential converts from participating.<sup>83</sup> A notable example reflecting the disposition of these Isoro can be drawn from the Ilare section of the city. The point was made that, in this part of the city, as with others, ritual processions were imposed several times within several weeks, such that it hindered the presence of the people at the church and sometimes prevented them from going home after their services.<sup>84</sup> These methods employed to assert the dominance of Yoruba Religion were described by specific individuals within the Christian community as not having had debilitating effects on the growth of Christianity.<sup>85</sup> However, the resistance initiated by the Isoro, as the subsequent section will show, sometimes degenerated into conflicts.

As earlier stated, while the Ooni, including the palace and town chiefs, appear to have adopted Christianity, which some of them practised alongside the Yoruba Religion, the Isoro, whose responsibility included the conduct of festivals, rituals, and rites, were considered vital to the sustenance of the memory of the culture heroes remembered to have played significant roles in the establishment of the city and its continuous existence through certain feats. The efforts of the Isoro to preserve the dominance of Yoruba Religion in the town, which, Christianity in particular, was rapidly permeating, engendered the outbreak of conflicts. These conflicts, however, seemed limited to Christian communities that were fundamentalist and churches built within certain sections of the city intersecting sacred spaces of Yoruba Religion. The encounter between Christians and the votaries of Yoruba Religion seemed to have degenerated into conflicts mainly on the pretext of encroachment and violation of rituals and rites associated with specific festivals and sacred spaces by Christians through the construction of church buildings and some of the religious activities they engaged in.<sup>86</sup> Festivals in Ile-Ife are a mixture of the reenactment of past historical events, within which a deified culture hero played a central role. Festivals were held through the spiritualisation of the material preferences of the deified culture heroes and, in some cases, the invention of certain social activities that served as fillers and extensions of the duration of cultural events.<sup>87</sup> These aspects of Ifè festivals have spatial and temporal possessions belonging to lineages of deified culture heroes. These possessions served as a medium through which the importance of the historical figures was reasserted through annual commemorations.<sup>88</sup>

The approval given to the CMS for the construction of church buildings gave impetus to the influx of different church denominations in Ile-Ife, leading to the encroachment of Christians upon groves and pathways considered sacred to Yoruba Religion. Initially, the allocation of sacred spaces, especially groves, to the Christians was readily supported by the votaries of Yoruba Religion with the expectations that the presence of the Christians in the groves would elicit the wrath of the otherworldly, the effects of which would truncate the advent of Christianity. Meanwhile, the proliferation of church buildings, despite the outcomes anticipated by the

votaries of the Yoruba Religion, was interpreted as a threat to the existence of these sacred components, thus leading to the outbreak of conflicts. For illustration, the reaction of the adherents of Yoruba Religion to the construction of the Christ Apostolic Church (CAC) will be explored here. In the 1930s, the CAC members searching for a new site to construct a church building approached the Ooni to allocate space, specifically, the *Olose* grove.<sup>89</sup> This sacred grove within the Ife metropolis was considered particularly important to the Moore section of Ile-Ife. Despite attempts made by the Ooni, his chiefs, and specific individuals to impede this request, the Christians were able to acquire access to the space. The penetration of the grove by Christians was interpreted as a violation of traditional laws protecting the spatial possessions of the otherworldly through the profanity which the presence of the Christians introduced to the grove. This led to a smallpox epidemic within the CAC community, the outbreak of which has been described as a bioweapon used by the votaries of the Yoruba Religion.<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, despite the opposition of votaries of the Yoruba Religion, church buildings situated within or in proximity to sacred groves have continued to thrive, and this has contributed to the obliteration and, in some cases, the decrease in the extent of sacred sites, which were hitherto ubiquitous and extensive in Ile-Ife. The proliferation of churches, which suggests the growth and development of Christianity in Ile-Ife, did not, however, bring the resistance of the votaries of Yoruba Religion to an end. The presence of church buildings, which was widespread within the town, seemed to have aggravated competition for space by placing the belligerent adherents of both religions in confrontation with each other, leading to the struggle for the control of sacred days, pathways for processions, and spaces, thus causing violent encounters. For instance, the primordial contention between Obatala and Oduduwa remains an ongoing contest reenacted annually, specifically through the weeks cutting through December and February, which encompasses certain essential days for Christians. The use of drums is significant to these festivals, which intersect. Specifically, while the Oduduwa festival banned the use of drums, that of Obatala voided it. Therefore, the use of drums within the city was strongly prohibited during this period until after the Obatala festival had taken place to avert disasters.<sup>91</sup>

