

**Missionary Encounters and the Development of Yoruba Women's
Spirituality 1842-1930**

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by

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To Johnson Olajide Abimbola, my pillar of support

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the development of Yoruba women's spirituality as it interacted with mission Christianity between 1842 and 1930, highlighting three major concerns. The first is that conversion of Yoruba women to Christianity did not automatically transform their traditional beliefs, attitudes and practices as the missionary evangelists thought it would. Rather, the discovery made through this study is that conversion marked the beginning point for Yoruba women's spiritual transformation from their primal understanding of self, the family, the society and the Transcendent.

Secondly, the dearth of women's perspectives on religious developments in Africa has led to the portrayal of the experiences of both women and men as being uniform. On the contrary, this study delineates fundamental issues relating to women that hindered them from moving away from their traditional values to embrace Christian attitudes and practices. These first two concerns above lead to the third argument that Yoruba women's spiritual transformation was closely tied to their cosmological worldview; thus precluding them from fully becoming Christians until Christianity was adapted to their cultural context. This study therefore highlights the primacy of Yoruba culture and worldview in women's interactions with missionaries who propagated the Gospel in Yorubaland.

While most authors have relied on ethnographical approach, this study follows the examples of scholars such as J. D. Y. Peel and Ade Ajayi to derive the responses of Yoruba women to Christian spirituality from archival records in the form of journals, reports and correspondences of missionaries to Yorubaland, stored in the archives. Out of a total of twenty four missionaries and their spouses who consistently interacted with Yoruba women in ways that significantly influenced their spirituality, twenty-one were from the CMS, two were Baptists and one was from the Methodist mission.

Although Yoruba women, including wives of Yoruba missionaries did not document their religious encounters, the Church Missionary Society (CMS) had an effective arrangement by which its missionaries recorded and sent in details of their daily encounters with the Yoruba from the 1840s to the early 1900s. Similarly, the memoirs of some European women such as Miss Sarah Tucker and Mrs Anna Hinderer are also veritable sources used to evaluate Yoruba women's spiritual transformation. While Yoruba women were not deliberately targeted by missionaries, out of eight hundred and forty journal entries evaluated, forty eight per cent recorded encounters with women, either in the market, on the streets, in the blacksmith shop or in shrines where ritual proceedings were carried out.

Although the Methodist Missionary Society's archive was consulted, unlike the CMS, the journal entries of their missionaries lacked details of their daily interactions with Yoruba people, especially women who are critical to this study, thus limiting its value for investigating contacts with women. However, other Methodist sources, such as the official magazine, *The Gleaner*, compensate for this shortfall. While the journals of Thomas Jefferson Bowen, which were later published in book form, are important sources for investigating Baptist work in Yorubaland, it is not clear how they survived

while those of other Baptist missionaries such as Edwin Clark and Joseph Harden did not survive.

The most critical finding in this thesis is that neither did Yoruba women become fully Christian, nor did Christianity become a Yoruba religion until the periods of absence of many foreign missionaries, first as a result of the American Civil War of the 1860s and then during World War I between 1914 and 1918. The first major sign of Yoruba women's spiritual renewal is traceable to the spiritual experiences of Abiodun Akinsowon and Sophie Odunlami who not only revived aspects of Yoruba women's primal spirituality, but also adapted Christianity and gave it a Yoruba image. Some distinctive features of Yoruba women's spirituality that turned Christianity into a Yoruba religion include re-introduction of their leadership role, introduction of water as a healing agent, acceptance and interpretations of dreams, visions and revelations, and the resuscitation of Yoruba mode of praying.

Secondly, this thesis establishes the link between African women's primal religious beliefs and practices and the form of their adapted Christian spirituality. While Yoruba women's spirituality went through various stages of quarantine, confrontation, assimilation and adaptation as it interacted with mission Christianity, Yoruba culture and worldview remain prominent features of each stage. Although religious conversions were made at each stage, the attitudes, beliefs and practices which define meaningful relationship with humanity and the Transcendent, were not totally transformed until Christianity was adapted to incorporate significant aspects of the culture and worldview of the Yoruba. The implications to be drawn from this is that for Christianity to survive as an indigenous religion, women in each Yoruba generation, will need to look back at Yoruba history, culture and worldview to satisfy their search for meaning.

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Author's Declaration

This thesis conforms to the prescribed word length for the degree of Doctor in Philosophy for which it has been submitted for examination.

No part of this work has been presented before for a degree offered by the University of Liverpool or by any other establishment.

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May 2008

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Although mission Christianity came with the goal of changing African religions, cultures and spirituality, current religious attitudes and worship practices among African Christians reflect that African traditional religions, culture and cosmology continue to be in active tension with Christianity as mediated by the missionaries. While beliefs in the pantheon of divinities, ancestors, priests and priestesses gave way to the exclusivity of the Trinitarian God of Christianity, practices such as exuberant worship, praying in the mother tongue, using water as a ritual object and elaborate mourning rites remain resistant to Western influences. Whereas, the African Independent Churches appear to be the best hunting ground for the blending of Christian beliefs with traditional African attitudes and practices, the mission Churches in twenty first century Yorubaland are also incorporating many African practices, especially the aspects of prayer and Church music, into their liturgies.

Conversion of Yoruba through their encounters with missionaries,¹ including the Yoruba liberated slaves from Sierra Leone, from the 1840s has occupied the attention of scholars in recent decades.² In contrast, this study is concerned with the transformation of women's spirituality. While religious conversion involves a measure of conflict, it 'occurs when the "religious self" of a person is destabilized by

¹ Some Yoruba ex-slaves had gained the status of missionaries in the Sierra Leone recaptive colony, thus, the term missionaries encompasses African and European agents of the missionary societies, especially the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (WMMS).

² For details of these debates, see J. F. A. Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria: 1841–1891* (London: Longman Group Ltd, 1965); E. A. Ayandele, *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria: A Political and Social Analysis* (London: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd, 1966); J. D. Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2003); Oyeronke Olajubu, *Women in The Yoruba Religious Sphere* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003).

the encounter with a different system of religious ideas.’³ However, three erroneous assumptions have distorted the understanding of Yoruba Christian women’s spiritual formation. The first is the tendency to regard spirituality as being synonymous with religious conversion.⁴ Rather, conversion is the starting point for spiritual formation, and this study attends to the longer process of spiritual transformation. Secondly, the dearth of women’s perspectives on women’s religious experiences in Africa leads to erroneous portrayal of the experiences of both genders as being uniform. This study investigates the distinctive features of Yoruba women’s religious experiences and the particular challenges faced by women. The third assumption is the tendency to trivialise the implications of culture in spiritual experiences. This study highlights the primacy of culture in Yoruba women’s interactions with missionaries, both Western and Yoruba, as well as other groups of returnees.⁵

This thesis examines aspects of the missionary encounters that affirmed, and those that challenged Yoruba women’s primal spirituality. The proposition in this thesis is that although Yoruba women’s encounters with missionaries led to significant conversions, it did not automatically invoke the spiritual transformation anticipated by the missionaries in Yorubaland, because of the factors of Yoruba culture, history and religious traditions. Rather, these same factors led to an adaptation of Christianity to its Yoruba cultural context, a process that is emergent in the latter years covered in this study.

³ Massimo Leone, *Religious Conversion & Identity: The Semiotic Analysis of Texts* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. xi.

⁴ While religious conversion refers to a change from one religious affiliation to another, transformation of spirituality is a deeper level of responding to the new religion, observing its demands and fulfilling its obligations. Conversion could be abrupt and immediate as James Craig argues, spirituality transforms over a period of time. See James Craig Holte, *The Conversion Experience in America: A Sourcebook on Religious Conversion* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), p. x.

⁵ CO 265/154, Enclosure dated 15 Nov. 1839, in Doherty to Russell, 30 Nov. 1839. The returnees’ representatives were the 23 Yoruba *Saro* who wrote the petition to Queen Victoria enclosed in Doherty’s presentation to Lord John Russell.

Missionary activities in Yorubaland, from 1842 to 1930, are the focus of this study. Hence, detailed investigation into the way Yoruba women related with others within the wider community, and how they responded to the Transcendent after their conversion to Christianity, is closely evaluated. In essence, the main argument in this thesis is that although Yoruba women converted to Christianity, they continued to exhibit the beliefs, attitudes and practices of their primal religions. Conversion, therefore, was not the end of their experience as they encountered the missionaries.

Therefore, this study investigates the encounters between missionaries and Yoruba people between 1842 and 1930 to discover why some aspects of Yoruba women's spirituality changed and others were resistant to changes. This chapter examines three foundational issues as a prelude to investigating the development of Yoruba women's spirituality. Firstly, it gives a general background, the motivation and rationale for the study, and the tensions generated as Yoruba women attempted to move out of their primal religions. It also clarifies the use of major concepts in this study, such as spirituality, culture and religion in the context of Yoruba Women's conversion to Christianity. The second task of this chapter is to put in place relevant information on Yoruba women of the nineteenth century, and to provide a general overview of the relevant missionary groups, the key missionaries that Yoruba women encountered in the period under review and the main missionary centres in Yorubaland. A synopsis of the seven chapters in this thesis is given at the end of the chapter.

Background of this Study

The central argument in this study is that Yoruba women's conversion to Christianity in the nineteenth century, though significant, did not produce corresponding transition from Yoruba primal understanding of how to relate with the Transcendent and the rest of humanity to missionary perception of God and the entire creation. Although conversion of Yoruba women through their encounters with missionaries and the Yoruba liberated slaves from Sierra Leone from the 1840s occupies the attention of scholars, the tendency has been to treat the issue of spiritual transformation as if it was synonymous with conversion.

Motivation for Examining Yoruba Christian Women's Spirituality

Although the motivation for this study comes from divergent but interrelated perspectives, the consistent theme is that the spiritual formation of Yoruba women is rooted in the cultural beliefs, attitudes and practices that had animated them in their relationship with one another and to the Transcendent. One of the motivations for this study is the persistence today of certain beliefs and behavioural patterns that had been established through which people relate consistently with the Transcendent and one another in Yorubaland over a prolonged period of time.

While it is difficult to determine for how long pre-contact cultural orientations had persisted among the Yoruba, the insistence of Andrew Walls, a mission historian, that, the sharp contrasts in the various ways different communities in different ages received and responded to 'Christianity' is strongly linked with the culture and

worldview⁶ should be tested in the Yoruba experience. Hence, his view stimulates an enquiry into the essential differences between conversion and the spiritual processes of making meaning and living a fulfilled life. Why then did Yoruba women, who are the subject of this thesis, retain some aspects of their indigenous processes of making meaning, regardless of all attempts by missionaries to re-orientate them through mentoring, Gospel proclamation, church liturgy and education?

Whereas the missionaries' intention was to make them do away with 'country fashions',⁷ Yoruba women held on tenaciously to the primacy of certain beliefs, attitudes and practices from the traditional society. This investigation therefore comes out of the curiosity of this investigator to test the claims of scholars, such as Walls that, although conversion could take place among a people group, culture has always been an important factor in the way converts have responded to their new faith.⁸

An attempt to discover why some practices from the traditional forms of making meaning changed, while others did not, is another motivating factor for this enquiry. Andrew Walls aptly sums up the contextual nature of Christian missions, on which this thesis is based in his argument that although Jewish Christians in 37 CE, those of the Council of Nicea at about 325 CE and Yoruba converts of the nineteenth century claim to be Christians, 'one group appear(s) suspect or even repellent to the other', because, in his view, different groups or communities 'appear to be concerned about different things'.⁹ The theory of Walls has motivated this researcher to test the

⁶ Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transition of Faith* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2004), p. 5.

⁷ CMS/CA2/049/95 D. Hinderer, 'Missionary at Abeokuta, June 12 – Sept 25 1849' Journal, Friday 22 June 1849.

⁸ Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transition of Faith*, pp. 7 – 15.

⁹ Ibid, p. 5.

religious experiences of Yoruba women of the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, not only as they converted to mission Christianity, but also as they responded to it. Thus, the Yoruba practice that remained unchanged among many Christians was for women mourners to put on a sad countenance, groan or weep, and throw themselves to the ground many times in a dramatic manner, to show their sympathy for a bereaved person, raises questions that are relevant to this investigation.¹⁰

Another pertinent question, which informed this study, is how far cultural affinity between the evangelist and the evangelised influence the outcome of the Christianization process. Significant efforts were made by Yoruba men and women, ex-slaves such as Samuel and Susan Crowther, who were recaptives¹¹ and others from Nova Scotia¹² and Trinidad,¹³ to promote mission spirituality. The missionaries and the congregation of the Wesleyan Methodist also played a prominent role at the formative stages of Christianity in Yorubaland as recorded by Miss Tucker, a British woman observer of the missionary activities in the 1850s, in her memoirs on the Yoruba:

[Yoruba] Christians belonging to the Wesleyan congregation at Sierra Leone, and their intreaties for spiritual help had led to a visit from the Rev. T. B. Freeman [of mixed race], so well known as the active Wesleyan missionary among the Ashantees.¹⁴

¹⁰ This comes from first hand experience of the author.

¹¹ Samuel Crowther was one of the recaptives rescued in 1822 by Captain Leeke, the commander of one of the Squadron vessels, *Myrmidon* manning the West African coasts after the 1807 Slave Trade Abolition in Britain. See Parliamentary Papers PP LIV, 1852, Papers relative to the reduction of Lagos, pp. 133 – 34, Straith to Palmerston, 20 August 1851.

¹² A. F. Walls, 'The Nova Scotian Settlers and Their Religion', in *Sierra Leone Bulletin of Religion*, June 1959.

¹³ Maureen Warner-Lewis, *Trinidad Yoruba: From Mother Tongue to Memory* (Tuscaloosa, AL.: University of Alabama Press, 1996), p. 34.

¹⁴ Sarah Tucker, *Abeokuta; Sunrise within the Tropics: An Outline of the Origin and Progress of the Yoruba Mission* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1854), p. 54, 86 - 7.

However, missionaries attempted to convert them to Christianity, and transform their spiritual orientation without taking into consideration means of harmonising the two cultures.

Given that Yoruba returnees constituted about seventy percent of evangelists to the Yoruba, one would have expected that transition from the primal culture to Christian contexts should have been smoother. On the contrary, Yoruba women held on to the primacy of certain beliefs, attitudes and practices in traditional society. It is argued that Christian ex-slave emigrants who solicited for the help of missionaries in their bid to take the Gospel to their homeland did so believing that they were introducing Christianity as a civilizing religion to their people. This argument is further attested to by the observations of Tucker in her memoirs

But many of those Christian emigrants, who... enjoying the means of grace at Sierra Leone... seized on every opportunity of intercourse with Sierra Leone [Christianity], to send the most urgent intreaties to their friends and former ministers to use all the means in their power, that missionaries might be sent to Abbeokuta. They... felt so sure of an answer to their appeal that they did not hesitate to assure Shodeke, the king, that 'White man would soon come.'¹⁵

Insights from memoirs such as Tucker's above and a collection of materials in the Church Missionary Society (CMS)¹⁶ archive used in this chapter suggest that Yoruba women and the missionaries had different priorities. Whereas Yoruba women wished to continue to derive meanings from their culture and worldview, missionaries attempted to introduce new ways of making meaning.

¹⁵ Tucker, Abeokuta; *Sunrise within the Tropics*, p. 54.

¹⁶ The Church Missionary Society is referred to in this thesis from this point onward as CMS.

What is Spirituality?

The first critical tension that needs to be resolved here, is to seek a suitable definition for the term 'spirituality', the difficulty of which, perhaps, is why many scholars avoid differentiating between conversion and transformation of spirituality in their evaluation of the religious experiences of Africans. Spirituality in the context of this research is defined as: attitudes, beliefs and practices within changing religious, social and political contexts that bring out new meanings out of cumulative experiences, such that the individual continues to derive meaning in the relationship with the Transcendent and the rest of humanity.

It is argued here that it is the ambiguous nature of spirituality that created difficulty for Yoruba women as well as Yoruba and European missionaries; and even many scholars in recent times, in making a clear distinction between religious conversion and transformation of spirituality. The difficulty in having a single definition of spirituality arises from the fact that spirituality comes out of varying experiences. This study examines particularly the role of culture in the development of Yoruba women's spirituality, and this informs the above definition of 'spirituality'.

Conversion is not only differentiated from spirituality in this study, it is here argued that conversion is the starting point for the transformation of an individual's spiritual experiences. Whereas religious conversion could take place without major changes in the primal worship attitudes and practices of the convert, spirituality cannot be transformed without making reference to the core values in the individual's life. Therefore, whereas transformation of spirituality is a gradual process, conversion could be instantaneous for a particular convert, and it could be an 'abrupt, intense

religious experience that takes place within the context of a longer process of transformation' for others.¹⁷ Thus, while the changes in Yoruba women's religious allegiance from the worship of *orisa* to Christianity were visible, as portrayed in the missionary sources,¹⁸ the patterns of worship and prayer, the perception of the enemy and the beliefs in dreams, visions and revelations remained unchanged as seen in the religious expressions of Yoruba women between the 1880s and the 1930s.¹⁹

Although scholars, such as Alexander Schmemmann portray conversion and spirituality as if they were exclusively Christian experiences,²⁰ the resistance of Yoruba women to mission Christian spirituality show that both experiences are applicable to other faith and cultural systems. Conversion and spirituality are more complex in the case of Yoruba women who had moved from different *orisa* within the African Traditional Religions, before Christianity or even Islam added their additional dimensions to the religious experiences of the Yoruba.

The term 'spirituality', therefore requires a clear definition in view of the complexities of Yoruba women's multiple experiences and accumulated processes of making meaning which they had encountered during their spiritual transition from one religious tradition to another. The term is used specifically here to refer to Yoruba women's spiritual practices and identity that were totally integrated within a broader Yoruba cosmology, which in this context refers to Yoruba perception of the universe, its composition in terms of nature, humanity and spiritual realities. In Yoruba

¹⁷ Holte, *The Conversion Experience in America: A Sourcebook on Religious Conversion*, p. x.

¹⁸ E. g. Mary Ije's declaration in Tucker, *Sunrise Within the Tropics*, p. 149.

¹⁹ E. g. Abiodun Akinsowon discussed extensively in chapter six. See also, J. D. Y. Peel, *Aladura: A Religious Movement among the Yoruba* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 71 - 72.

²⁰ Alexander Schmemmann 'Christian Spirituality', in G. S. Wakefield, *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (London: SCM Press, 1983), p. 362.

cosmology, history, society and culture were united, and women had their particular gendered responsibilities alongside those of men.

Although there are areas of common interest in both African and Western discourses on spirituality, such as the diminishing role of women in Christianity, the central issues in the burgeoning Western discourse on spirituality differ from issues arising from the primal experiences of Yoruba women in religion and culture.²¹ For example, Western scholarship on spirituality over the last quarter of the nineteenth century tended to emphasise post-traditional spiritualities of individual quest or rejuvenating spiritual traditions with established denominations of Western Christianity. Feminist contributions reflect preoccupation of Western women with the church tradition of subordination of women, which is different from the active participation of Yoruba women in traditional religions.²²

Movement between one religion and the other in African Traditional Religions did not disturb Yoruba women's spirituality because the spiritual orientations of those religions were essentially the same. However, contact with mission Christianity attempted to disrupt Yoruba culture, cosmology and social structure, and thus necessitated transformation of Yoruba spirituality: that is, their worship patterns, use of spiritual objects, attitudes towards the enemies, cosmological worldview and perception of spiritual realities.

²¹ E.g. Ronald J. Gordon, 'Rise of Pietism in 17th Century Germany', in *Church of the Brethren Network*, April 1998; Philip Sheldrake, *A Brief History of Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007); Sandra M. Schneiders, 'The Effects of Women's Experience on their Spirituality', in Joann Wolski Conn (ed.), *Women's Spirituality* (New York, Paulist Press, 1986); Schmemmann 'Christian Spirituality'.

²² See for example, Sandra M. Schneiders, 'The Effects of Women's Experience on Their Spirituality' and Ann Carr, 'On Feminist Spirituality', both works in Joann Wolski Conn, ed., *Women's Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1986); Carol Ochs, *Women and Spirituality* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983); Philip Sheldrake, *A Brief History of Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007).

Walls' account of contextual Christianity lends support to the notion of a necessary and inevitable transformation of Yoruba women's spirituality as they moved from their primal religions to Christianity.²³ However, as this thesis will show, missionaries expected Yoruba spiritual identity and practices to fall away on conversion and be replaced by Western piety. This led to serious missionary misconception of the religious experiences that continue to animate the spiritual sensibilities of a convert. Thus, Walls' theory challenges the missionaries' notion, which amounts to an oversimplification of movement between one religion and another.

The spiritual formation of Yoruba women following their conversion to Christianity can only be reasonably assessed by taking into consideration their varied spiritual experiences and the range of factors involved in their former processes of making meaning. Spirituality, for Yoruba women encompassed fundamental issues that required attention, such as childbirth, deliverance from death and sicknesses, and economic freedom as they related with one another and with the Transcendent. The accounts of Oyindala, who surrendered all her former items of worship,²⁴ and Mary Ije, who gave her total allegiance to Christ,²⁵ were, examples of women who showed a great desire to move totally to Christianity despite Yoruba Christian women's experience of a spiritual 'gulf', which only an adapted Christianity could, and later would, fill.

²³ Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement*, p. 5.

²⁴ T. J. Bowen, *Adventures and Missionary Labours in Several Countries in the Interior of Africa from 1849-1856*, 2nd ed. (London: Frank Cass and Company Ltd. 1968), p. 158.

²⁵ Tucker, Abeokuta; *Sunrise within the Tropics: An Outline of the Origin and Progress of the Yoruba Mission*, p. 150.

Mission Christianity undoubtedly challenged Yoruba women's core spiritual values and practice. Yoruba women converts experienced a shift from what had been their centre of power, influence, meaning and origin, located in their traditional roles in religion, in the family and in the community. Christianity had not provided viable alternatives that incorporated their culture and cosmology. Yoruba Christian women were thus involved in a search for gender identity and meaning, which was not a problem for them in the traditional society that missionaries met on arrival in Yorubaland. Their search for identity transcended self, because the individual in Yorubaland as in other parts of Africa does not exist alone.²⁶ Hence, spirituality for Yoruba women represented the totality of life experiences, family commitments and personal goals and aspirations.

Conversion of Yoruba women to Christianity, therefore, was dangerous for communal cohesion as it posed a threat to communal processes of making meaning. In extreme cases, women who did not live up to societal expectations were persecuted because of their failure to participate in the corporate process of making meaning and thus contributing to the survival of the race. Peel observes that

Most references to persecution – about three quarters of reported cases – concern women, young women in particular: mothers of babies, betrothed women, and adolescent girls. It was not just that young women were more susceptible than others to pressure from their elders, but that they were responsible for discharging a key (and, as it seemed, threatened) social function... the most essential role of the *orisa* was to ensure that the lineage was reproduced; and it was the chief responsibility of the women of the compound to cherish the *orisa* to this end. *When Christianity drew women away from this duty, it could only be seen as a blow struck at the vitals of the family.*²⁷

²⁶ John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Portsmouth; Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1990), p. 106.

²⁷ Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, pp. 235 – 236. (The emphasis is mine).

Conversion to Christianity, therefore, introduced a tension, because it was seen as drawing women out of their responsibilities in the traditional society.

Although the apprehensions that led to the hostilities by Yoruba leaders is examined in greater detail in chapter four, a quick reference to an example of blockade to Yoruba women's spirituality is essential here. For example, the Lisa of Ondo who could not hide his disapproval and discouragement of women from going to missionary compounds queried the wives of one of his chiefs for contravening his instructions.²⁸ Although Ondo women went back to worship with missionaries on Sundays, their enthusiasm before Lisa reprimanded them was dampened. Charles Philips, a Yoruba missionary of the CMS observed that the women gave correct interpretation to Lisa's reluctance in allowing contacts with missionaries, because, in spite of his diplomatic approval, 'so much is he dreaded', that women became apprehensive of attending services.²⁹

Thus, it is argued here that insights gained from reading missionary journals suggest that Yoruba women were not a *tabula rasa* when they came in contact with mission Christianity that was presented within the mode of nineteenth-century Western cultures and values. Missionaries, however, were unmindful of the fact that Yoruba women had a past, out of which they did not move completely, and a present into which they had not made an absolute transition. Thus, Yoruba women's encounter with missionaries was more than the meeting of religious ideas. It demanded major adjustments to every facet of their lives, first as women and secondly as family and community facilitators.

²⁸ See CMS/CA2/078 C. Phillips, Journal Entry, 10 July 1877.

²⁹ Ibid.

These changes involved emotional and psychological search for what James Fowler refers to as human 'centre of value, origin and meaning'.³⁰ Although it was earlier pointed out that Yoruba spirituality is defined in terms of its communal values, the individual process of making meaning cannot be totally ignored. Where the personal goals of an individual runs counter to that of the family and community, there is a clash of spirituality, as is to be demonstrated in chapter three in the celebrated case of Efunsetan, the Iyalode of Ibadan. Therefore, Yoruba women's spirituality is psychological, a search for meaning within conflicting religious, social and political contexts and a human desire to make meaning out of life experiences.³¹

Spirituality, in the context of this study also has a social function, which can be analysed in sociological terms, as nineteenth-century Yorubaland witnessed massive social, religious and political changes, which brought significant changes to the life situation of women in particular and the society at large. Due to their former complex network of roles, responsibilities and relationships as wives, mothers, religious leaders, female divinities and ancestors, women had to redefine their processes of making meaning within the changing religious and social contexts of nineteenth-century Yorubaland. Yoruba women converts' spirituality, therefore, was a process of becoming functional Christians who were deriving meaning from their relationship with the Transcendent and responding to the changes that redefined their social, cultural, political and religious circumstances.

³⁰ James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: the Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers Inc., 1981), p. 145.

³¹ Shirley Potts, 'Not for Nothing', in *Linchpin*, 5, no 1, (2002), p. 12.

Culture, Religion and Yoruba Women

The argument of T. S. Elliot, an English poet and scholar that, ‘No culture has appeared or developed except together with a religion’³² is congruent with the argument advanced in this thesis that transformation of spirituality was more important than conversion as Yoruba women converts negotiated the cultural differences between the former faith and the new one. The common boundaries of religion and culture are established in this study, as culture is defined as the totality of the shared values of people’s lives reflected in their personal and common experiences.³³ Religion, on the hand, is taken as ‘any set of values and beliefs, which promote integration and stability’³⁴ among persons sharing them.

Thus, religion was the core of Yoruba spirituality, as it was in many traditional African communities where ‘religion is life and life is religion’.³⁵ This was affirmed as missionaries observed the pervading presence of religion in Yorubaland, which was characterised by the consistent presence of the *orisa* in the compounds and on the streets:

The streets, however, are diversified by sheds, which serve the purpose of shops, and here and there by orisha or idol houses; and at intervals there are open spaces, shaded by trees, and used as markets.³⁶

Given the level of commitment to the pantheon of *orisa*, missionaries had a difficult task in changing converts to Christian monotheism, which required that they do away

³² T. S. Eliot, *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (London: n. p., 1958), p. 15.

³³ Olajubu, *Women in The Yoruba Religious Sphere*, p. 2.

³⁴ Malcolm Hamilton, *The Sociology of Religion: Theoretical and Comparative Perspectives*, 2nd ed. , (New York: Routedledge, 2001), p. 20

³⁵ Kofi Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion* (Accra: FEP International, 1978), p. 1.

³⁶ R. B. Hone, ed., *Seventeen Years in Yoruba Country: Memorials of Anna Hinderer... Gathered from her Letters and Journals* (London, The Religious Tract Society, 1872), p. 60.

with the pantheon of gods. The Yoruba were quick to defend their position when the missionaries criticised their system of beliefs:

When the Yorubans are reproved for idolatry, they will maintain that they worship God (Olorun), but that they worship him through orisha, who will pray to God for them, and obtain the blessings they desire.³⁷

However, in spite of the Yoruba concept of pantheism, many women who converted to Christianity such as Mary Ije and Oyindala immediately surrendered their totems of traditional worship and adopted monotheism. This was not a uniform practice among Yoruba women, many of whom continued to believe in *Olódùmarè* as the Supreme God of the Yoruba, both transcendent and remote, whose messengers are female and male *orisa* acting as intermediaries between *Olódùmarè* and his creatures.

Yoruba culture and religions affirm the place of female divinities, who were either mythological or human figures with outstanding qualities, commitment or sacrifice to society, immortalised in death, such as Moremi Ajasoro, a woman martyr in Ile-Ife. Also, a Yoruba mythology has it that a devoted Yoruba woman, ? ya took her own life when she learnt of the death of her husband, Sango. A variant of the myth has it that as she fell down and succumbed to death, she became a large river and was therefore deified and worshipped by many.³⁸ Yoruba women's spirituality therefore identifies with the divine image in a unique way. A good number of nineteenth-century Yoruba women were given special recognition as a result of one valiant act or the other. Two of these are examined further in chapter three.

³⁷ Tucker, Abeokuta; *Sunrise Within the Tropics*, p. 33.

³⁸ G. J. Afolabi Ojo, *Yoruba Culture: A Geographical Analysis* (London: University of London Press Ltd, 1966), p. 164.

However, critical aspects of Yoruba culture were disrupted as Yoruba women began to experience religious change. The first generation of Yoruba women converts to Christianity lived in two worlds. Whereas Yoruba traditional spirituality affirmed their role as priestesses, mission spirituality alienated them from the divine image, as Schneiders observes as being consistent with the experiences of Western women in Christianity.³⁹ A major issue in African responsiveness to a new religion, for instance, is the factor of communalism, which makes it difficult to distinguish Yoruba Christian community from Yoruba traditional community.

Thus, while Christianity, especially in the missionary form of spirituality looked to the individual to respond to the Gospel message, African traditional religion was usually a communal affair. While the Christian community is made up of converts from every part of the globe; the traditional African community was made up of blood relations, who were united by the same divine experience, common goals and worldview, and under the supervision of the same gods.

The family as cornerstone of the community in which every member of the extended family and wider community shared a common value was central to Yoruba women's spirituality. Thus, Yoruba women's spirituality had been moulded by the common culture, religions, philosophy and worldview of the Yoruba before they encountered the missionaries. They were not only influenced by gender-specific experiences, such as the communal expectations for them to nurture the *orisa*, but also bound together 'by a whole way of life, material and spiritual'.⁴⁰ Even when the Yoruba converted,

³⁹ Schneiders, 'The Effects of Women's Experience on their Spirituality', in Joann Wolski Conn (ed.), *Women's Spirituality*, pp.31 – 48.

⁴⁰ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (London: University press, 1958) p.16

they were still bound by the complex details of their culture and philosophical thoughts, as observed by Miss Tucker:

Their minds are ingenious and acute, and many of their common proverbs, with which Mr. Crowther has enriched his Vocabulary, show a quickness of observation, and knowledge of human nature, which even their friends in this country were not prepared to expect.⁴¹

Yoruba women's ceremonial cultural observances were so captivating that many of the nineteenth-century missionary observers such as Isaac Smith, English;⁴² J. A. Maser, German;⁴³ and Thomas King⁴⁴ and Samuel Crowther Junior,⁴⁵ Yoruba, all missionaries of the CMS could not ignore them.

Relevant Background Information on Nineteenth-Century Yorubaland

Seven missionary centres have been selected for this study in Yoruba country, which the itinerant evangelists entered with their 'civilizing' religion and their European conception of humanity, namely, Badagry, Abeokuta, Lagos, Ibadan, Ogbomoso, Ijebu-Ode and Ondo. Yorubaland, with its coastal and inland waterways, was accessible as a major entry point to the trans-Atlantic movement of missionaries of African, European and American origin.

The entire region was located in present day Nigeria to the Southwest, just below the confluence of the Rivers Niger and Benue. It is bounded on the West by Dahomey and on the south by the Bight of Benin.⁴⁶ Whereas missionaries landed at the seaports

⁴¹ Tucker, Abeokuta; *Sunrise within the Tropics* p. 28.

⁴² CMS/CA2/082, Isaac Smith, Journal 12 September 1855.

⁴³ See CMS/CA2/068 J. A. Maser, Journal 13 August 1855.

⁴⁴ CMS/CA2/0061 Thomas King, Journal 15 September 1855. See also CMS/CA2/061/33 Thomas King Journal, 1 Oct. 1856.

⁴⁵ CMS/CA2/032 Samuel Crowther Jr., Journal 25 September 1855.

⁴⁶ Samuel Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd. 1921), p. xxiv.

in Lagos and Badagry, formerly fishing villages, their goal was the hinterland of the Yoruba country.⁴⁷

Thus, although Badagry and Lagos, the coastal towns gained prominence due to their strategic locations, Wesleyan missionaries soon moved into Abeokuta from Badagry in 1845, followed by the CMS missionaries in 1846. Before the arrival of the missionaries, however, explorers and traders had provided the earliest information on the Yoruba, which was initially identified by the Hausa variant of its name, 'Yarriba'. Yorubaland of the nineteenth century was a target for evangelism primarily because of its size of about 70,000 square miles and its concentrated mid-nineteenth century population of two million people.⁴⁸

Although Ile-Ife remained the spiritual capital of the Yoruba country,⁴⁹ Oyo, known as Katunga, was the political centre. Many towns emerged out of Oyo after the wars of 1825 that scattered the Yoruba into various new kingdoms, such as Abeokuta, Ibadan, Ado, Ondo and Ogbomoso.⁵⁰ From the coast to the hinterland, Clapperton identified about thirty-five large towns in Yorubaland.⁵¹ In 1855 Bowen, the pioneer Baptist missionary estimated that Lagos and Ibadan had 20,000 and 70,000 inhabitants; Ijaiye had 35,000, while Ogbomoso and Oyo had 25,000 inhabitants.⁵²

⁴⁷ Tucker, *Abeokuta; Sunrise within the Tropics*, 1854, p. 47.

⁴⁸ Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas*, p. xxiv.

⁴⁹ Ojo, *Yoruba Culture: A Geographic Analysis*, p. 124.

⁵⁰ Tucker, *Abeokuta; Sunrise within the Tropics*, pp. 13 – 18.

⁵¹ H. Clapperton, *Journal of a Second Expedition into the Interior of Africa* (London, n. p., 1829), pp. 1 – 59.

⁵² Bowen, *Adventures and Missionary Labours in Several Countries in the Interior of Africa from 1849-1856*, p. 218.

The Yoruba country had been destabilised by the slave trade and intertribal wars before missionaries arrived there in the 1840s. Women were particularly at risk as they were easy targets of the slave raiders. Although there are no precise statistics of how many women were sold into slavery, individual information such as that of Crowther's mother, Afala and sisters,⁵³ and Yoruba women's presence in Dahomey and Freetown, were evidences of their ordeal in the thriving domestic market. Yoruba women were also sold into shipments bound for the European plantations, while some, such as Susan (later to become the wife of Samuel Crowther) were recaptured on the high seas by the British squadrons manning the coast.

Yoruba Women

Yoruba women shared a number of characteristics and traits with other African women, but a distinct history, origins and demography is distinguishable and discernible. They belong to an African ethnic group that is constantly studied by scholars in the field of African Christianity. Similarly, although Yoruba women's spirituality was a product of their primal religions and cultural background, the particular historical and social contexts in which they encountered the missionaries are also significant for the post-conversion development of their spirituality.

Yoruba women were central to nineteenth-century missionary concerns, not only because they responded more actively to the missionaries' Gospel proclamation, evidenced in the earliest baptismal records,⁵⁴ but also because of their strategic importance, given their traditional roles in the spirituality of primal Yoruba society.⁵⁵

However, missionaries could not interpret some of the Yoruba women converts'

⁵³ CMS/CA3/04 S. Crowther to W. Jewett, 1837.

⁵⁴ Peter B. Clarke, *West Africa and Christianity* (London: Edward Arnold Publishers Ltd, 1986), p. 63.

⁵⁵ Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, pp. 235 – 236.

fundamental responses to the Transcendent for two principal reasons; similar to what Leith Ross also points out in the case of Igbo women. First, there was the tendency to equate Yoruba women's religious and societal roles with those of Western women. Secondly, missionaries tended to disregard some of the fundamental factors and core issues in African women's past, making concerted efforts to re-orientate them and align their beliefs and practices with Western forms of Christian spirituality.⁵⁶

Although missionaries made significant impacts and ultimately gained converts in Abeokuta, Ibadan, Ogbomoso, Ijaye, Ado Ekiti and Ilesha, the role of women in bringing about the needed breakthrough for conversion among the Yoruba deserves the attention it receives in this thesis. The observation of Peter Clarke, a mission historian that 'converts were slow in coming' and that it was women who first responded to missionaries' Gospel proclamation⁵⁷ indicates the pertinence of the specific focus on women in this study. By their response, Yoruba women became the first fruits of the labours of the pioneer missionaries such as Samuel Crowther of the CMS and T. J. Bowen, of the Southern Baptist mission.

Thus, peculiar issues relating to gender, culture and historical roles in society that defined Yoruba women's relationship with the Transcendent in the traditional society, as well as their means of making meaning, posed major challenges to the development of Yoruba Christian women's spirituality. While the difficulties encountered by Yoruba men who were polygynists in their bid to gain acceptance into church membership is equally important, the means available to Yoruba women for reconciling their primal practices with mission spirituality was more problematic.

⁵⁶ Leith Ross, *African Women: A Study of the Ibo of Nigeria* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934).

⁵⁷ Clarke, *West Africa and Christianity*, p. 63.

Therefore, the proposition by Aylward Shorter, a twentieth-century missionary to Kenya, an author and anthropologist that, the African past must be seen to be continued in contemporary spiritual reality,⁵⁸ is borne out by this enquiry, where the continuation of aspects of Yoruba women's traditional worldviews into their post-conversion spirituality is brought into view.

The first contact missionaries had with Yoruba women was in Sierra Leone, outside of their original homelands where they were ex-slaves, emancipators⁵⁹ and recaptives.⁶⁰ This came about as a direct result of the transatlantic Slave Trade, which had forced settlement in Brazil, Cuba, and Sierra Leone. Lamenting on the peculiar experiences of Yoruba women taken into slavery, Crowther observes:

Here, a most sorrowful scene imaginable was to be witnessed – women, some with three, four or six children clinging to their arms, with the infants on their backs, and such baggage as they could carry on their heads, running as fast as they could...they endeavoured only to save themselves and their children: even this was impracticable with those who had many children to care for.⁶¹

Even though there are no statistics to show the number of Yoruba women taken into slavery, and the traditional claim through oral tradition is that they were fewer in number than men, their experiences enumerated in the above quotation were in no ways less traumatic than those of their male counterparts. Every slave was regarded as a chattel in the transatlantic slavery experience whose price had been paid and who must pay back through uncompromising labour in the plantation of their 'masters'.

⁵⁸ Aylward Shorter, *African Christian Spirituality* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1978), pp. 24 – 25.

⁵⁹ Emancipators refer to the slaves that gained independence and began to return to Africa from the 1787 experiment of Granville Sharp. Another group was the Nova Scotians whose migration to West Africa was keenly observed in Walls, 'The Nova Scotian Settlers and Their Religion'.

⁶⁰ The recaptives are the ex-slaves who were rescued on the seas before getting to the plantations. This group is examined extensively in Tucker, *Abbeokuta; or Sunrise within the Tropics: An Outline of the Origin and Progress of the Yoruba Mission*.

⁶¹ Samuel Crowther, in his letter to the secretary of the Church Missionary Society in 1837 gives a vivid account of the circumstances that led to his being sold into slavery (see CMS/CA3/04 Letter of Mr Samuel Crowther to the Rev. William Jewett, 1837).

Thus, for Yoruba women who experienced slavery, Christianity was associated with the slave plantations, or in the case of those whose ships were diverted mid way, Christianity was regarded as a religion of the Diaspora.

Despite the close association between Christianity and the slave trade, Western missionaries had begun to identify Yoruba recaptives and resettled freed slaves in Sierra-Leone as early as 1822. Many of them had even converted to Christianity and were relating with the European missionaries as intelligent and energetic people.

The missionaries at Sierra Leone speak of the greater degree of intelligence and energy apparent in the people there since the year 1822, before which time, as we have already stated there were scarcely any Yorubans in the colony, though afterwards they were brought in such numbers, that at present more than half the population is Yoruban. And on the other side of the Atlantic, Lord Harris, the present governor of Trinidad, has spoken of the superiority of the Yorubans in that island over the other emancipated Negroes... Their natural disposition is very lively; the children are full of mirth and play, and are particularly fond of riddles.⁶²

The vantage position of the Yoruba in the African traditional experience gave them the prime position they occupy as objects of study by African and European scholars such as J. B. Webster, David Laitin and J. D. Y. Peel.⁶³

The Yoruba women ex-slaves shared common identity with those at home. The return of Diaspora slaves to their extended family system was significant for the formation of Yoruba Christian women's spirituality as it facilitated the spread of the returnees' Christian religion. 'Several touching instances of the re-union of relations occurred.'

⁶² Tucker, Abeokuta; *Sunrise within the Tropics: An Outline of the Origin and Progress of the Yoruba Mission*, pp. 27 – 28.

⁶³ J. B. Webster, *The African Churches among the Yoruba 1888 – 1922* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964); David Laitin, *Hegemony and Culture: Politics and Religious Change among the Yoruba* (London: The University of Chicago Press Ltd, 1986); Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*.

For instance, John McCormack, a Yoruba missionary of the CMS at Abeokuta found many of his family members and returned to them. Similarly, another returnee introduced a woman with so much excitement to Henry Townsend, an English man and a CMS missionary at Abeokuta, 'I done find my wife' (meaning, I have found my wife).⁶⁴

The way the houses were built as extended housing units underscores the strong emphasis on the communal nature of Yoruba existence and promoted polygyny that is discussed extensively in chapter five. Thus, women never had a separate existence; rather they belonged to a whole network of relationships represented by the extended family, which contribute to their meaning making process. For example:

Ibadan has the characteristic features common to the Yoruba towns. The houses are all of one pattern, being a square, enclosing a court open to the sky. The apartments occupied by the family are low dark rooms, without windows, covered by a sloping roof of grass or agidi leaves, projecting beyond the building, so as to form a piazza, supported by posts. Here visitors are received, and business is transacted. There are also sheds for the horses, goats, sheep, and poultry, which thron the court by day. A doorway leads into the street, forming the only break in its monotonous face of blank mud wall.⁶⁵

The above vivid descriptions of Ibadan by Anna Hinderer, the English wife of the German missionary of the CMS in Abeokuta and Ibadan in the 1850s, shows how closely knit the extended families were in Yorubaland.

Although farming was a major occupation in Yorubaland, women rarely engaged in it as extensively as the men did. Their traditional vocation was smallholding farming

⁶⁴ Tucker, Abeokuta; *Sunrise Within the Tropics: An Outline of the Origin and Progress of the Yoruba Mission*, p. 89.

⁶⁵ Hone, ed., *Seventeen Years in Yoruba Country: Memorials of Anna Hinderer...Gathered from her Letters and Journals*, p. 60.

(*oko etile*), pottery and food processing, such as *ogi* and *eko* (corn meal), and petty trading.⁶⁶ As Anna Hinderer observed:

But the principal occupation of the people is farming, in which everyone is engaged, whatever other calling he follows, each having a right to such land as he chooses to occupy outside the walls, provided only that it be not already appropriated. ...The soil is extremely fertile. Indian corn and yams, the staple articles of food, form the principal produce of the farms, but Guinea corn, beans, ground-nuts, and cassada, are also cultivated, as well as cotton, which is grown both for home use and for exportation.⁶⁷

The chief occupation of Yoruba women was trading, weaving and pottery, providing opportunity for missionaries to gain easy access to them in the period when Gospel proclamation was emphasized as a confrontational method in chapter four.

The women spin cotton and sell the thread to the weavers, who are men, and men are the tailors who make garments. The women again make earthen pots, cook, wash, dye with indigo, and buy and sell most of the provisions, which pass through the market.⁶⁸

As a result, almost all the significant contacts missionaries had with Yoruba women took place in the markets, at the weavers loom or in their pottery sheds, where their attitudes, beliefs and practices were most visible.

Missionaries in Nineteenth-Century Yorubaland

Although nineteenth-century missionaries were not the first set of Christians who arrived at West Africa, the difference between them and the earlier Portuguese emissaries of Prince Henry the Navigator, was that they went to Africa purely for evangelistic and civilizing mission.⁶⁹ The Wesleyan Methodist missionaries and CMS

⁶⁶ C. L., Adeoye, *Asa Ati Ise Yoruba* (London and Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 151.

⁶⁷ Hone, ed., *Seventeen Years in Yoruba Country: Memorials of Anna Hinderer...Gathered from her Letters and Journals*, p. 61.

⁶⁸ Bowen, *Adventures and Missionary Labours in Several Countries in the Interior of Africa from 1849-1856*, p. 308.

⁶⁹ CO 265/154, Enclosure dated 15 Nov. 1839, in Doherty to Russell, 30 Nov. 1839.