For the Christians, this was not a practice they agreed with. An account relates a conflict between Christians and the votaries of the Yoruba Religion during the Obatala festival conducted from December to March when the ban on the use of drums imposed by the adherents of Oduduwa was supposed to be voided by the votaries of Obatala, who had the sole prerogative to use drums according to Ife traditional law. During the festival, a procession was conducted through a circuitous route situated close to the site of *Igbo Iso*, a sacred grove hitherto associated with Obameri, but had become occupied by St. Paul's Anglican Church.<sup>92</sup> At the time of the procession, the church members seemed to have been engaged in a religious activity featuring drumming – a violation of a traditional law associated with Obatala and Oduduwa rituals in Ile-Ife. As such, the procession degenerated into a violent conflict when the votaries of Obatala heard the percussion of drums upon approaching the site of the grove occupied by the church. Similarly, during the Obameri procession phase of the *Itapa* festival, an individual from the church violated the ban on drumming by publicly beating an *ibembe* drum and speaking in derisive terms about the practice of Yoruba Religion and the votaries of Obameri in particular. As a result, this person was severely beaten, therefore leading to a disagreement with the Christian community.<sup>93</sup>

### **Social Change and Concord in Ile-Ife**

The effort to reassert the dominance of Yoruba Religion in the city was furthered through violent encounters in several cases by the members of the numerous lineages that are custodians of cults, rituals, and festivals associated with the multiple gods in the pantheon of Ile-Ife, the Christian community seemed to have continued to record a growth in the population of converts. Lange, in his observation of a similar trend during the reign of Ooni Aderemi between 1930 and 1980, remarked that "instead of reenacting the creation and events of the primordial days within the framework of traditional cult practices on the streets and at the religious sites of Ife, people were now beginning to spend their hours of religious worship in the churches and mosques."<sup>94</sup> The consequence was that several religious-cultural practices were abandoned and, in some cases, were combined with Christianity. For instance, Ooni Aderemi was described as an exemplary Christian by "regularly charging his

family to regularly pray through the morning and evening prayer sessions. He enjoyed Christian worship at the church and ran an open household free of juju or occult practice."<sup>95</sup> Additionally, he was reported to have stated that "he himself was a prophet of God and that every child God must be able to approach God directly through bible reading and prayers."<sup>96</sup> Furthermore, the indigenous sacred practices, which served as a source of legitimacy for the political powers of chiefs, were demystified and abolished due to the adoption of Christianity. For illustration, during the reign of Ooni Adesoji Aderemi, a certain Obajio, who was to smash the head of a sacrificial dog with a cudgel during the Olojo festival, refused to perform this ritual, citing his devotion to Christianity, his new religion, as his reason. Furthermore, several policies were initiated to abolish practices contrary to the values associated with modernity and Christianity.<sup>97</sup>

The interconnectivity of the *ebi* (lineage) system in Ile-Ife in which individuals belonged to and could trace kinship across multiple lineages, in addition to the social impacts of the activities of Christian communities from which members of the indigenous population extracted benefits, contributed to the eventual establishment of concord between the competing religious groups and engendered social transformations. Specifically, the educational institutions established by the Christians contributed to the emergence of concord. The schools in which religious and Western education were taught would prepare the younger generation as facilitators of religious harmony. From this crop of the beneficiaries of missionary social policies, many became prominent personalities in the traditional, economic, political, and professional spheres in Ile-Ife. This period served as the formative period for notable figures such as Ooni Adesoji Aderemi, who, along with the members of his lineage as Akui Royal Compound<sup>98</sup>, would become key members of the Anglican church. In addition to this were several other prominent individuals whose exposure to missionary educational and health institutions served as indicators of the need for the tolerance and large-scale acceptance of Christianity among the people of Ile-Ife.<sup>99</sup> Additionally, specific notable individuals who had converted to Christianity encouraged amicable relations between the Christians and the votaries of the Yoruba Religion. This includes Chief S. M. Onitiju, the Obaloran of Ife, who, despite being a convert, could,

through mediation, broker a lasting peace between the members of St. Paul's Anglican Church and the clans involved in the Itapa festival.<sup>100</sup> Others were Mr. Josiah Ademakinwa and Mr. Emmanuel Latunde, who played significant roles in facilitating the tolerance of Christianity among the members of their respective lineages.<sup>101</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Until 1899, the Yoruba traditional religion remained predominant in the socio-cultural and socio-political systems of Ile-Ife. The advent of Christianity, facilitated by city natives in collaboration with CMS agents, including E. A. Kayode and Reverend Charles Phillips, initiated a gradual process of religious change among members of the indigenous political class. However, this change also engendered resistance spearheaded by the class of Chiefs concerned with preserving the city's religio-cultural system. The resistance, which was targeted at reasserting the pre-eminence of the Yoruba religion, led to violent conflicts and, in some instances, the use of infectious diseases as bio-weapons against the Christian community. As the study shows, the combination of social improvements from which the people of Ife benefited and the membership of the indigenous political class in the Christian community played significant roles in the entrenchment of Christianity within the city. This ultimately led to the decline of the Yoruba religion through the loss of membership (due to conversion) and the obliteration of sacred sites. Over the years, Christianity has assumed a predominant status in Ile-Ife. However, despite its significant decline caused by religious change and social transformation, Yoruba traditional religion has continued to endure.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Ayandele. *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria 1842-1914* (London: Longmans, 1966).

<sup>2</sup> See for instance, Ebenezer Adegoke, "A study of the role of women in the burial rituals of the Ife of Southwestern Nigeria," King's College London, Unpublished PhD Thesis (1995): 341-345.

<sup>3</sup> This refers to Orun, regarded by the Yoruba to be the abode of deities, ancestors, and spirits. For further reading, see Drewal, Margaret Thompson. *Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Play, Agency* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> See for instance, Suzanne Blier, *Art and Risk in Ancient Yoruba: Ife History, Power and Identity, c. 1300* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013): 367.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Fabunmi, *Ife the Genesis of Yoruba Race* (Lagos: John West Publication, 1985): 18.

<sup>6</sup> Jacob Olupona, *City of 201 Gods: Ile-Ife in Time, Space, and the Imagination* (California: University of California Press, 2011): 63-64.

<sup>7</sup> This refers to the Yoruba wars of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, colloquially referred to as the Ekitiparapo war. For instance, see, Isaac Adeagbo Akinjogbin (ed.). *War and peace in Yòrùbáland, 1793-1893* (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books (Nigeria), 1998) and Stephen Akintoye. *Revolution and Power Politics in Yorubaland, 1840-1893* (London: Longman Group Limited, 1971).

<sup>8</sup> Frobenius, Leo. *The Voice of Africa: Being an Account of the Travels of the German Inner African Exploration Expedition in the years 1910-1912* (London: Hutchinson, 1913): 291.

<sup>9</sup> Oluwafunmiyi Raheem and Elugbaju, Ayowole Segun. "Moremi in the Ritual Drama of Ilé-Ifè: A Light into the Edi Festival," *Journal of Black Culture and International Understanding (JBCIU)* 3, no. 1 & 2, 2017: 62-89.

<sup>10</sup> Jacob Olupona, *City of 201 Gods: Ile-Ife in Time, Space, and the Imagination*.