(commonly referred to as modern mission), who landed in Badagry in 1842 and 1843 respectively, entered Yorubaland with the sole purpose of evangelizing the people.⁷⁰ While modern mission succeeded in making disciples among Yoruba women, the Portuguese could not lay claim to much success in Christianization. The Portuguese mission, however, was the foundation of the international slave trade in West Africa.⁷¹

The unique mark of modern mission in Yorubaland is that about seventy percent of the missionaries were indigenes themselves, who were either the *Saro*⁷² or *Creoles*.⁷³ Thus, whereas the word missionary has come to be associated with Europeans and Americans, even in very successful works on African missiological history, the initial evangelists were the Yoruba who invited missionaries to come with them to ‘their country people who are now living in darkness, without the light of the Gospel’.⁷⁴ Their desire was to save their people from slavery and idolatry.⁷⁵ Thus, the missionaries whom Yoruba women encountered were first and foremost Yoruba who wrote about eighty percent of the journals in the CMS archives, then Europeans and Americans. Top of the roll call of African missionaries were Samuel and Susan Crowther, Thomas King, who became widowed while still in Sierra Leone, and Daniel Olubi, Yoruba missionary and the successor of the Hinderers as CMS missionary in Ibadan mission station.

⁷⁰ See Thomas Birch Freeman, *Journal of Various Visits to the Kingdoms of Ashanti, Aku, and Dahomi in Western Africa*, 3rd ed., Harrison M. Wright, int. (London: Frank Cass, 1968). See also CMS/CA1/0215 H. Townsend’s Mission of Research, November 1842.

⁷¹ Reginald Coupland, *The British Anti-Slavery Movement* (London: Frank Cass & Co Ltd, 1964), p. 18. See also Clarke, *West Africa and Christianity*, p. 32.

⁷² *Saro* was the colloquial form of describing the Sierra Leonean Yoruba ex-slaves in Yorubaland.

⁷³ The children of the *Saro* Christians who were born in Sierra Leone were similarly called *Creoles*.

⁷⁴ CO 265/154, Enclosure dated 15 Nov. 1839, in Doherty to Russell, 30 Nov. 1839.

⁷⁵ Michael Crowder, *The Story of Nigeria* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), p. 143.

A significant mark of many of the African missionaries was that they were liberated slaves of Yoruba origin who were resettled in Sierra Leone. While a few of them retained their African names, most of them adopted the names of their English pastors or mentors at the time of their baptism; thus their names often make their African roots obscure.⁷⁶ Although they had become Christianized and even some of them westernized, as E. A. Ayandele, an African mission historian argues,⁷⁷ nevertheless the fact of their being Yoruba was of tremendous advantage to the CMS when the matter of interpreting Yoruba spirituality became an issue. It is also of significance for this study in providing source material concerning Yoruba women's spirituality.

Another distinguishing mark of modern mission in West Africa is the process through which European missionaries arrived in Sierra Leone from 1804 and Yorubaland from 1842. Although endemic fever deterred the more promising English missionaries, who opted for service in India and China⁷⁸ rather than Africa, the CMS was able to engage other nationals such as the German, David Hinderer and his English wife Anna, as missionaries to Yorubaland.⁷⁹ CMS mission agents deployed to Yorubaland were of diverse nationalities and from different Christian denominations, including Lutherans, Quakers and Anglicans.

Whereas CMS missionaries arrived in the Sierra Leonean colony before the Wesleyan Methodist mission, the reverse was the case when they arrived in Nigeria as guests of the Yoruba returnees, invited to assist in taking the Gospel to their own country.

⁷⁶ Ayandele, *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria: A Political and Social Analysis*, p. 243.

⁷⁷ E. A. Ayandele, *The Educated Elite in the Nigerian Society* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1974), p. 9.

⁷⁸ Andrew Walls, 'Africa in Christian History' in Andrew Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, New York and Edinburgh: Orbis Books; T & T Clark, 2002), p. 117.

⁷⁹ Hinderer, *Seventeen Years in Yoruba Country: Memorials of Anna Hinderer... Gathered from her Letters and Journals*, p. 12.

While the pioneer Wesleyan Methodist missionary, Thomas Birch Freeman entered Badagry in 1842 from the Gold Coast, Charles Gollmer, Henry Townsend and Samuel Crowther, missionaries of the CMS joined the evangelistic crusade of the returnees in 1843. The pioneer Southern Baptist missionary, Thomas Jefferson Bowen entered Yorubaland in 1850 through Badagry, then Abeokuta, while he moved to Ijaye his first mission station after a brief stay at Bi-Olorunpelu.⁸⁰

After his return to the United States in 1853 for a short vacation during which he married former Miss Laurena Davis, his ministry in Yorubaland expanded. Although the climate and condition of Yorubaland was not conducive for Western visitors, the initial success of the Bowens in Yorubaland attracted more Baptist missionaries, such that by 1855 the Baptist mission already had three mission stations. T. J. Bowen and William H. Clark worked together in Ijaye in 1854; by 1855 Bowen had left for Ogbomoso while J. M. Harden manned Lagos.⁸¹ Although some tragic situations led to high rate of death among the missionaries, Bowen's report of possibilities of making a major breakthrough among Yoruba women led to the interest of more missionaries who followed him to the country of the Yoruba. These included the Rev. and Mrs J.S. Dennard, the Rev. and Mrs J. H. Lacy and W.H. Clarke.⁸²

The Methodists, who were renowned for the high level of their organisation in the Gold Coast (present day Ghana) and elsewhere, could not replicate this in

⁸⁰ Bowen, *Adventures and Missionary Labours in Several Countries in the Interior of Africa from 1849-1856*, p. 158. See Clarke, *West Africa and Christianity*, p. 63. See also Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria: 1841-1891*, p. 31.

⁸¹ Bowen, *Adventures and Missionary Labours in Several Countries in the Interior of Africa from 1849-1856*, pp. 182 – 3.

⁸² The official starting date of Baptist work in Nigeria is August 5 1850, when Bowen arrived in Badagry. In 1853, the Dennards arrived but died within the first year of their arrival. The Lacys who came in the same year, returned to America within three months of their arrival due to 'culture shock.' For more details on early Baptist work, see Travis Collins, *The Baptist Work in Nigeria: 1850 – 1993* (Ibadan: Associated Book-Makers Nigeria Limited, 1993), pp. 6 – 8.

Yorubaland. The early years of the mission was riddled with complex and unhelpful administrative plans as it was run as a joint District with Gold Coast, until Freeman resigned in 1857. John Milum, in his time as joint chairman was to reorganise the Yoruba mission as a separate District.⁸³

Apart from the critical task of separating the mission from its parent body, Milum, in addition, was to establish the main congregations in Lagos into self-supporting circuits under African superintendents. Furthermore, he was to distinguish between the roles of missionaries and pastors so that missionaries could concentrate on expanding the mission in Yorubaland.⁸⁴

CMS missionaries enjoyed significant political support of the British government, thus placing them at an advantage over other missionary groups in Yorubaland. Even though the CMS was regarded as a nonconformist 'sect' within the Anglican Church, missionaries enjoyed the support of Queen Victoria, demonstrated in her sending of two Bibles to the Yoruba missions in 1852.⁸⁵ It is important to note that the Anglican Church was thus represented in Yorubaland by evangelical missionary efforts alone, rather than other tendencies within its broad church

With a strong political backing for the CMS therefore, their agenda was not only Gospel proclamation, but also trade and civilizing mission. Their influence transcended religious conversion, as they also impacted upon the social and cultural lives of the people. As Michael Crowder, an African mission historian argues:

⁸³ John Milum, Notes on Separation of the Yoruba and Popo District from the Gold Coast; recd. In Meth. House, 5 July 1878; Meth.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, p. 125.

The emphasis in any history of early missionary activity in Nigeria must be on the CMS, since as an offshoot of the Anglican Church it had official sanction.... The political influence of the Church Missionary Society, therefore, was much greater than that of any other group.⁸⁶

For this reason, CMS missions have the greatest significance for this study of Yoruba women's spirituality.

The fact that many of the Yoruba missionaries had been westernized meant the way they attempted to interpret Christianity to the Yoruba was from the Western context as did their European counterparts. Andrew Walls was correct therefore in observing that:

Missionaries were, generally speaking, children of the European Enlightenment, and their Christianity came adapted to Enlightenment values; indeed they expected its transplantation to Africa, closely allied as it was to education and modernization, to issue eventually in an Enlightenment discourse in Africa. It has done so, but only partially.⁸⁷

These extra-curricula activities of the missionaries distracted them from paying sufficient attention to the cultural aspects in the primal spirituality of the Yoruba.

The missionaries who concentrated on the conversion task were sometimes too strict in their condemnation of what they considered to be the 'heathen' practices of Yoruba women. David Hinderer, as a German pietist was not, strictly speaking an Anglican and 'did not share the impulse of evangelicals in the Church of England to exploit a close relationship with the political establishment to advance religious objectives.'⁸⁸

While others, such as Thomas Jefferson Bowen became 'comrades at arms', fighting

⁸⁶ Michael Crowder, *The Story of Nigeria* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), p. 145.

⁸⁷ Andrew Walls, 'Africa in Christian History' in Andrew Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (New York and Edinburgh: Orbis Books; T & T Clark, 2002) p. 123.

⁸⁸ J. D. Y. Peel, 'Problems and Opportunities in an Anthropologist's use of a Missionary Archive' in Robert A. Bickers and Rosemary Seton (eds), *Missionary Encounters: Sources and Issues* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1996), p. 92.

on the side of the people of Ijaye against the Dahomeans in the late 1850s. The militant people of Ibadan were unhappy with Hinderer's pacifist stance. Irrespective of their nationalities, missionaries succeeded in gaining converts among Yoruba women but failed to affect worship practices or help the women interpret their perception of prayer, dreams and visions. Missionaries persistently hoped that conversion was capable of regulating the conduct of the converts.

The returnees and missionaries of African descent were therefore critical in the process of interpreting Yoruba cultural means of making meaning. As early as 1843, Andrew Wilhelm and some other Christian returnees had pioneered evangelistic work in Badagry by holding regular services on Sundays. Although they did not make many converts, their contribution was critical for laying the foundations for the establishment of modern mission in Yorubaland.⁸⁹ Sarah Tucker observes:

Andrew Wilhelm, who, as it will be remembered had arrived here in 1843, [and] had throughout maintained an upright and consistent conduct, which had won for him the esteem and respect of all. He held Divine service regularly on the Sundays, and on week-days took every opportunity of drawing sinners from the evil of their ways. He had had much to contend with, and met with many discouragements, but he persevered. A few gathered round him, like-minded with himself, and to others he was made the means of awakening their consciences and preparing them for further progress. Two of those who had remained firm and faithful to their God, notwithstanding the opposition and ill-treatment of their relations, were called to their rest soon after the arrival of the missionaries; and it almost seems as if their departure had been delayed that they might have the comfort of their ministry on their dying beds. They died, declaring their entire dependence on the blood of Christ, and their peace in the prospect of approaching death.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ This is largely true in the cases of the CMS and Methodist and may not necessarily be the case with the Baptist.

⁹⁰ Tucker, *Sunrise Within the Tropics*, pp. 112 – 114.

Andrew Wilhelm and his *Saro* colleagues who initiated missionary endeavours in Yorubaland were people of impeccable characters. They earned the respect of the people and created an enabling environment for full mission work among their own people.

The place of the wives of missionaries is also critical to an evaluation of the transformation of Yoruba women's spirituality. Although they did not have missionary status, nor were they assigned public roles such as itinerant preaching, they laboured as much as the male missionaries to gain converts and also attempted to re-orientate the Yoruba converts as much as their circumstances permitted. While Crowther was instrumental to the translation of the Bible to Yoruba language, Mrs Crowther was also renowned for starting a school for girls in Lagos where she mentored the younger women.⁹¹ Similarly, while David Hinderer engaged in the public role of evangelism, church planting, preaching and discipleship, his wife, Anna was working energetically at home where she kept board of many Yoruba children. She recorded how she taught and encouraged them to engage more in outdoor games rather than sitting idly all the time to listen to the moonlight tales only.⁹² While Mrs Hinderer's zeal to help develop the younger generation is commendable, her negative perception of the way Yoruba women gathered children and told them tales at night showed how missionaries and their wives attempted to dismiss the useful oral tradition of connecting the children with the origin and worldview of the Yoruba.

Anna Hinderer recorded in her diary that

It was such a pleasure to see the boys climbing up trees, though they did tear their clothes, and the girls running, dancing, and jumping about in healthful games, instead of that

⁹¹ See Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria: 1841–1891*, p. 39.

⁹² Anna Hinderer, Journal entry, November 30, 1859, in Hinderer, *Seventeen Years in Yoruba Country: Memorials of Anna Hinderer*, p. 205.

general lying down, listless, apathetic plan of being content with half-a-dozen riddles, which they have said so many times.⁹³

While Mrs Hinderer's recreational method 'was such a pleasure', as she said in her diary, she missed an opportunity for adapting Christianity to incorporate the valuable means through which the Yoruba used to teach the children about the origin of the race through didactic 'riddles'. These 'half-a-dozen riddles' were the means through which the Yoruba had preserved their history, identity and spirituality before the arrival of missionaries.

Although their most significant contribution was their duties as keepers of home boarding schools, the work of missionaries' wives involved mentoring and teaching both boys and girls. Their curricula were slightly different for boys, as girls were taught mainly sewing, language and singing as their core subjects.⁹⁴

However, women such as Laurena Bowen and Anna Hinderer also made an important contribution in the discipleship programmes in the Church. For example, such efforts of wives of missionaries at leading catechumen classes and helping to prepare candidates for baptism were recorded in the diary of Mrs Hinderer:

We have about eight or nine classes of different stages; and a very interesting assembly, at the bottom of the church, of those who cannot learn to read. We gather these together, and first tell them a short simple Bible story, and let them tell it us again, to see that they remember it, and take it in. Then we teach them a text, or a verse of a hymn, and the last quarter of an hour is always given in all the classes to teaching by repetition some catechism, and sometimes for change we have the whole school together to go over the Creed, the Lords

⁹³ Ibid..

⁹⁴ Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria: 1841 – 1891*, pp. 138 – 139.

Prayer, and the Ten Commandments, to make sure they are not forgotten.⁹⁵

Thus, through such didactic means, wives of missionaries constitute an important influence in the development of Yoruba women's spirituality.

The foundation of the returnees and Yoruba missionaries such as Samuel Crowther, Thomas King and Johnson became an advantage as they tried to proclaim the Gospel to the people with whom they shared common identity and history in Yoruba language and through the prolific use of proverbs.⁹⁶ Mrs Hinderer recorded it that this earned them much respect:

They are real helpers, satisfied in their calling, liking the place, and attached to us. Johnson is a sterling man, so straightforward, a rare quality in an African, I am sorry to say; a man well acquainted with his Bible, loving and reverencing it: and he quotes it so readily and appropriately. He is quite his master's right hand, for work among the people, and in trying to get up another station. He is now watching and caring so nicely for the new candidates, and they much respect him. Several of them have chosen him as the witness at their baptism. Allen is a younger man and very well disposed, and our regard for him increases.⁹⁷

Therefore, although Europeans and Americans played significant roles in the missionary enterprise in nineteenth-century Yorubaland, the core missionaries were Yoruba people with distinctive Yoruba identity and love for their homeland.

Chapter Synopses

The central theme around which this study revolves is that transformation of Yoruba women's spirituality began with religious conversion, but it is a gradual process which can be discerned by scrutiny of Yoruba women's conduct during the contact

⁹⁵ Hinderer, *Seventeen Years in Yoruba Country: Memorials of Anna Hinderer*, pp. 297 – 298.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 277 – 278.

⁹⁷ Hinderer, *Seventeen Years in Yoruba Country: Memorials of Anna Hinderer*, p. 183.

period 1842–1930. Conflicts between the missionaries and Yoruba women on the issue of practical aspects of Christianity were evident in missionaries' reports, and these are consulted extensively in this investigation of the process through which Christianity became a Yoruba religion and by which Yoruba women became Christian. This thesis is developed in five chapters following this introduction. The stages for analysis of missionary encounters in the conversion process by Humphrey Fisher, a mission historian; namely quarantine, confrontation and reform⁹⁸ are adapted and expanded further in this project where four analytical stages are identified: quarantine; conflict; assimilation and adaptation.

Chapter two performs two functions. First, the rationale and methodology of the thesis is established. Relevant recent literature is reviewed to identify existing scholarly arguments which provide a platform for this investigation. The basis for the central theme – that conversion and transformation of spirituality are distinct process – is clarified. The literature review also highlights the problematic tendency to assume that male spiritual formation fully represented the experiences of both genders. The thesis methodology for investigation of the specifics of the transformation of Yoruba women's spirituality following conversion to Christianity is made clear. There is a considerable problem in that there are no available accounts by Yoruba women themselves as sources for this investigation. But Yoruba women feature prominently in the accounts of (male) missionaries and in the writings of European women. These documents provide the primary and secondary literature. The second function of this chapter is to clarify the available sources and to evaluate their reliability their potential and their limitations.

⁹⁸ Humphrey, J. Fisher, 'Conversion Reconsidered: Some Historical Aspects of Religious Conversion in Black Africa' in *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 43, No. 1. Jan, 1973, p. 32,

Chapter three makes the case for the resilient nature of Yoruba women's primal spirituality. It investigates the interleaving of culture and cosmology reflected in the pre-contact ritual practices and socio-political life of Yoruba women. It argues that although some aspects of Yoruba women's primal practices, attitudes and beliefs are amenable, some only changed minimally, while yet others remained unalterable even after Yoruba women had come into sustained contact with mission Christianity.

Chapter four examines the stages of quarantine and of conflict between missionaries and Yoruba women. The contrasts between traditional African religion and missionary Christianity are stark, and the chapter throws into relief the tensions experienced by women who were the targets of evangelisation.

Chapter five explores Yoruba women's responses to missionaries' 'means' for their assimilation into Christianity and the impact of these processes of assimilation on the transformation of women's spirituality. Yoruba women converts are the focus of attention for arguing in this chapter that although education and discipleship programmes greatly facilitated the development of Yoruba women's spirituality, church policy on polygamy isolated the women further from becoming bona fide members of the church.

Chapter six shows how Yoruba women attempted to resolve the cultural differences by adapting Christianity to respond to cultural nuances in worship, prayer, dreams, visions, revelations and the use of objects, such as water in religion. Chapter seven draws the findings to the conclusion that until Yoruba women adapted to their own

cultural milieux, they did not fully become Christians nor did Christianity fully become the Yoruba religion of the Yoruba. Yoruba women however seized the advantage of the absence of European and American missionaries' in Yorubaland to begin a process of adapting Christianity to fit into their own cultural and cosmological modes.

Conclusion

Adaptation continued in Yoruba Christianity and women continued to play a large role in its formation and development. As will be seen in chapter six and in the summary of the findings, Yoruba women did not fully become Christians until their attitudes, beliefs and practices within the changing religious, social and political contexts reflected their cumulative experiences. Although, they exhibited new worship practices and beliefs in their relationship with the Transcendent and the rest of humanity, they continued to derive meanings from their culture and worldview. Adapting Christianity therefore meant adopting some of the core values in their cosmological worldview to give Christianity a Yoruba meaning and help converts form a Christian culture that was adaptable to Yoruba culture and cosmology.

CHAPTER TWO

RELEVANT LITERATURE, METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES

Although a plethora of literature abounds on nineteenth-century missionary activities on religious conversion as well as social, political and economic development in Africa, very few focus on women, and fewer still on the development of African women's religious experiences or Yoruba women's spiritual formation.¹ While Ade Ajayi, a renowned historian makes a generic evaluation of the development of modern Nigerian elites,² E. A. Ayandele shows great interest in missionary endeavours in Yorubaland, making a general examination of missionary labours,³ as well as of the social and religious activities of the ex-slaves from the redemption colonies.⁴ Consistent with broader scholarship during the 1960s, neither author focuses specifically on Yoruba women.

Subsequent scholarship has considered the role of Yoruba women, thus reinvigorating an earlier focus found in the pioneering work of Sylvia Leith-Ross who makes a case for the social, economic and religious development of women.⁵ Leith-Ross' work was one of the earliest scholarly attempts on African women in which she focussed specifically on Igbo women, arguing that African women had a greater role before and even after Western visitors had interfered with the economy, politics and

¹ Yoruba women's spiritual development as they came into contact with missionaries from the 1840s is the main focus of this study as already established in chapter one.

² J. F. Ade Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria 1841-1891 The Making of a New Élite* (London: Longman Group Ltd, 1965).

³ E. A. Ayandele, *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria 1842-1914* (London: Longmans, Green and Co Ltd, 1966).

⁴ Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996) p. 102

⁵ Sylvia Leith-Ross, *African Women: A Study of the Ibo of Nigeria* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934)

religions, than is usually acknowledged by scholars.⁶ While Nina Mba, a female African scholar,⁷ and Jean Hay and Sharon Stichter, commentators on African women's studies⁸ emphasise the role of women in the political and economic development in Africa, J. D. Y. Peel, an African mission historian and anthropologist⁹ and Oyeronke Olajubu, an African writer on women's studies¹⁰ acknowledge the significance of women in Yoruba religions. However, other scholars tend to focus more on the social and economic aspects of African women's life.

Whereas Yoruba women's spirituality is an essential key for understanding the development of Christianity in Africa, the treatment of this subject has not been given sufficient or specific attention as the focus of existing work is on religious conversion. Emphasis on conversion that tends to classify 'conversion and spirituality' as a single experience, stems from the way missionaries perceived their task in Yorubaland.¹¹ The faulty notion that once religious affiliation changes, every aspect of beliefs and practices responds in corresponding ways is assumed by authors who continue to present conversion as being synonymous with the transformation of spirituality. However, this thesis insists that conversion only marked the beginning of transition by Yoruba women into a new role within the family and the society, and into a new way of relating with the Transcendent. Apart from highlighting the important roles of women in the spiritual transformation from African primal expressions to African

⁶ Leith-Ross, *African Women: A Study of the Ibo of Nigeria*, p. 21. Leith-Ross argues that historical findings about women, more often derived from men, do not give a good representation of female concerns, because they are biased and inconclusive.

⁷ Nina Emma Mba, *Nigerian Women Mobilized: Women's Political Activity in Southern Nigeria, 1900 – 1965* (Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, 1982).

⁸ Jean Hay and Sharon Stichter, eds, *African Women South of the Sahara*, 2nd ed. (Essex: Longman Group Limited, 1995), p. vii.

⁹ J. D. Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000);

¹⁰ Oyeronke Olajubu, *Woman in the Yoruba Religious Sphere* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003).

¹¹ See for example CMS/CA2/085 Henry Townsend to Henry Venn, Annual Letter, 1852.

Christian religious experience, the active participation of women in this process is vital to the understanding of the phenomenological growth of Christianity in Africa.¹²

The dominance of male scholars in the fields of African Christian theology, history and missiology further aggravates the faulty notion of perceiving conversion and transformation of spirituality as a single experience. Male African scholars such as E. A. Ayandele and E. K. Ekechi tend to portray both men and women in African cultural history as sharing the same physiological, psychological, emotional and even religious experiences, and tend to ignore the impact of differentiated Yoruba gender roles upon Christian formation.¹³ However, Verena Shephard, a historian and others observe that since the 1970s when women's history emerged as a distinct field of study, methodological assumptions that men and women feel historical experiences in the same ways is being reviewed.¹⁴ The nature of scholarly approaches by male theologians and historians therefore create the urgency for studies aimed at reconstructing specifically women's roles in religion, society, politics, and economy.¹⁵

This chapter is in two parts. The first part reviews selected available literature to establish the thesis methodology arrived at by adopting and adapting existing methodologies in African scholarship, taking note of five aspects of this study. First, it examines the primal experiences of Yoruba women, set out in this thesis as the basis

¹² Mercy Amba Oduyoye, 'The Empowering Spirit of Religion' in Ursula King, *Feminist Theology from the Third World: A Reader* (London, New York: SPCK/Orbis, 1994).

¹³ See Ayandele's perception of the value of polygamy to Africans for instance in Ayandele, *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria 1842-1914*, p. 335. See also E. K. Ekechi, *Missionary Enterprise and Rivalry in Igboland 1857 - 1914* (London: Frank Cass, 1972), p. 20.

¹⁴ Verena Shephard, Bridget Brereton and Barbara Bailey (eds.), *Engendering History, Caribbean Women in Historical Perspective* (London: James Currey Publishers, 1995), pp. xii-xv.

¹⁵ Only a few African women historians such as Elizabeth Isichei are published authors on African Christian history. Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Nigeria* (London, Lagos, New York: Longman, 1983).

for establishing pre-contact Yoruba women's spirituality. Secondly, it evaluates theories on the development of African spirituality. Thirdly, it examines some existing theories of conversion, especially as they help in proposing in this thesis that conversion and transformation of spirituality were two distinct experiences. Fourthly, it explores the relevant literature that brings out African women's visibility and, in particular Yoruba women's religious experiences beyond the relatively simple process of conversion. In the fifth place, this section establishes the analytical framework by which the four phases of Yoruba women's spirituality have been propounded in this thesis.

The second part of this chapter clarifies and evaluates the sources used in this study, taking into consideration four dimensions. It evaluates first, key secondary sources consulted in this thesis. Secondly, it seeks to establish the indispensable nature of oral sources in reconstructing Yoruba religious experiences. In the third place, it examines missionary memoirs, the vivid account of those who witnessed missionary encounters with the Yoruba. Fourthly, and by far the most extensively consulted source in this study, are the archival materials, which are evaluated here to highlight the strengths and limitations of this veritable source.

I Methodology

Researching Pre-Contact Yoruba Culture

When missionaries arrived in Yorubaland in the 1840s the Yoruba had not developed the art of documenting events. In consequence there is no written information by Yoruba women documenting their own roles and functions in religion, politics and social life, and thus no possibility of using women's own sources for evaluating the

changes that occurred as a result of their interaction with missionaries. Peel, however, has developed an effective methodology for examining the ‘pre-missionary contact’ experiences of Africans. He suggests that missionary writings reflecting the interactions between Africans and missionaries should be used as a source for reconstructing the primal experiences of Africans.¹⁶

Unless there are pre-contact documents, monuments, or artefacts, the main bulk of the evidence of the anterior state must be documents of the contact itself, produced by the European intruders (or, advantageously in the Yoruba case, their local associates). This is where historical inquiry has to start, working its way back to reconstruct the actual sequence from pre- to post-contact.¹⁷

This study adopts Peel’s methodology of using document of contact as sources.

This method advocated by Peel and used in his more recent publications, had been used much earlier on in the 1960s by scholars such as Ajayi and Ayandele.¹⁸

Although the concerns of these eminent scholars were not a reconstruction of Yoruba women’s religious experience, their methods are significant for this research. This study, in addition to drawing on archival sources, is informed by oral literature and relevant secondary literatures in the fields of African Christianity, history, spirituality and gender studies. The merit of exploring some of the existing works cannot be overemphasized, because, while archival resources supply the details of the direct encounters between Yoruba women and missionaries, relevant secondary literatures provide a theoretical frame for the interpretation of this evidence.

¹⁶ Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, p. 22.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria 1841-1891 The Making of a New Élite*; Ayandele, *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria 1842-1914*; Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*.

Although this research relies upon the perspectives of missionaries from various backgrounds, those of the missionaries of Yoruba origin are especially important as their writings portray an inner tension, self-reflection and evaluation which could only come from insiders to the culture, rather than outsiders, as Peel observes:

The result is that the student of Yoruba is in uniquely fortunate position, compared with other regions of Africa, that the great bulk of this material regarding the initial encounters of religion comes from natives of the society.¹⁹

Theorising African Spirituality

The rationale for undertaking this study on African women's spiritual formation is to examine further the argument of scholars such as Andrew Walls that conversion did not change traditional worldview, using Yoruba women as a case study. Conversion, as variously defined in this thesis, is a much simpler process of changing affiliation from one religion to another, while transformation of spirituality is the complex interaction between culture, worldview and the new religion. It is imperative to examine this difference between conversion and spirituality, especially as it involves African women, because, as Amba Oduyoye, a frontline female African Christian theologian puts it:

The religious lives of women in Africa are yet to be studied in any detail. General observation of the high proportion of women compared to men who practice distinctive types of spirituality suggests this as an important arena for investigation.²⁰

'Spirituality' has been defined in the context of this study in chapter one, and will be elaborated in chapter three. It is argued in this thesis that the fundamental differences between African and Western forms of spirituality caused difficulties in the process of

¹⁹ Peel, *Religious Encounter and the making of the Yoruba*, p. 11

²⁰ Oduyoye, 'The Empowering Spirit of Religion', p. 362.

making Christianity a Yoruba religion and in the formation of Yoruba Christian women.

In an attempt to explain spirituality from an African perspective, Dominique Zahan, a French African scholar and anthropologist defines it as ‘the very soul of African religion’ made manifest in the emotional expressions of the African’s faith and the meaning s/he gives to dialogues with the Transcendent.²¹ The view of Gordon Wakefield, editor of a major dictionary of spirituality that, the complex nature of spirituality calls for its being examined from multiple dimensions²² is therefore considered to be relevant for evaluating the impact of culture in the encounter between African traditional religions and Christianity, and the transition of Yoruba women from their primal religions to Christianity. African spirituality is therefore examined here taking cognisance of the influence of mission spirituality, which clearly is a form of nineteenth-century Western spirituality.

The submission of Guerin Montilus, a scholar on African philosophy that, Western forms of spirituality represent the philosophical, ethical and metaphysical truths of the West and therefore have limited application outside its cultural context²³ lends further support to the questioning here of missionaries’ subjection of Yoruba women to Western modes of worship and of relating with the Transcendent. He argues that whereas Western forms of spirituality influenced by the philosophical thought of Plato, Aristotle and others portray the world in a dualistic form, African thought

²¹ Dominique Zahan, *The Religion, Spirituality, and Thought of Traditional Africa*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 1.

²² Wakefield’s comprehensive analysis of spirituality covers racial and cultural perspectives, having entries on African, Asian, Black and American spirituality, among others. Gordon Wakefield, *A Dictionary of Christian spirituality*, ed., (London: SCM Press, 1983).

²³ Guerin Montilus, ‘Black Spirituality,’ in Gordon Wakefield, *A Dictionary of Christian spirituality*, ed., (London: SCM Press, 1983), pp. 51.

patterns do not separate the spiritual from the corporeal.²⁴ On the contrary, Montilus observes, the African worldview represents a holistic androgyny where God is both genitor (male) and genitrix (female).²⁵

This study employs Montilus' theological perception of the contexts in which Western forms of spirituality developed to argue that Yoruba women's resistance to Western forms of piety represented a legitimate demand for cultural relevance and the gender inclusion that had given Africa a meaningful sense of worship in the traditional society. Missionaries' expectation that conversion should automatically invoke a new spiritual experience was therefore an oversimplification of the fact that cultures would not change immediately following conversion.

Gordon Wakefield's comprehensive definition of spirituality as the 'attitudes, beliefs and practices, which animate people and help them to reach out towards super-sensible realities'²⁶ clearly shows that Christianity had to become the religion of the Yoruba if Yoruba women would become fully Christian. This definition opens up more possibilities for examining the spiritual experiences of Yoruba women in their encounter with mission Christianity. Although Carol Ochs writes from the angle of a Western scholar, her analogy of spirituality evoking an experience of 'relationship with reality'²⁷ can also be applied to Yoruba women's spiritual experience, because their religions, histories, sociological, political, and psychological milieus define the realities of their existence and their spirituality. Some of the elements informing their

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 52.

²⁶ Wakefield, *A Dictionary of Christian spirituality*.

²⁷ Ochs, *Women and Spirituality*, p. 10.

primal spirituality were transformed while others remained unalterable in women's interactions with the missionaries.

The contention of Andrew Walls that worldviews are ideas about God and the spiritual domain, which people create according to how they perceive reality, is helpful in clarifying which elements were transformed and which remained static in Yoruba women's spirituality. He also suggests that worldviews are ideas about relationships, ethical concerns and power.²⁸ Even though Walls suggests that worldviews are open to change as new ideas and outside influences come, he observes that human maps of reality are never forgotten; new ideas and information are placed on the existing map. This theory reconciles the conflicts brought about by the new patterns of religious expressions introduced by Christian conversion. It shows that the new orientation could only result in partial transformation of Yoruba women's primal spirituality because:

The process of change may be sudden or gradual, or show sudden leaps of more radical change. But while some elements may change drastically, other elements on the map may change little, or not at all.²⁹

Walls' concept of the spiritual map, therefore, is of major relevance to this investigation of how the various elements in Yoruba women's primal spirituality and realities responded to the dynamics of Christianity after conversion. Following conversion, religious experiences comprised both elements that were changeable, and those that were static. As Oduyoye argues, spirituality is 'the energy by which one lives and which links one's worldview to one's style of life.'³⁰ Some of the potential

Andrew F Walls, 'World views and Theology', in *Word and Context*, 5, 2006, 72 – 76.

Ibid.

Mercy Amba Oduyoye, 'Reflections from a Third World Woman's Perspective: Women's Experience and Liberation Theologies', in Ursula King, ed., *Feminist Theology from the Third World: Reader* (London: SPCK; New York: Orbis Books, 1993), p. 362.

elements in the 'energy' by which Yoruba women defined their existential characteristics were activated as they encountered missionaries' worldviews.

Another critical aspect of Yoruba spirituality is the making of meaning. Sociologists, from Max Weber in the nineteenth century to Robin Horton in the twentieth agree that meaning is essential to religious change and that all religions, whether primitive or contemporary give one meaning or the other to the adherents.³¹ Where Western forms of Christianity found meaning in eschatological concerns, Yoruba traditional religions gave greater attention to pressing existential concerns, and Yoruba women's identity was bound up with these concerns. This thesis pursues Horton's insight by tracing shifts in Yoruba women's identity during the transformation of their spirituality, following conversion.

As Oduyoye argues, the greatest needs for Yoruba women were peace, good health, children, business prosperity and society's progress and general wellbeing.³² Above all these general benefits of relating with the Transcendent, Yoruba women had a significant and distinctive religious identity because of their traditional role as the care-takers of the *orisa* in their primal religions.

The need to develop their identity therefore played a significant role in the formation of Yoruba women's spirituality. Exploring the theme of African women's self-concept, Oduyoye asks succinctly, 'what makes a woman?' and points directly to the

³¹ Robin Horton, 'African Conversion', in *Africa: Journal of International African Institute*, Vol. 41, 2, April 1971, p. 103.

³² Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), p. 34.

African 'folktalk'³³ as a major 'key' for unlocking the significance of self-identity in the development of African women's spirituality. Thus, proverbs, myths and stories were important for shaping African women's self-perception and helping them to cope with fears as they resolved life crises.³⁴ Yoruba women's identity was a major factor in their conversion to Christianity and in the development of a new spirituality. Thus, both the making of meaning and identity were critical in Yoruba women's religious transformation.

Ironically, the missionaries' spiritual formation had the tendency to portray women as inferior to, and less valuable than men. Davis is right therefore in arguing that female subordination not only affects women's self-esteem but also reflects invariably on their conception of the image of God.³⁵ 'Female domination in church tradition, as Walter Davis argues, is not only noticeable in the patriarchal interpretation of the Scriptures, but also in the Christian hymns', which serve to alienate women further and diminish their identity:

Our hymns speak of the faith of our fathers, not our mothers, we read of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but never of the God of Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel... Women are frequently left out of both the mental structures and the social structures of our culture. Their history is not only invisible, they themselves are frequently invisible in the way male dominated society speaks its language and makes its decisions.³⁶

In tune with Davis argument, this thesis is critical of the way missionaries mediated Christianity in Yorubaland from the 1840s to the early 1930s with the notion inherent in missionary forms of spiritual formation that women were inferior and subordinate

³³ Oduyoye coins 'folktalk' from a combination of two words – 'myths' and 'tales'. See Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, p. 21.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Walter, T. Davis, 'Our Image of God and Our Image of Women' in *Orita Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies* x/2 1976, pp. 105 – 146.

³⁶ Ibid, p. 125

to men. Evidence is presented in this thesis to show why Yoruba women, even after conversion, resisted the adoption of a spiritual identity that is defined by patriarchy.

Many observers distinguish between the individuality of mission forms of spirituality and communality in the African process of making meaning.³⁷ In Africa, spirituality identifies communality as its goal, because 'religion is life and life is religion'.³⁸ Aylward Shorter observes that 'spirituality' derives from the word '*spiritus*', literally meaning 'the life giving force which stems from God',³⁹ and thus disagrees with stressing 'interior' or 'inward' life because spirituality 'is the mode of living, the essential disposition, of the believer, and it imparts a new dimension to the believer's life.'⁴⁰

Shorter highlights the fears of some African writers who are concerned with the changes that Christianity made to the spirituality of Africans. He reiterates what Julius Nyerere perceives as undue emphasis on individualism, a major feature of mission Christianity and a vestige of nineteenth-century missionary spirituality. Although individuality promotes deeper relationship with God through a life of devotion and reflection, it does not facilitate the deeper level of African spirituality, which is encapsulated in communal relationship, which promotes dynamic and dialogical worship.

³⁷ See for example, John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann, 1989), p. 106; Emanuel Bolaji Idowu, *Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longmans, 1962).

³⁸ Kofi Asare Opoku, *West Africa Traditional Religion* (Accra: FEP International, 1978), p. 1.

³⁹ Aylward Shorter, *African Christian Spirituality* (London: Cassell, 1978), p. 4.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 4 – 5.

Hence, this study identifies Africans' 'values of contributing to the common good'⁴¹ and the pivotal role of women in maintaining this value as an important part of spirituality. The significance of communality in Yoruba spirituality as a major means of incorporating women in the mainstream of community development in three major missionary centres, Ibadan, Abeokuta and Lagos⁴² is discussed in detail in chapter three. Communality extends beyond devotion to God in worship, generating warmth in relationship within the religious sphere, to include promoting the common good through sacrificial living.

Thus, Shorter's criticism of mission Christianity's spirituality as a defensive approach, which defined spiritual standards in terms of a strict observance of sets of rules, disregarding the needs of the body, and therefore separating spirit from matter,⁴³ is relevant to the concerns Africans have about nineteenth-century missionaries. Laurenti Magesa, an African scholar is therefore right in his insistence that African Christian spirituality has a responsibility to put existential needs at the centre of its thought rather than concentrating on eschatological hope at the expense of freedom from poverty, ignorance and disease:

Africa calls for a spirituality, which is concerned with the glory of man for, as St. Irenaeus said, so many years ago, 'The glory of God is man fully alive.' Christian spirituality in Africa must act in the world for divine ends. It must be existential.⁴⁴

This thesis follows Magesa's approach by examining Yoruba women's continuing commitment to communal values during the process of transformation of their

⁴¹ See Montilus, 'Black Spirituality', p. 52 for a useful discussion.

⁴² Samuel Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas* (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1921), pp. 393 – 394, 405.

⁴³ Shorter, *African Christian Spirituality*, p. 16.

⁴⁴ Laurenti Magesa, 'Authentic African Spirituality' in Aylward Shorter, *African Christian Spirituality* (London: Cassell, 1978), p. 74.

spirituality. It also stresses the need to satisfy human needs as a major role of religion, which is not necessarily inconsistent with mission spirituality, but the interpretation of same within traditional Yoruba experience.

Although Shorter's anthology consists of divergent views of twenty Africans who have had significant contacts with Western Christianity and therefore deal with important issues in the process of forming African thought of God. This study investigates the original state of African spirituality with particular reference to women. Thus, chapter three makes detailed examination of Yoruba cosmology and Yoruba women's primal spirituality, in so far as this can be established from oral sources and missionary accounts. The 'attitudes, beliefs and practices' which Wakefield argues constitute this primal spirituality are examined to enable analysis of the aspects that were transformed and those that proved immutable on conversion to Christianity.

Theorising Conversion

While it is argued here that conversion is inconclusive until the process of making meaning has changed and a transition has taken place from the previous religion of the convert to the new ways of relating with one another and the Transcendent, the emphases of most researchers have nevertheless been placed on religious conversion. While it is arguable that there is no deliberate attempt by any scholar to refute such a claim, there has been a continued oversight in placing emphasis on the attitudes, beliefs and practices of Yoruba women after they converted from Yoruba religions to Christianity. The main argument in this study therefore is that although Yoruba women converted to Christianity, they did not leave behind their socialization process

in the primal religious traditions. This meant that Christianity had to evolve, considering the traditional religious, as well as social and political contexts of Yoruba women in particular and the Yoruba in general.

Although Peel argues that conversion is ‘the process, by which the religious identification of a people changes,’⁴⁵ the practical responses of Yoruba women to the core issues in the spiritual orientation of Christianity shows that such changes remained on the surface as long as cultural integration had not taken place. Thus, Christianity needed to do more than give Yoruba women a new religious identity. Their spirituality had to adjust to the social and cultural changes taking place, because they were in transition between life in the traditional society and life in the community of Christians, since Yoruba women’s traditional identity and the structures which enabled them to relate to the Transcendent had broken down. The task of this section therefore, is to address the usefulness of existing theories and models of conversion for this analysis of the development of Yoruba women’s spirituality following the encounter with mission Christianity.

Two questions pursued by Peel as being central to the understanding of Yoruba religious change are also valuable for analyzing Yoruba women’s responses to mission spirituality. The first is why Yoruba converted to Christianity and the second is why Christian converts carried some of the beliefs and practices from the Yoruba traditional religions into Christianity. Peel’s observations of the emergence of the *Aladura* movement, one of the earliest indigenous Yoruba churches that branched out of mission churches within the first two decades of the twentieth century, shed light

⁴⁵ J. D. Y. Peel, ‘Conversion and Tradition in Two African Societies: Ijebu and Buganda’, in *Past and Present*, 77, (Nov. 1977) pp. 108 – 141.

on the failure of the mission churches to meet the spiritual needs of the Yoruba.⁴⁶

Robin Horton's observation, offered in response to Peel, that the mission churches failed to satisfy African desire for 'explanation, prediction, and control of space-time events',⁴⁷ highlights failure to address what this study refers to as spirituality, as an unavoidable, yet unrecognized, next step after conversion.

Isolating missionaries in the quarantine period examined in detail in chapter four was inevitable if the indispensable traditional roles of Yoruba women as custodians of the *orisa* within the family and in society were to be protected. Yoruba women derived meaning and satisfaction from the *orisa*, who met their needs for children, protection, peace and prosperity. Even women who converted continued to exhibit some of the beliefs and practices of the primal religions.

Given the missionaries' failure to incorporate Yoruba culture into Christianity, Peel's first argument, that destabilization caused conversion, comes to focus. Thus, the Yoruba were open to religious change when they moved out of their homelands and away from their immediate homesteads:

Migrant traders are always easier to convert than farmers in their homeland... Yoruba traditional religion with its *orisa* symbolized the links, which are modified by rapid social change or dissolved by migration. When a man travelled to another town to trade he left his own town's peculiar cult behind him, and since there was no point in adopting the cults of another town, related to its traditional environment, he became liable to conversion to Islam or Christianity.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ J. D. Y. Peel, *Aladura: A Religious Movement among the Yoruba* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968).

⁴⁷ Robin Horton, 'African Conversion', p. 98.

⁴⁸ J. D. Y. Peel, 'Religious Change in Yorubaland', in *Africa, Journal of International African Institute*, 37, 1967, p. 300.

While Peel's argument is sound for male traders, he overlooks the fact that women who experienced social destabilization through marriage were also open to conversion. In addition, a more violent form of destabilization occurred through war and slavery, which made women, as well as men, more vulnerable to the religious ideals of their captors.⁴⁹

However, Horton disagreed with Peel's notion of rationalization, which he saw as extension of Weber's views. Peel argues that to rationalize is 'to reorder one's belief in a new and more coherent way to be in line with what one knows and experiences'.⁵⁰ While Peel based his judgement on the fact that *Aladura* Christianity drew the early generations of educated folks working as clerks in the cities, and away from their traditional religions, Horton queries 'the tendency to confound a multiplicity of gods with incoherence and a single god with coherence.'⁵¹ Horton's argument that Yoruba traditional religions had their own structures for responding to the problems of converts, parallel to those of mission Christianity, is useful for this research, where Yoruba women's perpetuation of the gendered structures of traditional religion is investigated.

Peel's second question reveals some of the reasons for conversion. Some converted, for example, because the primal religions were not in a position to offer the kind of power and influence which Christianity promised through economic projects and political programmes of the nineteenth century. While commercial opportunities became a major attraction for the Yoruba, Cyril Okorochoa, an African author

⁴⁹ Samuel Crowther, in his letter to the secretary of the Church Missionary Society in 1837 gives a vivid account of how many women were captured by slave raiders because of the need to save their children (see CMS/CA3/04 Letter of Mr Samuel Crowther to the Rev. William Jewett, 1837).

⁵⁰ Peel, *Aladura: A religious Movement among the Yoruba*, pp 294 - 295.