<sup>11</sup> Samuel Aghalino and Ayowole Segun Elugbaju. "Issues and Contentions in the Incursion of Islam and Christianity into Ile-Ife, Southwestern Nigeria," *International Area Studies Review* 25, no. 1 (2021): 21–35.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Fabunmi, *Itan Ibere Esin Kristi Ni Ile-Ife Ati Agbegbe Re: The Story of the Beginnings of the Christian Faith in Ile-Ife and Surroundings* (Ibadan: Day Star Press, 1970).

<sup>13</sup> Michael Adetunmbi, *Growth and Expansion of Christian Missions in Ifeland, 1899-2009* (Akure: Onwards Prints, 2012).

<sup>14</sup> Samuel Aghalino and Ayowole S. Elugbaju. "Issues and Contentions in the Incursion of Islam and Christianity into Ile-Ife, Southwestern Nigeria."

- <sup>15</sup> Isaac Akinjogbin (ed.), *War and peace in Yorubaland, 1793-1893* (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books (Nigeria), 1998).
- <sup>16</sup> David Laitin, *Hegemony and Culture: Politics and Change Among the Yoruba* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986): 53.
- <sup>17</sup> Reverend Thomas Harding, "Report of Visit to the Ondo and Ilesha Missions, 1890," *The Church Missionary Intelligencer: A Monthly Journal of Missionary Information* 42 (London: Gilbert and Rivington Limited, 1891): 189-195.
- <sup>18</sup> Stephen Akintoye, "The Ondo Road Eastwards of Lagos, c. 1870-95," *The Journal of African History* 10, no. 4 (1969): 583.
- <sup>19</sup> Kehinde Olabimtan, "Hinderer, David 1819-1890 Anglican Communion (Church Missionary Society) Nigeria," *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*, 2011, <https://dacb.org/stories/nigeria/hinderer-david/> (accessed 6th May, 2019).
- <sup>20</sup> Olatunji Ojo, "Slavery and Human Sacrifice in Yorubaland: Ondo, c. 1870-94," *The Journal of African History* 46, no. 3 (2005): 379-404.
- <sup>21</sup> Sara Berry, "Christianity and the Rise of Cocoa-Growing in Ibadan and Ondo," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 4, no. 3 (1968): 439-451.
- <sup>22</sup> Samuel Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas from the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate* (Lagos: C.M.S, 1921): 232.
- <sup>23</sup> Olatunji Ojo, "Warfare, Slavery and the Transformation of Eastern Yorubaland (South-Western Nigeria) c. 1820- 1900," York University, PhD Dissertation (2003): 72.
- <sup>24</sup> Sara Berry, "Christianity and the Rise of Cocoa-Growing in Ibadan and Ondo," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 4, no. 3 (1968): 439-451.
- <sup>25</sup> Olufemi Omosini, "Ife: The Years of Recovery, 1892-1930." In: Isaac Akinjogbin (ed.) *The Cradle of a Race: Ife from the Beginning to 1980* (Port Harcourt: Sunray Publications Limited, 1992): 171-172.
- <sup>26</sup> Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas*.
- <sup>27</sup> Dada Adelowo, "Islam and Christianity in Ile-Ife." In: Isaac Akinjogbin (ed.) *The Cradle of a Race: Ife from the Beginning to 1980* (Port Harcourt: Sunray Publications Limited, 1992): 337 and Adetunmbi, *Growth and Expansion of Christian Missions in Ifeland*, 24
- <sup>28</sup> Oral interview with Venerable Adeboye Awoyode, Aiyetoro Area, Okerewe, Ile-Ife, 20<sup>th</sup> October, 2019.
- <sup>29</sup> Oral interview with Venerable Adeboye Awoyode.
- <sup>30</sup> Oral interview with Venerable Adeboye Awoyode.
- <sup>31</sup> Adebisi Adeyombo, *From Parish to Cathedral: St. Phillips Anglican Church* (Ife: O. Adesiyon Ventures Ltd, 2010): 3
- <sup>32</sup> Adeyombo, *From Parish to Cathedral*, 4
- <sup>33</sup> Adetunmbi, *Growth and Expansion of Christian Missions in Ifeland*, 25
- <sup>34</sup> Adelowo, "Islam and Christianity in Ile-Ife," 338