⁵¹ Horton, 'African Conversion', p. 98.

identifies military prowess, superior technology and commerce as major factors in the conversion process in Igboland:

The military repressions and the international commerce and scientific technology, which marked the dawn of the colonial era in the Igbo heartland, combined to convince the people that the old gods were either too weak, or at least reluctant to combat the gods of the new age or had been altogether defeated...⁵²

Horton's suggestion that the rationale for conversion must be found elsewhere than in the superior rational capacities of clerks to those of artisans, helps to place converts in the right perspective in this study, because many of those on the forefront of founding *Aladura* churches were semi-literate farmers and not urban clerks.⁵³ However, Horton's rejection of the hypothesis that being a clerk offers greater opportunities than being a craftsman or a farmer, does not take into consideration that communicants who were trained by the missionaries soon became missionaries, town clerks and administrators. Although they did not facilitate the development of spirituality, they facilitated conversion as recorded by Henry Townsend as he compared the churches at Iloko and Itoku.⁵⁴

Walls' argument that life reality maps⁵⁵ continue to be updated is applicable in explicating the crises that were experienced when Yoruba women crossed from primal religions to Christianity. It was these two religious systems that Horton describes pictorially as the world of 'microcosm' to that of 'macrocosm'.⁵⁶ While not discrediting one as being more rational than the other, Horton however suggests that

⁵² Cyril Okorochoa, *The meaning of Religious Conversion in Africa: The Case of the Igbo of Nigeria* (Hants: Avebury Gower publishing Company Limited, 1987), p. 261.

⁵³ Horton, 'African Conversion', p. 98.

⁵⁴ CMS/CA2/0/049/95 David Hinderer, Journal Entry, July 14, 1848.

⁵⁵ Walls, 'Worldviews and Theology', 72 – 76.

⁵⁶ These two terminologies are Robin Horton's way of differentiating between the 'micro' gods of the Yoruba and the 'macro' God of the missionaries.

the primal religion was that of the ‘micro’ gods, while Christianity belonged to the ‘macro’ level of divine relationship. Walls’ observation is undisputable because even though Yoruba women crossed into another world of religion, key elements in their cosmological worldview appeared to be unchangeable. The demand for a major shift in the way Yoruba women perceived the world invariably resulted into conflicts in their spirituality, which remained unresolved until the emergence of an indigenized Christianity, which could be located on their life reality maps.

Peel’s model clarifying the terrain where religious encounters took place between the missionaries and the Yoruba is therefore relevant in spotlighting the various contexts in which conflict occurred between Yoruba women’s spirituality and missionary expectations. However, his suggestion that missionaries engaged the Yoruba with a new cosmological theory and new ethical system that reordered community life and met existential needs⁵⁷ does not adequately describe the transformation of Yoruba women’s spirituality following conversion. The missionaries’ worldview and their interpretations of the Scriptures alone could not resolve the internal crises that inevitably followed conversion.

Bringing Women, their Beliefs and Practices to Visibility

Bringing women and their beliefs and practices to the centre of argument in this study involves dividing Yoruba women’s encounter with the missionaries into four phases. It can be argued that whereas Yoruba women were looking for a new interpretation of how the world was linked with the Supreme Being, missionaries presented what they

⁵⁷ Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, pp. 153 – 154.

thought was the 'heavenly'⁵⁸ reality, because their 'duty', in the perception of Gollmer, a German agent of the CMS was to confront the Yoruba with 'the truth....'⁵⁹ This study adopts a four-phase method of showing the responses of women and reactions of and missionaries to the final process of bringing Christianity nearer home to Yoruba women. It examines how women quarantined the missionaries, how they were confronted by the missionaries, the process of assimilation through which the Yoruba acquired the knowledge of the Christian ethos, and finally the evolution of Yoruba women's authentic spirituality, obtained through adapting Christianity to take care of Yoruba traditional worldview. These processes indicate that the evolution of Christianity as a religion of the Yoruba was complex, but discernible.

An angle through which this study gains insight into the process by which women influenced their own free religious expression was the work of feminist theologians. Although the approach in this study is not strictly feminist, the works of some feminist theologians are vital in drawing attention to women's experience in a male dominated ecclesiological world. The tradition of the Church where 'male is the norm'⁶⁰ was a feature of Christianity as it was mediated by missionaries in Africa, and this is too significant to be ignored in a meaningful examination of the transformation of Yoruba women's spirituality, following their conversion to Christianity.

A major observation in this study is Yoruba women's resistance to change in spirituality, which occurred when their self-perception was radically challenged by the presuppositions in Western forms of spirituality that missionaries introduced into African Christian experience. This study therefore expands the reach of conclusions

⁵⁸ CMS/CA2/049/95 D. Hinderer, Journal, Friday 22 June 1849.

⁵⁹ CMS/CA2/043 C. A. Gollmer, Journal Entry 15 June 1854.

⁶⁰ Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (London: Geoffrey Chapman Ltd, 1968), p. 138.

drawn by Western feminist scholars such as Sandra Schneiders who argues that Western women's spirituality has been shaped by their experiences in Church and society where male dominance excludes women from the divine and men became the mediator between God and humanity.⁶¹ Thus, feminist reflections, as far as they reflect the spiritual orientation of missionaries in Yorubaland, are useful sources for seeking insight into missionaries' church administration and organisation in Yorubaland.

One of the major discoveries made in this study is that although male scholars have attempted to act as advocates for women on matters of spiritual concerns, issues of significance to the female gender have only been partially explored. For instance, Ayandele and Ajayi give insightful historical analyses of the social, economic, and political relationships between the Yoruba and nineteenth-century missionaries. Yet, neither Ajayi's minimal reference to polygamy,⁶² nor Ayandele's perception of how African Independent Churches eventually incorporated it,⁶³ effectively explains the male supremacy to the women folks. In fact, the situation was further compounded by Yoruba women's encounters with the missionary evangelists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This study engages with such issues as they affect the development of Yoruba women's identity and spirituality. It can be argued that it takes an African woman with an African exposure to critically evaluate African women's religious experience, especially the process through which Yoruba women became Christianized. While neither Oduyoye nor Olajubu, nor even this researcher

⁶¹ Schneiders believes that a major achievement of the Feminist movement is highlighting and rejecting male domination in society. See Schneiders, 'The Effects of Women's Experience on Their Spirituality', pp 42 – 44.

⁶² Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria 1841-1891 The Making of a New Élite*, p. 15 and in several other sections of the book.

⁶³ Ayandele, *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria 1842-1914*, p. 200.

could claim to have answered all the questions raised by this male domination of women, the call made by scholars such as Leith Ross for intensification of women's study in African society is well placed.

What makes Amba Oduyoye's enlightening theological paradigms of the Akan woman a model of how to approach this study, for instance, is the fact of her sharing the experiences of two cultures, (i.e. her being an Akan woman by birth and a Yoruba by marriage). It should be reiterated here that this study takes seriously the views that evaluations of African women's religious experiences thrive better when handled by female scholars who have adequate access to the culture, language and religions of Africans. It can be argued here also that European women's spirituality has received reasonable attention from European female theologians and feminists such as Mary Daly, Daphne Hampson and others. Oduyoye's theological reflection on spirituality and the female gender and her promotion of adoption of African spiritual emancipation as a woman of Africa,⁶⁴ therefore, go beyond her being 'a native of Ghana', or being married to a Yoruba. The method, whereby women responsibly investigate matters that relate to the general interest of the female gender, especially when the researcher shares the same concerns, is given seriousness in this study.

An instance of the relevance of women's investigations is the general missionary misconception that conversion was synonymous with transformation of spirituality obscured the need to establish a vital link between the primal religions and Christianity. This simple-mindedness of missionaries does not enable them to note, as John Mbiti, an African theologian and philosopher observes that, spirituality

⁶⁴ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995). See Mercy Amba Oduyoye's short description at the back cover.

encompasses 'those religious elements' that deal 'with the direct relationship between human beings and the spiritual realm'.⁶⁵ Rather, as women converts began to form Christian identities, a dual spiritual identity began to emerge. Indeed, some of the vital practices of their primal religions which missionaries failed to understand, remained irremovable. Oduyoye's argument that conversion did not change the way African women related to the Transcendent⁶⁶ directs attention to some key elements in Yoruba women's primal 'beliefs, attitudes and practices', which are considered here.

Similarly, Oyeronke Olajubu, a full-fledged Yoruba woman, 'rooted in the culture by birth and affinity', in her book, *Woman in the Yoruba Religious Sphere*, demands a re-evaluation of traditional women's religious practices.⁶⁷ Although Olajubu does not explore Yoruba women's spirituality, the specifically female Yoruba history that she examines is related to this investigation of the responsiveness of Yoruba women to missionary Christian ideals. Her historical approach is adopted here to argue that African women's spirituality has not been shaped by the factors of their historical origins, worldview and primal religions alone, but also the factor of their being female. So, women's studies provide vital paradigm for evaluating Yoruba women's encounters with missionary Christianity from the 1840s through a theological approach and the use of missionary sources kept in archives all over Europe.

Thus, Olajubu, a scholar of comparative history of religion and cultural analysis, evaluates culture as an instrument of change, adaptation and/or resistance to change, both in Christianity and in the Yoruba traditional religions. She re-echoes Wakefield's

⁶⁵ John S. Mbiti 'African Religion' in Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, Edward Arnold, *The Study of Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 514.

⁶⁶ Oduyoye, 'The Empowering Spirit of Religion', p. 387.

⁶⁷ Olajubu, *Woman in the Yoruba Religious Sphere*, p. 18.

conception of spirituality in her definition of culture as ‘beliefs and attitudes, the sum of a people’s lives mediated by individuals’ experiences,⁶⁸ and therefore argues that there were strong ties between culture and religion, because culture is a vehicle through which religion is expressed.⁶⁹ Oduyoye, in a similar vein argues that the African woman derived her strength and significance in the community from the way she wielded her influence. She emphasises the wider concept of the mothering role of African women who saw themselves beyond biological parents, but also role models of servant leaders to the entire community as

They develop a self- image of servants whose service is their source of honour and dignity. They are who they are because they make the community what it is. It is a spirituality founded on sharing all that is life-giving and a sense of justice and fair play.⁷⁰

This thesis examines further, Oduyoye’s argument that African women’s spiritual traditions developed from, and were sustained through the popular beliefs and practices, which mothers passed on to the children from one generation to the other.⁷¹

Although the issues of African women in religion are treated from different perspectives, there are connections between Oduyoye’s view of ‘daughters’ of Africa, Olajubu’s perception of Yoruba women’s place in the religious sphere and the development of Yoruba women’s spirituality examined extensively in this study. Both Oduyoye and Olajubu portray spirituality as the corollary of religion. Hence, their position portrays the dialectic between religious change and social-cultural factors. Secondly, while Olajubu explores the changes in political status, social structure, liturgical practices and rituals between Yoruba women’s primal religions and

⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 2.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Oduyoye, ‘The Empowering Spirit of Religion’, p.370

⁷¹ Ibid, p. 362.

Christianity, the broader cultural changes due to Western influence is given attention in this study.

Furthermore, Oduyoye's view that African women's theology is a response to mission theology, especially as it relates to the experiences of African women when they came in contact with the missionaries and the colonial administrators,⁷² is consistent in this study. Although she focuses on how the primal religions of Africa have shaped women's theology and influenced the religious and cultural climate of Africa, her suggestion that Christianity left permanent marks on the development of African spirituality⁷³ is fundamental to this study. This thesis, therefore, follows up from Oduyoye's balance in the constant interfacing between biblical interpretation and culture in evolving African women's theological reflections.⁷⁴

Another significant aspect of studies in Yoruba religious and social developments that has been adopted in this study as a means of reaching the core of Yoruba women's spirituality is myths. For instance, the role of women in defining the myth of the Transcendent was so fundamental to Yoruba primal beliefs that it has occupied the attention of scholars in their bid to interpret the Yoruba concept of God and their relationship with the divinities. Bolaji Idowu summarises that myths are valuable means by which African defined existence and the divine-human relationships:

In the myths, therefore, we have stories ranging from the simple explanation of common occurrences related to the fact of human existence, to answers to serious riddles like those involved in the phenomena of birth, human life in all its phases, and death; questions with reference to the Deity, the whence and wherefore of the unseen world in which man feels

⁷² Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd, 2001), p. 9.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 13.

himself enveloped, which rules, guides, or molests him. The myths thus serve the manifold purposes of statements of doctrinal beliefs, confirmation of faith in the mind, liturgical credo, simple metaphysics...⁷⁵

The reasons why women in Yoruba mythology were always held responsible for God's (*Olódùmarè's*) decision to change from immanence to transcendence are also examined extensively by scholars, and they are useful 'tools' for examining in this thesis why the *orisa* (the gods) were assigned to deal directly with created beings. For instance, E. A. Oyelade, an African philosopher, evaluates oral mythology in which the womenfolk were claimed to have abused the privilege of God's immanence.⁷⁶ Adopting the various views on the transcendence worldview of the Yoruba is very helpful because, some Europeans who had sustained contacts with West Africa in the nineteenth century also had their own versions of God's immanence as well as his transcendence in Yoruba religious experience.

For instance, French scholar, F. Baudlin, writing in 1884 gives an account of the myth of God's transcendence, stating that God withdrew himself from the world of the Yoruba and left its organisation and governance to lesser *orisa* (gods).⁷⁷ A. B. Ellis, a British officer maintained that the Yoruba used to worship the sky God (*Olorun*), who was ruled out of relevance because he was too lazy to control the affairs of the world. The people then turned to the *orisa*, his more active agents.⁷⁸ R. P. Bouche, a French writer gives a clearer understanding of why the blame for the myth of God's transcendence was heaped on womenfolk. He observed that the Yoruba's concept of

⁷⁵ Idowu, *Olódùmarè, God in Yoruba Belief*, p. 7.

⁷⁶ E. A. Oyelade, 'Unpublished Lecture on African Traditional Religions', RCT, Ogbomoso: Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, March 1998. Oyelade's collection of unpublished lectures contains African myths and folklores, passed down from one generation of Africans to.

⁷⁷ P. Baudlin, *Fetichisme et Feticheurs*, Lyon, 1884, p. 6 (translated by M. McMahon, *Fetichism and Fetish Worshippers*, 1885, pp. 9 - 10), (cited in Awolalu, 'The Encounter between African Traditional Religion', pp. 3 - 4).

⁷⁸ A. B. Ellis, *The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples of the Slave Coast of Africa*, London: 1894, pp.36-38 (cited in Awolalu, p. 5).

God's awesomeness made him delegate their care to the *orisa* with whom they related in prayer, worship and sacrifice, while the white man relates with God directly.⁷⁹ African theologians and historians such as Omosade Awolalu,⁸⁰ Dominique Zahan,⁸¹ and Geoffrey Parrinder⁸² propound theories that are helpful for unlocking some obscure aspects of these myths and particular attention have been paid to these theories in this study.

Analytical Framework for the Four Phases of Yoruba Women's Spirituality

The methodological framework for the analysis of stages of transformation of Yoruba women's spirituality in this research is adapted from Humphrey Fisher's three stages analysis of religious conversion. While Fisher identified the stages, which he applied to both Islam and Christianity, as quarantine, adhesion, and mixing,⁸³ this study employs a four-stage progression comprised of quarantine, conflict, assimilation and adaptation based primarily on the development of Yoruba women's spirituality, as it interacted with mission Christianity.

Although Fisher's second stage, adhesion, which he adopted from an earlier work by A. D. Nock, in which people are motivated to embrace new religions in response to changing cultural and political situations, is similar in many respects to the adaptation phase identified in this study, it differs in a major way. Whereas the extraordinary motivating influence of culture and politics reduce the allegiance of converts who take the new religion as supplements to the original one, thus having 'one foot on either

⁷⁹ P. Bouche, *La Cote des Esclaves et Le Dahomey*, Paris, 1885, p. 106 (cited in Awolalu, p. 4).

⁸⁰ J. Omosade Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, (London: Longman Group, 1979), p. 5.

⁸¹ Zahan, *The Religion, Spirituality, and Thought of Traditional Africa*, p. 16.

⁸² Geoffrey Parrinder, *West African Religion* (London: Epworth Press, 1949), p. 19.

⁸³ Fisher, 'Conversion Reconsidered', p. 32,

side of the fence'⁸⁴, adaptation motivates converts make the religion function within the contexts of culture and existing worldview.

The third stage, mixing, which occurs when people voluntarily converts to the new religion,⁸⁵ is similar in some respects to the assimilation phase. It also has some of the characteristics of the adaptation phase used in this study as it reflects what happens when people are well adjusted to the demands of the religion, thus blending its practices with those of earlier religions.

II Sources

Key Secondary Sources

Although archives are the most significant source for this research, it also benefits from missionary memoirs and key secondary sources. Some of the secondary sources such as Samuel Johnson's *The History of the Yorubas* provide key information on women's role within the traditional Yoruba society. Being the first scholarly attempt at writing Yoruba history by a Yoruba who lived in the nineteenth century, the work derives its strength from direct oral accounts of living witnesses at the time, as given by 'the bards..., from the time of king Abiodun downwards'.⁸⁶

As a Yoruba missionary and a writer of Yoruba history, Johnson died in 1902, leaving the publication of his work to his brother, O. Johnson⁸⁷. Although he wrote as a historian, his role as a missionary and an observer of and participant in Yoruba culture

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas*, p. vii.

⁸⁷ Ibid, p. ix-x.

and social life, place him at a vantage point to write extensively on Yoruba women's place in society, which is important for this work.⁸⁸

Although Johnson's analysis of the political situation in Yorubaland, with the emphasis on the internal rivalries and wars, which resulted in massive movement of population, provides an important context for missionary work in Yorubaland, and his insightful analysis of the Yoruba religion and culture is even more useful in bringing out clearly the complementary roles of women in the political administration of Yorubaland.⁸⁹

While Johnson's work is a source book for women's place in Yoruba early history, Oyeronke Olajubu's *Women in the Yoruba religious Sphere* is one of the outstanding works on Yoruba women in recent times. Although she also adopted ethnography and oral sources⁹⁰ to evaluate women's place in culture, society, indigenous religions and Christian tradition, the value of the work for this thesis is her exploration of Yoruba women's identity, power, and gender relations.⁹¹

Oduyoye's *Introducing African Women's Theology* is an exploration of the theological concerns of African women from the context of their peculiar experiences within the traditional religions, cultures, missionary history and colonialism.⁹² Adopting the storying approach for her investigation Oduyoye identifies the major concerns of African women, which are parallel to the goals of this study. She submits

⁸⁸ Ibid. Although Johnson's work was not published until the early twentieth century due to delays and the death of the author, it was the first major historical work on Yoruba by an African.

⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 26-40.

⁹⁰ Olajubu, *Women in Yoruba Religious Sphere*, p. 3.

⁹¹ Ibid. pp. 65 – 92.

⁹² Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology*, pp. 10 – 11.

that what the African woman needs is a theology that liberates, which sets its own visions, open to particularity and difference, and being aware of patriarchal and oppressive ideologies working against women.⁹³

Although many scholars, such as the last two referred to above, have argued for the significant role of women in religion, Peel adopts a sociological enquiry into the beliefs and behaviour exemplified in African independent churches,⁹⁴ reflecting the active participation of Yoruba women in the leadership structure at the beginnings of the *Aladura* churches.⁹⁵ Although it is not an attempt to make a generic study of African Independent Churches, it focuses on two independent churches, the Christ Apostolic Church and Cherubim and Seraphim. While exploring the role of Christianity as cause and catalyst of social change in Africa, he emphasises the perception of religions as the meeting of two cultural systems, European Christianity and the various indigenous religions and culture.⁹⁶

In a much later work,⁹⁷ Peel demonstrates his commitment to making women visible by reflecting their part in the evolution of religion and society. Thus the identity of Yoruba women, which is a major aspect of this study, is parallel to Peel's purpose to construct a Yoruba identity through the contacts they had with two major world religions-Islam and Christianity- in the nineteenth century.⁹⁸ By maintaining that the indigenous cultures, worldviews and religions inform the traditional identity of Yoruba women, he provides the basis for exploring Yoruba women's place in religion

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Peel, *Aladura: A Religious Movement among the Yoruba*, p. 1.

⁹⁵ Ibid, pp.71; 77 - 80.

⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 1-3.

⁹⁷ Peel, *Religious Encounter and The Making of the Yoruba*.

⁹⁸ Ibid, p. 190.

and cosmology in this study.⁹⁹ His insightful evaluation of Islam, which was Yoruba's first contact with a world religion, is valuable for comparing the nature and contexts of religious influences on Yoruba women, all of which shape Yoruba spirituality. As he examined the writings of the first set of literate Africans in the CMS archive, he submits that the African agents of the mission, more than any other group, determined the modern consciousness of Yoruba people.¹⁰⁰

A significant source-book for missionary activities in Yorubaland is Travis Collins' notable work, *The Baptist Mission of Nigeria: 1850-1993*, which is the history of Southern Baptist Convention Missionary work in Nigeria. It is important to this study because he explores significant phases that make up the history of Baptist work in Nigeria.¹⁰¹ Although the beginning (1850-1887), was marked by the arrival of Thomas Jefferson Bowen in 1850, the work was not established until 1853 when his effort was complemented by his wife, and two other missionaries and their wives.¹⁰²

The significance of women to the development of Baptist work is established in two major areas. First, as facilitators of educational programmes started by Mrs Bowen as she taught sewing and reading in her home.¹⁰³ Second, the leadership initiatives provided by Sarah Marsh Harden sustained Baptist work when it was disrupted as a

⁹⁹ Ibid. pp. 88-122.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, pp. 10-11

¹⁰¹ Although only two of the phases are relevant to this research, the phases are: Dawn and Difficulties (1850-1887); Rupture and Reconciliation (1888-1914); Establishment and Expansion (1915-1959); Partnership and Progress (1960-1993). See Travis Collins, *The Baptist Mission of Nigeria, 1850-1993: A History of Southern Baptist Convention Missionary Work in Nigeria*, (Ibadan; Associated Book-Makers, 1993)

¹⁰² Ibid, pp, 7-9.

¹⁰³ Ibid, p.8.

result of the return of foreign missionaries to their homelands due to the American Civil war in the 1860s.¹⁰⁴

Oral Sources

This study employs four major forms of oral sources - myths, poetry (*Ifa* corpus), *oriki* (praise chant) and song. Although, Yorubaland was a non-literate society, it had excellent oral communication techniques,¹⁰⁵ which had been used in the pioneering work of Samuel Johnson referred to above.¹⁰⁶ Myths, which society neither seeks to validate or establish the accuracy of, are an important 'source in the search for meaningful community'.¹⁰⁷ Myths of origin are used extensively in chapter three to explore the place of women in the cosmological history, as well as in the sustenance of Yoruba communities, which stood the risk of annihilation.

Secondly, the value of oral poetry, especially the *Ifa* corpus, in highlighting women's parallel or complementary role in Yoruba cosmology, religion and society, emphasised in chapter two, is evaluated by Deidre Badejo.¹⁰⁸ She stresses the place of women in Yoruba power constructs as revealed in the role of *Osun* in the *Ifa* corpus observing that '*Osun* and women like her, then, are themselves expressions of power... [and that] women-power itself is indispensable to women essence, an expression of omnipotence.'¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, p. 12.

¹⁰⁵ S. O. Biobaku, *Sources of Yoruba History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), pp. 1 – 8.

¹⁰⁶ Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas*.

¹⁰⁷ Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women & Patriarchy*, p. 21.

¹⁰⁸ Diedre L. Badejo, 'Oral Literature of the Yoruba Goddess' in Jacob K. Olupona and Toyin Falola, *Religion and Society in Nigeria: Historical and Sociological Perspectives* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd., 1991) p. 81.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. p. 83.

Although oriki (praise chant) and songs are used within limits and with discretion in this study, they contribute to the knowledge of pre-contact Yorubaland referred to in chapter three as Yoruba people's praise names and songs. Also the history of a town's activities is derived from what is preserved in songs and chants. Thus a major aspect of Ibadan praise chant cited in chapter three reveals the historical contexts of Yorubaland at the time of the arrival of the missionaries, where Ibadan people were presented as valiant, war-loving people. Its major limitation however is that it seeks to present, in an exaggerated form, the positive dimensions of events being represented.¹¹⁰

A major limitation of oral sources identified in this study is the problem of multiple variants of the same story, leaving the researcher with the task of identifying the most credible. Another major problem which materials presented in Yoruba language could pose is that of accessibility to non-speakers of the language. Although missionaries of Yoruba origin responded to these challenges by embarking on translation works, only the oral sources that had direct relevance to their work, some of which are translated into English language in this study,¹¹¹ attracted their attention.¹¹² While the bridal prayer, as a form of oral poetry which is rendered in Yoruba in chapter five could pose a challenge to a redactor who does not speak the language, this study benefits from the advantage of the researcher having an in-depth knowledge of Yoruba and English languages.

¹¹⁰ Biobaku, *Sources of Yoruba History*, p. 64.

¹¹¹ For example, an important resource book utilized in this study on the Yoruba culture and customs and translated into English by this researcher is published in Yoruba language; see C. L., Adeoye, *Asa Ati Ise Yoruba* (London and Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1979).

¹¹² Samuel Crowther is renowned for his works on Yoruba Vocabulary, Yoruba Proverbs and Yoruba Bible Translations. For some of his translations of Yoruba proverbs, see Sarah Tucker, *Abeokuta; Sunrise within the Tropics: An Outline of the Origin and Progress of the Yoruba Mission* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1854); p. 277, Appendix 2.

Jan Vansina, a scholar, however, makes succinct propositions, especially where recourse to oral traditions appears suspect in rewriting history of Africa. She argues that tapping into the ‘power of memory of successive generations of human beings... is not necessarily untrustworthy as a historical source, but... merits a certain amount of credence within certain limits,’¹¹³ Where the weight of evidence in the oral traditions appears weak, literary sources in the early missionary documents, as well as the sources credited to the emerging Yoruba elite, may be used to verify a source by a consistent redactor. This study therefore adopts the method of corroborating oral sources with literary materials such as missionary memoirs and journals and reports from the archives.

Missionary Memoirs

The use of three major missionary memoirs in this study, two by British women¹¹⁴ of the CMS, and one by a male American Baptist missionary, are significant in two major ways. Firstly, while Bowen had not shown any particular interest in reflecting the perspectives of women in the contacts, Tucker and Anna Hinderer tend to give a little more details and report women’s concerns in their encounters. Thus the graphic detail of women’s religious roles in traditional worship at Abeokuta,¹¹⁵ and Ibadan¹¹⁶ given by Tucker and Anna Hinderer, respectively, are important for constructing their indigenous spirituality.

¹¹³ For a rich understanding of oral traditions and how it can facilitate historical reconstruction, see Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, H. M. Wright, trans., (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1965), p. 1.

¹¹⁴ Tucker, Abeokuta; *Sunrise Within the Tropics: An Outline of the Origin and Progress of the Yoruba Mission*; Anna Hinderer, *Seventeen Years in the Yoruba Country: Memorials of Anna Hinderer*, 4th ed., C. A. & D Hone, eds (Surrey: Billing and Sons Printers, 1877); T. J. Bowen, *Adventures and Missionary Labours in Several Countries in the Interior of Africa from 1849-1856*, 2nd Ed. (London: Frank Cass & Co Ltd, 1968).

¹¹⁵ See Tucker, Abeokuta; *Sunrise Within the Tropics*, p. 140

¹¹⁶ Hinderer, *Seventeen Years in the Yoruba Country*, p. 93.

Secondly, although each memoir emphasises the denominational and national interests of the writer, another remarkable feature of missionary memoirs are that important information about the work of one denomination is reflected in the writings of another. Thus some information about the beginning of Methodist work is portrayed in Tucker's memoirs in her attempts to give a sequential pattern of the arrival of each missionary group to Yorubaland.¹¹⁷ Bowen's memoirs also demonstrate the level of cordiality among various missionary bodies as he reported his stay 'for about a year and a half' in the CMS compound in his early days in Abeokuta.¹¹⁸

Nevertheless, individual interests and perspectives on mission work come through in their memoirs. Hence, Anna Hinderer gives the most details, which are used extensively in chapter five, when she reported on church services, Sunday schools, and baptisms, either in their short sojourn in Abeokuta or in their extensive service in Ibadan.¹¹⁹ Thus, her memoirs are very valuable to assess the assimilation process of Yoruba into Christianity. Furthermore, her significant contribution to the transformation of Yoruba girls and boys is reflected in her passion for her work with the children boarding with her.¹²⁰

While Tucker's work focussed on Abeokuta in the 1850s,¹²¹ Anna Hinderer's work, published posthumously in 1877 by family friends under the close supervision of her

¹¹⁷ Tucker, Abeokuta; *Sunrise within the Tropics*, p. 86.

¹¹⁸ Bowen, *Adventures and Missionary Labours in Several Countries in the Interior of Africa*, p. 131.

¹¹⁹ Hinderer, *Seventeen Years in Yoruba Country*, pp. 31, 37, 62, 63, 76.

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 103, 117, 120

¹²¹ Tucker, Abeokuta; *Sunrise within the Tropics: An Outline of the Origin and Progress of the Yoruba Mission*.

husband, starts with the Abeokuta story but gives elaborate details of the Ibadan side of the story of Yoruba women.¹²² Anna Hinderer's memoirs were derived mainly 'from her own journals, letters and other papers', which were extremely confidential, intended for 'eye of personal friends'.¹²³

Mrs Hinderer's memoirs is also an important source that reflects the work of Western women in the domestic terrain, as the editors made clear that 'her husband was the Lord's chief instrument for gathering disciples, organizing the Church, and exercising discipline for its government', while Anna work 'was chiefly within the compound, amongst its few men and women.. and still more amongst the happy children [where she was] civilizing, training and teaching...'¹²⁴ Thomas Jefferson Bowen's intentions for writing his memoirs was to provide 'information in regard to countries but little known, and to call the attention of Christians to a people, who, it seems are ready to receive the Gospel.'¹²⁵ Although published many decades after his death, the memoirs are extremely detailed, containing information ranging from the geography of Yorubaland to seasons and climate.

A substantial part of Bowen's memoirs are devoted to the challenges and successes associated with his pioneering efforts at mission work as he passed through many towns and cities, such as Badagry, Abeokuta, Bi-Olorunpelu, Ijaye, Ogbomoso and Ilorin. In each of the towns, he was particularly drawn to the language, religious ceremonies, and customs of the people which he believes 'are of sufficient importance

¹²² Hinderer, *Seventeen Years in Yoruba Country: Memorials of Anna Hinderer*.

¹²³ *Ibid*, p. vi.

¹²⁴ Hinderer, *Seventeen Years in Yoruba Country: Memorials of Anna Hinderer*, pp. v-vi.

¹²⁵ Bowen, *Adventures and Missionary Labours in Several Countries in the Interior of Africa*, p. iii.

to merit a more extended investigation...'¹²⁶ Although Bowen's memoirs focus mainly on his role in laying the foundations of Baptist work in Yorubaland, it also details its growth and expansion, which was marked by the arrival of other missionaries and their wives from 1853 onwards.¹²⁷

Three main limitations are identified in the use of memoirs in this study. In the first place, they are subjective reports, which offer the personal perspectives of the writers. Secondly, they terminate with the death or illness of the writer. Thus Anna Hinderer's memoirs only went as far as 1868, when ill health forced her to stop. Although Bowen resumed work in Ijaye, when illness forced him to withdraw from Yoruba mission field, which he pioneered, he suffered the same fate as Anna Hinderer and had to be placed in an institution, where he spent the rest of his life. Thirdly, with the exception of Tucker's memoirs, the other two which were collated and edited posthumously run the risk of credibility. Thus, the memoirs may be taken as being less reliable than the missionary journals, which emanate directly from the writers.

Archival Sources

Archival materials used in this research are the written accounts given by mostly male missionaries, both Yoruba and European of their activities, which brought them into close contact with Yoruba women and men. Although the Methodist and Baptist archives were consulted, very little value was derived from them as critical information on daily encounters with women is not reflected in the journal entries. However, the case of CMS was different as every missionary was requested to keep a daily journal of his activities, out of which he wrote out the quarterly, later twice

¹²⁶ Ibid, p. iv.

¹²⁷ Ibid, pp. 180-187.

yearly, 'journal extracts'.¹²⁸ Although some of these accounts appear trivial, they are the important sources for deriving Yoruba women's practices before and after conversion to Christianity. Therefore, this research found the journals, reports, and personal letters of CMS missionaries emanating from the mission fields, as well as reports and letters from the mission secretary helpful in reconstructing the encounters women had with the missionaries.

Almost without exception all twenty-four missionaries, sixteen Yoruba, two Germans and six Britons whose two hundred and forty documents are examined in this investigation spanning the period between 1842 and 1912 encountered Yoruba women in their private homes,¹²⁹ in church settings¹³⁰ and at market square.¹³¹ Their sermons, visitations, casual interactions, and the reactions and responses of the people form the basis of the journal entries.

The archive does not appear to hold as much gender biases as many other historical sources, because missionaries did not set out deliberately to write on women or draw parallels between them and the men. The requirement to give a verbatim report of their encounters with Africans without editing whatever they considered to be unimportant helped to counteract any gender bias against recording contact experiences with women as opposed to men. Hence, the insights obtained from the journals reveal authentic details about the private lives of Yoruba women, and their

¹²⁸ J. D. Y. Peel, 'Problems and Opportunities in an Anthropologist's use of a Missionary Archive', in Robert A. Bicker and Rosemary Seton, eds, *Missionary Encounters: Sources and Issues* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1996), p. 74.

¹²⁹ CMS/CA2/049/95 D. Hinderer, 'Missionary at Abeokuta, June 12 – Sept 25 1849' Journal, Friday 22 June 1849.

¹³⁰ CMS/CA2/049/95 D. Hinderer, Journal, 1 July 1849.

¹³¹ CMS/CA2/049/95 D. Hinderer, Journal, 3 July 1849.

public role as deities, priestesses and custodians of family and tribal divinities in the African traditional religions. As Peel observes:

In many parts of the world...missionaries were among the first outsiders to make sustained contacts with indigenous peoples, and their writings frequently contain accounts of local culture and society, oral traditions etc. which ...have an indispensable documentary value for standing at the beginning of modern cultural change.¹³²

The journal entries as sources are therefore indispensable as they reflect the traditional religious lives of Yoruba women's groups, and sometimes groups of men and women performing religious rituals and sacrifices together.¹³³ They portray women as being highly visible in public spaces such as markets and blacksmith's workshop,¹³⁴ outspoken, debating freely and often objecting publicly to the views of missionaries.¹³⁵ Apart from the missionary memoirs, journal records are the only sources that record details of the deathbed experiences of women, which reflect Yoruba women's views on death and the dying process. These accounts thus provide a valuable source for investigating Yoruba women's spirituality before and during the contact period.

It is further observed in this study that the journal entries of missionaries reflect women's active role in the socio-political life of Yoruba traditional society. So also were their astuteness, confidence, outspokenness and inquisitiveness demonstrated in missionaries' reports, especially the Yoruba, such as Samuel Crowther's journal of September 1855,¹³⁶ William Allen's journal entry of May 1859,¹³⁷ and William

¹³² Peel, 'Problems and opportunities in an Anthropologist's use of a Missionary Archive', p. 71,

¹³³ See CMS/CA2/0/068 J.A. Maser, Journal Entry 13 Aug. 1855; CMS/CA2/0/083 J. Smith Journal Entry 12 September 1855; CMS/CA2/0/061 T. King, Journal Entry 15 Sept 1855; CMS/CA2/0/032 S. Crowther Jr., Journal Entry 25 Sept. 1855

¹³⁴ CMS/CA2/070 William Moore, Annual Letter for 1879.

¹³⁵ See CMS/CA2/019 W. S. Allen, Journal for half year to December 1868, CMS/CA2/070 William Moore, Annual Letter for 1879.

¹³⁶ CMS/CA2/0/032 S. Crowther Jr., Journal Entry 25 Sept. 1855.

Moore's Annual Letter of 1879,¹³⁸ all of which affirm great participation of Yoruba women in the major events in the Yoruba society before contact with the missionaries.

These primary sources also provide first hand accounts of the difficulties Yoruba women converts experienced as they converted to Christianity, and the transformation of spirituality led to rejection of many traditional ritual practices. Thus, persecution of female converts who were flogged or tied down every weekend informed the subject of many missionaries' journal entries. For example, Hinderer's report of an incident in the Ibadan mission gives a vivid picture of the sacrifice Yoruba women had to make as they changed from traditional religions to Christianity:

In the early days of the Ibadan mission, no case created more disturbance than those of two girls who joined the baptismal class at Kudeti and were beaten by their fathers 'for refusing to take part in the usual sacrifice making',¹³⁹

Thus, the joys and victories of Yoruba women in spite of their fears, persecutions and disappointments as they went through harrowing experiences in the hands of community leaders, give credence to the reliability of the archival records in this study.

As valuable as the journal entries and letters are, they have three significant limitations. First, missionaries in Yorubaland represented their respective religious traditions, and their loyalty belonged to their sending bodies. The exclusive nature of Christianity clouded Western missionaries' perception of Yoruba cosmology and

¹³⁷ CMS/CA2/018/16 William Allen, Journal Entry, 15 May 1859.

¹³⁸ See CMS/CA2/0/070 William Moore, Annual Letter, 1879.

¹³⁹ See CMS/CA2/049 D. Hinderer, Journal Entry, 1853.

culture. Thus, missionaries as agents of religious change were prone to biases, which are reflected in many of their journal entries.¹⁴⁰

The second major limitation in the use of the archival sources is that while sources authored by Yoruba male missionaries provide a Yoruba perspective, there are no materials written by Yoruba women themselves. Thus, there are no primary materials with which to corroborate the accounts of male missionary witnesses.

The third limitation has to do with the fact that CMS' request for daily report from its agents terminated at about 1910, while this study covers the period up to 1930. However, minutes of church councils and other colonial records have been used to supplement missionary reports and correspondence for the period beyond 1910. Hence, the limitations in missionary reports do not stand in the way of objective analysis in this study.

Conclusion

Although many authors¹⁴¹ perceive spirituality as a consistently nebulous concept, it is used in this context to describe Yoruba women's 'attitudes, beliefs and practices' in their transition from their primal religions to Christianity. All of these factors define their relationship with one another, their families, communities and universe, and help them to derive meaning from life experiences. A major objective of this study is to highlight the important distinction between the process of religious conversion and that of transformation of spirituality.

¹⁴⁰ See, for example CMS/CA2/032 S. Crowther Junior, Journal Entry 25 December 1855.

¹⁴¹ Sheldrake, *A Brief History of Spirituality*, p. 1.

Although existing theories and models of conversion evaluated in this chapter aid an understanding of the dynamics of spirituality as a religious experience, none of them distinguishes between conversion and spirituality. While many African women became converted to Christianity, by and large, cultural and social factors tended to dictate Yoruba women's spirituality as discussed further in chapter three. Essentially, the central argument is that conversion did not stimulate transformation of spirituality as missionaries thought that it would. Rather, primal beliefs, attitudes and practices influenced the ways in which Yoruba women made the transition from their traditional religions into Christianity.

CHAPTER THREE

WOMEN'S SPIRITUALITY IN YORUBA COSMOLOGY AND CULTURE BEFORE MISSIONARY CONTACT AND DURING THE QUARANTINE PHASE

Since Yoruba society was non-literate, there is an absence of documents reflecting Yoruba cosmology and culture preceding sustained contacts with nineteenth-century missionaries. Researchers interested in pre-contact Yoruba interactions with one another and the Transcendent have therefore depended largely on oral tradition, which the Yoruba had preserved and passed on from one generation to another through myths, proverbs, songs, artefacts and community relics such as Opa Oranyan at Ile-Ife.¹

However, in addition to these sources, which have various limitations highlighted in chapter two, J. D. Y. Peel's method of consulting written documents emanating from missionary journals for recovering the primal existence of the Yoruba² has been adopted in this study for verifying many of the stories emanating from the above sources. This method is tenable as nineteenth century missionaries typically spent their first few months in Yorubaland getting acquainted with the local people, and significantly for this research, observing their culture and religious practices.³

During this period of investigation by missionaries, they had the opportunity of observing Yoruba worship patterns, religious rituals, culture and social life, thus paving the way for interacting with the spirituality of the people. It is in this light that

¹ Afolabi Ojo, *Yoruba Culture: A Geographical Analysis* (London: University of London Press, 1966), P. 258.

² J. D. Y. Peel, *Religious Encounters and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), p. 22.

³ Travis Collins, *The Baptist Mission of Nigeria 1850 – 1993* (Ibadan: Associated Book Makers, 1993), p. 7.

this chapter makes extensive use of oral sources such as myths, poetry, and song, as well as missionary reports and correspondence to recover the past experiences of Yoruba women before their conversion to Christianity.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine aspects of Yoruba cosmology, culture, religions, social and family life which informed the attitudes, beliefs, and practices through which women made meaning in the traditional society. This exercise provides a means of showing why some traditional attitudes of the Yoruba towards the Transcendent and the parallel relationship with the community were changeable with mission spirituality and why others were resistant to change. In the first place, this chapter highlights the place of women in Yoruba cosmology. Secondly, it examines the role of women in traditional religion. Thirdly, this chapter evaluates the significance of women in the social and political organisation of the traditional Yoruba society. Finally, it examines the implication of the pre contact period for the commencement of the quarantine phase and its impact on the development of Yoruba women's primal spirituality.

Women in Yoruba Cosmology and Culture

The Yoruba has its own cosmology, as it exists in other communities, through which they relay the stories of 'how the world began and continues how humans came to exist, and what the gods expect of us.'⁴ They had three levels of spiritual realities in their cosmology, which is represented by a triangle as set out in the appendix to this thesis. While *Olódùmarè*, the Supreme God of the Yoruba who is non-gendered operates alone at the highest level of the spiritual order, the *orisa* and ancestors, male

⁴ Nancy Ellen Abrams and Joel R. Primack, 'Cosmology & 21st Century Culture' in *Science* (vol. 239, pp. 1769 -1770, 7 Sept. 2001)

or female function at the lower levels in Yoruba cosmology. Yoruba cosmological history has it that, women were prominent in God's plan of creating the world. This prominence is established in the relationship between the created world and the Transcendent world. Therefore, Yoruba women's place in cosmology is not only based on what the gods expected of them, but also on what they expected of the gods. Women's role in the cosmos, therefore, is a major way of evaluating their primal values, attitudes, beliefs and practices, through which they related with others as well as the Transcendent. Three aspects, among others are important for evaluating women's role in Yoruba cosmology and culture. These are women's active involvement in creation, the created cosmological order and the founding of the Yoruba race.

Women in Yoruba Creation Story

The active and complementary roles of women in Yoruba creation stories explains why Yoruba women's spirituality would not be easily accommodated within the passive and subordinate roles that mission Christianity assigns to them. Although *Olódùmarè* (God in Yoruba belief) is the ultimate in creation and existence, the two human agents involved in the creation process were female and male. While this perception of creation appears similar to biblical creation story, in contrast to the biblical interpretation of nineteenth century mission Christianity, women in Yoruba mythology were not considered inferior to men.

The missionaries' superimposing of the Old Testament creation story upon Yoruba mythology introduced a new range of meanings. The biblical creation narratives in Genesis chapter one, which informed the theology and spirituality of nineteenth

century missionaries, perceived women in a passive role in creation as she was derived from the male. The subordinate role ascribed to women in Church and secular society, which is totally different from the spiritual orientation promoted by Yoruba creation myths, is further developed in chapter five.

Although there are arguments on both sides as regards the gender of *Oduduwa*, which are examined further in this study; the tradition that upholds the Yoruba belief that *Oduduwa* and *Obatala*, female and male divinities respectively collaborated in the creation of the earth, can be summarised as follows:

Obatala and *Oduduwa* used to have their abode in heaven with 'Olódùmarè', the Supreme God who sent them down to the watery expanse to construct the solid mass now known as the earth. The supreme God gave them the chameleon and the hen as companions and a quantity of soil and bits of nails in the shell of a snail for the performance of the task. On arriving at the watery expanse, *Obatala* threw down the mixture of soil and iron as he was instructed to do and the hen began to scatter it with its clawed toes until a large span of the watery region was reclaimed.⁵

Therefore, apart from defining a larger context of existence in which the Yoruba was only a part, the myth helps to establish that women were recognised as an active agent in creation, and they were expected to have a sense of worth in relating to the Transcendent.

A further implication of the indispensable role of the female is reflected in the fact that *Olódùmarè* not only used female human agent, he also included a hen, a female animal as one of the important animals that were to accompany the divinities in

⁵ This story, like the other variants, identifies a significant role played by the female divinity *Oduduwa*, just like some others reproduced by other credible and reputable Yoruba historians. These include Emanuel Bolaji Idowu, *Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longmans, 1962), pp. 22 – 7; Lucas, *The Religion of the Yoruba*; Afolabi Ojo, *Yoruba Culture: A Geographical Analysis*, p. 182.

negotiating the 'watery expanse'. Therefore, by locating them in a meaningful way as participants in the important process of creating their cosmos, *Olódùmarè* meant for the female gender to be active in his worship also. Women's identity and patterns of behaviour in the world are therefore defined by their active participation in creation. Thus, women continue to see themselves, not just as consorts to men, but as partners in the creative process of the cosmos as further revealed in the activity of the hen:

The point at which the hen began to spread the earth came to be known and called 'Ife' – an inflection of the word 'expand', which means 'expanded' or, 'the area that has been expanded'.⁶

Hence, the prime Yoruba town, 'Ile-Ife' – 'the expanded home', popularly referred to as the cradle of the Yoruba derived its name from the activity of female and male divinities cooperating to carry out the orders of *Olódùmarè* to reclaim an expanse of land mass out of the watery chaos in collaboration with the hen and chameleon.

Thus the equality or complimentary role of *Obatala* and *Oduduwa* is further observed in the way both divinities have been symbolically represented in works of art at Ile-Ife and other cities in Yorubaland. Both symbolically represent the upper and lower lids of a calabash (a round object by which the Yoruba symbolise the cosmos). While *Obatala*, the sky divinity represented the top half of the cosmos, *Oduduwa*, the female divinity symbolises the lower half, or the earth divinity. This explains why many Yoruba regard *Oduduwa* as the parent deity, from where they all have their source.⁷

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ojo, *Yoruba Culture: A Geographical Analysis*, p. 182.

Although, it was *Olódùmarè* – the supreme God of the Yoruba, who came down to give humans the vital breath of life, after which it became a living being,⁸ the valuable role of the female is unmistakable. Thus, in emphasising the role of *Oduduwa*, the female divinity that had the responsibility of moulding human forms, Yoruba women derived their sense of value, significance and influence, which was to find expression in their eventual adaptation of Christianity, as further discussed in chapter six.

The way Yoruba women perceived themselves in relation to God and the community, and the role the community assigned them, was to make it difficult for them to remain loyal to the missionaries after their conversion. This accounts for one of the reasons why women would readily accept quarantine of the missionaries as examined in chapter four of this thesis. Whereas Yoruba women saw their prototype in the female *Oduduwa*, a mythological messenger of *Olódùmarè* and God's agent in creating the earth and humanity, missionaries moved in with a new conception of the role of women in religion and society.

Male or Female Progenitor?

The story of creation has many variants in Yoruba mythology as can be deduced from the different accounts of authors in their attempts to recover the history of the Yoruba. The traditional practice among scholars is to consult many of the myths and proverbs to recover the practices in the primal society, especially as they attempt to explain the mystery surrounding human origins and evolution.⁹ While it is not disputed that *Oduduwa* is the progenitor of the Yoruba race according to the mythological

⁸ Idowu, *Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba Beliefs*, pp. 22 – 7

⁹ Myths have been identified as a significant ways of getting to the roots of Yoruba philosophical thoughts without the interference of foreign influence. For a fuller discussion on this, see Segun Gbadegesin, *African Philosophy and Contemporary African Realities*. (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), pp. 1 – 2.

traditions on the origin of the Yoruba, as well as missionary sources attest to the fact, the question of a male or female progenitor continues to be inconclusive. Although Samuel Johnson, a Yoruba missionary presents the two positions on the gender of *Oduduwa*, he appears to lend greater weight to the male *Oduduwa*.¹⁰ On the part of Samuel Crowther, another Yoruba missionary, his reference to *Oduduwa* in his early journals was 'the great goddess of the Yoruba', thus throwing his weight behind the position of a female *Oduduwa*.¹¹

However, three major factors are important in resolving the tensions surrounding the gender of *Oduduwa* are his/her personality, the location where s/he is being referred to, and the political contexts of the nineteenth century. Although there is a consensus that *Oduduwa* was the prime divinity of the Yoruba, however, the variants of the myth of origin portray two images of the ancestor. While some historical account claimed him to be male, others persisted that she was a female, the wife of 'Obatala', or 'Obanla' – chief divinity. These conflicting views also appear to depend on particular localities. While Ile-Ife promoted the male divinity theory, *Ado-Odo* and the towns at its precincts strongly contended for a female *Oduduwa*.¹²

The Yoruba had an early tradition which identifies *Oduduwa* as female. However, two notable missionaries, Samuel Crowther and Samuel Johnson, though they agree that *Oduduwa* was the founder of the Yoruba race, they presented opposing views on the gender of the icon who remains the rallying point for the Yoruba, whether they are Ekiti, Oyo, Ijebu or Egba, the diversified people groups that emerged as Yoruba after the disintegration of the Oyo Empire. When it became clear that *Oduduwa* had

¹⁰ Samuel Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas* (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1921), p. 3.

¹¹ CMS/CA2/031 S. A. Crowther, *Journal*, 1850.

¹² Idowu, *Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba Belief*, p. 25.

become the hero and rallying point for the Yoruba, some people became wary of referring to their founder as a female. It thus became a sensitive issue, and opinions of missionaries too were divided on it.¹³ While Crowther held the view that *Oduduwa* was a female, Johnson, also a Yoruba missionary affirms that *Oduduwa* was not just male, but one of the male kings of Yorubaland.¹⁴ Although more people have come to accept Johnson's views in current thinking on the origin of the Yoruba, scholars however continue to seek means of resolving the riddle.

Regardless of the divided opinion however, *Oduduwa*, widely acclaimed as the national deity of the Yoruba country was worshipped in almost every part of the Yorubaland.¹⁵ The Yoruba identified and related with one another as 'omo Oodua' - children of *Oduduwa*.¹⁶

Idowu's thorough treatment of the question of the gender of *Oduduwa* emphasises the fact that women occupied a distinctive place in Yoruba beliefs about their origins. He points out that even in Ile Ife where the tradition of male divinity gained the widest acceptance, some fine details in the liturgy of *Oduduwa* worship reveals that she was referred to in feminine terms as Idowu argues:

Many things point to the fact that the name belonged to a female divinity originally. Even in Ile-Ifè where the male-divinity tradition is strongest, there is in the liturgy a hint, which strongly indicates that the divinity was a goddess. In a brief, unemphasised point in the liturgy, we catch the words *Iye 'malè (Iya Imalè)* – "The mother of the divinities" or

¹³ Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas*. This is one of the problems with African (and especially Yoruba) history, where male writers have made certain assumptions about women in advancing their arguments. More often than not, men speak about women in general terms as if men and women felt history the same way. The tendency is that the perspectives of women are not so clearly portrayed.

¹⁴ Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas*, p. 3.

¹⁵ Afolabi Ojo, *Yoruba Culture: A Geographical Analysis*, p. 182.

¹⁶ 'Oodua' is the shortened form of *Oduduwa*, and the current usage of the name in describing the 'cord' that ties the entire Yorubaland together, and the factor that has continued to govern the cohesion of the people as a unit, from inception, and up till the present time.

“Mother-Divinity”. Even though the priest would rather call this an aberration than a genuine part of the liturgy, it stands there, whenever it is allowed to, as a witness.

In Ado, *Oduduwa* is indisputably a goddess. She is said to be the first of seven divinity-children of whom *Orisa-nla* was one. Igbo-ora claims to have received her cult from Ado. But, as we have observed, there is confusion in the cult at Igbo-ora and this in more ways than one. Part of the liturgy there begins

Iya dakun gba wa o
Ki o to ni to'mo
O gbe gi l 'Ado

O mother we beseech thee
To deliver us
Look after us; look after (our) children;
Thou who art established at Adó

The earliest reference to *Oduduwa* as a male figure is connected to a later theory surrounding a man who had great allegiance to the goddess *Oduduwa*. This devotee of the Yoruba goddess overran Ile-Ife at some period in history. People started to refer to him in the name of *Oduduwa*, attributing his success to his divinity as well as a mark of honour for him, until gradually that appellation stuck to him. Nevertheless, the original understanding that the Yoruba progenitor, *Oduduwa* was a female figure remained in entire Yorubaland.

Those who migrated at an earlier period from Ile-Ife to establish some other communities retained the understanding of female *Oduduwa*. One of such towns is Ado-Odo where she was not only known as a female divinity, but also worshipped as the mother of creation.¹⁷ Yoruba mythology sometimes requires creativity to remove the ‘shell’ behind a story. For instance, Idowu gives a good insight into how the conception of *Oduduwa* as a male began in Ile-Ife.

¹⁷ Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, p. 119.

But yet, as the ritual ballad is recited, we hear phrases like "my lord" "my husband" and such phrases as strongly indicate that a god is being addressed. The male conception of *Oduduwa* has very likely arisen in this way then. *Oduduwa* was the priest of the goddess as well as the head of his dynasty. At the time of his death he had won the respect of people far and wide, so that it was an easy matter for him to become an Ancestor deserving worship. Before very long, however, he became identified with his own divinity and entered the pantheon on her attributes. In this way, Ile-Ifè began to think, not of a goddess, but of a god *Oduduwa*. But, before this identification, there had already been clans, which had dispersed with the pure cult of a goddess; these keep on with the tradition. It must be observed here that it is almost in Ile-Ifè alone that the male-divinity cult is strong. In most other places the man *Oduduwa* is regarded only as an ancestor and not as a divinity.¹⁸

The veracity or otherwise of this line of thought does not preclude an advancement of Yoruba women's involvement in the founding of the Yoruba race. Although missionaries had observed Yoruba women in religious spheres, they were not careful enough to understand the key roles that women had played in the formation of Yoruba community and ultimately Yoruba spirituality. Histories of the Yoruba, either from male or female source, however, serve to establish the significance of women in the primal society that *Oduduwa* is the ancestor of the Yoruba.¹⁹

Sustaining the Cosmos:

Yoruba women's primal spirituality is not only determined by their complementary role in creation, it is also established in their role as sustainers of the cosmos as revealed in Moremi, a valiant Yoruba woman. Although the story of Moremi is classified as a myth, the Yoruba has kept her memorial such that the myth has turned to reality. As Oduyoye observes, 'myths and folktales shaped and continue to shape

¹⁸ Idowu, *Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba Belief*, p. 112.

¹⁹ Samuel Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas* (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1921), p. 3.

social relations'.²⁰ Thus Moremi's story remains indelible in Yoruba history and continues to influence the behaviour of women. Besides, her valiant act remains a cardinal point of reference in appraising the formation of Yoruba women's spirituality.

A major point of reference in Moremi is her courage and bravery through which she met and displaced the Ugbo people when they arrived at Ile-Ife,²¹ reclaiming Ile-Ife, the ancestral home of origin of the Yoruba. Although the Ugbo were the original settlers at Ile-Ife, they lost the right to the land when they migrated. However, they soon regrouped and became an overwhelming threat, raiding Ile Ife regularly and carrying men, women and children away as slaves. Meanwhile, Moremi, a valiant woman decided to salvage the situation at her own peril by allowing the Ugbo militants to abduct and take her away as a captive. Her radiance and beauty attracted the attention of the king of the Ugbo people, who took her over as one of his wives.

Yoruba women's primal spirituality is characterized by their wit and intelligence, which later stood as a major challenge to missionary activities. During the periods when missionaries confronted Yoruba with the Gospel through itinerant evangelism,²² given elaborate treatment in chapter four, Moremi's example reflected in the way Yoruba women responded to missionary spirituality. Through her skilful scheming in the Ugbo royal household, Moremi discovered the secret of the successful raids of the

²⁰ Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, () p. 19.

²¹ Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas*, pp. 147 – 148.

²² See Allen's debate with a woman at the blacksmith's shop, CMS/CA2/018/16 Journal of William Allen, Abeokuta 8 May 1865.

Ugbo, in a similar way Delilah tricked Samson to help the Philistines overcome the military prowess of Israel.²³

Although the Yoruba overpowered the Ugbo warriors, Moremi was left to fulfil her pledge of a worthy sacrifice to the water divinity. The gods rejected her offer of goats, chicken, oil and cloth, but accepted Moremi's only son, who she willingly offered as a sacrifice. Thus, the highest point of her life, which informed Yoruba women's primal spirituality was her sacrifice, which the whole community rewarded by venerating her and pledging that all Yoruba thereafter had become her sons and daughters.²⁴

Yoruba women's spirituality, which is shaped by an emphasis on endurance, sacrifice and self-transcendence, portrayed in Moremi's heroic act, was affirmed as women converts endured many persecutions which followed their conversion and subsequent transformation of spirituality, discussed at length in chapter five. However, like Moremi, they had the conviction that their goals for conversion were worthy and noble, therefore, they remained undeterred. While Moremi became a legendary figure in Yorubaland where many monuments were raised in her memory,²⁵ an elegy composed in her memorial and her courage is emulated in²⁶ the heroic acts of many

²³ See Judges 16: 20.

²⁴ Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas*, pp. 147 – 148.

²⁵ Female halls of residence in many Universities in modern day Yorubaland of South-West of Nigeria are named after Moremi in memorial of her distinguishing contribution to Yoruba survival.

²⁶ A poetic song expressing water divinity's rejection of goat ('ewure'), cloth ('aso'), but accepting Moremi's child ('omo') is still being chanted to explain why the only child of Moremi was sacrificed.

<i>Moremi Ajasoro, Moremi Ajasoro,</i>	Moremi, Ajasoro
<i>Ewure o' fun mi me ma gba o,</i>	I reject the goat you offer me
<i>Moremi Ajasoro</i>	Moremi, Ajasoro
<i>Aso o fun mi me ma gba o</i>	I reject the clothing you offer me
<i>Moremi Ajasoro</i>	Moremi, Ajasoro
<i>Omo o fun mi me ma ko o</i>	The child you give me I did not reject
<i>Moremi Ajasoro</i>	Moremi, Ajasoro

early Christian women investigated in chapter six, which also remain indelible in Yoruba Christian history.

Women in the Created Order

Okorochoa, in his assessment of the African cosmos suggests that creation is divided into 'two inter-penetrating and inseparable, yet distinguishable parts', namely, the world of the spirits and the world of humans.²⁷ Another dimension to creation, which is detailed elaborately in this thesis, reveals the women were fundamental in creation and sustenance of the cosmos in Yoruba cosmology. It is argued here that Yoruba cosmology was far more complex than the nineteenth-century evangelical missionaries realised. While the missionaries perceived the Godhead as the monotheistic Transcendent, Yoruba cosmology has a hierarchical structure representing the polytheistic Transcendent.

In Yoruba perception, at the lowest rung of the scale are the priests and priestesses, who act on behalf of the divinities (*orisa*); next are the ancestors, followed by the divinities who act on behalf of the Supreme God, *Olódùmarè*, who is the ultimate in all things. The *orisa*, however, were regarded as intermediaries and messengers of *Olódùmarè*.²⁸ The *orisa* were neither mythological figures, nor human ancestors and their cult, even though vested with the power to represent God, is never regarded as God, but as messengers of God. It is instructive that both male and female

²⁷ Cyril Okorochoa, *The Meaning of Religious Conversion in Africa: The Case of the Igbo of Nigeria* (Hants: Ayebury Gower Publishing Company Limited, 1987), p. 52.

²⁸ Idowu, *Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba Belief*.

personalities could be deified in Yoruba representation of *orisa* as Bowen observed in the carved image of *Orisapopo*.²⁹

Despite the fact that the Yoruba cosmology consists of a pantheon of gods, Yoruba had a concept of a supreme God who is not given any physical representation. Although the goal of missionaries was not to discover the place of women in Yoruba cosmology, they showed interest in discovering God in the created order of the Yoruba. Thus, God's transcendence is revealed in Yoruba beliefs and practices as they did not build any shrine for *Olódùmarè*. While Kefer observed that they had many houses for the *orisa*, as he passed through the streets of Ibadan in 1851, God's transcendence in the Yoruba sense was established in that no shrine was ever built for the Supreme God.³⁰ Thus Bowen's interactions with Yoruba people led him to insightful conclusions about Yoruba beliefs:

Everybody in that country believes in one true and living God, of whose character they often entertained correct notions. Most of the people worship certain imaginary creatures whom they regard as mediators between God and men.³¹

Therefore, in spite of the fact that Yoruba never built temples for *Olódùmarè*, they did not equate him with *orisa*, nor perceived God differently from the missionaries. While the Yoruba perceived the *orisa* as the messengers of *Olódùmarè*, missionaries proclaimed that Christ is the mediator between God and humanity. The Yoruba have

indeed, an idea of one Supreme Being, whom they call *Olorun*, and who, as they believe, is the Creator of all things; and will often express their good wishes by "God bless you," or "I praise God for your health,"; but they virtually deny him, by believing that he takes little or no cognizance of things on earth. They offer him, therefore no sacrifices, and pay him no

²⁹ Bowen, *Adventures and Missionary Labours in Several Countries in the Interior of Africa from 1849 – 1856*, p. 315.

³⁰ CMS/CA2/059 J. T. Kefer, Journal 29 December 1855.

³¹ T. J. Bowen, *Adventures and Missionary Labours in several countries in the interior of Africa from 1849-1856*, 2nd ed. (London: Frank Cass, 1968), p. 160

homage; all their worship is reserved for those divinities of their own invention, to whom they imagine he has delegated his power, and to whom alone they look for help.³²

In spite of the differences in Yoruba and mission beliefs about God's transcendence, the common grounds in both traditions of spirituality facilitated greater chances for Yoruba women's transformation of spirituality.

Women's belief in God's transcendence in the traditional religions, which promoted deep reverence and respect for mediators such as priests and priestesses were to be transferred to missionaries who were seen as God's messengers. In essence, this facilitated the peaceful conduct of missionary evangelism, thereby removing many instances of hostilities missionary preaching generated. Thus, when Allen's preaching was disrupted in Ibadan, a woman ran out from the crowd, prostrated herself before the missionary and offered kolanuts as a token of peace and cordiality.³³ Such an attitude, which derived from Yoruba traditional notions of priests and priestesses as representatives of the *orisa*, facilitated the process of spiritual transformation of women as it helped to create a peaceful atmosphere for the missionaries to work.

However, the greatest hindrance to the transformation of Yoruba women's spirituality in the manner expected by the missionaries was their relationship with the Transcendent, which is derived from their belief that *orisa* were messengers of *Olódùmarè*. While they believed that each *orisa* was assigned to perform definite roles and functions in the life of individuals or the community, the mission's spirituality insisted on monotheism. Therefore missionaries were unrelenting in their insistence on biblical teachings as a means to redirect Yoruba beliefs about God. For

³² Sarah Tucker, *Abbeokuta: Sunrise Within the Tropics: An outline of the origin and Progress of the Yoruba Mission* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1853), p. 32.

³³ CMS/CA2/019 W. S. Allen, Journal Extract for 1868.

example, Samuel Ajayi Crowther a Yoruba missionary of the CMS argued that the knowledge of the Scriptures was inevitable for a change in Yoruba beliefs, attitudes and practices to really occur. He believed that idolatry would be removed when

...all the elementary school books are extract from the Holy Scripture inculcating all virtues and condemning all vices, and vividly pointing out the folly and superstition of idolatrous worship.³⁴

Critical to Crowther's suggestion was the Jewish Shema which forbids the worship of any other god apart from Yahweh. It states:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.... Do not follow other gods, the gods of the peoples around you; for the Lord your God, who is among you, is a jealous God and his anger will burn against you, and he will destroy you from the face of the land.³⁵

Contrary to this warning, Yoruba women were intricately committed to the *orisa* and formed a network of affiliations with it right from birth. With each changing life circumstance, a new *orisa* was introduced to a woman's pantheon of *orisa*. For example, when a woman was born, she inherited the divinity to which her parents were committed. Shortly after birth, she was assigned her *orisa* through divination, and yet another one at the point of marriage as she adopted the divinity of her extended matrimonial family.³⁶ Ironically she may also become an adherent of yet another *orisa* through attempts at crises resolution, because she resorted to divination to ascertain which *orisa* could alleviate her problems. Therefore, they served more than one *orisa* at any given point in time. Thus missionary journals are replete with examples of women moving from one *orisa* to the other, in search of solutions to life problems. An example is that of a woman with emotional and psychological problems

³⁴ E. K. Ekechi, *Missionary Enterprise and Rivalry in Igboland: 1957 – 1914* (London: Frank Cass, 1972), p. 24.

³⁵ Cf. Deuteronomy 6: 4 – 5 & 14 – 15 (NIV).

³⁶ Olajubu, *Women in Yoruba Religious Sphere*, p. 32.

who moved from 'making *Obatala*' to purchasing '*Elegbara*', until she was finally directed to the Church.

Although various theories on God's transcendence are commonly held by both Christian and Yoruba spiritual traditions, they differ on the personality of God. While Yoruba believed that women were to be held responsible for the decision of *Olódùmarè*, to move his abode far beyond the reach of humanity,³⁷ Christianity did not offer any explanation for God's 'throne' being established in heaven.³⁸

While many myths explain the distance of *Olódùmarè* from his creation, the *orisa*, ancestors, priests and priestesses, therefore became more prominent in the ensuing conflicts from missionary attempts to influence Yoruba women's spirituality as discussed in chapters four and five; and women's attempts to adapt Christian spirituality in chapter six. Whereas *Olódùmarè*, God in Yoruba concept did not have any physical or gender representation, priests, ancestors, *orisa* could be male or female.

Although missionaries operated within a monotheistic experience, Yoruba religions and philosophical concepts held that the divine image was both genitor (male) and genitrix (female).³⁹ Therefore, female figures could represent the divine image as divinities and spiritual deities. Moreover, both sexes were sometimes unified to represent a single divinity, which Montilus describes as 'African wholism', which he

³⁷ See E. O. Oyelade, Lecture from African Traditional Religions RCT, Ogbomoso: Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, March 1998, sited in chapter two.

³⁸ C/f Psalm 11: 4

³⁹ This view is common to many African societies. For more on Black Spirituality, see, Guerin C. Montilus, 'Black Spirituality' in Gordon S. Wakefield,(ed.) *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1983) p. 52.

contrasts with Greek philosophical thought on dualism. Such concepts are also reflected in the philosophical statements of the Yoruba, in which all of creation were made in male and female forms (*t'ak? t'abo la da 'le aye*). Therefore, religious artworks as well as real life events reflected deep-seated spirituality of dual representation of the divine image. Such beliefs were translated into spiritual realities in the details of a carved representation of *Orisapopo*, which Bowen observed in Yorubaland.⁴⁰

Western missionaries usually had difficulty interpreting other cultures, because they were products of a background in which spirituality had been influenced by Greek philosophical thought formulated by Plato, Aristotle and others, usually perceived as having universal application.⁴¹ Therefore, Hinderer's response to the rituals reflected a measure of ambivalence as he chose to preach on the Christian doctrine of 'heaven and hell'⁴² with the hope that once religious conversion was achieved, there would be a change to Yoruba beliefs and worship practices. Such expectations were not always met because the spirituality that informed such worship practices was fundamental to Yoruba centre of value and meaning. Although Hinderer, in his disappointment linked Sagbua's 'objections' with his role as a chief; complaining: 'his objection is always, if he did away with his country fashions, he could no longer be chief.'⁴³ Hinderer was blind to the fact that beyond protecting his exalted office, Sagbua knew the danger of repudiating a ritual that involved one of his wives.

⁴⁰ Bowen, *Adventures and Missionary Labours in several Countries in the Interior of Africa From 1849 to 1856*, p. 315.

⁴¹ Montilus, 'Black Spirituality', p. 51.

⁴² CMS/ CA2/0/049/95 D. Hinderer, Journal entry, 22 June 1849.

⁴³ Ibid.

A Yoruba woman of 1840s, what one *orisa* gave was distinct from what the other offered, meaning that a single person had to worship both to receive benefits from them simultaneously. Missionaries puzzled Yoruba women and challenged their fundamental beliefs in the *orisa*, because the primary function of religion among the Yoruba was meeting existential needs. For the Yoruba, life on earth was an indicator of what life in heaven would look like. It was an attitude of ‘what shall we get’ and not ‘what shall we give’, a question of overcoming the enemy and not praying for the enemy.⁴⁴

The nineteenth-century Yoruba women’s spirituality came out of the concerns surrounding the survival and well being of the society. Traditionally, Yoruba women’s spirituality was reflected in the prayer rituals, including the one preceding the marriage ceremony, an important rite of passage by which a Yoruba female moved from adolescence into womanhood. Among the principal concerns of Yoruba women in *ekun iyawo* (the bridal lamentation) were for *orisa* to give her children, riches, prosperity and support from groom’s family, and ward off evil such as diseases, losses and opposition.

Yoruba Women’s Spirituality

Although Yoruba women were highly visible in their role in religion before sustained contacts with missionaries, limited understanding of the significance of this visibility on the development Christianity in Yorubaland led to assigning them subordinate roles in the Church. David Hinderer, a German missionary of the CMS in his characteristic manner wherever he worked in Yorubaland, undertook a tour of

⁴⁴ Sarah Tucker, *Abbeokuta or Sunrise within the Tropics*, pp. 37 – 38.

Badagry in the company of some local chiefs within a few months of his arrival in 1849. In one of his journals, he recorded his observation of a female divine object carrying a child on her back at the centre of a ritual proceeding, which he witnessed:

...we witnessed the performance of a sacrifice made to the Goddess of Elu. The idol was a small female figure with a little child on her back just in the position as the women here carry their children and with her arms she held a kind of dish...⁴⁵

Hinderer's observation points to three fundamental aspects of Yoruba cosmology. His first point the female divine object was consistent with the fact that both male and female could be deified in primal Yoruba society, as shown above. Secondly, this symbol implied that women as well as men could symbolize power in Yoruba religious sphere.⁴⁶ Thirdly, women were central to family sacrifices and without the wife many family sacrifices were rendered unacceptable. For instance in another entry in his journal after a visit to Sagbua, the ruler of the Egba people in 1849, Hinderer wrote: 'Visited Sagbua today, who had just a priest with him, making sacrifice for himself and one of his wives'.⁴⁷ In spite of the symbolism of these female images, pointing to women in terms of motherhood, nurturers of babies and procurers of human and land fertility,⁴⁸ missionaries were to fail to assign a corresponding role to women as in the traditional religions and society. They also took away the role of priestesses away from women making no provision for alternative means of functioning within Christendom.

⁴⁵ CMS/CA2/049/94 D. Hinderer, Journal 24 March 1849.

⁴⁶ Oyeronke Olajubu, *Women in Yoruba Religious Sphere* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), p. 68.

⁴⁷ CMS/CA2/049/95 D. Hinderer, 'Missionary at Abeokuta, June 12 – Sept 25 1849' Journal, Friday 22 June 1849.

⁴⁸ Bowen, *Adventures and Missionary Labours in several Countries in the Interior of Africa From 1849 to 1856*, p. 315.

Women as Orisa and Ancestors

Although the Yoruba had three levels of spiritual realities in their cosmology, with female and male figuration at the lower two levels, *Olódùmarè*, the supreme God of the Yoruba who is non-gendered operates alone at the highest level of spiritual order. *Orisa* and ancestors however could be either male or female, and both priests and priestesses had significant roles in Yoruba traditional religion. Thus, beliefs in *orisa*, both female and male, mediated by priestesses as well as priests, confirmed Yoruba women's self identity as a bona fide member of the spiritual order in Yoruba religious sphere.

For example, a male *orisa*, *Ogun* (the god of iron) was associated with hunting, while a female counterpart, *Osun* (a goddess of the river) was more directly associated with fertility and reproduction, which could be in terms of land productivity or child bearing. While *Yemoja* (another river goddess) gave Yoruba women children, *Orisanla* (or *Orisaoko*) was said to bless the earth and guaranteed land fertility and abundant harvest of farm crops.

Among the Igbo, for instance, the prominent female divinity linked with the fertility of the earth is 'ala' or 'ale'.⁴⁹ The earth spirit of the Ashanti, a tribe in Ghana, known as *Asase Yaa* or *Aberewa* (old mother) is also so highly revered among male and female adherents that every Thursday of the week was set aside for her worship. Hence, no Ashanti farmer tilled the ground on those days, as they were considered sacred unto the gods. This later brought about a major religious and cultural conflict between them and missionaries who upheld Sunday as a day of worship.

⁴⁹ Geoffrey Parrinder, *West African Religion* (London: Epworth Press, 1949), p. 37.

In addition to a female being qualified to be a priestess and there being female *orisa* in Yorubaland, women were closer to the *orisa* than men, because they were the nurturers of the *orisa* while men gave their attention to *Ifa*, the Yoruba cult of wisdom and divination. In the same way as men are hardly allowed into the cult of caring for the *orisa*, few women were admitted into the cult of *Ifa*. Thus, Yoruba elders perceived a threat to the harmony and balance of Yoruba cosmology, whenever women neglected their paramount religious duty of caring for the *orisa*. In 1848, for instance, when the incidence of women's conversion and abandoning of the *orisa* was escalating, Yoruba elders pressed for traditional spiritual reawakening at Abeokuta, requesting that every woman should take up her ritual object, the totem of *orisa* and every man his *Ikin Ifa*.⁵⁰

The belief that female divinities had the qualities of a mother is so deep-seated among the Yoruba, that a challenge to such notion by a missionary, William Allen proved futile. Although Allen was a Yoruba missionary by birth, as a returnee ex-slave, he had lost touch with Yoruba beliefs due to his exposure to Western spirituality in Sierra Leone. Ayandele is right therefore, in proposing that many *Saro* Yoruba had imbibed new spiritual orientation that was at variance with what obtained at home.⁵¹

For instance, a group of women in Abeokuta who were challenged by William Allen over their interpretation of an averted calamity; they insisted that it was the divine intervention of the *orisa* that saved their children.

⁵⁰ CMS/CA2/061 T. King, Journal Entry, 2 December 1850.

⁵¹ Ayandele, *The Educated Elite in the Nigerian Society*, p. 9.

The argument the Egba women had with Allen centred on what he considered to be a misinterpretation of the fall of a large boulder of rock as an extraordinary event in an 1859 journal. The fact that the rock did not fall in the daytime, causing havoc to the children who played under its shade meant to Yoruba observers the providential act of a female divinity. Thus, in their reference to the rock as ‘motherly rock’, they drew attention to the powers associated with the female to protect, nurture and preserve. Allen however disagreed with their glowing interpretation of *orisa* prowess, arguing that God alone reserved the right to save and preserve from danger. He stated in his journal:

They said that the rock was a motherly one, in as much as it did not fall when children were under it. I told them it was not the power nor the will of the rock not to injure their children but God alone who can preserve us from all dangers.⁵²

When Allen noticed that the divine attributes associated with the rock were cast in female metaphors by referring to it as ‘motherly rock’, he attempted to break the solidarity of the group by appealing to the support of the men.

Whereas missionaries sought to offer rational explanations for occurrences, Yoruba women felt more secure with ‘spiritual explanation’. William Allen’s efforts at explaining away the ‘*abiyamo* [a motherly] rock’ could not persuade the women that their claims were faulty. The women questioned Allen, seeking to know why the rock did not fall in the day time, killing many young children who played under its shade.⁵³

Allen wondered why the Egba women should be grateful to the created being rather than the Creator. However, a woman was quick to defend their beliefs and spiritual integrity by affirming the divinity of the rock, claiming ‘*Orisa ni*’! (she is a goddess!):

⁵² CMS/CA2/018/16 William Allen, Journal Entry, 15 May, 1859.

⁵³ Ibid.

Those men who were present listened to me whilst I told them that they should give the praise to God and not to a senseless rock but a woman was standing who did not like to hear me so speak of what they had already deified. She exclaimed aloud, (*Orisa ni, Orisa ni*)...⁵⁴

Although Allen did not reveal the response given by the men, one would propose that they would have thought this to be a legitimate female interpretation of the event. At the end of the day, Allen gave up the fight since the woman and her colleagues would rather reject the missionary's proposition than give up their commitment to the female *orisa* that was to be appeased the following day with animal sacrifice:

The bold looking woman in a rage said tomorrow we shall kill an animal for the motherly rock. I said I have done my duty in telling that it was not well in the sight of our maker. I then left the place. The above mentioned rock is about fifty feet in circumference.⁵⁵

Allen's apparent inability to interpret the event in light of God's providence was taken by the women as undervaluing the power of female goddess and thus removing a vital aspect of Yoruba women's primal spirituality.

Yoruba Women as Priestesses

The missionaries were confronted with the reality in Yoruba worldview whenever notable female Christian converts who had been a priestess of one divinity or the other continued to reflect some aspects of their primal spirituality in the 1840s and the 1850s. For example, Afala, a priestess of *Obatala* and mother of Samuel Crowther, was convinced of the need for a sacrifice to the divinity who she believed was responsible for her reunion with her son, who was a Yoruba missionary.⁵⁶ While this

⁵⁴ CMS/CA2/018/16 William Allen, Journal Entry, 15 May, 1859.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Cited in Jean Decorvet and Emmanuel Oladipo, Samuel Ajayi Crowther: The Miracle of Grace (Lagos: CSS Bookshops Ltd., 2006), pp. 59 – 60.

shows how deep-seated their traditional beliefs were, it also demonstrates the resilient nature of Yoruba practices.

Thus, when 'Akere', the priestess of '*Yemoja*' divinity made a brief appearance but strong impact in Abeokuta in 1855, missionaries were amazed at such an open display of loyalty to a religious ritual led by a woman they considered as 'a cheat' and 'an impostor'.⁵⁷ In contrast to the experience of missionaries, who were struggling for acceptance in Yorubaland at the time, she commanded great following from Christians and non-converts alike from neighbouring towns and villages who flocked to her for blessing, healing and deliverance from failure.

It can be argued that Akere's display of *Yemoja's* potency in Abeokuta provided an opportunity for the missionaries to learn more of the primal position of women in the Yoruba religious sphere. Rather than taking advantage of the event to gain greater understanding of the role of women in Yoruba religion, missionaries were hasty to dismiss the practices as irrelevant for divine-human relationship. Isaac Smith, an English missionary of the CMS, discounted the whole event as irrational and superstitious describing it as 'the great superstition of the day... the absurdities of *Yemoja*'.⁵⁸ The interpretations of four missionaries from different backgrounds, two of whom were Yoruba, Samuel Crowther Junior and Thomas King as well as J. A. Maser, a German and Isaac Smith, an English man, however, reveal their critical lack of insights to Yoruba women's primal spirituality.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ See CMS/CA2/061 T. King, Journal 15 September 1855. See also CMS/CA2/032 S. Crowther Jr., Journal 25 September 1855.

⁵⁸ CMS/CA2/082 I. Smith, Journal 12 September 1855.

⁵⁹ See CMS/CA2/068 J. A. Maser, Journal 13 August 1855; CMS/CA2/082 I. Smith, Journal 12 September 1855; See also Crowther Jr. and T. King above.

Rather than attempting to give Yoruba women's cosmological worldview a Christian interpretation, missionaries were confounded by the fundamental nature of the practices in primal society, especially as it touched Christian converts who were also still sharing in the religious ethos of their community. Christian converts could not be separated from these spiritual experiences of the community, because to the African, religion is not a set of dogmas that people memorize; rather, it comes out of the experiences of the people, when they encountered the divine in the midst of the realities of life.⁶⁰ Therefore, the purpose of religion to the Yoruba was to make meaning in all aspects of life, and in this particular event, the goal was healing and the preservation of the race, which was strong enough to capture the attention of converts at Abeokuta to seek refuge under the goddess *Yemoja* and her priestess, Akere.

Although it seemed irrational to Smith, Yoruba search for meaning hinges on the fact that water was so central to Yoruba spirituality, as it becomes obvious during the process of adaptation discussed extensively in chapter six of this thesis. Hence, apart from *Yemoja* whom Akere represented, almost all river divinities such as *Oya* and *Osun* were female. Therefore, women had a special role in the primal Yoruba spirituality, interpreting the wishes to the people, as well as making the people's wishes known to the divinity, thus mediating healing, unity and peace.⁶¹ Apart from the fact that river divinities are female, water was so central in Yoruba women's spirituality. In fact the Yoruba had a believed very strongly that nobody maintains a hostile stance with water because of its versatile use to sustain life (*Enikan ki bomi*

⁶⁰ James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues* (Maryknoll: Orbis books, 1992).

⁶¹ Male divinities such as *Orisa-nla*, *Sango*, and *Egungun* have male priests such as *Oloosanla*, *Magba* (*Onisango*), *Alagbaa* respectively, while female divinities such as *Ayelala*, *Osun*, and *Yemoja* have priestesses in form of *Alayelala*, *Olosun* and *Yemoja*. See Awolalu, 'The Encounter between African Traditional Religions', p. 111.

sota, omi la buwe, omi la bumu). Furthermore, Yoruba generated spiritual bonding among themselves by drinking from the same source.⁶²

One of such issues in the *Yemoja* saga is the paramount belief among many African tribes that river divinities had the powers to offer children, which endeared Yoruba women to river goddesses and her priestesses. Being one of the pantheons of female divinities, *Yemoja* had her distinctive priestesses and adherents. She is the deity mother of all rivers, and worshipped principally because the Yoruba believed that she had innumerable children, which she gave out to her devotees.⁶³ Her span of influence was further enlarged because of the primacy of bearing children, which, among the Yoruba, as in most other African communities, is not just for procreation but also for perpetuating the family lineage and thus guaranteeing the survival of the race.

Similarly, because the Yoruba believed in the immortal spirits for life sustenance till old age (*'aiku l'ewe'*), Akere's prescription of the water of a perennial stream to infants and expectant mothers filled a very important gap in Yoruba primal spirituality, which was all-round well-being and long life – *'alaafia'*.⁶⁴ Hence, women, men, children and infants flocked to her to receive the water that could give them longevity. In the early period of missionary contact, the mortality rate was especially high among children due to poor diet, underprivileged hygiene and health delivery system.⁶⁵ Thus, infant mortality, which the Yoruba conceptualised as *'abiku'*,

⁶² The traditional expression of welcome to a visitor or guest by offering her/him water is preserved among the Yoruba till date.

⁶³ For fuller discussions on *Yemoja*, see G. J. Afolabi Ojo, *Yoruba Culture: A Geographical Analysis* (London: University of London Press Ltd, 1966), p. 165. Other female Yoruba divinities include *Oya*, (goddess of the Niger River) and *Osun*, (goddess of the *Osun* River).

⁶⁴ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd, 2001), p. 34.

⁶⁵ Ojo, *Yoruba Culture: A Geographical Analysis*, p. 165.

drove women especially to extreme measures to secure the lives of their young children.

Although an examination of the validity or otherwise of Akere's claims to spiritual healing is outside the consideration of this study, nevertheless, it is here argued that in the primal society she symbolized a mediator between the world of the living on the one hand and that of the ancestors, *orisa* and *Olódùmarè*, on the other. The Yoruba believed that the powers of *orisa* were mediated through the priestesses and priests who were believed to understand the mysteries of the spirit realm and effectively communicated these to the people. The society therefore depended on the priestesses and priests to mediate such favours as healing, protection from hostile neighbours, longevity, good harvests, provision of children, etc. Female and male *orisa* prevailed in Yorubaland up unto the time of Yoruba encounter with the missionaries.

However, the conflict of understanding, which resulted in a major crisis of adaptation of roles by Yoruba Christian women as discussed in chapter six, hinges on Western notions of God. Evangelical spirituality of the nineteenth century recognised ordained male priests only as human mediators of God's person and presence. Hence, John Maser, a German, could not understand how a woman, standing by a river, could mediate the divine presence. Hence, he simply dismissed Akere as a 'false prophetess'.⁶⁶

Secondly, many nineteenth century missionaries had problems reconciling the female gender with the representation of the divine because of their own patriarchal view of

⁶⁶ CMS/CA2/068 J. A. Maser, Journal 13 August 1855.

the Supreme God. Hence, missionaries chose either to dismiss the veracity of the Yoruba perception of the divine, or to give the Yoruba worldview a Christian meaning. Such denial posed a major hindrance for reconciling the differences between the two spiritualities and made mission spirituality more distant to Yoruba women who preferred to retain their traditional worldview of the Supreme Being.

Although Akere was a competitor providing an alternative to Crowther Junior's medical services at Abeokuta, he nevertheless sought to understand her actions rather than reject them. While Western missionaries simply discountenanced Akere's sensational 'water-healing' in Abeokuta, Crowther made a positive biblical interpretation of Akere's traditional mediation of *Olódùmarè's* power in *Yemoja*. Peel observes that Crowther's attitude was not unusual for missionaries of Yoruba origin who were always sympathetic and eager to relate Yoruba primal spirituality to Christian practices.⁶⁷ Crowther's allusion to Jesus' miraculous healing of a lame man by the pool of Bethesda: 'little did we expect to hear of another pool of Bethesda in these our days', in the journal referred to above, could have been the beginning of a new understanding between missionaries and Yoruba women. However, most Yoruba missionaries would rather stay with the opinion of their Western counterparts.

The common grounds Crowther identified was the significant role that water played at Bethesda River in first century Palestine and Ogun River in nineteenth century Abeokuta. Both events emphasised the dimension of the supernatural in miraculous healings, which in Western missionaries' mindset, should be dismissed as irrational. Even though Crowther later was to switch back quickly to the side of his foreign

⁶⁷ Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, p. 21.

peers, by referring to Akere as a ‘daring impostor’ who was merely taking advantage of her gullible adherents, he reflected a degree of tolerance and accommodation of Yoruba spirituality, while his European counterparts distanced themselves from the primal means of appropriating the presence of God.⁶⁸ Despite Crowther’s later view, the critical lesson was while the agent of God’s power in the Bethesda was Jesus, a male mediator between God and humanity; Akere in the case of Ogun River was a woman priestess of *Yemoja*, Yoruba goddess of the River.

This was a point at which adaptation of Christianity could have commenced if only the missionaries gave the needed Christian interpretation to Yoruba spirituality as biblical Paul did to Greek spirituality in Athens. Crowther’s first impulse exemplifies a form of Yoruba adaptation of Christianity which Yoruba women were later to develop further as will be shown in chapter six. Apart from the role of women as *orisa*, oral history⁶⁹ and archival sources reveal the distinctive place of male and female ancestors in primal Yoruba religion and society. Whereas ancestors could either be recognised at the community or family levels, they were actual human persons, who made outstanding contributions to the lives of their communities; hence their memories were kept alive by deifying them after death.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ CMS/CA2/032 S. Crowther Jr., Journal 25 September 1855. Crowther’s reference to the healing at Bethesda was an allusion to Jesus’ miracle in John 5: 2 – 9.

⁶⁹ As already stressed in chapter one, Jan Vansina gives an analysis of how oral traditions can facilitate historical reconstruction, see Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, H. M. Wright, trans., (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1965), p. 1.

⁷⁰ Toyin Falola and Demola Babalola, ‘Religion and Economy in Pre-Colonial Nigeria’, in Jacob Olupona and Toyin Falola, eds, *Religion and Society in Nigeria: Historical and Sociological Perspectives* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited, 1991), pp. 152 – 3.

Women in Yoruba Society

Although women's role in Yoruba traditional society reflected their high levels of leadership and influence, it also defines Yoruba traditional spirituality, which insisted on placing the community above the individual for whom the process of making meaning was incomplete until communal cohesion and well being have been promoted.⁷¹ Madam Tinubu and Efunsetan, two distinguished *Iyalode* (mother of the community) in nineteenth-century Yorubaland exemplified this societal expectation by which both men and women cooperated in building a virile community. The *Iyalode* was regarded as:

...mother of the town, to whom all the women's palavers (disputes) are brought before they are taken to the king. She is, in fact, a sort of queen, a person of much influence, and looked up to with much respect.⁷²

They were not just representatives of women in the society; rather, the title connotes a female chief, complementary to a male chief and wielding equal power.⁷³ However, missionaries' failure to appreciate the complimentary exercise of power by women and men in Yoruba society was to lead to their induction of Yoruba women converts into subordinate gender roles within Christianity as will be shown in chapter five.

As functional parts of the larger society, women provided physical, psychological, material and moral support for the expansion of the community including being active supporters in time of war. These complementary gendered roles contributed to the process of making meaning, both on personal and communal levels. The significance of the part that society played in the formation of Yoruba women's spirituality is

⁷¹ For fuller details, see John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann, 1989), p. 106.

⁷² Anna Hinderer, *Seventeen Years in the Yoruba Country: Memorials of Anna Hinderer*, 4th ed., C. A. & D. Hone, eds (Surrey: Billing and Sons Printers, 1877), p. 110.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

evident in the major role ascribed to them and in their expected participation in ensuring the security of their community. The leadership activities of Tinubu and Efunsetan are now examined to give a clear picture of women's role in the establishment of, and making meaning for the Yoruba nation, a community in which religion was inseparable from governance.