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<sup>35</sup> National Archive Ibadan (NAI), Ife Div. 1/1, File 26, CMS (Y) 4/1, "The History of the Foundation of the Gospel at Ile-Ife, 1897-1939" and Adetunmbi, *Growth and Expansion of Christian Missions in Ifeland*, 25

<sup>36</sup> Adelowo, "Islam and Christianity in Ile-Ife," 4 and NAI, Ife Div. 1/1, File 26, CMS (Y) 4/1.

<sup>37</sup> Despite the peace agreements engendered by the British colonial officials from Lagos, the people of Ile-Ife continued to seek the dispersal of Modakeke from their lands. See for instance: Isaac Akinjogbin (ed.) *The Cradle of a Race: Ife from the Beginning to 1980* (Port Harcourt: Sunray Publications Limited, 1992): 81.

<sup>38</sup> Adetunmbi, *Growth and Expansion of Christian Missions in Ifeland*, 30.

<sup>39</sup> Adelowo, "Islam and Christianity in Ile-Ife," 337.

<sup>40</sup> Toyin Falola and Aribidesi Usman, *Movements, Borders, and Identities in Africa* (Rochester: University Rochester Press, 2009): 70.

<sup>41</sup> Isaac Akinjogbin (ed.) *The Cradle of a Race: Ife from the Beginning to 1980*, xi-xiii

<sup>42</sup> Oral interview with Pa. I. A. Otete, Moore Street, Moore quarters, Ile-Ife. 18<sup>th</sup> September, 2019.

<sup>43</sup> Oral interview with Pa. I. A. Otete.

<sup>44</sup> Oral interview with Prince Adetoyese Adeniji, Obaloogun Street, Ilare quarters, Ile-Ife and David Ogungbile, "The Dynamics of Language in Cultural Revolution and African Spirituality: The Case of Ijo Orile-Ede Adulawo Ti Kristi (National Church of Christ) in Nigeria," *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 10, 1 (2001): 66-79.

<sup>45</sup> Carolyn Keyes, *Images of Yoruba Kingship in the 19th Century* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1988): 84 and Oral interview with Venerable Adeboye Awoyode.

<sup>46</sup> Oral interview with Pastor Femi Olayinka, Oranfe Phase 2 Area, September 2019.

<sup>47</sup> Oral interview with Amoke Akinwande, Iloro Area, Okerewe quarters, Ile-Ife. December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

<sup>48</sup> Samuel Afolabi et al., *Itan Ibere ati Idagbasoke Ijo Aposteli Ti Kristi Ni Ife, 1926-1997* (Ile-Ife: Timade Ventures, 2018).

<sup>49</sup> Oral interview with Pastor Femi Olayinka.

<sup>50</sup> Oral interview with Pa. I. A. Otete.

<sup>51</sup> Idowu Bolaji. *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longmans, 1962): 113 and Berry, "Christianity and the Rise of Cocoa-Growing in Ibadan and Ondo," 449.

<sup>52</sup> William Bascom, *Ifa Divination, Communication Between Gods and Men in West Africa* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1991): 3-79.

<sup>53</sup> Oral interview with Pastor Femi Olayinka.

<sup>54</sup> NAI, Ife Div. 1/1, File 26 "Smallpox: Out Break of."

<sup>55</sup> Oral interview with Pastor Femi Olayinka.

<sup>56</sup> Oral interview with Venerable Adeboye Awoyode.

<sup>57</sup> There were several sacred sites in Ile-Ife associated with diseases and they include Igbo Iwirin, Opa Oluseri, and Osangangan Obamakin groves for instance. For further reading, see: Suzanne Blier. *Art and Risk in Ancient Yoruba*, 124 and 185.