In Ibadan, although Aare (the war chief) was expected to lead in battles, the *Iyalode* was equally expected to provide all forms of support, including sensitising the people on the part they could play in the interest of the community. The case of Efunsetan, a highly influential and successful trader in Ibadan, who became the *Iyalode* at about 1867, is an example of the premium the Yoruba society placed on its women. Thus, when the *Iyalode* refused to give her support to Aare Latosa in 1874 as the war chief went to battle to protect Ibadan against external aggressions and to establish the city's supremacy among the Yoruba kingdoms as had been done when Ibadan fought the Egbas in 1861;⁷⁴ she was reprimanded by the community leaders. In a previous war in 1861, Efunsetan did not only give her moral support by donating 100 of her slaves to join the army of Aare Latosa,⁷⁵ she also extended credit facility to other chiefs, which were not repaid. Thus, her refusal to extend ammunitions on credit and subscribe some of her slaves as soldiers for the battle against Ado did not pass unnoticed, leading to three charges being brought against her by the Aare:

That she did not accompany him to the war.

That she never sent him supplies during the campaign.

That she did not come in person to meet him outside the town wall to congratulate him on his safe return.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ CMS/CA2/08/13 Letter from Alake to Norman B. Bedingfeld, Commander Sept 1861.

⁷⁵ Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas*, pp. 391.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 391.

Although the other chiefs did not consider *Iyalode's* offence as one that warranted capital punishment, they nevertheless took sides with the Aare that she owed it a duty not only to promote the well being of the community, but also to support every positive move to forge a leadership position for Ibadan within the larger Yoruba community.

Wars were very significant in the founding and establishment of Ibadan, which, in the same way as Abeokuta had to suppress all the communities around it. Thus, the community was making its meaning and deriving a sense of significance through the wars, which were sometimes proactive and at other times, defensive. The importance of wars to Ibadan consists in the way they were acclaimed as being so diligent in battle that they cared less for formal dinner in the face of battle:

*Ibadan omo a j'ooro sun,
Omo a je 'gbin je 'karahun,
Omo a f'ikarahun fo 'ri mu.*⁷⁷

However, it is not clear whether Aare expected Efunsetan to accompany him physically to the war, but her offer of slaves to join the troop of Ibadan in the previous wars indicated that she was expected to extend such assistance to him during the war with Ado. Therefore, it was not considered extraordinary for Aare Latosa to press charges against Efunsetan, because Ibadan did not only assume greatness within a relatively short period, it also enjoyed peace and security both within and outside its territory through its military prowess.⁷⁸ Meanwhile, the incessant wars of Ibadan had

⁷⁷ This poetic description of the people has a deep meaning in their zeal for the wars of supremacy. The kind of food that turned out to be the delicacies by which they were then described were not a product of sumptuousness, but the fact that they had to be battle ready. They had to act with dispatch by eating 'ooro', a fruit that leaves some bitter taste in the mouth, which grew naturally in the wild forest as they pressed for war. They also had no time to break the shell of snails before cooking and eating, and finally using their shells as the dish for eating and drinking.

⁷⁸ It has been made one of the constitutional laws of the town that there was to be no civil war, that if any chief ventured on one, whether his case be right or wrong, the whole town was to rise against him

depleted the wealth of the *Iyalode* who could no longer fund the army at the expense of her trade.⁷⁹

Similarly, in Abeokuta, bravery and wealth were not sufficient qualifications for a woman to occupy a decision-making role as men and women were selected into leadership by merit after giving due consideration to 'leadership ability, wealth and contribution to the well being of the town. At least, one-fifth of the *Ogbonis* were expected to be women, with the official title of *Erelu*.'⁸⁰ Although Abeokuta faced tests of survival because of her endless wars, the city was actually founded as a result of 'movement of population during the Yoruba wars.'⁸¹ The first title of *Iyalode* of Egba was bestowed on Madam Tinubu in 1864 in recognition of her laudable defence of Abeokuta during Abeokuta – Dahomey war. The same sacrificial service of Efunsetan in Ibadan was replicated in Madam Tinubu, a successful trader who supported the Egba with the supply of soldiers, gun and gunpowder. Her leadership qualities and influence had been noticed much earlier than 1864, as an ardent supporter of Akitoye, the deposed king of Lagos who was reinstated in 1851 through the intervention of British colonial administration.⁸² However, Tinubu's influence on Akitoye was so great that two chiefs protested, accusing her of dominating the throne.

Unlike Efunsetan, Madam Tinubu had a high sense of patriotism, which she demonstrated by her insistence that the control of trade should rather be in the hands of the indigenous people of Lagos. In pursuit of her goals, she resisted Campbell's

and crush him. Nina Emma Mba, *Nigerian Women Mobilized: Women Political Activities in Southern Nigeria, 1900-1965* (Berkeley: University of California, 1982) pp. 8 – 9.

⁷⁹ Mba, *Nigerian Women Mobilized: Women Political Activities in Southern Nigeria, 1900-1965*, pp. 8 – 9.

⁸⁰ Mba, *Nigerian Women Mobilized: Women Political Activities in Southern Nigeria*, p. 5.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁸² CMS/CA2/07/1 Lagos ex-king Akitoye to J.Beecroft, 1851.

(the British consul) move to encourage immigrant traders from Sierra Leone, Brazil and Cuba to participate in the commercial activities in Lagos.⁸³ This request led to Campbell's decision to force Dosunmu, Akitoye's son and successor to the throne of Lagos to expel Tinubu from Lagos in 1856. Tinubu found her way back to Abeokuta, her hometown and quickly aligned with the political leaders to enable her continue to pursue what she considered to be in the best interest of the community.

Whereas, Tinubu staked her personal interest to defend the overall interest of her community, Efunsetan had concerns about financing the wars, which were depleting her personal resources, that she could no longer keep up the pace at which she supported previous wars. Thus, she became trapped between two goals and needed to make a choice between loyalty to community and self-preservation through the survival of her trade. On the one hand, she could not afford to lose her wealth, which was part of the consideration for nominating her for the esteem role of *Iyalode*.⁸⁴ On the other hand, her position as a key citizen of the community had been jeopardised by her inability to perform the corporate role of safeguarding the interest of the general populace at her own expense. Thus, Efunsetan had a tension resolving her role as the mother of the community and her position as a money-lender to the chiefs, nobles and common people, all of which contributed to her meaning-making process.

Aare Latosa, whose act of bravery and persistence in fighting the wars had been interpreted as patriotism felt that Efunsetan was not only selfish, but that she had also

⁸³ J. F. Ade Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria 1841 – 1891* (London: Longman, 1965), p. 164.

⁸⁴ Efunsetan was not initially from Ibadan. She hailed from Abeokuta, settled in Ibadan and established a large business empire where she found the favour of the community who elevated her to a position of honour. For more on Efunsetan's origin, see Bolanle Awe, *Iyalode Efunsetan Aniwura* [n.d] Unpublished paper and 'Notes on the institution of the *Iyalode* within the traditional Yoruba political system.' Unpublished paper, 1974.

betrayed communal allegiance. It is not clear why women of means had always occupied the position of *Iyalode*, because Efunsetan's predecessor abdicated the seat because of her dwindling economic strength.⁸⁵ Efunsetan's act of self-preservation, therefore, deserved the sympathy of the ordinary observers. When placed side by side with the mythical Moremi of Ile-Ife who gave her best and all for the restoration of the peace of her community; then, those who called for an action to be taken against the *Iyalode* were making a case for sacrifice from a leader of her status. She was found guilty of divided interest, despite her wide benevolence towards the people, both the noble and the underprivileged. Aare Latosa however could not win the battle completely, as majority of the chiefs rejected his demand that Efunsetan be executed. Having been found guilty by the town council, she was rather deposed than being given a capital punishment.

Although Efunsetan had been removed from the post, her popularity remained intact. Thus, Aare was never pleased with the decision. It was difficult to fill the vacancy her deposition had created until her would-be successor was threatened with a straight choice between going into exile and accepting to occupy the position of *Iyalode*. Latosa, the war chief who continued to feel a sense of insecurity as long as Efunsetan was alive then decided to exterminate her secretly since his demand for public execution was overruled by the wishes of the people. He connived with Efunsetan's adopted son, Kumuyilo who facilitated the engagement of two of Efunsetan's close slaves that clubbed her to death on 30 June 1874 while she was asleep in her room.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas*, 391 – 2.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p. 392.

Although Samuel Johnson, a Yoruba missionary witnessed the event of how the two slaves responsible were executed publicly on 10 July 1874, the implications of Yoruba women's leadership role in society did not affect missionaries' insistence that women should remain in the background in the church and society. Johnson observes in his memoirs:

These 2 slaves were brought to the public meeting and the writer who saw them prostrating there before the chiefs saw them a few minutes later impaled at the Basorun market.⁸⁷

While Efunsetan's act is incomparable to the heroic act of the mythological Moremi, the big lesson that both stories have established is the dignity accorded women, not just as the home-makers that missionaries intended them to be in the new religious dispensation, but as a full part of the social and political administration of Yorubaland.

However, if an important and remarkable difference will be mentioned about Tinubu, it is the fact that at no stage did she renege in supporting the community in wars. She not only supported Abeokuta in the war against Dahomey, she also made her resources available for the Abeokuta–Ibadan–Ijaye wars of 1860-1865. In appreciation of her roles during these external aggressions the community decided to honour Tinubu with the title of *Iyalode* of Egba, the first of its kind in the history of Egba people. Unlike Efunsetan, she demonstrated a deeper level of community allegiance.

The identity of Yoruba women before the arrival of missionaries was that of vanguard of society's development. They were not expected to be onlookers in an emerging

⁸⁷ Samuel Johnson's description of the way the two slaves were executed goes to show that Efunsetan was a woman of great virtue, who commanded respect from the people, both while living and even after she had died.

community that was being threatened daily with annihilation. Tinubu remained loyal to the Egba cause, applying every resource at her disposal to quell a persistent war with Ijaye. All of these reinforced her influence in Abeokuta where she maintained an image of respect and honour until her death in 1887.

Implications of Yoruba Women's place in the Pre-Contact Period for the Quarantine Phase of Yoruba Women's Spirituality

The quarantine phase, which is the sequel to the pre-contact period, is characterized by many of the events of the pre-contact period. Therefore, the pre-contact period provides the basis for examining the implications of Yoruba women's place for the quarantine phase of Yoruba women's spirituality. Although the quarantine phase is a direct result of missionaries' failure to affirm women's place of influence within the indigenous culture, religions and society, it evoked two contrasting responses from Yoruba women. While the return of the Yoruba ex-slaves to Yorubaland produced a positive response towards their religion by their family members, the implication of the changes it demanded on their culture, cosmology and worldview brought about significant hostilities towards both African and Western missionaries. This section therefore draws two major implications of the events of the pre-contact period for the commencement of the quarantine phase of Yoruba women's spirituality.

A different cosmological worldview

Although Yoruba leaders limited missionary contacts with members of the larger society, they were particularly careful about women, more than any other group, because contacts with them would threaten the social and spiritual order of the family and society. Peel argues that the chiefs were conscious of women's strategic role in nurturing and caring for the *orisa* and therefore would do anything to alienate them

from Christianity, to avoid them being drawn away from these sacred duties, thereby placing the interest of the family and society at risk.⁸⁸

Thus, the initial euphoria that greeted the arrival of missionaries, which resulted in the conversions of many priestesses, such as Afala, an *Obatala* priestess, and Daniel Olubi's mother, a priestess of *Ogun*⁸⁹ created panic among the leaders of the community. Their reaction, which was an instant embargo on further conversions or association with missionaries by women and men, was in form of a declaration by the elders that Christian missionaries should be isolated 'till every woman has again made her *orisa*, and every man his *Ifa*.'⁹⁰ While many instances of conversions were followed up with the surrendering of the *orisa* to the missionaries, the perceived threat of the Yoruba leaders rests on the fact that there was mutual dependence between the spiritual and the physical worlds. They believed that the *orisa* would only fulfil its obligation of protection, provision, peace and longevity as long as each member of the society fulfilled her or his obligation to it.

Consequently, Yoruba women were technically barred from missionary compounds, which were often located near fetish groves, which were forbidden for women to enter.⁹¹ Whereas most of the returnees, who had become westernized, were not prevented from becoming converted, the leader jealously guarded the local people, who are believed to have a stake in the fortune of the society. David Hinderer, the CMS missionary in Ibadan in 1852 recorded a usual saying of the chiefs:

⁸⁸ Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, pp. 235 – 236.

⁸⁹ Hinderer, *Seventeen Years in the Yoruba Country*, pp 154 -155

⁹⁰ CMS/CA2/061, T. King Journal 2 December 1850.

⁹¹ Tucker, *Abbeokuta; or Sunrise within the Tropics*, pp. 154 - 155.

We are their fathers, they are our children, we justly punish our children for their disobedience but for the Sierra Leonean people, we leave them alone, them you may instruct, they may do white man's fashion, but not our people.⁹²

Therefore, leaders of the community effectively halted the development of mission forms of spirituality, while re-establishing the primacy of traditional means of making meaning. Consequently, not many converts were made among women, who in spite of their being precluded from interacting with missionaries were the first major contact between Yoruba traditional religions and Christianity. This was evident in 1848 when Crowther's mother and the two other women were baptized.⁹³

Whereas the effectiveness of the communal sanctions prevented massive conversions of women, as missionaries had deep respect for traditional Yoruba leadership, they were unrelenting in their interactions with individual or groups of women in their attempts to promote a different cosmological worldview. Thus, compared to other places, Yorubaland had fewer frictions than the highhanded Methodist missionaries in Calabar who faced hostility between 1855 and 1856 as Anderson and other missionaries were boycotted for giving asylum to two men and a woman accused of killing a young boy by supernatural means.⁹⁴ This is probably due to the CMS which always emphasised 'wise respectful deference... to the authority of Native Chiefs'.⁹⁵

However, it is being argued here that apart from the actions of Yoruba leaders, women, on their own right fought off every attempt by missionaries to redefine Yoruba worldview in a way that undermined the self worth and identity of women.

⁹² CMS/CA2/0/49/96 D. Hinderer, Journal Entry for October 13, 1852.

⁹³ Clarke, *West Africa and Christianity*, p. 63.

⁹⁴ United Presbyterian Missionary Record, 1856, pp. 151 – 6, Anderson, Journal Entry for Sunday 1 June 1856.

⁹⁵ CMS/CA2/L2 Instructions of the Parent Committee to those about to join the Yoruba Mission. 21 October 1856.

The implication of Allen's challenge to a group of women in Abeokuta who were bent on sacrificing to the 'motherly rock',⁹⁶ referred to earlier in this chapter, demonstrates Yoruba women's rejection of a cosmological worldview where the female is not represented in the concept of the Transcendence. Thus the women effectively quarantined Allen by snubbing him and establishing their confidence in the traditional worldview through which they derived meaningful purpose for their existence as women.

Conflicting Religious and Cultural Traditions

The Yoruba traders who initiated the whole plan of returning to Yorubaland with the Gospel had the goal of fostering a new religion, which had implications for the culture of the recipients, as they stated:

we have a soul to save, [they said, as they looked back] upon their country people who are now living in darkness, without the light of the Gospel.⁹⁷

Similarly, Yoruba people saw in missionaries such as Thomas Birch Freeman, who arrived at Badagry in 1842 but moved to Abeokuta in December of the same year because of the favourable disposition of the leaders, 'the representative of a nation and of a religion...'⁹⁸

Being products of the Enlightenment, the missionaries' culture was shaped by rationality, which was an important part of their beliefs and practices. On the contrary, Yoruba women's culture was shaped by their communal role and identity. Hence, while missionaries were keen observers of the religious activities of Yoruba women, little was put into consideration in mediating Christianity in Yorubaland. Hinderer,

⁹⁶ CMS/CA2/018/16 William Allen, Journal Entry, 15 May, 1859

⁹⁷ CO 265/154, Enclosure dated 15 Nov. 1839, in Doherty to Russell, 30 Nov. 1839.

⁹⁸ Tucker, *Abbeokuta; or Sunrise within the Tropics*, p. 88.

Bowen, Smith, Crowther (jnr) and Maser who observed ritual proceedings led by Yoruba women, and at other times saw how female objects symbolized divinities, did not make any attempt to interpret Christianity in the light of the cultural role of Yoruba women. Thus missionaries underrated the influence of women in the traditional society, primal religions and cultural milieus which formed the bedrock of Yoruba women's spirituality.

The fact that three fundamental aspects of Yoruba philosophical and religious concepts were obscure to missionaries' perception led to their being isolated during the quarantine phase. First, in the same way as there were gods, so were there goddesses in Yoruba traditional religions. Secondly, women, as well as men, could symbolize divine power in the traditional religious systems.⁹⁹ Thirdly, women were central to family sacrifices to the extent that without the wife many family sacrifices would be rendered unacceptable.

Therefore, the dilemma for Yoruba women who had been used to a pantheon of gods which took care of different problems was not conversion into a new religion, but the demands it was making on their social lives. Thus, the Yoruba people quarantined Christianity because of its emphasis on eschatological issues at the expense of existential concerns. Existentialism in the time Yoruba women quarantined Christianity is encapsulated in the proverb: *ebi npa mi ?l?s? nkiri, nigbati ngo w? nu, ngo se w? 'de*. [I am hungry and the soap vendor is advertising, I need to satisfy my hunger before thinking of how to wash my body].

⁹⁹ Olajubu, *Woman in the Yoruba Religious Sphere*, p. 65.

Conclusion

Thus, Yoruba women's visibility in the formative stages of the Yoruba race was for community survival, which led to their taking frontline positions in the meaning-making process of the Yoruba before their encounter with missionaries. Hence, women's role in building the Yoruba nation and its pantheon of gods did not come as a matter of chance; rather, it was a matter of active participation in the making of meaning for a race of humans that had a cosmological history in which women were functional and valuable.

The high points of the foundations of Yoruba women's spirituality as illustrated by the accounts of the trio of mythological Moremi, Efunsetan, the shrewd *Iyalode* of Ibadan and Madam Tinubu, the first *Iyalode* of Egba are therefore self-denial, self-transcendence and communal loyalty at the expense of personal interests. A hallmark of Yoruba women's primal spirituality was the identity they obtained through patriotism and self-sacrifice. Although men always dominated the political arena, women were actively functional in the religious sphere and contributed immensely to the survival of the race.¹⁰⁰

Later attempts to subjugate Yoruba women and offer them a subordinate role in the church hindered the transformation of their spirituality when they came in contact with missionaries. Thus, although the dynamics that challenged the transformation of spirituality did not confront conversion, nevertheless, they slowed down the pace by which Yoruba women responded to the Gospel after 1848.

¹⁰⁰ Olajubu, *Women in Yoruba Religious Sphere*, pp. 24 – 25.

While Yoruba women related with the Transcendent through their community, its history, verbal and symbolic language,¹⁰¹ their encounters with missionaries threatened to remove their cultural immunities. Thus, conversion to mission Christianity attempted to put an end to the heroic acts of Yoruba women and their public role, as will be further seen in chapter six, but restoring the image of women as valiant players in the religious arena, turned Christianity into a Yoruba religion.

Therefore, the need to protect the traditional integrity of women, as well as the best interest of society was the high point of the quarantine phase. However, missionaries were unrelenting in their pursuit of religious conversion and the transformation of spirituality among the Yoruba. Rather than a continued reliance on old family ties between returnees and their families, they adopted a more aggressive stance, in order to come out of their state of quarantine, which is the concern of the next chapter.

¹⁰¹ Spirituality in this sense is not viewed from a limited perspective of 'soul development', 'prayer' and 'virtuous living' but from the holistic viewpoint of what constitutes total human development. See Joann Wolski Conn, 'Women's Spirituality: Restriction and Reconstruction' in Joann Wolski Conn, (ed.) *Women's Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1986), pp. 9 – 10.

CHAPTER FOUR

YORUBA WOMEN'S SPIRITUALITY: THE CONFLICT PHASE

Introduction

In initial encounters with the Yoruba, missionaries received warm reception¹ and conversions of women to Christianity resulted.² Though the founding of different missionary centres varied in time, from the earliest at Abeokuta in 1845 to the latest in Ondo in 1875, women's subsequent reactions to attempts to impose westernized religious styles were similar.³ Initial warmth soon gave way to an attempt to quarantine missionary Christianity as the differences in the worship patterns, the main purpose of religion and the means of approaching the Transcendent resulted in isolation of the missionaries in Yorubaland.

The reason why the Yoruba quarantined Christianity as discussed extensively in Chapter Three of this thesis was not a protest against moving from one religion to the other; more so, in the traditional Yoruba society, conversion into one religion did not mean a total rejection of the other religions. The Yoruba were accustomed to having a pantheon of gods who were responsible for solving different problems. However, women not only rejected mission Christianity from the very first decade of its being promoted in Yorubaland, they raised serious objections to its spirituality because it did not carry their cultural heritage along, especially as it related to relationships with

¹ Yoruba returnees facilitated a rousing welcome for missionaries to Yorubaland. The Popos warmly welcomed missionaries in Badagry in 1842 – 1843, and the Egbas in Abeokuta in 1843 – 1845. In Ondo, in 1873, the Lisa received missionaries with open arms. In Abeokuta, they were met by the king's delegation of horsemen and trumpeters. For further details see Sarah Tucker, Abeokuta; *Sunrise within the Tropics: an Outline of the Origin and Progress of the Yoruba Mission* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1854) pp. 54, 86 – 87, 89.

² Peter B. Clarke, *West Africa and Christianity* (London: Edward Arnold Publishers Ltd, 1986), p. 63.

³ At Abeokuta, two major waves of publicly sponsored sanctions on Christianity in 1849-50 and in 1867, were aimed particularly at women. See CMS/ CA2/032 S.A. Crowther to H. Venn, 3 Nov. 1849; CMS/CA2/049 D. Hinderer, Journal for Quarter ending 25 Dec. 1849; CMS/CA2/072 J.C. Muller, Journal, Nov-Dec. 1849.

humanity as well as the Transcendent.⁴ Although Yoruba men had their own reservations for the new orientation to religion that missionaries were proclaiming, the fact that obligatory roles of women in nurturing the *orisa* were hindered as women began to respond to Christianity had specific implications for women as well as wider cultural implications. Meanwhile, Yorubaland was still under the threat of slavery, wars and commercial exploitation. Thus, in contrast to the earlier warm reception subsequent attempts to quarantine Christianity soon gave way to conflict. Yoruba women now confronted missionaries boldly in defence of their cultural heritages while missionaries, too, adopted more confrontational approaches, such as itinerant preaching, teaching and evangelism, which are discussed in the next chapter.

With this setting this chapter analyses four areas of conflicts over the development of women's spirituality, clarifying Yoruba women's responses to mission Christian spirituality as it was presented to them. These areas are conflicts in what Yoruba women perceived as spirituality as opposed to the missionaries' approach to spirituality. Secondly, it contrasts Yoruba women's perception of the function of religion with the missionaries' main goal for proclaiming the Gospel. Thirdly, this chapter examines the difference between the Yoruba notion of relating with the Transcendent and the missionaries' concept of God. The fourth major tension is an evaluation of the conceptual differences between Yoruba and mission Christianity's perception of death and afterlife.

⁴ See CMS/CA2/018/16 William Allen, Journal Entry, 15 May, 1859. See also CMS/CA2/059 J. T. Kefer, Journal 29 December 1855. Kefer, a Yoruba missionary perceived that the Yoruba had no temples for God, but the *orisa*. See also Tucker, Abeokuta; *Sunrise within the Tropics: an Outline of the Origin and Progress of the Yoruba Mission*, p. 32.

While evangelism produced Yoruba women converts, it exposed major differences between the cultural worldview of the Yoruba and those of missionaries, which hindered the transformation of Yoruba women's spirituality into mission spirituality. Although both men and women had encounters with the missionaries and experienced cultural dislocations in the way missionaries presented the Gospel, many women responded in ways that showed that they were unyielding to missionary forms of spirituality. For example, Osu Daropale, a successful trader in Badagry, in addition to believing in the power of God for bringing economic success, remained committed to the worship of her '*ori*' (literally 'head', which was a predominantly women's religious obligation,⁵ through which the Yoruba believed that their personal destiny was being controlled). In spite of Daropale's condemnation by Samuel Pearse, a Yoruba missionary, she was tenaciously committed to her '*ori*', to the extent that she attracted the attention of 'all the local European and Brazilian traders' who would 'send presents on her feast day'.⁶

The scope of this survey relates to the older missionary centres in Yorubaland such as Badagry, Abeokuta, Lagos, Ibadan, Ijaye, and Ogbomoso in the 1840s and the 1850s, though the experiences in the later centres such as Ondo in the 1870s are also referred to from time to time. Although they focussed more on conversion, the archival data from the evangelistic activities of Jefferson Bowen, Charles Gollmer, William Allen, Thomas King and Charles Phillips, recorded in their journals and memoirs, also provide evidences for issues related to the development of Yoruba women's

⁵ Oyeronke Olajubu, *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), p. 33.

⁶ CMS/CA2/076 S. Pearse, *Journal*, 1 January 1863.

spirituality. These archival sources reflect especially Yoruba women's encounters with missionaries, mostly at shrines and their market stalls.⁷

Conflicts over Outer Demonstration of Inner Belief

The conflict phase could have been less confrontational, if missionaries' task was seeking converts alone, which was their primary objective for evangelizing Yoruba women. Conflicts arose when missionaries began to demand that converts express and conduct themselves within the context of the evolving Christian community, in which spirituality meant an inward relationship only within the divine order. While Yoruba women would rather express their inward feelings through an outward demonstration of their beliefs, which was consistent with Yoruba culture and socially acceptable norms and patterns, missionaries emphasised giving outward expression to inward transformation, an approach which was in accordance with Western disposition.⁸ Thus, there was bound to be conflict between African practices and Western piety as Yoruba women encountered Western missionaries.

There were divisions among the missionaries on the best way to approach the cultural variations between the Yoruba on the one hand and the missionaries on the other, because Western forms of piety were thought by missionaries to be the ideal for the converts. The situation of Yorubaland was not as it was in many other areas of Africa such as Southern Africa where David Livingstone pioneered the work of Gospel proclamation⁹ because the missionary to Yorubaland consisted of Africans who were

⁷ Nina Emma Mba, *Nigerian Women Mobilized: Women Political Activities in Southern Nigeria, 1900-1965* (Berkeley: University of California, 1982), pp. 14 – 15.

⁸ See, for example CMS/CA2/059/05 D. Hinderer, Journal August 14, 1855.

⁹ Brian Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag: Protestant Missions and British Imperialism*

returnees from Sierra Leone, as well as Europeans and Americans. However further tensions developed because most of the Yoruba missionaries who had become westernized, had reservations on incorporating some elements of Yoruba spirituality. While James White was quite open to the idea of incorporating some elements of Yoruba spirituality into Christian practices as the Holy Spirit directed,¹⁰ William Allen¹¹ expressed reservations about such an idea.

Even among British missionaries of the CMS, there were differences of opinion on what attitudes and practices could be regarded as religious piety, and thus carried over into Christianity. The following examples illustrate Andrew Walls' argument adopted in this thesis that responses of the various groups of Christians reflected the respective group. While Joseph Smith, an English missionary of the CMS found deep piety in traditional religious practices that reflected the spiritual ethos of Yoruba women, Henry Townsend dismissed them all as 'outside religion'. In Smith's evaluation, the reverence and devotion that the Yoruba showed towards the *orisa* should be carried over into Christianity by the converts. Although he did not approve of idol worship, nevertheless, Smith challenged converts to emulate the exemplary character, devotion and reverence the idol worshipers showed to the *orisa*:

In conclusion I exhorted them to copy [sic] from the heathen around them in zeal and devotedness to God and in some particulars learn from their example. 'How well kept the *orisa* were, the paths to them always swept clean, compared with the disrepair of the church and the unkempt graveyard'. I also told them that I often observe that the heathen when sitting in the market place have by their side their favourite idols to give them success in the disposal of the articles they expose for

in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries (Leicester: Apollos, 1990), p. 70.

¹⁰ CMS/CA2/087 J. White, Journal entries, 2 – 4 July 1857.

¹¹ See CMS/CA2/019 W. S. Allen, Journal entry, August 1870.

sale. So must Christians be always mindful of God and carry him with us in our hearts wherever we go.¹²

Missionaries' encounters with Yoruba women led many evangelicals to see a virtue in importing some of the practices in Yoruba traditional religious practices into Christianity.¹³

The inflexible approach of missionaries in their evangelistic proclamations brought about some confusion for Yoruba women who could not identify what to carry over from their former religions to Christianity until missionaries such as Smith pointed out that keeping the church premises clean is a mark of respect for God. Despite his commitment to making converts among the women idol worshipers, Smith not only commended their obligatory duty of keeping the *orisa* houses clean as their own way of relating with the Supreme God with reverence, but also recommended very highly that women converts emulate their example in the church as well.

Henry Townsend's view of Yoruba spirituality did not follow Smith's method of looking for virtues in Yoruba forms of piety and devotion to the *orisa*. He showed deep contempt for the ways the people were relating to the Transcendent. His thinking that religious responses should not only be expressed inwardly, but should also be motivated by the presence of the Holy Spirit, does not show a balanced appraisal of the condition of the Yoruba but a focus on nineteenth-century evangelical experience in England:¹⁴ This is evidenced, for instance in the records of Townsend:

¹² CMS/CA2/022/083 J. Smith, Journal, 1 January 1866.

¹³ Hinderer was constantly concerned about the spirituality of a few of his colleagues, describing their Christian beliefs as correct, yet the practice of it as 'cold and dead'. CMS/CA2/049 D. Hinderer, Journal Entry, 14 August 1855.

¹⁴ See D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in modern Britain: a history from the 1730's to the 1980's* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), p. 116 – 17; also, J. E Orr, *The second evangelical awakening in Britain* (London, Edinburgh: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1949).

We are delighted at hearing of the tokens of a revival of spiritual religion in England, we hope a portion of it will reach us for we need it from the highest to the lowest - what a difference would be made in our work. How many evils will be removed by it...The young men and women about us are really but little affected by spiritual religion, almost all is outside religion. A gracious revival of the work of the Holy Spirit is what we need.¹⁵

Although Townsend took cognisance of the need to resolve the visible suffering of the Yoruba due to the slave trade and the inter-tribal wars, he rather anticipated an awakening in Yorubaland that was similar to the revival outburst among the Moravians, Whitefield, the Wesley brothers, John Newton and other evangelical movements.

Thus, Townsend's hopes that Christianity would remove 'evils' from Yorubaland were well directed, his call and those of other missionaries such as David Hinderer, a German pietist, for an 'inner Religion',¹⁶ however, was not in line with the outward nature of Yoruba spirituality. Yoruba women's forms of piety and the sacred position in which they placed the symbols of their religions, showed that there were virtues in the way Yoruba worshiped God. Thus, Smith's observation of the events of the traditional society and commendation of the same attitude to Christian converts did not require them to carry a physical representation of God; rather, he encouraged them to 'carry God in [their] hearts'.¹⁷

What attracted Smith to the way the non-converts cleaned and decorated the shrines was not the worship of the *orisa*, but the worshipers' reverential attitude towards the shrines and the Transcendent. While Yoruba women were unwilling to do away with

¹⁵ CMS/CA2/085 H. Townsend, Journal entry 28 February 1860.

¹⁶ CMS/CA2/059/05 D. Hinderer, Journal August 14, 1855.

¹⁷ CMS/CA2/022/083 J. Smith, Journal, 1 January 1866.

many of the practices of their primal religions, the examples below show that it was not difficult to dissociate themselves from the *orisa* and taken on a new identity as believers in Jesus as the Christ. Thus, when converts handed over the symbol of their former divinity as a result of conversion, it was considered as the greatest mark of spiritual devotion.

Yoruba women convert's spiritual transformation was not all about conflict and confrontation, however. They wanted a dynamic worship experience, an emotional outward evidence of the inner transformation that had taken place, they had become transformed as far as forsaking the idol and clinging unto Jesus was concerned. Thus, Oyindala, the first female Baptist convert at Bi-Olorunpelu willingly surrendered her items of worship in the traditional religion,¹⁸ Mary Ije¹⁹ and even the wife of Atotodibo in far away Okrika²⁰ declared their total allegiance for Christ. After only a few days of listening to the teachings of Bowen, Oyindala made a clean break from her former idols, surrendering all the totems and symbols of her former religion to Bowen.

Beyond these practical steps, Oyindala showed evidence of conversion through her unmistakable emotional response recorded by Bowen with satisfaction.

At last she came to see me, with a countenance beaming with joy, and began to tell me how she had been distressed hearing the word of God, and how she now believed in Jesus the Saviour.²¹

¹⁸ T. J. Bowen, *Adventures and Missionary Labours in Several Countries in the Interior of Africa from 1849-1856*, 2nd ed. (London: Frank Cass, 1968), p. 158.

¹⁹ Tucker, Abeokuta; *Sunrise Within the Tropics*, p. 149.

²⁰ CMS/G3/A3 0 1881, no 36. Dandison Crowther., 'Notes on the Rise and Progress of Christianity at Okrika'.

²¹ Bowen, *Adventures and Missionary Labours in several countries in the interior of Africa from 1849-1856*, p. 158.

A woman such as Oyindala had demonstrated sufficiently that she was willing to do away with her primal spirituality by surrendering her items of worship in her former religion. However, there was a missing link between conversion and transformation of spirituality that missionaries did not resolve. For women such as Oyindala, the outward demonstration of her new religion revealed through the surrendering of the emblems of *orisa*, was equally as important as the 'inward' experience of conversion.

Even when converts demonstrated both 'outward' and 'inward' expressions of conversion, missionaries insisted on further changes which related to the peculiarities of culture and social relationships. Ajayi is right in arguing that many social practices were interpreted in religious terms as '[they] were regarded not just as unimportant matters of social convenience; to the missionary, each had a religious significance.'²²

Even in matters of dressing, whereas the Yoruba male costume was considered 'very becoming',²³ the Victorian frocks, which covered every part of the body, were highly recommended to Yoruba women as a mark of female modesty.

Whereas the standard Christian dressing, in the perception of missionaries, was the Victorian frock, which was high-necked, long-sleeved and reaching down to the knee,²⁴ Yoruba women were overtly criticised for wearing their local *iro* (a loose band of cloth tied round the waist) and *gele* (a strip of clothing for head covering), which were regarded as vain, too revealing and a reminiscence of their heathen past. On the

²² J.F. Ade Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria, 1841-1891, The Making of a New Elite* (London: Longman, 1965) p. 14.

²³ CMS/CA2/085 Henry Townsend Journal for quarter ending December 1847.

²⁴ For further reading on the social significance of dressing, see Glory Robertson, 'Pictorial Sources for Nineteenth-Century Women's History: Dress as a Mirror of Attitudes to Women', in *Engendering History: Caribbean Women in Historical Perspectives* (London & Kingston: James Currey Publishers & Ian Randle Publishers, 1995), pp. 111 – 122.

contrary, men's *dansiki* (native men's type of top) and *sokoto* (native trousers) were considered 'very becoming'.²⁵

Similarly, Thomas Birch Freeman was criticised by some Methodist missionaries at Cape Coast for allowing a young man and a girl who were scantily clothed with 'only the waist cloth, being from the waist upwards and from the knee downwards naked, and that in the presence of ladies', to serve food for him and his guests.²⁶ While missionaries regarded Yoruba women's traditional attire as exhibiting poor religious piety, which in the opinions of missionaries constituted moral destitution, the tropical weather had made light dressing quite fashionable, but above all most fitting for the hot climate.²⁷

Another aspect of what missionaries considered as outward religion was evident in Bowen's criticism of Yoruba boisterous nature in worship, in celebration and even in fulfilling a religious obligation. He argued that it was cultural for Africans to show emotions in worship and religious gatherings:

Christian converts in every part of Africa still retain their innate love of noise and gesticulation. Rare scenes are sometimes witnessed in the Methodist meetings on some parts of the coast. The sober Episcopalian converts are greatly delighted with the 'service'. To kneel a little, and to stand a little, by turns, to chant the doxology, and repeat the Lord's prayer in concert, to bow the knee mechanically whenever they repeat the name of Jesus in the creed, to exclaim 'Good Lord deliver us,' in solemn set of tones, twenty times successively, in the responses to the litany – all this has a strong hold on the hearts of the people, because it is congenial to their natural feelings.²⁸

²⁵ See CMS/CA2/085 Henry Townsend, Journal for Quarter Ending December 1847.

²⁶ Hope Waddell, vol. 1 p. 21 Journals, 26 March 1846.

²⁷ Bowen, *Adventures and Missionary Labours in Several Countries in the Interior of Africa from 1849-1856*, p. 310.

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 97.

Bowen's observation is not completely true of Yoruba worship. Whereas they showed excitement at one occasion, at another they showed reverence and total silence. For instance, Miss Sarah Tucker, a missionary observer in the 1850s recorded that in Sierra Leone:

One of the ceremonies that is gone through upon these sacred days, is the fetching water for the gods from some neighbouring holy fountain; and on these occasions long lines of priests and priestesses, and their immediate followers, are seen walking in procession with their calabashes on their heads, and often preserving the most profound silence. [These days are called Osse days, from a word signifying silence, and in Sierra Leone the Yorubans have very naturally transferred the term to the Christian Sabbath, which they call *Osse*.]²⁹

Thus, as much as Yoruba worship could be perceived as outward religion, a more careful understanding of their worship practices reveal an inward piety.

The dynamism of Yoruba spirituality as they related to God had a long history that is traceable to the time the *Creoles* were sojourning at Sierra Leone. For example, whenever one of the Christians died, the burial ceremony was not limited to Christian practices alone, but also blended with some aspects of traditional burial ceremonies. The ceremonies regularly referred to among the Yoruba as '*awujo*', the gathering of folk people in which they invoked the memory of the dead³⁰ was usually packed with emotions as the people wept aloud, sobbed and rolled on the ground. All these show that the Yoruba did not break away totally from their past.

What compounded the conflict between Yoruba women and the missionaries who arrived in Yorubaland was that rather than beginning to interpret the religious expressions of the people in terms of what was considered as the religions of the

²⁹ Tucker, Abeokuta; *Sunrise Within the Tropics*, p. 36.

³⁰ See, J. Peterson, *Province of Freedom* (London: Faber, 1969), pp. 187 – 192.

heart, missionaries began to look for means of westernizing Yoruba culture. The evangelicals therefore desired Western forms of piety, which was why Bowen criticised the converts' boisterous responses during baptism, although this was against local culture. Whereas the returnees had begun to incorporate some of the Yoruba cultural variations in the context of a new religion while they were still in Sierra Leone, such as *awujo*, referred to earlier, missionaries attempted to discontinue that line of introducing Yoruba traditional practices into Christian spirituality in Yorubaland. More conflicts between Yoruba women and missionaries were thus introduced as the church forfeited the opportunity of removing Yoruba traditional worship practices in the context of their conversion to Christianity by attempting to westernize the converts and change the culture of the Yoruba.

The conflict between what missionaries regarded as outward religion and inward religious experience became more pronounced as Yoruba women began to show their true feelings towards the Transcendent. For instance, when James Okuseinde, a native missionary from Sierra Leone confronted a woman convert in Ogunpa, Ibadan in 1873, he anticipated that she would show a deep soul stirring feeling of remorse and regret, a spiritual experience missionaries had come to associate with 'warm feeling'.³¹ On the contrary, the woman began to lament how her fortune had dwindled in spite of her moving from one *orisa* to another till she ended up becoming a Christian. While she was looking for 'good things' from her new relationship with God, Okuseinde expected her to demonstrate her conversion by directing the 'warm' feeling of her love to Christ. According to the record of this encounter in Okuseinde's journal:

³¹ CMS/CA2/029/02 J. Okuseinde, Journal Entry, 28 April 1873.

He asks her what sign is in her heart. She replied she's a great sinner. He asks again what sign is in her. She tells with many tears of the many sacrifices she has made to *orisa* 'but instead of good things, things went wrong with me, no peace with me whatever'. So it came to her to forsake them. He encourages her with Jn 6: 37. 'Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.'³²

Thus, the woman's hope for converting to Christianity, as was the case with most Yoruba women was not for emotional purposes alone, but practical concerns also.³³

Another typical example of Yoruba women's conflict with what missionaries had come to accept as the 'inner feeling' of warmth for God could be found in the way Afala, Crowther's mother responded to her new faith after converting from being a priestess of *Obatala* to Christianity. It is arguable that her conversion was not focussed towards heavenly matters. Rather, her becoming a Christian was her own way of responding to the Supreme Being who brought back her son who had been lost to slavery. Although she had an emotional feeling for the love of God, her conversion to Christianity was, firstly for an existential benefit of reuniting with her son.

Thus, neither Okuseinde's convert in Ibadan, nor Afala, Crowther's mother in Abeokuta responded to Christianity in the Western concept of piety. Although the two women were converted to Christianity, their responses to their new faith were still in the mode of their old ways of responding to the Transcendent within Yoruba cultural experience. For instance, after her conversion, Afala suggested a sacrifice should be made because it was *Ifa* that predicted that Crowther was to be consecrated to the Supreme Being at birth. Crowther had a difficult time convincing his mother that their reunion was to be interpreted as God's providential acts, rather than giving credit to

³² Ibid.

³³ Laurenti Magesa 'Authentic African Spirituality' in Aylward Shorter, *African Christian Spirituality* (London: Cassell, 1978), p. 74.

Ifa.³⁴ This shows that for Yoruba women there was a need for a deeper level of religious transition that would re-orientate their traditional beliefs, attitudes and practices into the Christian culture.

While many women fulfilled the religious aspect of change, there were differences in their emotional, psychological and social dimensions of spiritual change. In the thinking of the missionaries however, it was only an awareness of the human 'fallen' state brought about by sin and God's redemptive provision made through Jesus Christ that could produce the piety that Christianity demanded. Therefore, Yoruba women's concept of piety and the missionary mode of 'inward religion' often conflicted with one another creating problems which could not be resolved by mere persuasion, but only by a transformation of Yoruba cultural realities in the context of the evangelical's tradition.³⁵ As long as this conflict of what constituted 'outside religion' and 'inward experience' persisted, when Yoruba women got converted to Christianity, they did not imitate the missionaries' practices and attitudes in totality.

Conflicts over Yoruba Women's Religious Objectives

As much as many Yoruba women converted to Christianity, their spirituality continued to affirm that religion, while helping them to relate with the Transcendent, must result ultimately in material benefits such as power and influence, children, longevity, wealth, prosperity, happiness and good health. Thus the tensions between Yoruba women's spirituality and mission spirituality were defined by the divergence in the spiritual objectives of each side.

³⁴ The Memoirs of Samuel Crowther, cited in Jeanne Decorvet & Emmanuel Oladipo, *Samuel Ajayi Crowther, The Miracle of Grace*, (Lagos: CSS Bookshops, 2006), p. 60.

³⁵ Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, p. 250.

Material benefits as opposed to spiritual content was a major difference between Yoruba women and the missionaries' objectives for becoming a Christian, as the missionaries observed with disdain women who were non-converts showing off what they had obtained from *orisa*. For example, Allen, a Yoruba missionary in his journal of August 1870 reported an *orisa* woman in full regalia, boasting to the other women about how she would cross tollgates without paying the mandatory fines.³⁶ Her goal was simply to show off her material gains to potential women converts and to discredit Christianity by showing the converts some of the weaknesses of the new religion.

Similarly, when some female adherents of *Orisa Oko* discovered that their peers who converted to Christianity were confronted with the problem of gaining 'inner' transformation rather than an outward gain they boasted about the privileges and immunities of being followers of *Orisa Oko* ('farm idol').³⁷ The intention of these traditional worshippers was to discredit Christianity by amplifying the material benefits of traditional religions.

As Zahan comments, African traditional religions had humanity at the centre of existence,³⁸ while Christian spirituality is God-centred. This difference brought about a conflict of objectives and challenged Yoruba women's motives for converting to Christianity in the first place. Thus, as missionaries pressed for change, they observed that it was not uncommon for women who came to Christianity to have experimented with other divinities in their search for solutions to their many problems. Yoruba

³⁶ CMS/CA2/019 W. S. Allen, Journal entry, August 1870.

³⁷ CMS/CA2/058 S. Johnson, journal July 1879 and June 1861.

³⁸ Dominique Zahan, *The Religion, Spirituality, and Thought of Traditional Africa*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), pp. 66 – 80.

women had indeed a different agenda for converting to Christianity that was inconsistent with the missionaries' message centred on love for Christ and God's 'heavenly' Kingdom,³⁹ as Okuseinde discovered in Ibadan in the example cited earlier.⁴⁰

Although scholars such as Magesa finds relevance for a spirituality centred on human needs, it should be emphasised that such a spiritual approach thrives in a situation of daily struggles for bare necessities of life, healthcare delivery system for mothers and their babies, balanced diet, and other socio-economic concerns. Magesa maintains however that the situation of Africa had remained the same from time immemorial:

Africa calls for a spirituality, which is concerned with the glory of man for, as St. Irenaeus said, so many years ago, 'The glory of God is man fully alive.' Christian spirituality in Africa must act in the world for divine ends. It must be existential.⁴¹

Thus while Yoruba women were searching for support for earthly survival via spiritual fulfilment, missionaries were more keen to take them to a spiritual level that would change their focus to heavenly needs.

Some women converted to Christianity as a means of supplementing the power of the *orisa*, because in daily affairs no single god of the Yoruba was capable of solving all problems. Hence, Yoruba women enquirers went to the Christians with the hope of obtaining favours from the Supreme God. They would not accept a theological reasoning that was demanding evidence of an inner conviction of their imperfections, but taking no action to redress their state of poverty and hopelessness. In essence,

³⁹ See CMS/CA2/049/95 D. Hinderer, Journal Entry, Friday 22 June 1849.

⁴⁰ CMS/CA2/029/02 J. Okuseinde, Journal Entry, 28 April 1873.

⁴¹ Magesa 'Authentic African Spirituality' in Aylward Shorter, *African Christian Spirituality*, p. 74.

existential concerns were the most critical reasons for religious change among Yoruba women and not necessarily ‘the stirrings of the heart’ that missionaries anticipated.

Within traditional religion Yoruba women never resisted the need to change their allegiance from one *orisa* to the other, when expectations were not being met by a particular deity. For example, when a Yoruba woman shifted her allegiance from Sango to *Yemoja*, variations would occur concerning the items and patterns of worship, but the core of her beliefs about what a divinity stood for and the extent and limits of its powers were essentially the same. However, whereas some women were willing to endure hardship until their desires were met, others such as an *orisa* priestess Samuel Johnson encountered in Ibadan in 1879 concluded that Christianity was not for them:

She had been a believer at Ilorin and taken a Muslim name, but misfortune showed up her mistake. Later at Lagos she had married a Christian, who had taken her idols away. But now she was back at her former religion, and all had gone well with her.⁴²

Thus, both women who converted to Christianity and those who stayed within traditional religions shared a common spiritual orientation, in the face of the problems confronting them in post-contact nineteenth-century Yorubaland; both groups were searching for material objectives.

Indeed, missionary journals are replete with examples of women moving from one *orisa* to the other, in search of solutions to life’s problems. An example is that of a woman with emotional and psychological problems who moved from ‘making *Obatala*’ to purchasing ‘*Elegbara*’, until she was finally directed to the Church:

⁴² CMS/ CA2/058 S. Johnson Journal Entry, 1 July 1879.

A woman comes to church at the prompting of 'various warnings by dreams, and the constant disturbance and restless state of her heart at all times.' She had spent four bags of cowries 'making *Obatala*' with no benefit; and was then told she must get herself an *Elegbara* [*Esu*, i.e. the Devil]. This was an elaborate assemblage: an image with miniature clubs, small calabashes with medicines and strings of cowries attached to it, all of which cost several heads of cowries, seven goats, and other occasional sacrifices. But her heart was still troubled, till she met a Christian woman who comforted her and told her to go to God's house. Here she was 'wrought upon' by Proverbs 8:32-36...and gave up the *Elegbara*.⁴³

Thus, the humanistic functions of religion were so fundamental to Yoruba women that any deity deserving of their attention and loyalty would not fail to meet their existential needs among which the search for children and the survival of the race ranked high on the scale of priority. The way Yoruba women perceived religion therefore required that missionaries allowed a time of settling down into the new religion, within which the prospect would have shifted from the former spiritual orientation to the Christian one. A typical example of how women moved from place to place in search of solutions to problems, rather than God strictly, is a troubled woman passer-by in Ogbomoso, who accidentally joined the Bible lesson of the CMS 'to try her luck'. Adolphus Mann, a Yoruba missionary of the CMS recorded how he:

Spoke for the first time to a woman who has been attending for two months. She had lost her two children, and paid money in vain for help from *Ifa*, to the hunters 'who are said to find the good medicine against death in the far distant woods' and to the Muslims. She then reckoned that as all are subject to one God, she should seek help from those who preach and tell people to abandon the *orisa*. She was put off by the cool reception she got from Mrs Bowen at the Baptist Mission, and hearing the lessons as she passed by the CMS station, she called in to try her luck.⁴⁴

Even though the woman knew that the missionaries would insist on her abandoning the *orisa* her level of desperation for children, which had taken her from the hunters to

⁴³ CMS/CA2/061/33 T. King Journal, 1 Oct. 1856.

⁴⁴ CMS/CA2/066 A. C. Mann, Journal Entry, 10 July 1854.

the Muslims, finally brought her to the CMS station. Thus Christianity becomes a means to an end, as far as the woman's need to fulfil a pressing need was concerned and not strictly a means of reaching and worshipping the Transcendent.

While it is easy to conclude that Yoruba women were only open to change whenever there was a pressing need, it is important to consider that they were living amidst great uncertainties that made material and psychological needs inevitable. It is argued here that a strong motive for Yoruba women's allegiance to their primal religions was because they needed answers for their unending string of problems. Hence, what constituted a rational religion to them was the fulfilment of the basic necessities of life in a condition where people were coping with wars, slavery and survival of the race. It was not a contradiction, therefore, for Yoruba women to emphasize the need for peace, good health, children, prosperity and general well being. Although missionaries were often under pressure to give material promises as a strategy for gaining converts, when they resisted such temptations, they stood the chance of losing such prospects. This is reflected in an experience which Okuseinde recalled:

Her husband had been sick and much had been spent in vain on sacrifices. A Christian woman suggested they attend; they came and tried to do all what was asked of them...but her husband still died.⁴⁵

Thus, although to the Yoruba the goal of religion was primarily to meet critical needs, missionaries had good reasons to avoid raising the hopes of converts, because when such expectations failed converts would be disappointed and retrace their steps.

However, one major attraction of Christianity in comparison with traditional religion or Islam was the absence of financial demand made upon convert. To converts, this

⁴⁵ CMS/CA2/029 J. Okuseinde, Journal Entry, 9 May 1870.

represented earthly gains over and above 'heavenly'⁴⁶ benefits. While women suffered under huge financial strain in the traditional religions as a result of the financial cost of the endless sacrifices, Christianity preached 'freely ye obtained, freely shall ye give'. Therefore, Christianity was attractive to Yoruba women as it offered significant relief to the financial strain on them because their meagre income was hardly sufficient to meet their immediate needs. In contrast, even Islam, which predated Christianity in Yorubaland, expected that monies had to be paid for prayers. Where 'saraa' (ritual offering or feast) were stipulated, it always involved huge sums of money, which many women could hardly afford.⁴⁷

However, traditional practices of bringing gifts were often continued after conversion to Christianity. Yoruba women converts could be generous in response to what they gained from Christianity, giving copiously to their spiritual benefactors out of a free volition. Despite Mrs Hinderer's objection in Ibadan in 1854, she could not restrain a woman convert from bringing her gifts. She observes:

As it is the constant practice to take fowls, cowries, and other offerings to their gods, I thought it necessary to tell her we did not desire she should bring a full hand to us: she said she knew it, but begged we should accept her little present to make her happy.⁴⁸

Thus, in the woman's response though she understood that she was not under any obligation, she maintained continuity in her spirituality before and after conversion.

Missionaries not only refused to take money themselves, they also criticised severely priests and priestesses in the traditional religions who obtained monetary and material

⁴⁶ See CMS/CA2/049/95 D. Hinderer, Journal Entry, Friday 22 June 1849.

⁴⁷ CMS/CA2/019 W. S. Allen, Journal Entry, 9 July 1882.

⁴⁸ Anna Hinderer, *Seventeen Years in the Yoruba Country: Memorials of Anna Hinderer*, 4th ed., C. A. & D Hone, eds (Surrey: Billing and Sons Printers, 1877), p. 102.

rewards for services rendered.⁴⁹ It is important to stress here that missionaries were right in criticising such gifts as extortion, because whenever the Yoruba could not meet the demands of the priestesses and priests of the traditional religions, they turned to Christianity. Such attraction to Christianity is perceivable in the case of a barren woman in Badagry whose husband was asked to sacrifice a goat to *Ifa*. Daniel Coker recalled the man saying, ‘if... the object desired is not got, he will join the Christians and no more worship *Ifa*.’⁵⁰ Nevertheless, such conversions, motivated by pure materialistic considerations, rarely endured the test of time as in the case of Thomas Okiji, an Ake communicant who converted when he needed healing from a chronic illness. However, his conversion was short-lived as he returned to traditional religion in order to secure his inheritance for his brother.⁵¹

Conflicts in Yoruba Women’s Perception of God

Even though the Yoruba concept of God agreed with that of mission Christianity in a number of ways, the fundamental differences between them informed the areas of conflict with Yoruba women’s spirituality. Whereas God’s transcendence is commonly held by both spiritual traditions, they differ on the issue of God’s immanence and how to continue to relate with him in spite of his being far from them. While the Yoruba believed that women were to be held responsible for the decision of *Olódùmarè*, the Yoruba sovereign God, to move his abode far beyond the reach of

⁴⁹ *Yemoja* priestess cited in chapter two was described as a public cheat by Thomas King (See CMS/CA2/061 T. King, Journal, 3 March 1856).

⁵⁰ CMS/CA2/022/28 Daniel Coker, Annual letter, 9 Nov. 1876.

⁵¹ CMS/ CA2/068 J. A. Maser, Journal Entry, 21 October 1854.

humanity,⁵² Christianity did not offer any explanation for God's 'throne' being established in heaven.⁵³

God's transcendence is given expression through Yoruba beliefs and practices, as reflected in the views of Kefer, a German missionary of the CMS, who observed as he passed through the streets of Ibadan in 1851 that though the Yoruba had many houses for the *orisa*, they had no shrine for the Supreme God.⁵⁴ The implication of this is that the Yoruba did not have a religion that was dedicated to the worship of God; rather, they related with him through their pantheon of *orisa*. Similarly, Bowen's interaction with the Yoruba led him to insightful conclusions about their beliefs:

Everybody in that country believes in one true and living God, of whose character they often entertained correct notions. Most of the people worship certain imaginary creatures whom they regard as mediators between God and men.⁵⁵

The fact that Yoruba never saw *Olódùmarè* as *orisa*, or built temples for him and their perception of God tended to affirm Jewish teachings of not making any likeness of God. This did not conflict with mission Christianity⁵⁶. However, the similarities ended with the Yoruba need for a mediator in the *orisa*, rather than the mediatory roles of Jesus Christ emphasised by mission Christianity.

They have, indeed, an idea of one Supreme Being, whom they call Olorun, and who, as they believe, is the Creator of all things; and will often express their good wishes by "God bless you," or "I praise God for your health," &c.; but they virtually deny him, by believing that he takes little or no cognizance of things on earth. They offer him, therefore no sacrifices, and pay him no homage; all their worship is reserved for those

⁵² See E. A. Oyelade, Lecture from African Traditional Religions RCT, Ogbomoso: Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, March 1998.

⁵³ Cf. Psalm 11: 4.

⁵⁴ CMS/CA2/059 J. T. Kefer, Journal 29 December 1855.

⁵⁵ Bowen, *Adventures and Missionary Labours in several countries in the interior of Africa from 1849-1856*, p. 160.

⁵⁶ Cf. Deuteronomy 4: 4-5; 14.

divinities of their own invention, to whom they imagine he has delegated his power, and to whom alone they look for help.⁵⁷

In spite of the differences between Yoruba beliefs and the missionaries' concept of God's transcendence, the common grounds in both traditions of spirituality had potential for facilitating greater chances for the transformation of Yoruba women's spirituality. Women's belief in God's transcendence in the traditional religions, which promoted deep reverence for mediators such as priests and priestesses means that reverence was transferred to missionaries who were seen as God's messengers. This in essence facilitated the peaceful conduct of missionary evangelism, easing other causes of hostility that the missionaries' proclamations usually generated.

An event in Ibadan reminiscent of the biblical account in Acts 14: 13 of an attempt by the priest of Jupiter to deify Paul and Barnabas at Lystra show how missionaries were revered. While Allen, a Yoruba missionary was preaching, he was disrupted as a woman ran out from the crowd and prostrated herself before him, offering kola nuts as a token of peace and cordiality.⁵⁸ Such an attitude, which derived from Yoruba traditional notions of priests and priestesses as representatives of the *orisa*, facilitated the process of spiritual transformation of women as it helped to create a peaceful atmosphere for the missionaries to work. Given a better understanding and interpretation of Yoruba worldview within the context of Christianity, Yoruba women stood a great chance of making easier transition into their new faith process.

However, the greatest hindrance to the transformation of Yoruba women's spirituality was the way they related with the Transcendent which is derived from their belief that

⁵⁷ Tucker, Abeokuta; *Sunrise Within the Tropics: An Outline of the Origin and Progress of the Yoruba Mission*, p. 32.

⁵⁸ CMS/CA2/019 W.S Allen, Journal Extract for 1868.

the gods (*orisa*) were messengers of Olódùmarè. Yoruba belief that each *orisa* was assigned to perform definite functions in the life of an individual or the community, was contrary to mission spirituality that is based on monotheism. The church's insistence on biblical teachings and biblical religion and the belief in monotheistic God means redirecting Yoruba beliefs about God. These teachings permeated the rank and file of missionaries and even cut across denominations. For example, Samuel Crowther, a Yoruba missionary of the CMS argued that the knowledge of the Scriptures was the foundation for a change in Yoruba beliefs, attitudes and practices, especially if the education curriculum was so designed that

...all the elementary school books are extract from the Holy Scripture inculcating all virtues and condemning all vices, and vividly pointing out the folly and superstition of idolatrous worship.⁵⁹

Nevertheless, Yoruba women in the traditional society were intricately committed to the *orisa* and formed a network of affiliations with it right from birth.

Although missionary preaching was used effectively to teach exclusive beliefs in one God, it often resulted in resistance from Yoruba women whose spirituality closely aligned to the pantheon of gods. In this context, biblical teaching and religious dialogue offered the immediate advantage of exposing the cultural state of Yoruba women and the deep seated beliefs of Yoruba about God and their relationship with him. Yoruba women more often than men encountered missionaries as they engaged in their daily chores, thus producing an informal setting for proclaiming the Gospel. Mission Christianity not only attempted to change Yoruba women's perception of God, but also equipped other women to influence their colleagues in giving up their

⁵⁹ E. K. Ekechi, *Missionary Enterprise and Rivalry in Igboland: 1857 – 1914* (London: Frank Cass, 1972), p. 24.

beliefs in a multiplicity of gods and the practices of going from one shrine to another as in the above case.

Thus, apart from the personal contacts, open dialogue with women became a key to engaging with their belief system with a view to changing their spirituality. Interjections from the audience were tolerated and accepted as a means of judging the responses of their listeners. W. S. Allen, for example took full advantage of a woman's objection to a point in his sermon to teach his audience what he considered the right attitude to the worship of God:

He preaches to a hundred people at Eleta. A woman in the crowd interrupts with the praise of her deity *ori*. Allen refutes her by saying that *ori* is merely made of cowries, and only God who made them should be worshipped.⁶⁰

Although Allen's preaching was targeting religious conversion, it equally drew out a fundamental aspect of women's belief about God. Whereas Allen's focus was on God, whom he perceived to be the centre of human devotion, the woman's spirituality, which focused on her person, is a fundamental aspect of Yoruba spirituality that identifies *ori*, which in literal terms means 'head', as a determinant of personal destiny.

Therefore, the woman who responded by chanting her *ori*, was expressing a deep-seated Yoruba spirituality, which places humanity at the centre of existence, rather than God. While such spirituality had relevance for men and women, it was particularly critical for women who were the custodians of the '*ori*' cult in each

⁶⁰ In Yoruba cosmology '*Ori*', literally meaning 'Head' and is used symbolically to describe the Creator who is the 'Head' of all things that exist, or the personal destiny which determines the course of life of a person. CMS/CA2/019 W.S Allen had a permanent preaching stand in Eleta Ibadan in 1868, from where he stood to preach, and many women were his listeners who confronted him on issues fundamental to their spirituality.

family. Hence, by chanting her *ori*, she registered her disagreement with the concept of God Allen's homily was projecting. Her emphasis was that success or failure could only be adduced to personal destiny, which determined the course of every individual on the earth. Though a choice was irrevocable once made, its effects could be ameliorated through worshiping and appeasing *ori*.

Allen succeeded in conveying his message across despite the interruption, contending that *ori* was a mere string of cowries, which, in his view should not replace God as an object of worship. Although Allen disputed with the woman, arguing spiritedly from the Scriptures, the concept of *ori* persists in the Yoruba worldview, both in Christian or non-Christian circles because of its relevance in describing God as the 'Head' of all things. Therefore, through didactic use of preaching, the core beliefs and practices of women were not only challenged, some of them were also effectively aligned with Christian concepts aimed at achieving transformation of Yoruba spirituality.

Women were always quick to defend their position whenever the evangelists touched on the beliefs and practices which animated them and threatened their meaningful relationship with God. Such objections turned extremely hostile and confrontational when missionary perspectives challenged their fundamental values or worldview. Although missionaries considered these differences of beliefs as 'error', and women who opposed them as 'dry bones', they nevertheless made a division between the 'error' and conversion, conceding that the ability to convince or convert rests with the Holy Spirit. As White, a Yoruba missionary observed:

But it is one thing to convince and be convinced of error...it is another thing to convert and be converted. The former is all that we can do. The latter is more the work of the Holy Spirit

which may God vouchsafe to breathe upon the dry bones of our day.⁶¹

It is argued here that where the objections were deep seated as in the case cited above, missionaries were right to absolve themselves of the responsibility for the outcome of the encounter, rather leaving this with the Holy Spirit.

Such conviction that conversion was the prerogative of the Holy Spirit, however, overlooked differences in cosmological worldview discussed in chapter three, which was responsible for the polarities between Yoruba women's spirituality and mission spirituality. Hence, while Robin Horton is right in observing that African cosmology has a two-tier structure, one of the lesser spirits and the other of the Supreme Being,⁶² the attempts of mission Christianity was to totally wipe out the world of the spirits and ancestors. In the thinking of missionaries, such a move would offer Yoruba women the opportunity of relating directly with the Transcendent.

Thus, Yoruba women were major promoters of a polytheistic worldview given their deep seated attachment to the world of the ancestors and spirits. Hence, Yoruba women derived social goal from polytheism rather than strictly religious obligations. Their roles were very critical in sustaining the *orisa* as they offered sacrifices to the gods, and worshipped God through them. The most critical value of polytheistic worship to Yoruba women was that they had the opportunity, not only of serving as officials at the shrines, but also of deriving immediate favours from the gods of the land. Thus, when missionaries such as William Allen, himself a Yoruba, discredited the *egúngún*, by referring to them as 'Aku devil' (the devil worshipped by the

⁶¹ CMS/CA2/087 J. White, Journal entries, 2 – 4 July 1857.

⁶² Robin Horton, 'On the Rationality of Conversion', in *Journal of the International African Institute*, 45, No 3 (1975), p. 1.

Yoruba),⁶³ he attacked a major aspect of the Yoruba cosmological worldview which constituted a significant part of Yoruba spirituality and so underlined the gaps between Christian mission and the Yoruba existence.

While Western forms of spirituality dichotomize between God and the devil, the Yoruba traditional worldview portrays the devil as a messenger of Olódùmarè (God), who is responsible for discharging 'evil' on the disobedient, or contravening worshipers of *orisa* (the gods).⁶⁴ The Yoruba concept is that 'good' and 'evil' were combined in the creation process of the earth - *t'ibi t'ire l'a da ile aye*. Such unification of good and evil in Yoruba women's spirituality was not easy to remove, because both consisted in their experiences. This concept, therefore, promoted the tensions between missionary and Yoruba women's spirituality.

The implication of missionaries' insistence on monotheism as the basis for Yoruba women's Christian spirituality resulted in women's dislocation from the traditional centre of power, meaning and origin. While this study does not pass a value judgement on the appropriateness or otherwise of any of the religious traditions in nineteenth-century Yorubaland, it does agree with scholars such as Parrinder, who points out women's enhanced status as 'priestesses, mediums and exorcists' in the primal religions.⁶⁵ Therefore, the Yoruba women's encounter with mission Christianity not only brought significant decline in their social, cultural, political and religious roles, it also demanded major adjustments in the way they related with humanity and exclusively to *Olódùmarè* (the Supreme God).

⁶³ CMS/CA2/018/16, Journal of William Allen, Abeokuta, 8 May 1865.

⁶⁴ Bolaji Idowu, *Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longmans, 1962), p. 80.

⁶⁵ Geoffrey Parrinder, *Africa's Three Religions* (London: The Camelot Press, 1969), p. 165.

By far the most aggressive challenge to the primal spiritual expressions of women was the missionaries' disruption of Yoruba ritual processes. As Awolalu points out, in each ritual which involved sacrifice, women saw themselves in communion with the Transcendent, either atoning for the sins of the community or supplicating for greater productivity in terms of good harvest or the births of more children.⁶⁶ Although the disruption of such solemn proceedings contravened the most sacred obligation to the *orisa* missionaries were quick to point out that it was a primary obligation, divinely appointed for them, to explain that there is only one God. An account in the journal of Gollmer, a German agent of the CMS at Igbesa in 1854, points out the level of the conflict between the Yoruba on the one hand and the missionaries on the other:

A dozen men and women are singing their god's praises, while a priest sprinkles the blood of freshly killed goat on those present. Gollmer goes up close and with uplifted hand, tells them that God requires no more sacrifice, on account of the sacrifice of Christ. The singing breaks off, and all faces turn in alarm towards him. The two priests 'quietly begged that I would proceed on my way'. Gollmer refuses, saying it is time for him 'to testify to the truth - to lead you in the right way - God sent us to you and if we were silent God would be wrath with us.'⁶⁷

Although such high-handed methods achieved little results either in terms of religious conversion or transformation of spirituality, it draws attention to the determination of missionaries to wipe out every practice that promoted Yoruba primal spirituality. Even as the people demonstrated Yoruba love for peace as they pleaded with Gollmer to leave, he felt compelled to try to convince the people about 'the right way'.

Where Gollmer could be excused on the basis of being an outsider to the core values Yoruba women were protecting through sacrifice, even Yoruba missionaries who knew how vital it was to the spiritual harmony of the community and survival of the

⁶⁶ J. Omosade Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, (London: Longman Group, 1979), p. 137.

⁶⁷ CMS/CA2/043 C. A. Gollmer, Journal Entry, 15 June, 1854.

race, put up a similar challenge as Gollmer. For instance Samuel Cole, a Yoruba missionary interrupted a sacrifice at Abeokuta:

Cole greets them. They ask him not to disturb their sacrifice: 'they are busy now, have you no modesty?' Cole says he will come back later to talk on the folly of worshipping idols: 'will you not allow me to speak to you then? We will hear, said a woman, let him go away, you don't know him, he will try to get you in to speak to you, words which you do not like to hear.' They go on with their sacrifice.⁶⁸

While the women could be acting in ignorance as Cole claimed, the point being made here is that their sacrifice to *orisa* shows the Yoruba perception of God.

Although missionaries attempted to replace sacrifice with prayers, such moves were met with resistance from women. Whereas prayer had always been a major aspect of Yoruba women's spirituality before the advent of Christianity, sacrifices were regarded as the peak of spiritual connectedness with the Transcendent, during which worshippers made supplications for the favour of a particular *orisa*. Thus, a major step in the transformation of spirituality was when prayer took over from sacrifice as a spiritual expression. Charles Phillip, a Yoruba missionary observed that:

One of the proofs of the sincerity of our converts...is the habit of prayer which they have acquired. Nothing of importance is taken by them without first seeking God's assistance in prayers. Before leaving for a journey - before commencing their daily work - before taking or administering medicine, they would ask for God's blessing, protection and assistance.⁶⁹

Thus, while the disruption of sacrifices adopted by Gollmer and Cole was an extreme and hegemonic evangelistic method, the preaching and teachings of Bowen, Crowther and Phillips yielded fruits as women converts expressed their conviction that prayer was more potent than sacrifice. For instance in 1878, a woman in the candidate class of Charles Phillips in Ondo, following the recovery of her husband and brother from

⁶⁸ CMS/CA2/029 S. Cole, Journal Entry, 13 December 1877.

⁶⁹ CMS/CA2/078 C. Phillips, Journal Entry, 28 May 1874.

an illness, asserted that although Africans lived in the midst of evil, 'prayer is more efficacious than sacrifice'.⁷⁰

Despite all the conflicts with the primal spirituality of women highlighted above many women following conversion to Christianity, maintained unflinching trust in God, and as I will show in chapter six, moved towards a form of Christianity adapted to Yoruba culture. But persecution soon followed women's conversion. The fact that persecution was not limited to Yorubaland shows that women's contravention of some of the cultural boundaries was viewed as beginning to affect the society, especially as some women were surrendering their idols and totems of worship to be destroyed. Dandeson Crowther, a Yoruba *Creole* missionary and son of Bishop Samuel Crowther in far away Okrika (a riverine area south-east of what was to become modern day Nigeria), recalls the experiences of a woman simply referred to as 'Atorodibo's wife'. Even in the face of a threat to her life, this woman continued to demonstrate her total allegiance to Christianity. When Okrika women were taken captive by the Ogonis as they travelled by canoe to trade with them, because the Ogonis were aware that Okrika women were converting to Christianity, Atorodibo's wife boldly proclaimed her faith in 'the God of Heaven' whom she believed was more powerful not only to save but also to deliver her from the gods of the Ogonis. In spite of a vow to deal ruthlessly with such women, an Ogoni man who was overwhelmed by the woman's courage and conviction in the saving power of God, saved her and facilitated her escape back to Okrika.⁷¹ Thus, Atorodibo's wife survived the Ogoni's assault on Okrika women.

⁷⁰ CMS/CA2/078 C. Phillips, Journal Entry, 9 March, 1878.

⁷¹ CMS/G3/A3 0 1881, no 36. Dandison Crowther., 'Notes on the Rise and Progress of Christianity at Okrika'.

Hence, even in the face of threats within their community, many women converts such as Oyindala, Bowen's convert in Bi-Olorunpelu,⁷² or Mary Ije, the mother of Thomas King, a Yoruba missionary who was the first catechist of the CMS church at Lokoja in 1841⁷³ relinquished every tangible association with their primal religion.

Conflicts in Yoruba Women's Perception of Life, Death and Afterlife

The enhanced status and role perception of women in society, discussed extensively in Chapter Three, was affirmed in Ondo in 1876 in the people's conviction that women had indispensable roles in maintaining the cycle of existence. While speaking to Charles Phillips of the CMS, a convert identified the womb of a childbearing woman as heaven, which in Yoruba's cosmology provides an incubation site where the spirit of the dead re-enters the world of the living to continue the unbroken cycle of existence between the living and the dead:

The Ondo belief in which he was educated was that there was no heaven elsewhere but within a childbearing woman, where the spirit re-enters as soon as it leaves the body to be born again into the world as an infant. This is why they worship their deceased parents in their children.⁷⁴

Although this belief was central to all Yoruba culture missionaries attacked it and thus introduced major conflicts between Yoruba and mission forms of spirituality.

Whereas God's role was limited as reflected in the Yoruba creation myth, the Christian creation myth puts God at the centre of life, because he was directly involved in the creation process, in which the human male appears to have a major

⁷² Bowen, *Adventures and Missionary Labours in Several Countries in the Interior of Africa from 1849-1856*, p. 158.

⁷³ Tucker, Abeokuta; *Sunrise Within the Tropics*, p. 149.

⁷⁴ CMS/CA2/078 C. Philips, Journal Entry 6 August 1879.

role in the sense that the female was derived from his body.⁷⁵ Furthermore, although childbearing was one of the most exalted roles of women in Yoruba society, the fall of humanity in the Christian cosmological myth once again presented the childbearing image of the woman in a negative light. For instance, in the Church tradition the woman was to blame for the errors of humanity. This is reflected in the views of Augustine and many other Church fathers, as Diarmaid MacCulloch, a European scholar of Reformation Studies says

For Augustine, this crucial moment of the fall described in Genesis 3: 7 was the moment when sexual shame entered the world.... Who had started the disobedience, Augustine asked, and thus ushered in disorder and shame to history? A woman, Eve, when she badgered Adam into plucking the apple off the tree. And so, all women were a threat to order....⁷⁶

Consequent upon her disobeying God's instruction in the Garden of Eden, Eve, and by implication all women were cursed and caused all of humanity to die.

Although neither the Yoruba nor the missionaries' forms of spirituality viewed death as the end of existence, the evangelical eschatology saw death for a Christian as a move to a better place where life continues. Therefore, death was not to be feared; rather it was to be faced with fortitude and joy. On the other hand the Yoruba saw death as a rite of passage into the world of the ancestors where the dead continued to be associated with the living through the regular sacrifices offered to the gods. This was always a major point of conflict in the conversion process.

The evangelicals were critical of what they saw as a negative Yoruba perception of death. They, on the contrary, presented the dying process in a positive light. For

⁷⁵ The creation myth in the biblical worldview which the missionaries held as authentic was that woman was created from man's (Adam) rib. Cf. Genesis 2: 18 – 23.

⁷⁶ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Reformation: Europe's House Divided, 1490 – 1700* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 120.

instance, Gollmer, a German CMS missionary, criticized the chief of Ketu town who requested help so that 'he, his wives and children may not die but live prosper and have peace'. He described them as

poor blind people, their only desire is to live and their only fear is to die, what a contrast between them and a happy believer who can say 'to die is gain'⁷⁷

On the contrary, Yoruba women, who were playing a significant role in the process of preserving the race and the family, could not disagree more; they always affirmed life and never glorified death.

The Yoruba wish for longevity was challenged when illness became protracted and was filled with pains. Christian converts, who must remain strong even in the face of a slow and painful death, were therefore ridiculed by their family members who were non-converts. While it is observable that non-converts could not bear the sight of suffering or even death, Gollmer paid tribute to the women converts who had to show fortitude and cope with such contradictions, even at the point of death:

Gollmer describes the death after a painful illness of an elderly female communicant, 'poor as regards the things of this world, but rich in God.' The old woman's daughter was not a Christian, and Gollmer contrasted the poor suffering old mother, without a complaint, without a murmur and full of comfort, joy and praise- whist on the other hand, her young, strong, healthy and idolatrous daughter was full of trouble, gloom and sorrow, and almost angry with her mother for talking so much about God and heaven and for admonishing her to forsake idols.⁷⁸

Thus, while Gollmer praised the dying woman for exhibiting fortitude, which is an important characteristic of Christian spirituality, he was highly critical of the irreverent attitude of the daughter, who was a non-convert.

⁷⁷ CMS/CA2/043 C. A. Gollmer, Journal Entry, 12 August 1858.

⁷⁸ Ibid

Although the younger woman's attitude to her mother's death-bed experience fell short of Christian spiritual standards, it affirmed Yoruba women's search for meaning to life. Hence, non-converts' efforts to make sense of Yoruba Christian converts' preoccupation with issues of life after death, 'heaven and hell',⁷⁹ the 'slavery of sin and Satan'⁸⁰ and theological comparison between the irrational worship of 'the dead idol' instead of the 'living redeemer'⁸¹ always resulted in more conflicts. In a similar vein, Samuel Cole's journal explains the tensions and conflicts experienced by Matilda Suada, a woman who converted out of personal conviction of the Lordship of Jesus in Abeokuta:

Her conversion in 1860 caused great surprise 'for she was a woman of no ordinary wealth and had respectable families'. She was the only daughter of Efunlola, the richest woman of Ikereku township, who was vehemently hostile to her conversion 'for fear she might not give her a worthy heathen burial...'⁸²

The critical issue in Suada's story was not in her conversion, but in its implications for the mother's destiny, which were very significant. Although she may have loved her mother greatly as an only child, as a Christian convert she could no longer participate in the traditional ceremonies that were significant to Yoruba spirituality. Her mother's opposition to her conversion, therefore hinged on her spirituality which desired a good rite of passage, so that she would be guaranteed a comfortable abode in the 'heaven of the ancestors'.

Apart from her mother's concerns, Suada stood to lose all the benefits due to her when her mother assumed the status of an ancestor, through death, because according

⁷⁹ CMS/CA2/049/95 D. Hinderer, Journal Entry, Friday 22 June 1849.

⁸⁰ CMS/CA2/049/95 D. Hinderer, 'Missionary at Abeokuta, June 12 – Sept 25 1849' Journal, Wednesday 20 June 1849.

⁸¹ CMS/CA2/049/95, D. Hinderer, Journal Entry, 1 July 1849.

⁸² CMS/CA2/029 S. Cole, Journal Entry, 21 December 1876.

to Yoruba beliefs, if Matilda continued to sacrifice regularly to her dead mother she would be protected from negative spiritual forces and gain good health, children, material blessings and business prosperity. Conversely, Suada's desire to be buried in the Christian burial site when she died in 1876 was not fulfilled as her eldest son, Ogun, who though not a convert, nevertheless wanted to grant his mother's wish. He could not prevail on the family,⁸³ and so Suada did not get full benefit of Christian's advantages.

While Suada stood out as an example of a convert who withstood the contradictions of her former spiritual orientation and the oppositions of family members, many women refused to shift their ground when the missionaries' teachings conflicted with Yoruba worldview. In such instances, neither conversion nor the transformation of women's spirituality from its former state was achieved. Thus when William Moore preached to two Egba women who had gone to *Obatala's* shrine to seek for children, their views were very representative of those of many Yoruba women at the time. Upon enquiry as to where they wished to go after death, one of them replied that they would be pleased to go where their ancestors had gone. When pressed further, she revealed what made meaning to Yoruba women and informed the basis of their spirituality in the traditional society:

After further exchange about the condition of the dead, she asserts that 'their deceased fathers... come out from the world of spirit every year in the shape of *Egungun* and Oro, 'to be feasted and given cowries by their descendants, and that 'had there [been] any trouble in the world of spirit they would have told them.'⁸⁴

Although the Egba woman's views stood in clear contradiction of Christian beliefs, it affirmed that the relationship between living and dead was never severed at any stage

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ CMS/CA2/070 William Moore, Annual Letter for 1879.

of existence, as there was a symbiotic relationship between the living and the dead. Despite the missionaries' criticisms of *Egungun* and labelling it as Aku devil,⁸⁵ 'the inhabitants of heaven' (*ara orun*) were central to the Yoruba concept of afterlife. When they made occasional appearances, they were believed to represent the ancestors who had come to visit their 'people'.

While the ancestors watched out for the interest of the living by protecting, blessing and telling them things they needed to know about their present world and the world beyond, the living kept up their memory by sacrificing to them regularly and making feasts in their name. The implicit confidence Yoruba women placed in the ancestors derived from the Yoruba belief that errors made while one was still living were ameliorated in heaven was a place for moral redress. Missionaries' efforts to choose themes according to what they perceived to be the need of their audience failed to achieve the desired results. Their failures could be likened to the experience of Saint Paul in the New Testament who attempted to proclaim the Gospel by engaging the Athenians in a philosophical debate on an inscription at the entrance to their town, which reads: 'to the unknown God'.⁸⁶ But unlike the Athenians who refused to be drawn into a debate with Paul, Yoruba women were always quick to react to any idea that challenged their fundamental spirituality, debating and defending their position freely.

For instance, when Moore chose the blacksmith's shop to speak on the burning lake of fire, he did not bargain for the unusual wit and intelligence of a woman in the group he was talking to. He probably planned to have a psychological effect on his

⁸⁵ CA2/018/16, Journal of William Allen, Abeokuta, 8 May, 1865.

⁸⁶ Cf. Acts 17: 23.

audience, playing on the fear of the people for fire, especially when confronted with its physical reality. However, the woman almost removed the impact of this message completely when she raised a question of Yoruba beliefs in ancestors. Objecting to Moore's theory on the reality of hellfire, she insisted that if there was ever such a place, they would have noticed its effects on the ancestors who regularly visited the living in the form of *Egungun* (masquerade).

It took Moore's exceptional wit to save the embarrassment that could have resulted as he quickly turned the whole thing to a joke:

William Moore speaks to a group in a blacksmith's shop about the burning lake of fire in hell. A woman challenges him on the grounds that they never saw any traces of it on the ancestors who returned as *Egungun*. All round the shop people look at Moore to see how he will reply. 'Why do you think they always cover their bodies entirely with cloth when they appear? A hit; everyone laughs.'⁸⁷

Thus, no matter how hard missionaries worked to present the Christian perspective, the Yoruba women's fundamental belief in and implicit trust in the ancestors, as represented in the *Egungun*, always stood in the way of conversion and even of spiritual transformation in the case of converts.

Whereas Christian concepts were made explicit since missionaries were always preaching about only one heaven and one God, Yoruba cosmology presents two categories of heaven – the 'heaven of the ancestors', and the 'heaven of broken pots'.⁸⁸ When an individual dies, s/he goes to the heaven of the ancestors if adjudged morally upright. If judged to the contrary however, s/he goes to the heaven of broken pots where s/he suffers moral reproof by having all her/his 'evil deeds' scraped off

⁸⁷ CMS/CA2/070 William Moore, Annual Letter for 1879.

⁸⁸ Oyelade, Lecture from African Traditional Religions RCT, Ogbomoso: Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, March 1998.

her/his body with earthen broken pots. Thereafter, s/he would return to the earth with another chance for moral improvement. S/he continues to make the rounds until s/he qualifies to go into the heaven of the ancestors.

It would amount to overgeneralization to assume that the fact that Yoruba women and men challenged the position of missionaries, especially where it touched on their spirituality, meant that there were no shifts in their position. In some cases the theme or image being chosen for the sermon completely captivated women especially when it did not conflict with any of their fundamental beliefs or practices. That was why J. C. Muller, a German missionary of the CMS achieved a positive result, gaining the attention of women as he chose a popular theme of the redemptive power in the blood of Jesus. Motivated by a woman washing clothes, he drew a parallel between the cleansing power in the blood of Jesus that washed away sins in the same way dirt comes out of the cloth that is being washed.⁸⁹ These divergent variations notwithstanding missionaries gained many women converts to Christianity; though their spirituality could not develop.

Summary and Conclusion

Although the main goal of the evangelical missionaries of the nineteenth century was religious conversion, they discovered there was more to the changes they envisaged than an intellectual form of religious expression. In their desire for their converts to gain what Peel describes as ‘a continuous sense of the saving presence of Jesus Christ and of the enthusing power of the Holy Spirit’⁹⁰, missionaries engaged in itinerant

⁸⁹ CMS/CA2/072 J. C. Muller, Journal Entry, January 1864.

⁹⁰ Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, p. 250.

preaching and evangelism which drew them into arguments and conflicts with Yoruba women.

However, women's spirituality conflicted with missionary objectives, which, while not hindering religious conversion, stood in the way of a smooth transformation of spirituality. Although some CMS missionaries such as Joseph Smith, English and J.T. Kefer, German acknowledged the values derived from primal Yoruba spirituality, Henry Townsend, English and David Hinderer, German thought this fell short of a 'spiritual' or 'inward' demonstration of beliefs. Therefore, when the intrinsic values in Yoruba primal spirituality were overlooked, conflicts arose as Yoruba women resisted every move of the missionaries' to promote Western forms of spirituality. Rather, the women demonstrated a spirituality, which conformed to their culture and accepted social norms and patterns. In spite of the major differences in the perceptions of God, they found the Yoruba concepts more meaningful because these offered them higher levels of participation and dynamism in worship, had a revered role for women and offered more in terms of practical benefits.

Even though women resisted changes to their spirituality due to the deep conflicts which appeared not easily resolved, the sheer force of missionaries' conviction broke many of the defences of traditional Yoruba women, thus producing many converts. However, while the task of religious conversion ended with the decision to abandon the *orisa* and take up the Christian books, the more enduring process of teaching and mentoring, which produced strong Christian disciples took much longer. This process of assimilation is the focus of the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

YORUBA WOMEN'S SPIRITUALITY: THE ASSIMILATION OF CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY

Introduction

Yoruba women, especially the non-converts had the greatest confrontations with missionaries in the period following the quarantine, which is the conflict phase examined in the last chapter. Although itinerant preaching did not make much impact in teaching Yoruba women the fundamentals of mission spirituality, it brought them into closer contact with the Gospel message and resulted in significant conversions. However, by the beginning of the 1860s, when European, and even Yoruba missionaries, such as James Okuseinde began to demand a deeper level of commitment among converts,¹ it had become obvious to both converts and the missionaries that conversion was a distinct experience from transformation of spirituality. Hence, making converts was only the beginning of an endeavour to create a community of Christians in Yorubaland. While the two earlier phases brought out the significant divergence in the spiritual orientation of Yoruba women, they highlight the need for a thorough process of assimilation into Christianity, which is the concern of this chapter.

The outworking of policies and practices of the mission churches are examined in this chapter to identify aspects of Yoruba women's spirituality that were totally transformed, ones that changed marginally and those that were unchangeable and therefore remained consistent with Yoruba primal spirituality. Firstly, this chapter examines the response of Yoruba women to discipleship programmes designed as foundations for the formation of a new orientation towards God and society.

¹ CMS/CA2/029/02 J. Okuseinde, Journal Entry, 28 April 1873.

Secondly, it examines the effectiveness of mission liturgy as converts made the transition from primal to Christian spirituality. In the third place, this chapter evaluates the effects of church policies on Christian family and the spiritual formation of women converts who were in polygynous marriages at the time of conversion. Finally, it examines the reactions of Yoruba women to the strategy of using Western education for the formation of Christian spirituality.

Discipleship Programmes and the Formation of Yoruba Women's Christian Spirituality

Yoruba women's encounters with missionaries at the initial stages in the 1840s and 1850s had revealed that the women converts' expressions of beliefs and practices were consistent with what obtained in the traditional society and continued to reflect Yoruba cosmological worldview. Therefore, full assimilation of converts into Christianity became as urgent as making more converts. Olajubu is apt in her observation as she draws attention to the central roles of women in defining, developing and sustaining indigenous religions:

As European and Yoruba missionaries embarked on the Yoruba people's conversion to Christianity, they encountered indigenous religious worldview and value systems that were highly developed and rich in tradition.²

In spite of the significant number of converts between 1860 and 1890, Yoruba women converts continued to show traits of their traditional worldview. The church therefore continued to seek means of integrating women converts into the new community of Christians.

² Olajubu's entire analyses of the symbiotic relationship between gender and power in Yoruba dispel the theory that women's roles in religion were minimal. See Oyeronke Olajubu, *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003).

Thus, Christianization of Yoruba women did not end with religious change, rather the need for changes in all aspects of the converts' attitudes and practices became more critical to their proper integration into a spiritual community that had its own moral, religious, social and cultural identity. Therefore, churches were established as centres for redirecting the spirituality of Yoruba women and men in the second aspect of their relationship with the Transcendent, through discipleship programmes, policies and education.

However, since spirituality is a continuing human developmental process, encompassing all aspects of human experiences³ the earlier influences Yoruba converts had from their spiritual backgrounds in the primal religions and in some cases, Islam⁴ had a significant impact on the ways by which their Christian spirituality evolved. Thus, in the attempt to offer Yoruba a new religion, missionaries also provided them with 'spiritual traditions and corporate settings which fostered their own brand of "spirituality".'⁵ Nevertheless, mission strategies were subject to acceptance, rejection, or adaptation, as Yoruba women responded to Church liturgy, discipleship programmes, church policies on ideal Christian family and education.⁶

Both liturgy and discipleship appeared to be effective means for the Christian spiritual formation of converts, which missionaries employed to induct Yoruba women into

³ Sandra M. Schneiders, 'The Effects of Women's Experience on their Spirituality', in Joann Wolski Conn, *Women's Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), pp. 30 – 31.

⁴ Islam had been established in Yorubaland by 1810 influencing the culture, language and family life before the missionaries arrived in the 1840s. This is evidenced in many of the Arabic words borrowed. For more details, see J. D. Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), pp. 190 – 195.

⁵ David Lonsdale 'The Church as Context for Christian Spirituality' in Arthur Holder (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), p. 239.

⁶ This chapter concentrates on women's acceptance or rejection of mission's practices, teachings and policies, while the next chapter is devoted to adaptation.

Christian beliefs, practices and worship. Discipleship programmes provided wider opportunities for teaching Christian tenets to new converts and complemented church liturgy in evangelical settings where primacy was given to sermons, hymns and prayer in the context of public worship. Thus, a high level of participation in liturgy and discipleship was meant to redirect their spirituality from former worship of *orisa* to absolute trust in the Trinitarian God of Christianity.⁷ Four critical aspects of mission's discipleship processes, which were critical to the transformation of Yoruba women's spirituality, are hereby discussed.

Baptism

Baptism, which missionaries regarded as an outward demonstration of the inner spiritual transformation, was successful in helping Yoruba women move from their primal spiritual orientation to that of Christianity and, for converts, it was an important rite of passage.⁸ After the quarantine period ended, more women converted to Christianity and they were usually in the majority at baptisms, especially in the Ibadan mission station. Anna Hinderer's account of her husband's baptising converts at Ibadan in 1867, shows that the number of women baptized was almost double that of men:

My dear husband was cheered by his interesting service yesterday (Advent Sunday), nine women and five men gathered round him for baptism, and a most interesting sight it was, trusting as we did they were truly converted persons. They looked so earnest, and had been well instructed ; their answers, during the time of preparation, were often quite

⁷ Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (New York: Orbis Books, 2004), p. 50.