<sup>58</sup> Oral interview with Venerable Adeboye Awoyode.

<sup>59</sup> Oral interview with Venerable Adeboye Adewole.

<sup>60</sup> Oral interview with Venerable Adeboye Adewole.

<sup>61</sup> Richard Lander. *Records of Captain Clapperton's Last Expedition to Africa, Volume 1* (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1980): 94.

<sup>62</sup> Oral interview with Venerable Adeboye Adewole.

<sup>63</sup> Oral interview with Venerable Adeboye Adewole.

<sup>64</sup> Oral interview with Venerable Adeboye Adewole.

<sup>65</sup> Oral interview with Venerable Adeboye Adewole.

<sup>66</sup> Oral interview with Mr. Akin Benedict Olagbaju, Maryland, United States, July 30<sup>th</sup>, 2019 suggested that like him, several people of his age group were handed over to missionaries such as Father Cloutier of the Catholic Church for instance and many of them would go on to graduate and become professionals.

<sup>67</sup> Oral interview with Venerable Adeboye Awoyode.

<sup>68</sup> Oral interview with Venerable Adeboye Awoyode.

<sup>69</sup> This is perhaps due to the fact that the presence of colonial administration was yet to be fully established in Ile-Ife during this period. See for instance, National Archives Ibadan (NAI) CSO 12/23 9 File 587/1904 Vol. CSE/1/1/711 Agreement Between the Ooni of Ife and the Modakeke People.

<sup>70</sup> Frobenius, *The Voice of Africa*, 290-291.

<sup>71</sup> Oral interview with Ganiyu Rabi, Fajuyi Area, Moore, Ile-Ife, 18th January 2020.

<sup>72</sup> Oral interview with Mr. Shina Adeyemo, Ogboni lane, Iremo, 11<sup>th</sup> November, 2019 suggested that Pa. E. T. Adeyemo, a prominent member of the Anglican church was one of such individuals to amass so much wealth from cocoa farming.

<sup>73</sup> Two instances portraying Oòni Ademiluyi Ajagun's pursuit of economic power were recorded to have been the reason for his compulsive re-settlement of the hitherto exiled people of Modakeke and also, his extensive exploitation of the Native Authority System. For further readings, see: Oyediran, Oyeleye. "The Position of the Ooni in the Changing Political System of Ile-Ife," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 6, no. 4 (1973): 373-386.

<sup>74</sup> Frobenius, *The Voice of Africa*, pp. 276 -282

<sup>75</sup> Oral interview Venerable Adeboye Awoyode.

<sup>76</sup> For instance, see: NAI, Ife Div 1/1, File 40. The third anniversary service of his highness, Aderemi, the Oni of Ife.

<sup>77</sup> Dierk Lange, "Preservation of Canaanite Creation Culture in Ife Culture in Ife." In: Peter Probst and Gerb Spittler (eds.), *Between Resistance and Expansion: Dimensions of Local Vitality in Africa* (Hamburg: LIT Verlag, 2004): 125-155.

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<sup>78</sup> Omotoso Eluyemi, *This is Ile-Ife* (Ile-Ife: Adesanmi Printing Works, 1986) and Derin Richardson, *Nigeria in Transition; Biography of Sir Adesoji Aderemi, the Oòni of Ife 1930–1980* (London: Witherby Publications, 2003).

<sup>79</sup> While the religion and level of devotion of these chiefs cannot be ascertained, the names of these chiefs suggested they probably had an early exposure to foreign religions. See: NAI, Ife Div. 1/2, File 109 "Changes in Inner Ward Chiefs", from the Native Authority Office to the District Officer Ife, October 6th, 1955

<sup>80</sup> Oyediran, "The Position of the Ooni in the Changing Political System of Ile-Ife."

<sup>81</sup> Oral interview with Professor Muhib O. Opeloye, Parakin area, Ile-Ife, 10<sup>th</sup> May, 2019.