⁸ Baptism in nineteenth century Yorubaland, as much as in the early centuries of Christianity was a ritual central to the Christian religious identity signifying the convert's admission into the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. It admits the convert into the sacred meal, the Eucharist (Communion), which is the body and blood of Jesus symbolized in the bread and wine. See Columba Stewart, 'Christian Spirituality during the Roman Empire (100-600)' in Arthur Holder (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), p. 77.

touching, and in the service, instead of That is my desire/ two or three burst forth with I will, I will, I will/ folding the hands in their earnest way, and again to Dost thou believe? Yes, yes, sir, that only I believe and trust in.⁹

Baptism of converts therefore, is a major yardstick for arguing in this thesis that by the middle of the 1860s, although the evangelists had not fully addressed the issue of contextualizing Christianity along with this important rite of passage, Yoruba women's spirituality had begun the process of transformation.

Whereas the baptism of converts, whether male or female signified a sense of spiritual attainment, as far as missionaries were concerned, the more critical test was if there were changes in attitudes and practices of the converts before baptism was granted. Yoruba women as well as their male counterparts, Mrs Hinderer carefully noted, were sincere and earnestly answered the questions posed at them during the baptismal service. Thus, for Yoruba converts, baptism meant more than a change of religion; it was a rite of passage into another religious tradition. Anna Hinderer noted that:

All the fourteen [baptismal candidates] were idolaters not long ago. We now have the idols which some of them used to worship; but some worshipped the god of water, others the god of war, and another the god of thunder.¹⁰

The most remarkable aspect of Yoruba women's attitude to baptism was surrendering all objects (idols) of their former religions to missionaries and taking on the objects of their new faith, thus transferring their belief, trust and allegiance from the *orisa* to God through Jesus Christ.

The fact that baptism brought about a difference to the lives of the converts and the non-converts is significant in the sense of its social implication. This became

⁹ Anna Hinderer, *Seventeen Years in the Yoruba Country: Memorials of Anna Hinderer*, 4th ed., C. A. & D Hone, eds (Surrey: Billing and Sons Printers, 1877), p. 289.

¹⁰ Hinderer, *Seventeen Years in the Yoruba Country*, p. 289.

inevitable because the Catechism taught the converts the statements of the Christian faith and by and large, their lives were being patterned after those of the biblical characters, while their conducts were being moderated by the basic doctrines in the Creed as Ajayi observes:

In these different ways the majority of the early converts, who by the nature of things had to be very keen and zealous, did learn to read in the vernacular at least some portion of the Bible, usually St. Mark's gospel, telling the story of the life of Jesus, or the Catechism setting out the basic doctrine, or a few of the most popular hymns.¹¹

Thus, it was to be expected that the differences of beliefs and practices would separate them. However, because the Yoruba were a socially cohesive people, baptism had the social implication of drawing many people to the church, as Mrs Hinderer observed in the Ibadan mission station that

Many strangers come to church on Sunday, to see if it is true that many of their townspeople have joined the Christian religion. A few Sundays ago seven persons were baptised. In one we were particularly interested; a blacksmith, who seems to have partaken of the true change, and on whom the Spirit of Life has breathed. ...So we have much to make us hope, but we are longing to see new ones coming forward to enlist on the Lord's side¹²

Mrs Hinderer is right in regarding those who did not belong to the church as strangers; nevertheless, rather than creating a separation between converts and their friends, baptism became a means of evangelizing the Yoruba and gaining more converts as well as a useful tool for social cohesion.

Whereas the discipleship programme took the converts through a rigorous process of integration into the church through the catechumens' classes, it was received with

¹¹ J. F. Ade Ajayi, *Christian Mission in Nigeria (1841-1891): The Making of A New Elite* (London: Longman Group Ltd, 1977), p. 132.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 184.

great excitement by both female and male converts, and even enquirers and on-lookers. Although committing portions of the Bible such as St Mark's gospel or The Ten Commandments and the Creed to memory was not as interesting to the converts as the ceremony itself, it served the purposes of engaging and identifying with the Christian story and formed the foundations for contextualizing Christianity.

Even though it was mandatory for the converts to commit long verses of the Bible and some other materials from the Catechism to memory as a precondition for baptism, some exceptions were granted. While these exceptions were based on the earnestness and devotion such as that of Mary Ije, the aged mother of Thomas King, the Yoruba missionary, who was baptised by Mr Muller, not because of her relationship with the missionary, but because of her confession of Christ:

One of those whom Mr. Muller baptised was Mary Ije, the mother of Mr. Thomas King, a catechist at Sierra Leone. She was a very aged woman, and had found it impossible to learn the creed or the ten commandments; but the general state of her mind, her consistent conduct, and the simple earnestness with which, in answer to some question, she replied, "I look to Jesus alone for the saving of my soul," were satisfactory evidences of a meetness for the rite.¹³

The discipleship programmes designed to prepare the converts for baptism were not only thorough; significantly, they also formed a basis for the adaptation of Christianity by Yoruba women converts at the fullness of time, as will be shown in chapter six.

Literacy Programmes

As Walls argues, acquiring the 'divine truth' was a main goal of the discipleship process as 'the word of the master' passes 'through the disciple's memory and into all

¹³ Sarah Tucker, *Abbeokuta: Sunrise Within the Tropics: An outline of the Origin and Progress of the Yoruba Mission* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1853), p. 149.

the mental and moral processes; the ways of thinking, choosing and deciding' and forming new attitudes in the converts both at home and in the society.¹⁴ Hence, David Hinderer, a German agent of the CMS persistently impressed upon his congregants at the Iloko church in the suburban district of Abeokuta, the advantages of literacy programmes over oral tradition. As both converts and non-converts were encouraged to gain the skills, more conversions occurred:

After my address to them, we had some discussion about the Primer, about learning to read and write, I encouraged them to come to school and to send their children, and when among other things I told them that they could talk to a friend at a distance by way of writing without going to that friend's house, they were exceedingly surprised and laughed heartily.¹⁵

Thus, the literacy programmes turned out to be a successful 'means' of seeking converts and of cultivating Christian attitudes and practices in them.

Converts in Itoku church proved Hinderer right that the literacy skills had significant advantage for the development of Yoruba society. Although many people converted to Christianity at Itoku, they did not make the significant progress as those of Iloko church because they neither had printed books at their disposal nor had they yet begun to acquire reading skills as reflected in a journal of Hinderer, a German missionary at Abeokuta:

...meeting the class of communicants in the evening, I had a repetition this time with them, and found that they were very backward in knowledge of divine truth, but really one cannot expect more of people who have not yet a word of scriptures in their hand, and are depending entirely on what they hear and are taught.¹⁶

¹⁴ Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*, p. 50.

¹⁵ CMS/CA2/0/049/95 David Hinderer, Journal Entry, July 14, 1848.

¹⁶ CMS/CA2/0/049/95 David Hinderer, Journal Entry, 14 July 1848.

Thus, while the converts at Iloko would go back home to authenticate lessons taught them in the Scriptures as did the Berean Christian converts in the New Testament;¹⁷ Iloko converts depended on oral tradition even in their learning processes.

Whereas English Language was taught for the sake of commerce and civilization,¹⁸ literacy skills in the local languages were developed so that the converts will read the Bible and other Christian literature in their mother tongue.¹⁹ Thus, the use of literacy programmes as a means of assimilating converts enhanced the spiritual development of Yoruba women converts and prepared them for the period of adaptation.

In Abeokuta, Ibadan and other mission centres, adult literacy for converts took place during the Sunday school as well as on weekdays.²⁰ While learning to read the Catechism, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments were considered most essential for converts, simple Bible stories, hymns and repetition of a verse of the Bible were considered to be adequate for those who could not read or write such as Mary Ije, referred to earlier.

The literacy programme gained acceptance in Ibadan as is clear from the elaborate details of the level of organisation of the Ibadan mission in 1867. A rapid growth in the development of Yoruba women's spirituality was brought about by the richness and variety of materials, the commitment of the teachers and the zeal of converts who faithfully attended Sunday school:

¹⁷ Cf. Acts 17: 11.

¹⁸ See Hope Waddell, in United Presbyterian Missionary Record, p. 146. See also CMS/CMS/CA2/045 Dr Harrison to Venn, 29 May 1862. The arrival of three new missionaries to Abeokuta 'will give a considerable impetus to the progress of the English Language which seems of itself to raise the person who is acquainted with it in the scale of civilization'.

¹⁹ Ajayi, *Christian Mission in Nigeria (1841-1891): The Making of A New Elite*, p. 131.

²⁰ CMS/CA2/085 Townsend, Journal Extract for April to September 1858.

The school consists of men and women, who are most anxiously and diligently reading, and learning to read; men on one side the church, and women on the other... We have about eight or nine classes of different stages; and a very interesting assembly, at the bottom of the church, of those who cannot learn to read. We gather these together and first tell them a short simple Bible story, and let them tell it us again, to see that they remember it, and take it in. Then we teach them a text, or a verse of a hymn, and the last quarter of an hour is always given in all the classes to teaching by repetition some catechism, and sometimes for change we have the whole school together to go over the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments, to make sure they are not forgotten. Oh, what bright, eager, earnest, black, shining faces we have in our African Sunday school! ²¹

As the various Christian literatures became more readily available in the Yoruba language, the early converts were so closely associated with their books that they were called 'people of the book' (*onibuuku*). However, books went beyond the original purpose the missionaries intended them to serve as facilitators of the assimilation process to Christianity. As books replaced the totem of *orisa* for women, and men too began to surrender their symbol of *Ifa* divination known as *ikin Ifa*,²² books therefore became an object of power for Yoruba converts.

Significance of Books to Discipleship to the Process

Books are significantly tied to the success of the discipleship programme because a significant difference between Yoruba traditional religions and Christianity is that whereas power is preserved in the totems and symbols of worship in the primal society, the Christian community was being developed on the basis that all powers in heaven and on earth rest in faith in Jesus as the Christ. Thus, while power is perceived as a tangible aspect of worship in Yoruba cosmology, Christianity views power as invisible where nothing exists or even terminates outside of God.

²¹ Hinderer, *Seventeen Years in the Yoruba Country*, pp 289 – 290.

²² CMS/CA2/061 T. King, Journal Entry 2 December 1850.

The transition was incomprehensible to Yoruba women converts when missionaries demanded that they surrender their idols and no attempt was made to give them a substitute object of worship. Yoruba women therefore held the books as the objects of worship in their new religion. While missionaries thought that they had separated their converts from idolatry, Yoruba culture precluded women from accepting their being 'powerless' and vulnerable to the non-converts who would begin to bewitch them. Thus, Yoruba women did not perceive the books in terms of their functions in the discipleship and liturgical processes alone; they were also viewed as objects of power.

Coincidentally, the non-converts perceived the books with the same sacredness with which they regarded their idols. Whereas, very few women were admitted into the Yoruba *Ifa* cult, which was regarded as the custodian of deep mysteries, women were freely admitted into the 'cult' of the literate elite that was emerging through Christianity. Associating the Bible and Primer with power, therefore, gave the impression that the books were equivalent of the charms and incantations that were used in primal religions for devious purposes. In Ibadan for example, a female convert who had become verse in reading the Primer was accused of using its power to bewitch the man her family had betrothed her to marry.²³

Whereas in the primal Yoruba society, knowledge was the reserve of people with high status, such as kings and the older members of the community; the introduction of the Bible and the Primer removed such a privilege, because they were being learnt by

²³ CMS/CA2/058 S. Johnson, Journal 7 August 1875.

people of every age group and social classification, and of both genders. Conversely, *Ifa*, the repository of wisdom among the Yoruba, remained a primary cult limited by status, and into which only few men were admitted, and fewer women, still.²⁴ Therefore, Yoruba considered it a privilege when women were given access into the Bible and Primer, which replaced 'ikin' *Ifa* and admitted women and 'girls' into the world of wisdom.²⁵

Translation

Translation work however was the key to the discipleship programmes, because the missionaries rated comprehension far more than ownership or idolizing of the books. Not only did comprehension help gain more converts, the spiritual formation of converts were also being affected by their knowledge of the biblical events. Although translation work had begun while the Yoruba agents of the CMS such as Samuel Crowther were in Sierra-Leone, responsiveness of the converts encouraged missionaries to translate more literature so that the people could learn the Scriptures in their heart language:

The 'interpretation of tongues' was among Mr Crowther's most important occupations. And he had already sent home the Gospel of St. Luke, the Acts of the Apostles, and the Epistle to the Romans, besides a translation of Watts First Catechism. He had revised a Yoruba primer, which had been prepared by Mr Townsend and Mr Gollmer in England, and its appearance at Abbeokuta in print was hailed with delight by his hundred-and-eight Sunday adult scholars. Half their difficulties vanished when they found that the strange characters now conveyed to them some familiar sound; they were never tired of reading it; several of them committed the whole to memory...²⁶

²⁴ Olajubu, *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere*, p. 117.

²⁵ See CMS/CA2/090 D. Williams, Journal 12 February 1867.

²⁶ Tucker, *Abbeokuta: Sunrise Within the Tropics: An outline of the origin and Progress of the Yoruba Mission*, p. 156.

Thus, while many missionaries, such as Hinderer and Townsend of the CMS and Bowen of the Baptist mission, played significant roles in the translation process, the contributions of Crowther, a Yoruba missionary was outstanding.

Crowther's publication of a book, *Grammar and Vocabulary of the Yoruba Language* in 1852, the first of such enterprise by a native speaker, also served the purpose of motivating many efforts in such directions.

The outcome may be seen in the durability of the Yoruba version of the scriptures to which Crowther was the chief contributor and in the vigorous vernacular literature in Yoruba that has grown.²⁷

A major step in defining the spirituality of Yoruba women was David Hinderer's translation of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, a classic on Christian spirituality that allegorises the life journey of a Christian, into Yoruba language. While the Bible taught Christian doctrines, *Pilgrim's Progress* focussed on the spiritual journey of Christians in the face of distractions, trials and tribulations.²⁸

By 1867, women converts in Ibadan overstretched their resources to buy the *Pilgrims Progress* as the Hinderers used it as a family devotional in their large family consisting of children in their boarding school. Although all the children found the stories captivating, Anna Hinderer observed particularly how Ogunyomi, a young woman found comfort in the stories, which to her were spiritually fulfilling and therapeutic at a time she had to cope with the pains of 'whitlow':

The Pilgrims Progress is becoming appreciated by our people. My class of women on Sunday afternoons are greedy for it; we each read a paragraph, and talk about it; and on the Sunday evenings, after a little Scripture-repeating, and hymn-singing,

²⁷ Andrew Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (New York and Edinburgh: Orbis Books and T&T Clark), p. 160.

²⁸ CMS/CA2/0/049/96 David Hinderer, Journal Entry, 20 October 1848.

I read it with my girls, and D. with the boys; they are perfectly charmed. Ogunyomi is suffering fearfully from a whitlow: she said if we could always read Pilgrim she might forget the pain. Their open mouths and exclamations, when the full meaning of something in it presents itself vividly before them, are most entertaining.²⁹

Although the book was 'a little expensive for them' many of the girls 'are preparing their money to buy it, and then it will go to farms and houses, and be quite the family book'.³⁰

The success of using discipleship programme to create new ways of life for the Yoruba was such that it put in place a foundation for Yoruba women in their search for new ways of making meaning and of relating with the Transcendent. The strategy became widespread in virtually all the missionary centres so that Bowen, the pioneer Baptist missionary, became a student of Yoruba language and this yielded great dividend in his publication of a *Grammar and Dictionary of the Yoruba Language* in 1858. Bowen's biographer, E. A. Ayandele observes that his concentration on the formation of nouns and description of verbs at such an age and time won the acclaim of linguists.³¹

The Effectiveness of Mission Liturgical Process on Yoruba Women's Spirituality

Even though liturgies were in oral forms in the primal religions, transition to the process whereby the priests read aloud from the written format and the congregants gave appropriate responses was not so difficult because literacy programmes had prepared Yoruba women for participating meaningfully in the liturgy. However, the effectiveness of the liturgy was also closely tied to the effective use of the mother

²⁹ Hinderer, *Seventeen Years in Yoruba Country*, p. 191 – 192.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ T. J. Bowen, *Adventures And Missionary Labours in Several Countries in the Interior of Africa From 1849 to 1856* (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd, 1968), p. xiv.

tongue, which Crowther and the other missionaries had observed while preaching to the freed slaves in Sierra Leone:

We have mentioned that before Mr Crowther left Sierra Leone, he had translated part of the liturgy into the Yoruban language; this he now used, and found how suitable it was to the wants and feelings of his people.³²

Apart from evoking an emotional response from both preachers and listeners, formal liturgical process also stimulated a positive and spontaneous response to the message.

Hence, the use of the mother tongue greatly facilitated the development of Yoruba women's spirituality, bringing back the reminiscences of the joy that filled the hearts of Crowther and his audience the first time he proclaimed the gospel in Yoruba language:

...it is interesting to see what were his feelings of joy and thankfulness, and deep self-abasement, when in January 1844, he stood forth the first ordained native minister of Western Africa, to proclaim the Gospel of salvation, in their own tongue, to hundreds around him, rescued like himself from slavery of body and mind, and invited them to enter into the glorious liberty of the sons of God.³³

The success of the translation work on the way the Yoruba received the formal liturgies was significant. Whereas the people had been suspicious of the returnees' motive for bringing a new religion into Yorubaland, when Crowther read the scriptures, preached the sermon and pronounced the blessings in Yoruba, the congregation responded with a loud shout of "Ke oh sheh, Ke oh sheh - so let it be, so let it be!"³⁴

³² Tucker, *Abbeokuta: Sunrise Within the Tropics: An outline of the origin and Progress of the Yoruba Mission*, p. 155.

³³ *Ibid*, p. 92.

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 93.

Hymns

The issue of using Yoruba language to minister to the Yoruba brought a new dimension to the development of Yoruba women's spirituality instilling greater confidence in them not only to memorize the Scriptures, but also to begin to compose hymns in Yoruba language. Whereas missionaries had attempted in the past to transfer Christian practices and attitudes to Yoruba women without being mindful of their rich cultural heritage, James White, a Sierra-Leone born Yoruba catechist,³⁵ changed this trend by composing Christian hymns, following the pattern and rhythm of the indigenous musical tradition.

However, a few westernized Yoruba returnees from Sierra Leone, especially the Egba congregations at Abeokuta argued that rendering the Christian message in the native tongue could impair the truth being conveyed in the hymns. Townsend encouraged them to regard the development as a positive one. He however made note of the objections of the Egba group in one of his journals:

Some of their Christian hymns, words and tunes being of native composition...Some of my carriers (Egba converts), were rather scandalized at the attempt, but I encouraged them to view it in a better light.³⁶

The fears of the Egba converts were not unfounded however, because the Yoruba language could be manipulated by converts whose Christian theology was not yet deep, as White experienced at a later time in Otta, in the above example.³⁷ James Johnson also advocated for a reform of the liturgy and insisted that they must be

³⁵ CMS/CA2/ 087 James White, Journal Entry Otta from 1854 – 1890.

³⁶ CMS CA2/085 H. Townsend Journal Entry 29 August 1857.

³⁷ See CMS/CA2/ 087 James White, worked as catechist at Otta, 1854 – 1890.

suiting to local conditions and concerns, and recommended these songs for use in other stations.³⁸

Undoubtedly, the use of the mother tongue had a serious impact on the assimilation of Yoruba women into Christianity because they were in the forefront of hymn singing, composition and memorizing of Scriptures. Crowther gave his support to the strategy of adapting locally-composed hymns for religious purposes because for him they were songs 'of suitable scriptural compositions of their own adapted to their native airs.'³⁹

Prayer

Although missionaries succeeded in adapting the hymns to suit local settings, there were significant differences in the prayer patterns of the missionaries and Yoruba women converts. Whereas missionary prayer focussed on the divine, Yoruba women's propitiation was for personal enrichment. Thus, although prayer was a major element in the formation and development of Yoruba women's spirituality the form and content of Yoruba prayer did not fit into missionaries' concept of praying. Even though there were areas of agreement between the two traditions, areas of divergence between the prayer patterns of Yoruba women coming out of the primal society and those of evangelical Christians, were significant.

Whereas every expression of hope meant prayer to the Yoruba, because prayer to them could also be an expression of goodwill, missionaries differentiated between prayers and wishes. For instance, Townsend's expression of hope that missionaries

³⁸ CMS/CA2/056 The Rev. James Johnson, Report on Otta August 1877.

³⁹ CMS/CA3/04 Crowther to Venn, 6 November 1866.

would fulfil the good plans they had for the Yoruba, during his maiden visit to Abeokuta was responded to by those who had gathered in the King's court to welcome him with resounding 'amin o' (Amen).⁴⁰ The Yoruba believed that God was inherently present in every good wish and plan, initiating it, and working it out through human agents. However when it was not a wish then it was a request. The prayers of Yoruba women therefore usually consisted of requests for safety of children, protection from real or imagined enemies, business prosperity, personal and communal peace.

Hence prayers occupied a large space in the life maps of Yoruba women, constituting important elements in the rites of passage such as wedding and the birth of a baby. Therefore, when women converted to Christianity, it was not the concept of prayer that posed problem, but its focus. Whereas Yoruba primal prayers could be addressed to a divinity or a human authority, Parrinder observes that monotheists such as missionaries who made every request to God through Christ could not perceive that the purpose was to call upon all the varied powers for provision and protection.⁴¹

Although the Yoruba perceived the convergence of the gods as the peak of worship, by virtue of the particularity of the Christian message, missionaries did not share the polytheistic views of the Yoruba. Such difference was what a female European observer of the nineteenth-century events in Yorubaland meant by saying that Yoruba prayers do not qualify as spiritual worship. The prayers coming from the polytheistic worldview of the Yoruba 'can, of course, be no spiritual worship', because they were being 'offered to their imaginary deities':

⁴⁰ Tucker, *Abbeokuta: Sunrise Within the Tropics*, p.

⁴¹ Geoffrey Parrinder, *Africa's Three Religions* (London: Sheldon Press, 1969) p. 71.

no confession of sin, no prayer for pardon, no supplication for the Holy Spirit, and no thanksgiving for redemption can come from their hearts or lips..., Make me rich,” ‘make me healthy’, ‘Give me children’, ‘Avenge me of my enemies’, are the only petitions that a poor Yoruban ever offers to his god.⁴²

Conversely, rather than confessing sins or seeking for pardon, Yoruba traditional worship focused on the basic needs, petitions and requests for goodwill and well being.

Another significant difference between Yoruba and mission Christianity prayers was the extemporaneous nature of Yoruba prayers, which differs from the Anglican and Episcopal traditions which were in written format and usually began with confessions. Contrary to Yoruba prayer patterns, which reflected evil wishes for the enemies, and invokes God’s punishment on them, missionary prayers requested for pardon for enemies. Hinderer noted a malicious song by non-converts, praying for evil to come on the converts in the mid of the night, in his journal entry:

Whilst I am writing this during the first watch of the night, I hear the devilish songs against the ‘Book people’ such as “with those who take book, it shall never be well.”⁴³

However as soon as converts began to accept the principle of praying for the enemy, non-converts were dismayed at that the ‘Book people’ were willing to forgive them unconditionally:

The comprehensiveness of the prayers in the Litany particularly struck them; and even bigoted idolaters, if they happened to come in at that part of the service, were astonished at Christians praying for their enemies.⁴⁴

⁴² Tucker, *Abbeokuta: Sunrise Within the Tropics: An outline of the origin and Progress of the Yoruba Mission*, pp. 37 – 38.

⁴³ CMS/CA2/0/049/96 David Hinderer, Journal Entry, 20 October 1848.

⁴⁴ Tucker, *Abbeokuta: Sunrise Within the Tropics: An outline of the origin and Progress of the Yoruba Mission*, p. 155.

Thus, by and large, the process of making meaning through prayer began to differentiate converts from non-converts in nineteenth-century Yorubaland.

Although prayer meant much to the Yoruba in general, it was particularly important for developing Christian instincts of Yoruba women. Right from the primal Yoruba societies, '*Ekun Iyawo*', the bridal lamentation for a woman on the eve of her wedding consisted of qualities women regarded as providing the 'good life', such as childbearing, because 'prayers for children and appearances at every available shrine in order to secure them and keep them healthy are the prime essence of women's spirituality, like men, they believe that life is meaningless unless one bears children'⁴⁵. Similarly, a woman who prospered in her vocation or business and made much wealth was regarded as an asset and she enjoyed immense popularity in her matrimonial extended family.⁴⁶

Even though marriage was a time of celebrations, bridal lamentation constituted meaning to the life of Yoruba women who had to make some rituals, seeking the favours of the divinities to give her children, wealth, and protect her against enemies, infant mortality (*abiku*), sicknesses, and losses. Adeoye observes that bride would usually kneel before the elders and mutter words such as the ones below in her lamentation poetry:

*Baba e sure fun mi pe
Ki n ma f'abiku se 'le
Ki abiku ma fi ile mi se ode,
Ki ta'run t'ofu maa gbe gbe wo mi,
Ki t'owo t'omo ya le ke si mi.
Ile ti n ba wo ko di 'le owo
Baluwe ti won ba we mi si,*

⁴⁵ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, 'The Empowering Spirit of Religion', in Ursula King, ed., *Feminist Theology from the Third World: A Reader* (London: SPCK, 1994), p. 368.

⁴⁶ She is regarded as having good fortune (*aasiki*) and she benefits those around her.

Bi eniyan fe bi eniyan ko fe
Ki ibi omo mi sun ibe.
*E sure ki n ma k'elenini ni'le oko.*⁴⁷

Father, pronounce your blessings
That *abiku* will not attend my way
That *abiku* will not reside in my quarters
That sickness and losses may not cast their glances at me
But that wealth and children may beckon on me
That my residence will be congenial for money
My abode will be attractive for children
Wherever I have my bridal bath
Whether the enemy likes it or not
Will be the resting place of my baby's placenta
That I will not encounter distracters
In my matrimonial home.⁴⁸

The introduction of prayer in the liturgical process, however, began to give bridal prayers a deeper level of relationship with the Supreme God rather than the elders as in the primal society. Secondly, rather than cursing the enemies, the bride prayed for their forgiveness, bringing young women into a new relationship with God and making them become more magnanimous in their relationship with others and matured in their perception of God.

Apart from restructuring the various forms of praying, the evangelical tradition also regarded childbirth as a unique occasion in the life of a woman, hence the composition of a special prayer to mark the distinctiveness of a woman's experience. Thus, evangelical 'Prayers for the Churching of Women' reflected a pervading sense of danger similar to '*Ekun Iyawo*' in the Yoruba spiritual tradition. Although there were some significant differences, which reflected divergence in Yoruba worldview and Christian spiritual orientation, the concept of the presence of the enemy was

⁴⁷ C. L. Adeoye, *Asa Ati Ise Yoruba* (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 228.

⁴⁸ A literal translation of the bridal lamentation cited above.

however equally strong in both traditions. Prayers for the Churching of Women open with a deep sense of appreciation:

I am well pleased: that the Lord hath heard the voice of my prayer; that he hath inclined his ear unto me: therefore will I call upon him as long as I live. The snares of death compassed me round about: and the pains of hell gat hold upon me. I found trouble and heaviness, and I called upon the Name of the Lord: O Lord, I beseech thee, deliver my soul. Gracious is the Lord, and righteous: yea, our God is merciful.⁴⁹

Whereas in primal Yoruba spirituality, prayers were directed through divine agents such as ancestors or human agents such as parents, priests or priestesses, Christianity directs all requests to God through Christ. In '*Ekun iyawo*' (bridal lamentation), however, prayers were directed to the Transcendent through the parents of the bride, who as representatives of the divine were endued with special abilities to pronounce blessings, by the virtue of their role in the conception, birth and nurture of the young woman.⁵⁰

A major difference between Yoruba spirituality and that of the evangelicals however was the tendency to overlook the role of human agents in spiritual matters, which is reflected in the priest's emphasis while ending his prayer for the churching of women:

Grant, we beseech thee, most merciful Father, that she, through thy help, may both faithfully live, and walk according to thy will, in this life present; and also may be partaker of everlasting glory in the life to come; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*⁵¹

Whereas the priest emphasizes eschatological issues, the babalawo (*Ifa* priest) focussed on '*Ifa Esentaye*' (life journey divination) for the future of the child.⁵²

⁴⁹ *The 1662 Book of Common Prayer* (London: John Bill, etc, 1678).

⁵⁰ Parents, especially mothers invoke the powers associated with the blood that was shed during labour and the ties of the umbilical cord, which though physically broken, is spiritually re-enacted.

⁵¹ *The 1662 Book of Common Prayer*.

⁵² *Otototo Babalawo olowo*

Lo difa fun Olowo

Otototo ni jokun Babalawo

The distinguished diviner for the rich

Divined for the rich

The special diviner for the wealthy

Coincidentally, it was *Ifa Esentaye* who divinely prevented Afala, Samuel Crowther's mother from consecrating him to any of the divinities of the Yoruba, because *Ifa* specifically predicted that the child was destined to serve only the Supreme God.⁵³ Incidentally, Crowther did not only become a missionary of the CMS, he was the first person to be ordained among the agents of the CMS in Yorubaland and later consecrated as a Bishop.

Although there was a general apathy toward adopting primal beliefs into the process of assimilating Yoruba women into the community of Christians, David and Anna Hinderer made an exception as they gave a Christian interpretation to the name of Olaotanmo ('Honour or riches shall never cease'), one of their women converts at Ibadan in 1860. While speaking with Olaotanmo and her two friends, the Hinderers observed that starting from what they understood was the best way to change the orientation of Yoruba women:

We talked of the honours and riches of the world, and of those she was now seeking in Christ our Saviour, the nothingness of the one, the truth of the other. At the sacrifices and worship at her birth, honour and riches were promised, but what has she seen of them? Sorrow, trouble, pain, and poverty, instead; and what would they have done for her in the life to come? But what God promises in Christ Jesus shall never fail us: He will never deceive us. She was intensely interested in this little talk on her name.⁵⁴

Thus, Olaotanmo benefited immensely from the Hinderers using the Yoruba process of making meaning in the traditional society as a starting point in their proclamation that 'Christ Jesus' 'shall never fail' or 'deceive' his followers. However, as much as

<i>L'o difa fun Oloro</i>	Divined for the wealthy
<i>K'a je pa ka gbon owo re poroporo</i>	That we may consume it and shake the hands free
<i>Babalawo Olomo lo difa fun Olomo</i>	The diviner for the child-seekers divined for parents

For fuller details on *Ifa Esentaye*, see Adeoye, Asa ati Ise Yoruba, p. 233.

⁵³ Cited in Jean Decorvet and Emmanuel Oladipo, *Samuel Ajayi Crowther: The Miracle of Grace* (Lagos: CSS Bookshops, 2006), p. 59.

⁵⁴ Hinderer, *Seventeen Years in Yoruba Country*, pp. 222 – 223.

Yoruba women derived so much interest and meaning from Christian spiritual orientation given them through discipleship programmes and church liturgy, church policy on polygamy hindered the progress of transiting from primal to Christian spirituality.

Monogamy and the Development of Yoruba Women's Spirituality

The major setback that Yoruba women converts experienced in their transition from their primal to Christian attitudes and practices was due to the church's handling of the issue of polygamy. Yoruba women's family life was challenged as they were severely penalised for their implication in polygyny, an African system of marriage over which they had no control. Although Yoruba women adjusted their spiritual lives in keeping with the discipleship programmes and church liturgy, such as replacing the primal process of prayer with that of Christianity and replacing the totems of worship with the 'Books', church policy on polygamy, nevertheless, denied them membership of the church. While many women were already in polygyny, the marriage system that enables a man to marry more than one wife,⁵⁵ conversion to Christianity did not make a provision for them to gain full membership of the church.

Ironically, many of the Christian emigrants from Sierra-Leone on whom hopes had rested that they would be the foundation members of the church in Abeokuta had succumbed to the influence of the local people in 'following the evil custom of the country' and already accumulated 'a plurality of wives.'⁵⁶ Thus, enforcement of monogamy as a prerequisite for baptism denied many women the opportunity of

⁵⁵ For more on polygyny, see Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, *Recruiting Ourselves* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1994), pp. 74 – 75, 211 – 212. See also Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), pp. 143 – 147, 161 – 162, 166, 201.

⁵⁶ Tucker, *Abbeokuta: Sunrise Within the Tropics: An outline of the origin and Progress of the Yoruba Mission*, p. 41.

developing Christian character and undertaking Christian's rite of passage for gaining full membership of the Church. Whereas the position of women in a polygynous marriage in the nineteenth century was ambivalent as societal ethics prevented them from rejecting the common values associated with it,⁵⁷ their means of enjoying further fellowship within the church appeared to have terminated with their marital status.

Paradoxically, an African woman of the nineteenth century was in a precarious circumstance socially that made it unwise for her to express her dissatisfaction when her husband took another wife. Any married woman who challenged polygyny was perceived traditionally as being jealous, and such allegation could lead to more serious accusations such as witchcraft, especially in a context when infant mortality was very high. Although it would appear from the arguments of male observers such as Ayandele⁵⁸ and Ekechi⁵⁹ that women accepted polygyny because it reduced their domestic burden, several ancient Yoruba folk-tales and philosophy proved such notion to be otherwise.⁶⁰ Hence, the silence of women to the indulgent attitude of men in the traditional society was not unconnected with the negative portrayal of women who protested as jealous and therefore dangerous to the safety of children of the compound and survival of the race.

⁵⁷ Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, p. 145.

⁵⁸ E. A. Ayandele, *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria 1842 – 1914* (London: Longman, Green & Co Ltd, 1966), p. 335.

⁵⁹ E. K. Ekechi, *Missionary Enterprise and Rivalry in Igboland: 1957 – 1914* (London: Frank Cass, 1972), p. 20.

⁶⁰ A common Yoruba song debunks such claims of a woman seeking relief from domestic work:

<i>A gboko le'ri kii p'antete o</i>	The proud owner of the husband cannot be careless
<i>A gboko le'ri, A gboko le'ri, kii p'antete o</i>	The proud owner of the husband cannot be careless
<i>B'o ba p'antete ategun a gboko lo</i>	If she is, the wind blows off the husband
<i>A gboko le'ri, A gboko le'ri, kii p'antete o</i>	The proud owner of the husband cannot be careless

This is a metaphoric way of warning a woman to concentrate on her domestic work, because failing to do so amounts to carrying her husband on her head without holding him with two her hands. Such behaviour, it is believed, may result in the 'wind' blowing away the husband from her head.

A common philosophical statement among the Yoruba: '*Orisa je n'pe meji obirin ko si*', ('no woman prays to the gods for a deputy in her home') shows that women's silence could not be interpreted as an endorsement of the system, rather as a matter beyond their control. Furthermore, women in polygyny tended to be emotionally restricted towards their husbands, because public display of affection either in the home or outside in the full glare of other women was socially inappropriate. A polygynist is not regarded only as a husband but more as father of the compound. Isichei's observation that 'the lives of women who found a polygamous household less than wholly emotionally satisfying tended to revolve round their children'⁶¹ sums up the precarious situation of African women in polygyny and the way they consoled themselves.

The problems of Yoruba women from polygynous relationships are further compounded by the church's handling of their status. The fact that missionaries were divided along racial lines: that is Africans versus Europeans on the question of baptism of women from polygynous compounds shows that the system was one of the ways by which African patriarchy can be defined. While African missionaries were convinced that women from polygynous homes should be baptized and admitted into full membership of the church, Western missionaries viewed polygamy as incompatible with the teachings of the church.

Although Crowther's baptism of women from polygynous settings was a violation of the standard and principle of the church on one man one wife, his argument that

⁶¹ Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Nigeria* (London, Lagos, New York: Longman, 1983), p. 259.

women were not the offenders but mere ‘involuntary victims of a social institution’⁶² appears impeccable. The fact that he left out the men shows fairness, because the man who had more than one wives was the culprit if polygyny was an offence, while the women were mere victims of a circumstance over which they had no control. Among many others in the early days of conversion in the 1840s, Crowther’s mother, Afala was from a polygynous compound, because Crowther had other half brothers who took care of his mother while he was in the liberated slaves camp in Sierra Leone.

The tradition of regarding women within a polygynous relationship with sympathy was not limited to missionaries of African origin, who had a deeper understanding of the limitations imposed on women by the African culture. Mary Slessor, the female pioneer missionary of the Presbyterian mission at Calabar, one of the prominent centres for missionary activities of the nineteenth century in West Africa, also regarded polygamy as an injustice to women. Although she reprimanded the two young wives of a chief who were caught in adultery, she argued that men had the blame for the women’s indecency since they lacked due attention from their husbands in a polygamous setting.

Whereas Mary Slessor did not condone the women’s lack of chastity, she was further persuaded to be stern by a male convert, Okon, who pointed out that the people ‘will say that God’s word be no good if it destroy the power of the law to punish evildoers’.

Thus, facing the offending wives of the Calabar chief, Slessor said:

You have brought much shame on us by your folly and by abusing your master’s confidence while the yard is in our possession. Though God’s word teaches men to be merciful, it

⁶² CMS/CA2/031 Crowther to Venn, 3 January 1857.

does not countenance or pass over sin, and I cannot shelter you from punishment.⁶³

Nevertheless, Mary Slessor's perception of men as the chief culprit shows that the church ought to have taken a more lenient approach on the process of admitting women into the membership of the church. She took advantage of the situation to express her wholesome condemnation of polygyny, blaming the men because in her view the system was unjust to women:

Ay, but you are really to blame. It is your system of polygamy which is a disgrace to you and a cruel injustice to these helpless women. Girls like these, sixteen years old, are not beyond the age of fun and frolic. To confine them as you do is a shame and a blot on your manhood: obedience such as your command is not worth the having.⁶⁴

Thus, while men committed an offence by taking on more than one wives, women were made to pay the penalty for the indulgency of their husbands.

Apart from the sympathetic stance of Slessor and those of some African missionaries such as Crowther, the official position of the CMS was not helpful to women. For example, Henry Venn (1796-1873), honorary secretary of the CMS (1841-1872), who left an indelible mark on the development of Christianity in Africa, took a position on polygyny that led to the weakening of the position of women in the church. Both he and Bishop Weeks of Sierra Leone, in 1856, vehemently opposed baptizing wives of polygynists. While Weeks paid his maiden visit to Yorubaland and the Niger as bishop, he discovered to his dismay the practice of baptizing wives of polygamists, to which he expressed the serious objection of the Anglican Communion.

⁶³ I Schapera, ed., David Livingstone, *Livingstone's Missionary Correspondence, 1841-1856* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961), p. 42.

⁶⁴ Livingstone, *Livingstone's Missionary Correspondence*, p. 42.

Crowther, however, argued that his decision was not an indication of support for polygamy, insisting, 'I have never at any time had a doubt in my mind as to the sinfulness of polygamy and as contrary to God's holy ordinance from the creation and confirmed in the time of the flood'.⁶⁵ He pleaded that if missionaries were allowed to use their discretion, with time Christianity would permeate the culture of the Yoruba and redress such matters without creating new problems of social disequilibrium:

We use our discretion that such practices which the laws of the country allow, but not being among those in immediate requirements necessary for salvation, but which Christianity after a time will abolish, are not interfered with.⁶⁶

Ironically, the second major opposition came from Henry Venn, the ardent advocate for the development of authentic African Church. His response to Crowther's plea was even more vehement than that of Bishop Weeks. Contrary to Crowther's opinion, Venn insisted that monogamy was one of the minimum requirements of the church for salvation. Arguing from the Scriptures, he alluded to Jesus' teachings on marriage in Matthew 19: 1-10 and Mark 10: 2-11:

...it is written, 'Let every man have his own wife and let every woman have her own husband.' God's standard for all nations is one and cannot be varied because of the social status or circumstance of any people, nor can the standard be varied in a new church from what obtained in the old.⁶⁷

Although Venn's opinion that women caught up with polygamy was to denounce it, and afterwards be admitted into the church was affirmed by many European missionaries and confirmed by the Lambeth conference in 1888, the women were the ultimate losers.

⁶⁵ CMS/CA2/031 Crowther to Venn 3 January 1857. This was Ajayi Crowther's response to Henry Venn's paper titled 'Christian Marriage in African Society' in which the latter concluded that Christ regarded polygamy as adultery and that the church cannot and must not vary it.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ CMS/CA2/031 This is the thrust of Venn's paper that was sent as the *Annual Report of the C. M. S. 1857*, which was later turned to a pamphlet titled 'Christian Marriage in African Society' 1857.

While Venn's position negated his plea for contextual Christianity in Africa, Crowther's practical appeal was that African cosmology be allowed time to blend with Christian spirituality so that 'leaf' would eventually become 'soap' as predicted variously by two Yoruba missionaries of the CMS, J. White and M. J. M. Luke in 1856 and 1881 respectively.⁶⁸ The Church's insistence on monogamy had greater implications for women who were inevitably suppressed by the conditions attached to Christian family life than men who were free as soon as they disowned their fleet of wives. Although men suffered considerably too, the sacrifice women made was far greater because male converts were refused baptism only until they gave up polygyny. For instance, David Kukomi, a leading Ibadan convert in 1859 had to wait until 1867 before he was baptized after renouncing sixteen of his seventeen wives.⁶⁹ Although he set up a compound to house the sixteen estranged women near his own residence and continued to meet their 'pressing temporal needs',⁷⁰ they remained as Christians without attaining unto full membership of the church.

Kukomi's former wives could not be said to have had a fair deal from such an arrangement. His action raises some fundamental questions. Who meets the emotional, psychological and social needs of the women set aside? What status would they have in the church and a society that had no place for single mothers? Clearly, Kukomi's action had turned them into social outcasts within the church that placed much premium on marriage, and worse still in the society which regarded such women as social outcasts.

⁶⁸ See CMS/CA2/087 J. White, Journal Entry for 11 April 1856. See also CMS/CA2/064 M. J. M. Luke, Journal Entry for 17 March 1881.

⁶⁹ CMS/CA2/0/049 D. Hinderer, Half-yearly Report of the Ibadan station, 25 June 1867.

⁷⁰ CMS/CA2/075 D. Olubi, Journal Entry, 1 January 1868.

Excluding such women converts from baptism was significant for the development of their spirituality, because baptism was similar in many respects to the rites of passage that admitted a person into a cult or religious affiliation in Yorubaland, and symbolized the inward transformation that took place at the point of conversion. Other conditions attached to baptism other than the provisions of the scriptures are untenable.⁷¹

Secondly, when baptism was withdrawn from polygamists, a large number of the early converts had their spiritual growth hindered because they were cut off from the catechumen classes where they were taught the fundamentals of the Christian faith. On the one hand they lacked the vital psychological sense of belonging to the new Christian community, which baptism signified, on the other hand, when they professed Christ they lost the security which the primal religions provided. Therefore, through no fault of theirs, women converts from polygynous homes lost both ways. Arguably, the primal society and religions were more sensitive to the spirituality of women, making adequate provision for those who became single through the death of their husbands. Whereas the widow was espoused to the next of kin of the late husband in the traditional society, there was no Christian equivalent for women thrown out of marriage under spurious circumstances.⁷² Such women who returned to live with their parents again were referred to as *omo osu* (the circumstantial child in the compound). It is in this sense that this researcher agrees with Ayandele's criticism of the official position of the missionaries on polygamy. He argues that their teaching

⁷¹ Cf. Acts 16: 30 – 34.

⁷²For details of such an arrangement within the Yoruba culture, see Adeoye, *Asa Ati Ise Yoruba*, p. 236

on the subject was untenable, 'neither on Scriptural, nor on rational, nor on hypothetical basis'.⁷³

However, this researcher disagrees with many observers who blame missionaries for upsetting the social equilibrium of the society through monogamy, because polygamy was 'a product of the economic, social and political circumstances of the indigenous society'.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, the explanation of the church for throwing those women into chaos is indefensible. While the argument that orderly marriages be encouraged in the church is acceptable, the yardsticks for absorbing pre-conversion female members of a polygynists household into the church appears punitive rather than corrective, creating more problem for the church rather than solving the problem of polygyny in Yorubaland.

While most scholars argue in favour of polygamy that the traditional African economy depended so much on agriculture and it required massive labour to manually cultivate the land, women were charged with the responsibility of raising the children who would cultivate a large expanse of land and generate substantial wealth for their nuclear family. Apart from the economic advantage, the social and political status of an African man was determined, primarily by the number of wives he had and ultimately by the size of his family, all of which established his span of control. Hence, while kings, chiefs and the societal noble men demonstrated their social and political importance by becoming polygynists, women were mere 'pawns' for achieving their goals.