<sup>82</sup> Oral interview with Professor Muhib O. Opeloye.

<sup>83</sup> Oral interview with Deacon Samson Ijaodola.

<sup>84</sup> Oral interview with Deacon Samson Ijaodola.

<sup>85</sup> Oral interview with Deacon Samson Ijaodola.

<sup>86</sup> Oral interview with Venerable Adeboye Awoyode revealed that certain churches like St. Paul Church Aiyegbaju has had repeated encounters with a number of adherents of different deities particularly during festivals such as the Odun Oduduwa (Oduduwa festival), Odun Obatala (Obatala festival), Odun Obameri (Obameri festival) which forbid drumming but interestingly coincides with the period of Christmas festivities during which Christians hold church activities that required drumming.

<sup>87</sup> Edi festival is a combination of the re-enactment of Ugbo invasion of Ife, the heroic role of Moremi and lastly, the Eluro day in which sexual songs are rendered in a procession across town by men and women. For more details, see for instance: Oluwafunminiye Raheem and Ayowole Segun Elugbaju, "Moremi in the Ritual Drama of Ile-Ife: A Light into the Edi Festival."

<sup>88</sup> The deities in Ile-Ife own sacred spaces within Ile-Ife which are usually split between that which serves as the lineage compound and that which serves as the grove. For instance, Moremi has her compound at Okerewe where she holds a very prominent position and also Igbo Ilamoja which serves as her grove. A procession takes place between her compound in Okerewe to Igbo Ilamoja which serves as a way of commemorating the expanse of space under her control. The same is applicable to several deified figures such as Obatala, Oluorogbo, Obarese, Oranfe, Orisakire to mention a few.

<sup>89</sup> Kenneth Murray, "List of Pieces in Ife known or Believed to Contain Antiquities," National Commission for Museums and Monuments, 1948.

<sup>90</sup> Oral Interview with Pa I. A. Otete.

<sup>91</sup> Oral interview with O. O. O. Dada, the Oloja Iranje Idita, Iranje Ile, Ile-Ife, 8<sup>th</sup> September 2019

<sup>92</sup> Kenneth Murray, "List of Pieces in Ife known or Believed to Contain Antiquities," National Commission for Museums and Monuments, 1948.

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<sup>93</sup> Oral Interview Owoyomi Fatade, the Awise Awo Ilode and Oluwo Lokore, Lokore Oke Compound, Ita Osun, Ilode quarters, Ile-Ife, 18 September, 2019

<sup>94</sup> Lange, "Preservation of Canaanite Creation Culture in Ife Culture in If Culture in Ife," 125-155.

<sup>95</sup> Richardson, Derin. *Nigeria in Transition; Biography of Sir Adesoji Aderemi, the Ooni of Ife 1930–1980*, p. 31.

<sup>96</sup> Richardson, Derin. *Nigeria in Transition; Biography of Sir Adesoji Aderemi, the Ooni of Ife 1930–1980*, p. 31.

<sup>97</sup> Lange, "Preservation of Canaanite Creation Culture in Ife Culture in If Culture in Ife," 141.

<sup>98</sup> Richardson, *Nigeria in Transition*, 1.

<sup>99</sup> The missionary religion and education in Ile-Ife would go on to be a catalyst for the emergence of exceptional figures in Ile-Ife such as the late Pa. Oladoyin M. Adeyemo, who would go on to be the first Ife surgeon; Pa. Oyekunle Alex-Duduyemi; Business Magnate, the former Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, first Republic; Late Chief Orayemi Orafidiya, retired magistrate; Late Chief Awosiyan, a former Colonial Forestry Officer who was also the Director of Aderawo Trading Company under the reign of Oòni Adesoji Aderemi; Late Barrister Prince Pade Adewuyi, former secretary to the Ife Central Local Govt and former Chairman of Nigeria Cocoa Board to mention a few.

<sup>100</sup> Oral interview with Venerable Adeboye Awoyode.

<sup>101</sup> Oral interview with Pastor Femi Olayinka