⁷³ Ayandele, *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria 1842 – 1914*, p. 335.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

When James Oderinde was baptized at Kudeti church in Ibadan in 1856, his testimony shows the plight of women who were caught up in polygamy:

Of his three wives one died, and the other two were both baptized.... After much discussion, his second wife agreed to leave him – there were no baptism for polygamous men – and ‘he dismissed her in peace’.⁷⁵

Similar situations were experienced in other parts of the country where the church, in advocating monogamy as a condition for membership, failed to appreciate how much women converts stood to lose in their social circle. In Igboland, it resulted in loss of social status and prestige. For example, an eldest son who embraced monogamy automatically lost his rightful place as the political and religious head of the family.⁷⁶

Although the mission’s refusal to baptize women from polygynous homes did not hinder their conversion, it brought a major setback for their spiritual development. They were not qualified to attend catechumen classes where young converts were taught the rudiments of the Christian faith. Although they were not prevented from attending church services, the essential Christian foundation for their spiritual formation was missing. A major implication of not being well established in the faith was the tendency to mix the beliefs and practices of another faith tradition with those of Christianity.⁷⁷

Ironically, although the evangelists’ perception of domestic slavery, which was by far more oppressive than polygyny in Africa, was that ‘Christianity will ameliorate the relationship between masters and slave’, they insisted that ‘polygamy is an offence

⁷⁵ CMS/CA2/023 G. F. Buhler, Journal, 23 November 1856.

⁷⁶ Ekechi, *Missionary Enterprise and Rivalry in Igboland: 1957 – 1914*, p. 20.

⁷⁷ Yoruba women, who experienced Christian conversion without receiving the standard discipleship in the church, remain spiritually bound to the beliefs and practices of their earlier religious traditions such as the primal religions or Islam. See more on Polygyny in Islam in Azizah Al-ibri, ed., *Woman and Islam* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1982), p. 216.

against the law of God, and therefore is incapable of amelioration'.⁷⁸ In contrast, Islam, its contender, took advantage of the Christian opposition of polygyny to gain more converts. Since polygamy was accepted as a way of life in the family compounds, Islam capitalized on this acceptance to persuade the rulers and through them gain wider acceptance among the people.⁷⁹

Educational Philosophy and the Development of Women's Spirituality

Although the church played a significant role in the discipleship of converts, formal learning was a veritable means of gaining access to the minds of Yoruba women converts. Western education therefore was critical for the survival of the church, because the level of interdependence between the church and the school was so great that the school was regarded as 'the nursery of the infant church.'⁸⁰ While education was meant to civilize the people mainly, it also helped greatly to gain more converts among Yoruba women and prepare them for the impending task of adaptation.

Before the founding of formal schools, many missionaries had predicted that education would greatly transform the Yoruba society. For instance, Henry Venn's instructions to missionaries amplified the need to gain the control of the minds of converts in order to change the social, cultural and spiritual outlook of the Yoruba:

Remember that it is to affect the heart that you must chiefly aim. It will be easy to inform the understanding when the heart is inclined to listen.⁸¹

T.J. Bowen, of the Baptist mission also emphasised that even though the missionary task consisted principally of preaching and teaching Christian precepts, the church

⁷⁸ See CMS/CA2/L2 17 February 1857 contains the text of the decision communicated by the secretaries to missionaries in Yorubaland.

⁷⁹ Ajayi, *Christian Mission in Nigeria (1841-1891): The Making of A New Elite*, p. 107.

⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 134.

⁸¹ CMS/CA2/L1 H. Venn to W. Marsh, Letter, 17 April 1847.

and indeed every missionary could not divorce himself from the task of educating the people:

...he cannot avoid feeling an interest in everything pertaining to the physical, mental or moral improvement of mankind. He must not be a schoolmaster for the heathen, but, if he is wise, he will do all that he consistently can for the promotion of such schools as are adapted to the condition and wants of the people.⁸²

Bowen points out the connection between conversion and education, insisting on the centrality of instructing the people in a formal setting different from the church. He states that they 'must read the Bible', but observes that 'this implies instructions'.⁸³

The wise instructor of Africa is content to begin with the elements of knowledge, both religious and secular, and he continues his course by attempting a diffusion of such principles of Christianity, science, art and social improvement as the people can appreciate and reduce to practice.⁸⁴

On his own part, Samuel Ajayi Crowther, a Yoruba missionary, strongly contended that educating the people would greatly facilitate the task of the missionaries. Although he felt that Western education held the keys to disabusing the minds of Africans of superstitious beliefs and idolatrous practices, he suggested that all elementary school books should contain extracts from the Bible. This way, in Crowther's perception, Christian virtues would be stamped within the subconscious of the Yoruba people.⁸⁵ Western education was thus introduced to Yoruba by the missionaries and it remained within their direct control for the first 20 years of formal education in Yorubaland.

A major shift in the socialization process of women occurred from two angles as a direct result of the introduction of mission schools. First, Yoruba women were

⁸² Bowen, *Adventures and Missionary Labours in several countries in the interior of Africa*, p. 315.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 328.

⁸⁵ Cited in Ekechi, *Missionary Enterprise and Rivalry in Igboland: 1957 – 1914*, p. 24.

excluded from the programme of creating a middle class in the Yoruba society; and secondly by implication, women were alienated from the developing core of the educated elite class in the church and society.

The traditional societies, through their system of education, and especially in art, promoted concepts of dual-gender divinities as observed by some of the missionaries that the Transcendent

... is sometimes represented by images, as an armed male on horseback, and sometimes as a female suckling child; but in fact, is an androgyne, representing the productive power of nature, the great father and mother of all things material.⁸⁶

However, when Christianity introduced the notion of an all-male Deity, it minimised the relevance of women in the new order created by the church and this was promoted through the educational policies therefore preparing the male for leadership and reducing women to the levels of subordinates.

As Christianity introduced a male deity, religious beliefs and practices no longer focussed on the female deity, but on a male God, his son, his bishops and priests. While women formed the great majority of the congregation – the body of the church – a few men, the clergy, constituted the headship of the church. These new gender relations and realities were also being generated through the early patterns of Western education.⁸⁷

Pursuance of education objectives with gender biases implied that it encouraged the imposition of men and subordination of women through the differentiation between the contrasting educational philosophy and goal for boys and girls respectively. Whereas the boys were being trained to assume leadership roles in church and society, the girls were being educated to make them fit in properly to their domestic roles in

⁸⁶ Bowen, *Adventures and Missionary Labours in several countries in the interior of Africa*, pp. 314 – 315.

⁸⁷ Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (London: Zed Books Ltd, 1987), p. 134.

the family. The educational philosophy promoted Victorian ideals, which aimed at preparing women towards becoming good wives and responsible mothers.⁸⁸ Thus women were being trained to a minimum standard that will make them 'suitable wives for the men'.

While missionaries, both Yoruba and European subdued women, stripping them of the influence and authority that they had in the primal religions and society and offering them subservient roles in the Church, men could emerge as leaders. Technically, the boarding schools established in the homes of missionaries were to prepare women as homemakers, having been taught by the subdued wives of missionaries such as Mrs Hinderer in Ibadan,⁸⁹ and Mrs Bowen in Ijaye.⁹⁰

Although missionaries' wives made significant contributions to missions educational philosophy through their mentoring roles which placed them in a position of influence over generations of Yoruba children, when compared with the mainstream missionary activities, their work was considered secondary in importance. For example, Mrs Hinderer, the wife of the pioneer missionary in Ibadan founded a boarding school in their home in which she kept twenty six children:

... Three of the boys are learning the harmonium; it is a work of patience, in a hot country, only to have to hear it. I have Akielle and Oyebode every morning for lessons, general history, geography, Nicholls Help, &c., the girls for sewing from twelve to two o'clock, and I am now forming a class of women who live near us, to teach them

⁸⁸ Preferential treatment was also given to boys over girls in Igbo society. This is attributed to the values of 'civilized Victorian England' which operated a male dominated system of government and education. See Judith Van Allen, 'Aba Riots' or Igbo 'Women's War'? Ideology, Stratification, and the Invisibility of Women', in Nancy J. Hafkin and Edna G. Bay, Eds, *Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976), p. 80.

⁸⁹ Hinderer, *Seventeen Years in the Yoruba Country: Memorials of Anna Hinderer*, 4th ed., p. 290.

⁹⁰ Travis Collins, *The Baptist Mission of Nigeria 1850- 1993: A History of the Southern Baptist Convention Missionary Work in Nigeria* (Ibadan: Y Books, 1993), p. 8.

to sew, once a week. These are some of the regular doings, and the irregular may be called legion; doctoring, mending, housekeeping, receiving visitors.⁹¹

Quite apart from her responsibilities as a wife and mother to many of these children who were orphans,⁹² she taught and instructed them in subjects which ranged from music, history and geography, to sewing.

However, women subordination in mission spirituality is reflected by the fact that while Anna Hinderer, Akielle's teacher and mentor was not found competent to lead, her male pupils became leaders in the society. Furthermore, the tradition of discriminating against women reflects further in the fact that Akielle, a male boarder of Mrs Hinderer was appointed school master at Kudeti, while a female colleague, Ogunyomi ended up being 'a true fellow-helper in his work.'⁹³ If it were to be in the 1870s when adaptation had begun to take place, Ogunyomi too could have been appointed as a schoolmistress.

It is pleasant to record that early in 1869, Akielle, Mrs. Hinderer's first scholar, was appointed master of the school at Kudeti, soon after which he married Ogunyomi, who became a true fellow-helper in his work. About the same time, Oyebode was entrusted with the school at Aremo.⁹⁴

Marriage tended to suggest a termination of independent service for Yoruba women in the mission churches as their achievements were evaluated purely on the basis of their husband's work. Whereas the labours of Mary Slessor, a female missionary of the Presbyterian mission in Old Calabar were recorded with so much glamour, neither the works of Mrs Hinderer, Mrs Townsend and Mrs Akielle, wives of CMS missionaries,

⁹¹ Hinderer, *Seventeen Years in the Yoruba Country: Memorials of Anna Hinderer*, 4th ed., p. 290.

⁹² Ibid. Some of them were picked up from the rubbish tip having been abandoned by their parents for various reasons ranging from fear of sanctions against parents of twins, etc.

⁹³ Anna Hinderer, *Seventeen Years*, Feb, 3 1869.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

nor that of Mrs Bowen of the Baptist mission stood independently of their husbands'. Rather, they were always seen as 'fellow-helpers'.

Apart from the home schools, a major way in which missionaries promoted this prejudice in the mainline schools was to teach different curriculum for male and female pupils. The time-table sent out to head teachers of schools by Thomas Birch Freeman, the pioneer Methodist missionary to the Yoruba revealed gender differentiations. From Monday to Thursday, the girls were required to learn sewing and embroidery in the afternoons (2pm – 4pm) while the boys had lessons in Arithmetic, Grammar and Spellings. Although it was stated that the losses of the girls would be made up in the morning of Tuesdays, when they had extended lessons in the areas where they missed out, this was never adequately compensated for.⁹⁵ Boys therefore had an edge over the girls in the areas of education that was going to prepare them for clerical jobs and better pay within the new social dispensation.

Women were completely overlooked however in the plan of the missionaries to create a middle class comprising of teachers, missionaries and clerks, which essentially focussed on men. The serious implication of this is that no Yoruba woman was officially employed as a missionary or catechist of either the CMS or the Methodist, due to the fact that opportunities for higher education were reserved for the boys only.⁹⁶ Therefore, it is of grave consequence that of all the wives of the African missionaries such as Mrs Crowther and Mrs King, none left a written memoir. Although the wives of CMS missionaries were not given missionary status, the

⁹⁵ Methodist Archives, Freeman, 'Rules for Schools', 1848.

⁹⁶ Women were principally teachers in girls' schools. For a discussion of the service of female missionaries in Africa, see Deborah Gaitskell, 'Women and Education in South Africa: how helpful are the mission archives?' in Robert A. Bickers and Rosemary Seton (eds) *Missionary Encounters: Sources and Issues* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1996), pp. 114 – 127.

journals and correspondences in the diaries left by Mrs Anna Hinderer, David Hinderer's wife have been beneficial in revealing the perspective of Western women to Yoruba women's spirituality. A major gap of understanding is thus created in women's history, as wives of Yoruba missionaries left no records of their activities in the church or society.

Although in the traditional Yoruba society, only a few women were granted membership of the cult of *Ifa*, the divination of knowledge and wisdom, nevertheless, women were in the forefront of oral tradition, gathering children for didactic stories and moonlight tales about the ancestors, the origins of the village, the family rites, rituals and taboos. Thus, while missionary education gave greater impetus to learning and skills development, it limited the scope of Yoruba women in comparison with their male counterparts. Women who had served as informal educators by stimulating creative thinking, training the children in the art of listening, sharpening their memory and indoctrinating them with the societal values were relegated to the background through the Christian education system. These traditional roles began to wane with the introduction of the formal school system by the nineteenth-century missions. Apart from bringing in new values into the cultural understanding of the society, missionaries had as their goal, a total reorientation of the children into Western values and cultures. The critical role of women in educating the children was thus replaced with the educational system formulated principally by male missionaries to serve the ends of men within Yoruba society.

Despite the fact that female children showed more interest in Western education, limits were placed in the way of their advancement. Female children of missionaries

faced discrimination in the aspect of higher-level training or education, whereas, the males, especially the *Creoles*⁹⁷ had all the opportunities. Among many other Yoruba boys, Samuel Crowther (jnr) received apprenticeship training as a doctor in Freetown and later read Chemistry and Anatomy in King's College London, while T. B. Macaulay went to CMS Training College at Islington and King's College, London.⁹⁸ The advantage the boys had for training opened the doors of better jobs for them as missionaries and clerks while women simply took the domestic roles of home makers.

Nevertheless, it is curious to note that in spite of the fact that the policy makers for education had their hopes pinned more on the training of boys; the initial interest was from the girls who responded more positively and quickly than the boys. In Onitsha, in the eastern part of Nigeria, for example, when the first day school opened on Monday 15th November 1858, Crowther observed that 'the boys are wild, and unsteady, they like to run about in the plantations with their bows and their bamboo pointed arrows in their hands...'⁹⁹ and continued to disrupt the studies of the girls:

...but now and then half a dozen or more of them (...the boys) rush into the house, and proudly gaze at the alphabet board, and with an air of disdain mimic the names of the letters pronounced by the schoolmaster and repeated by the girls, as if it were a thing only fit for females.¹⁰⁰

Thus, while missionary education was geared towards the development of male educated elites in the Yoruba society, the female showed greater propensity for learning.

⁹⁷ *Creole* is the Yoruba descriptive of Kiriole, or Kiriyo (colloquia form of describing Christians) children of the *Saro* Christians from Sierra Leone.

⁹⁸ See CMS/CA3/037 J. C. Taylor to H. Venn, 17 May 1853. Other boys who had opportunities for training include Henry Robbin and Josiah Crowther who had apprenticeship training in Thomas Clegg's cotton factory in Manchester; James and Samuel Davies, who received training in navigation.

⁹⁹ CMS/ CA3/04(a) S. Crowther to H. Venn, 2 December 1858.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

Although missionary policies promoted the interests of boys over those of girls in its educational philosophy, women's charities in England and Canada were not discriminatory in supporting both male and female boarders in the homes of missionaries. Of particular interest to the education of the girls in Yorubaland and other places at the time was the gesture of Miss Barber of Brighton, an English humanitarian who, although she did not travel the miles, organised a special mission fund known as the "Coral Fund" 'specifically to enable CMS missionaries to keep boarders at the rate of about £3 per child per annum.'¹⁰¹

Conclusion

Although Yoruba women benefited immensely from education as a major means by which they were evangelized in their encounters with missionaries, their spirituality suffered a major setback because missionary education reflected gender biases, which tilted the power structure of the Yoruba society to the advantage of men. Since power was a major factor in spirituality, Western education therefore hindered the spiritual development of women. Although education was used as a means of entrenching Christianity in the social, cultural and spiritual milieu of the Yoruba, it was a socialization process which placed the males at an advantage over the female.

Thus, while discipleship programmes and liturgy opened up avenues for developing Yoruba women's spirituality and laying a foundation for contextualizing Christianity, church policy on the monogamous family and educational programmes greatly reduced Yoruba women's opportunity to move from their primal to Christian spirituality. Whereas Western education was structured to subjugate the female

¹⁰¹ CMS/CA3/037, J. C. Taylor, Report of Day & Sabbath Schools, 1863 and 1864.

converts, it gave birth to a new generation of women who participated in the process of adapting Christianity to take care of some significant peculiarities in Yoruba traditional values that missionaries had overlooked for almost four decades of 1840s to 1880s. This adaptation process by Yoruba women is critically examined in the next chapter of this thesis.

CHAPTER SIX

YORUBA CHRISTIAN WOMEN'S SPIRITUALITY: YORUBA ADAPTATION OF CHRISTIANITY

Culture and traditional practices continued to be reflected in the conduct of Yoruba women converts, despite the fact that, exposure to 'the Scriptures' through discipleship training 'invades the disciple's whole personality, to bring its influences to bear on the developing situations in which the disciple becomes involved'.¹ While the examination of processes of quarantine, conflict and assimilation in previous chapters is adapted from Fisher's well established stages of conversion – though without particular focus on Yoruba women converts – the focus here on adaptation goes beyond Fisher's categories. This chapter adds a new dimension to an evaluation of the contribution of women to religious development in Africa already begun by Mercy Amba Oduyoye,² Musimbi Kanyoro³ African female theologians and others, but again with a particular focus on Yoruba women.

Following a significant conversion rate during the first forty years of Yoruba women's encounters with missionaries, Christianity was yet to fully evolve as a religion of the Yoruba. Even though church membership increased, Yoruba women continued the search for meaning within Christian beliefs and practices. Thus, Christianity did not become a Yoruba religion and Yoruba women did not become fully Christianized until women converts began to adapt Christianity by incorporating resources from their former beliefs and practices in a process that began early in the

¹ Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (New York: Orbis Books, 2004), p. 50.

² Mercy Amba Oduyoye, 'The Empowering Spirit of Religion', in Ursula King, *Feminist Theology from the Third World: A Reader* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1994), pp. 361 - 377.

³ Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro, *Talitha Qumi! Proceedings of the Convocation of African Women Theologians 1989* (Accra: Sam-Wood Ltd., 2001).

encounter between Yoruba women and the missionaries, but accelerated from about the 1880s.

This chapter, therefore, shows that in the fullness of time, it was not the evangelists but the evangelized that came up with answers that were most suitable for harmonising their search for meaning within that relationship with others, as well as the Transcendent. The task of this chapter, therefore, is to explore the symbiotic influences between Yoruba women's spirituality and mission spirituality. Firstly, it clarifies the origin and purpose of the adaptation of Christianity to the primal practices of Yoruba culture and cosmological contexts. Secondly, it evaluates the processes by which women adapted their gender roles within the changing Yoruba context of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the third place, this chapter evaluates the Christian adoption of traditional holistic healing processes. Finally it examines the ways by which women adopted Yoruba ritual symbols, spiritual agencies, dreams and revelations to fulfil their quest for meaning within Christianity.

Whereas similar events were happening in the newer mission centres such as Ekiti and Ondo, this chapter is centred on the impact of women converts on adapting Christianity in the older mission centres such as Abeokuta, Ibadan, Badagry, Lagos, and Ijebu-Ode between the last quarter of the nineteenth and the first quarter of the twentieth centuries. Women in these older centres created a richer synthesis between mission Christianity and Yoruba cosmology, having been under Christian influence for longer than women in the newer centres during this period. As much as in the preceding times of contact, conflict and assimilation, missionary records continue to

be the best available sources for evaluation of Yoruba women's spiritual creativity. As will become clear, Yoruba women's adaptation of Christianity was to lead to the formation of the African Independent Churches. A full analysis of this development is beyond the scope of this study, where the focus remains Yoruba women's adaptation of mission Christianity.

The Origin and Purpose of Adaptation in Yoruba Women's Spirituality

Neither conversion nor any form of missionary induction processes fully removed the differences in the beliefs, attitudes and practices of Yoruba women before conversion and those of mission Christianity. The differences between Yoruba women's traditional worldview and that of mission spirituality was so fundamental that, as women converts assimilated Christian dogma and practices, they found the need for greater self expression in their Christian practice. From the 1880s, women grew in confidence in their making of significant meanings from their religious experiences as they imported aspects of their traditional practices into mission Christianity.

Two major developments during the last decade of the nineteenth century facilitated the adaptation process of Yoruba women's spirituality. Firstly, the onset of colonialism in the 1890s, which was marked by more geographical areas of the Yoruba country coming under the political control of the British government, brought a dramatic end to the hostilities that characterised missionary work from its onset in 1842.⁴ Hence, as British colonial administration expanded, the more missionary work moved further inland from the coast to include regions such as Ijebu and Ibadan, and

⁴ J. D. Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), p. 250.

as far as the eastern borders of Yorubaland such as Ondo and Ekiti.⁵ Women converts thereby had greater liberty to adapt some aspects of their Christian beliefs, attitudes and practices in ways that reflected Yoruba culture and worldview as the broader Yoruba perception of Christianity changed from a religion of strangers and outcasts⁶ to the religion of the victors, thus becoming more attractive to the local people.⁷ Therefore, as the period facilitated unprecedented conversions to Christianity and women were able to identify with it more openly, the doors of opportunity for their spiritual creativity opened and they were able to move beyond the forms of Yoruba Christianity anticipated by their Western missionary mentors.

Secondly, it was a period of cultural renaissance when Yoruba converts looked back at the positive aspects of their culture and incorporated them into the practice of Christianity. These cultural revivals were noticeable in the adjustments converts made in their attitudes and practices. Furthermore, a deeper sense of nationalistic feeling and cultural awareness came with the creation of the African middle class.⁸ A more radical form of nationalism was however practiced by Yoruba men, because of the additional advantages they had over and above women in the ordering of the new society.

A variety of explanations for the acceleration in conversion to Christianity from the 1890s have been offered. Peel's argument that the massive displacement of people

⁵ Colonial Administrator, Governor Glover of Lagos was the first effective European presence in Ondo. See CMS/CA2/068 J. A. Maser, Journal Entry, 24 December 1873.

⁶ CMS/CA2/031 S. Crowther journal for quarter ending 25 September 1849.

⁷ The same is true of the experience of the Igbo in the Eastern part of Nigeria. See similar discussions in Cyril Okorochoa, *The meaning of Religious Conversion in Africa: The Case of the Igbo of Nigeria* (Hants: Avebury Gower publishing Company Limited, 1987).

⁸ J. F. A. Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria: 1841–1891* (London: Longman Group Ltd, 1965), pp. 167 – 198.

from their traditional homelands during this period, opening them up to religious, as well as social and economic changes, is the major factor.⁹ Another theory suggests a more utilitarian perspective, emphasising the fact that Christianity offered many things which the traditional religions could not promise within the changing social climate, such as the power and prestige that came with literacy.¹⁰ Others claimed that conversion occurred when the primal religions could no longer provide answers for many of the issues raised by the massive social and political changes introduced by colonialism.¹¹ However, other reasons must be sought to explain why Yoruba women adapted their spiritual orientation. To understand why women made their move, it is necessary to focus on their attempts to derive meaning from their gendered female experiences.

Although missionaries made significant efforts at contextualising Christian dogma and practices, through their sermons and social relationships, Western culture and influences, still informed the background of their Christianity. Thus the social and spiritual contexts created by missionaries were shaped by Enlightenment perspectives and in many respects; they expected converts to conform to such a worldview. In contrast, Yoruba women converts continued to respond to the important influences of the primal religions and culture through which they derived meaning concerning their relationships and interactions. While a continuous development in Yoruba women's spirituality cannot be denied, it took place within the context of religious change, which involved an adjustment to their earlier spiritual orientation.

⁹ J. D. Y. Peel, 'Religious Change in Yorubaland', in *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 37, No 3: July 1967, p. 300.

¹⁰ David Laitin, *Hegemony and Culture: Politics and Religious Change among the Yoruba* (London: The University of Chicago Press Ltd, 1986).

¹¹ Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, p. 250.

In spite of their marginalization in the new social structures created by missionaries and colonial administrators, Yoruba women's central position within the adaptation of Christianity to reflect the body, soul and spirit of the Yoruba is significant. Placing the men in the forefront in the missionaries' bid to create an African middle class however subjected Yoruba women into greater difficulties as they forged a new religious orientation that was not only nationalistic, but also provided Yoruba freedom of expressions in worship. Hence, rather than taking on a hostile stance, women took advantage of their new freedom from the persecutions of the earlier periods, to express their own forms of spirituality and participate more actively in Christian spiritual development. Apart from their higher visibility, they also took on more public roles of preaching and evangelism than they did in earlier periods, as shown below.

The sociological term, 'adaptation', which refers to the 'process of interaction between changes made by an organism on its environment and changes made by the environment on the organism'¹² provides a useful tool for analysis of the origin and purpose of the adjustments Yoruba women made to Christianity. However, in spite of the wave of cultural revival that marked the last decade of the nineteenth century in Yorubaland, Yoruba women converts' adaptation of aspects of their traditional beliefs should be evaluated at a deeper level. Rather than being a part of the nationalistic feelings nurtured by Yoruba male protest, women attempted to synthesize primal spirituality with mission Christianity.

¹² A. William, *Haviland, Cultural Anthropology*, 5th ed. (New York: Rinehart and Winston, 1987), p. 140.

Therefore, the influence of Yoruba women's converts in giving Yoruba meaning to Christianity cannot be underestimated, in spite of Horton's argument that even without Christian encounters, Yoruba society was faced with inevitable cultural adjustment. Although initial interactions with women did not produce immediate conversion because of women's communal central role in guaranteeing the survival of the lineage, as shown in chapter three, missionary persistence led to conversions and many women became Christians. The influence of the missionary teachings remained with women converts as they withstood the persecutions from family and society, so resisting the pressure to forsake Christianity and return to their primal spiritual orientation.¹³ However, once women had overcome the hindrances to conversion and begun to settle down with the Church's dogma and practice, they began to place the unique imprints of their culture and worldview on Christianity. Therefore, although Yoruba women accepted the changes introduced to their core beliefs, practices and orientation to life, this was accompanied by great efforts to adapt Christianity to reflect primal religious, social and political practices.

That Christianity affected Yoruba women's spirituality is incontestable, but the point being emphasised in this chapter is that Yoruba women adjusted Christianity to reflect their culture and worldview. Incontestably, after thirty years of mutual interaction Christianity had achieved among converts a total reorientation of Yoruba belief from the pantheon of *orisa* to the exclusive worship of the monotheistic God. The turning of women converts away from their primary responsible of nurturing the *orisa* and believing exclusively in God through Christ marked a fundamental change in the role

¹³ Some of the psychological pressures such as curses and verbal abuses were recorded by Hinderer. See CMS/CA2/0/049/96 David Hinderer, Journal Entry, 20 October 1848.

ascription and identity of Yoruba women, as the pioneer Baptist missionary, Thomas Jefferson Bowen, had predicted.¹⁴

However, even though women embraced Christianity, during three decades of the encounter, the culture and worldview in which they practiced their Christian religion only responded marginally to the social changes brought by missionary Christianity. This introduced major crises of spirituality for Yoruba women as they had to function as Christians within the context of this persisting Yoruba culture and worldview. This concern was rightly expressed by J. D. Y. Peel:

Yet however responsive they were to the new moral world offered by the missionaries, the converts were still subject to the deep promptings of the Yoruba culture. As their numbers grew and as they became less special, and as their children grew up in the community as well as in the church, and as whole cohorts of the population began to turn to Christianity for what they saw in it, they could not help but make of it something more fully their own.¹⁵

Therefore, in spite of the massive responses of women to Christianity at the turn of the century the dilemma created by the strong impact of culture on the spiritual development of converts motivated women to place their distinctive imprint on Christianity in order to reconcile missionary and Yoruba spiritual life maps.

Although women were assigned the roles of passive worshipers through missionaries' interpretation of the Christian faith, the tide turned against such notion when Yoruba women began to see in terms of their roles, primal religions to their ascribed roles in the church. There was a strong impetus to reinstate Yoruba women's pre-Christian centrality in nurturing and caring for the *orisa*. Thus, Peel's insistence that the

¹⁴ T. J. Bowen, *Adventures And Missionary Labours in Several Countries in the Interior of Africa From 1849 to 1856* (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd, 1968), pp. 327 – 328.

¹⁵ Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, p. 255.

interaction between Yoruba culture, worldview and Christianity must never be presented as one-sided¹⁶ is valid, not only in evaluating religious change, but also in analyzing spiritual transformation.

The critical problem that made adaptation by Yoruba women inevitable was their discovery that missionaries had failed to resolve the cultural differences posed by Yoruba cosmology and Western Christianity. Even though Yoruba women had imbibed Christian morals, ethics, dogma and practices, the void created by transition from primal to Christian spirituality remained yet to be filled. For Yoruba women to continue as Christians and to derive meaning from their relationship with the Transcendent and one another, a mutual interaction between African and Western cultures and worldviews was necessary. Where there were tensions between the two conflicting cultures, Yoruba women converts had recourse to their primal process of making meaning in the traditional society for resolving these. This required finding a delicate balance between their Christian identity and adopted primal elements, so that the two worldviews were brought into harmony.

Apart from redefining their roles in Christianity to reflect their pre-contact life maps, Yoruba women Christians also revived many religious symbols from their former religious traditions and transposed them to function as Yoruba Christian religious symbols. Although some of these traditional symbols and elements, such as Ajaka's ritual drums,¹⁷ were later found to be unsuitable for Christian nurture, the last two decades of the nineteenth century witnessed massive conversions to Christianity, as converts freely adopted many aspects of their primal culture, philosophy and world

¹⁶ Ibid, pp 153 – 154.

¹⁷ CMS/CA2/087, J. White to H. Venn, 12 July 1856.

view. This chapter explores not only the role of women in adapting Christianity to reflect primal practices but also their identity as they adapted Christianity to Yoruba religious milieu.

Adaptation of Gender Roles (Negotiation of Leadership and Charismatic gifts)

A major concern within the religious experiences of African women was how they would define their roles and function within the context of the mission Churches. Whereas the Yoruba traditional societies operated a parallel form of administration, which recognised women as an integral part of leadership in the home, church and society,¹⁸ missionaries understood leadership as belonging to men. Administratively and economically, missionaries' creation of an African middle class targeted at men, compromised women's roles within the home, Church and society. Furthermore, while Western education trained men for leadership roles, it only equipped women for domestic roles. Even though power sharing in Yorubaland granted the men an advantage over women, nonetheless, women constituted an integral part of the civil government and economic leadership in the tradition society.

The roles reserved for women by missionaries negated what Yoruba understood as power, which was shared between the male as well as the female genders, thus fairly representing 'the notion of influence, the ability to effect as well as affect a situation significantly'.¹⁹ In traditional society a power balance was maintained between male and female genders. Whereas men exercised their spiritual influence through the *Oro* and *Egungun* cults, women had theirs through the *Gelede*, which was elaborately

¹⁸ Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, *Woman, Culture and Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), p. 125.

¹⁹ Oyeronke Olajubu, *Woman in the Yoruba Religious Sphere* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003), p. 66.

celebrated in Badagry.²⁰ While men controlled one end of the economy through the production of crops on the farms, although women had subsistent farming also, the balance was maintained by leaving them to control the markets.²¹ However, women's authority was almost completely eroded in the Church. When mission Christianity prescribed the full domestication of women, it affected not just their economic, political and social lives, but also the development of their spirituality. The most devastating influence on women's spirituality was their exclusion from leadership in the churches, a practice that was gradually extended to wider society.

Through adaptation processes, however, Yoruba women were able to resolve the crises of erosion of the powers which had previously been central to the value placed on women's roles and to meaning provided by traditional religions, reintroducing into Christianity women's roles that were capable of restoring the powers lost through missionary influence. As early as 1874, a new pattern of roles for women in mission churches, contrary to mission patterns, was evolving. For example, Maria Ekidan, a convert and former priestess of *Esu Elegbara* was renowned in the CMS church in Badagry, not only for her leading role in humanitarian and conciliatory works, but also for her preaching.²² Although the boldness with which she proclaimed the Gospel showed a clear departure from the background roles assigned to the wives of her missionary mentors, her valiant act was reminiscent of the place of women in the traditional social and religious traditions. Her humanitarian outlook on life and her courage were similar in many respects to those of women in Yoruba primal societies such as the historical Efunsetan, the *Iyalode* of Ibadan, her peer, Madam Tinubu of

²⁰ CMS/CA2/087 J. White, Journals, 31 Dec. 1855, 13 Jan. 1871

²¹ Nina Emma Mba, *Nigerian Women Mobilized: Women Political Activities in Southern Nigeria, 1900-1965* (Berkeley: University of California, 1982), pp. 14 – 15.

²² CMS/CA2/076 S. Pearse, Annual Letter, 13 October 1874

Egbaland, and the mythical Moremi Ajasoro of Ile-Ife who participated meaningfully in every facet of their community.

Adaptation brought out Yoruba women from the background roles assigned them by the missionaries. Ekidan, for instance, was acclaimed for her powerful preaching, which endeared her to all those who listened to her sermons as she moved from street to street.²³ Although such public roles taken on by Ekidan were totally inconsistent with missionaries' expectation for women, the zest with which she delivered her homilies earned her the title 'Mammy *Oniwasu*' ('mummy preacher').²⁴

Whereas in their former primal religions, women held leadership roles as worship leaders and priestesses, and could even be venerated to the exalted position of divinities such as *Oya*, *Yemoja* and *Osun*,²⁵ missionaries introduced a new tradition that shifted women totally to the domestic terrain. Therefore, no female missionaries were appointed by the CMS at the early stages of Yoruba mission and even wives of missionaries had no official leadership role, thus affirming that evangelical spirituality did not promote female leadership in church or society either in theory or in practice.

Since this practice was incompatible with Yoruba women's roles in the primal societies where women occupied leadership positions, women converts soon adapted their roles to reflect their former roles and practices. The records of Thomas King, a Yoruba missionary of his observations of Mammy *Oniwasu*'s prior life as a priestess

²³ CMS/CA2/076 S. Pearse, Annual Letter, 13 October 1874.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ J. Omosade Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites* (London: Longman Group Ltd, 1979), pp. 46 – 47.

of *Elegbara (Esu)*, shed light on what Yoruba women were before the adaptation of Christianity in accordance with Yoruba cosmology.

Prior to her conversion at Abeokuta in 1856 for instance, Ekidan was ‘...generally acknowledged as a leader... and a great instigator by her stimulating songs to those possessed by the imaginary demon...’²⁶ Thus her role as a leader of a spiritual group was recognised in the service she offered to those who were possessed by demons, although she had a series of problems with her credibility when she converted to Christianity because those she had exploited as she sacrificed to the divinity *Esu Elegbara (Devil)* insisted that she refund their cowries.²⁷ She was able to function more effectively when she relocated to the Badagry Church where she carried over her leadership roles for which she was well known in her former religion. Thus, when women converts began to adopt certain elements from their primal spirituality, staunch worshippers of idols such as Ekidan, a priestess of *Esu Elegbara* become converted, and many like Ekidan also proclaimed the Gospel boldly.

Although no missionary body made this restricted role for women an official policy, it was a consistent practise in all denominations within the Protestant tradition. From the early forbears of Protestantism, such as Martin Luther, women had been discouraged from taking public roles in Christianity when it involved preaching and teaching. Luther believed that the highest form of worship or service a woman could offer was to remain in the privacy of the home. He claimed that

²⁶ CMS/CA2/061 T. King, Journal, 11 April 1856.

²⁷ CMS/CA2/061 T. King, Journals, 11 April 1856; 4 Jan. 1857. ‘Have you taken so much cowries from us in the market, and after all do you go and take book [become Christian]...you must restore our cowries back...’ She replied that she had not received one thirtieth of what the *orisa* had consumed from her in sacrifices’

This modesty and restraint surpass all the acts of worship and all the works of all the nuns, and these words, 'Sarah is in the tent' should be inscribed on the veils of all matrons; for in this way they would be reminded of their duty... to accustom themselves to managing the household with care.²⁸

A good housewife, in Luther's views, is 'one who gladly stays at home and takes care of the management of the household, in order that the things which her husband provides may be properly allotted and administered'.²⁹

Luther clearly dichotomised role expectations along gender lines in contending that

...woman was created for housekeeping but men for keeping order, governing worldly affairs, fighting and dealing with justice [things that pertain to] administering and leading.³⁰

In his opinion, women should leave all forms of leadership roles, especially in the public sphere, in the hands of men, because he considers them as lacking in understanding, discipline and competence that such matters demanded. The tendency to subjugate women in the nineteenth-century extended beyond Protestantism and transcended Yorubaland. For instance, in both Anglican and Roman Catholic churches, it was observed that 'preaching and administration of the sacraments were male monopolies, and that positions of lay leadership were exclusively male....'³¹

Although the views of Luther and other subsequent Protestant leaders strongly influenced missionaries in Yorubaland in their assumption that women's place was in the home, by the 1880s missionary ethics and Yoruba practices based on this premise could no longer be enforced, because they were incongruous with Yoruba primal

²⁸ Pelikan (ed.), 'Lecture on Genesis', *Luther's Works*, 3: 201.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Karant-Nunn and Wiesner-Hanks, *Luther on Women: A Source Book*, p. 28, based on 'Table Talk', *Weimarer Ausgabe* TR I, no. 12, pp. 5-6. CE WA TR II, no 1979, p. 286.

³¹ Macleod, p. 68. Denominations such as the Quakers and Salvation Army opened up all offices to men and women by 1900, during which time in the Primitive Methodist, women preached locally.

beliefs. Missionaries' omission in understanding the interchangeable roles of Yoruba women as female divinities, worship leaders and worshippers resulted in a loss of meaning for Yoruba women. Consequently, Yoruba women tried to compensate for this loss by adapting Christianity through synthesizing primal elements with the Christian ethos.

A distinctive exception to what appears to be a general rule in mission spirituality became apparent by the 1880s, when adaptation of Christianity was already becoming the norm. Male African missionaries, such as Daniel Olubi and James Johnson, did not see any reason to hinder Christian women who wanted to take on public roles. Rather than discouraging them, Phoebe Lufowora and Dorcas Fawe, Yoruba women converts in Ibadan who were actively involved in evangelism in the 1880s, were officially appointed as public preachers with the full endorsement of Daniel Olubi, the successor of David Hinderer.³² A precursor of the process of adaptation is found as early as 1867, when a group of women in Lagos, under the pastorate of James Johnson, a Yoruba missionary of the CMS shocked the evolving Yoruba Christian community by preaching to highly revered Lagos chiefs.³³

Thus, while Western missionaries did not acknowledge women preachers or those who took on leadership roles, their African peers actively supported and encouraged it. While Western missionaries were still resistant to seeing women in ecclesiological leadership roles, their Yoruba peers, with their understanding of women's identity in traditional society acquiesced readily with women's initiatives. Thus, the women's recreation of their public roles received the full backing of their local pastors. In spite

³² J. D. Y. Peel, 'Gender in Yoruba Religious Change', in *Journal of Religion in Africa*, vol. 32, no 2, May 2002, p. 160.

³³ CMS/CA2/056 J. Johnson to CMS Secretary, 2 Sept. 1876.

of the fact that Yoruba missionaries of the CMS, Daniel Olubi in Ibadan, and Samuel Pearse in Badagry supported women's adaptation process, they nevertheless did not encourage their own wives to take on public roles, as they needed to be seen to toe the line of mainline mission practices or risk becoming marginalised within the larger denomination. Even within the Baptist tradition, Mrs Harden, a *Saro* returnee Christian, who was gifted in preaching, could not take on a public role until after the death of her husband.³⁴

Charismatic Gifts

Contemporary scholarship also sheds light on additional reasons to those arising from European Church history and tradition for the differences in the attitudes of Western missionaries and their African colleagues. Anthropologists, Rosaldo and Lamphere argue that the Western public-private distinction which Western missionaries applied to gender relationships was an additional factor leading to women's exclusion from charismatic roles.³⁵ Therefore, Western notions of gender did not arise solely from Church history but from wider Western culture. The counter-movement in the reintroduction of Yoruba women's public roles through adaptation of Christianity, attributable to the prevailing influences of the attitudes and practices from the traditional religions and culture, was visible in both public and private spheres.

The longer Christianity remained in Yorubaland, the greater its influence on women, and the more creative they became in adapting aspects of their roles in Church and society, to conform to their cosmology. In the early twentieth century as more women

³⁴ Travis Collins, *The Baptist Mission of Nigeria: 1850-1993* (Ibadan: Associated Bookmakers, 1993), p. 13.

³⁵ Cited in Jean O'Barr and Kathryn Firmin-Sellers 'African Women in Politics', in Margaret Jean Hay & Sharon Stitcher (eds) *African Women South of the Sahara*, 2nd ed. (Essex: Longman, 1995), p. 192.

converted to Christianity, the missionary status quo was increasingly subject to challenges by Yoruba Christian women who took on public roles as demonstrated by the examples below. While the church relegated women to the background positions in the church, through adaptation of Christianity, Yoruba women's traditional self-identity began to reappear. They appealed to and drew upon resources within the Yoruba cosmological worldview, such as those in the Yoruba creation myths, to revive the complementary patterns of male/female leadership found in traditional society.

Two outstanding women, Sophie Odunlami, a woman convert in the Anglican Church in Ijebu-Ode in 1918, and Abiodun Akinsowon, whose spiritual gifts and leadership roles emerged between 1918 and 1925, started out as members of the Anglican Church in Isoyin and Lagos respectively. Even though their geographical locations were far apart and gender struggle was not their principal concern, the way they came to prominence in the early twentieth-century mission church show their common commitment to reviving the traditional role of women in religion that missionaries had tried to destroy. As has been argued in chapter five, rather than succeeding in subjugating the women, mission education assimilated many of them and indirectly facilitated their reinterpretation of Christianity in their own context so that women would play a more significant part in both the church and society.

Although Odunlami started out as a school teacher in a village five miles from Ijebu Ode, her outstanding gifts could not be suppressed when the church was going through a crisis. Following the hasty withdrawal of foreign missionaries to their home countries due to war at the turn of the century, Odunlami's teaming up with men such

as Daddy Ali, the former sexton of the CMS church in Ijebu Ode, filled the vacuum.³⁶

At the height of the adaptation of Christianity to restore the former dignity of Yoruba women, Odunlami graduated from mere membership of the prayer band of the CMS church to become an itinerant evangelist popularising the use of rain water and prayer for healing those affected by the epidemic.³⁷ In contrast to the male domination of missionary Christianity, Odunlami's gender was no hindrance within the power structures created by the adapted Christianity.

The evangelical theological presuppositions that precluded women from public roles in the church were insufficiently strong to prevent Odunlami from carrying out her mission. It is right to claim that the devastating effects of the influenza epidemic which followed World War 1, leaving thousands of people dead in Yorubaland as in many parts of the world did not leave people with much choice. However, it is argued in this thesis that the Yoruba traditional perception of divinity as consisting of both female and male was of greater significance.

Odunlami's action therefore reflects an adaptation of Christianity to the primal Yoruba spirituality where women exercised spiritual power. Spiritual inspiration cuts across gender barriers in primal Yoruba religions where a priestess possessed by a male *orisa* would dress herself up in male attires and speak in a masculine baritone voice. Similarly, a man possessed by the female *Oya* divinity may braid his hair.³⁸

³⁶ J. D. Y. Peel, *Aladura: A Religious Movement among the Yoruba* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 62.

³⁷ Deji Ayegboyin and S. Ademola Ishola, *African Indigenous Churches*, (Lagos: Greater Heights Publication, 1997), p. 67.

³⁸ Oyeronke Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women: Making an African sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 87.

Odunlami's action was therefore a reflection of Yoruba women's roles as custodians of the spiritual and physical harmony of family and society.

As a Christian woman therefore, she continued to see her role as transcending that of a worshipper to become a mediator between God and his creations. Even though mission Christianity did not make any provision for a woman to function in the office of prophet, she adopted primal Yoruba spirituality, and adapted it to her Christian role as an evangelist. The fact that Odunlami's action gained the attention of the people and that they took her instructions seriously as she went round the length and breadth of the Ijebu country, shows the primacy and success of her role adaptation in contrast to the restrictive spiritual roles ascribed to women by Western missionaries.

A significant finding of this study is that adaptation gradually became widespread among Yoruba women irrespective of age or geographical location and this shows the resilience of assumptions that female leadership was to be respected, which persisted within traditional religion and was transferred into Yoruba Christianity. Just as Odunlami became popular with her rain water healing in the entire Ijebu district, Abiodun Akinsowon, a fifteen year old girl came to prominence due to her religious experiences in cosmopolitan Lagos. One significant factor in the adaptation of Christianity to reflect Yoruba spirituality was the willingness of Yoruba men converts to accommodate women in the mainstream practice of Christianity. Thus, just as Odunlami received the support from Daddy Ali, Akinsowon, received considerable help from Moses Orimolade, who was later to found the *Aladura* church, which adopted many aspects of Yoruba spirituality in a form of Christian spirituality. This

development eventually led to the separation of African Independent Churches from mission churches.

Although the church started out as a society, which originally meant to supplement the mission church activities, membership of their prayer band soon grew astronomically as in the day of Pentecost when three thousand Jews responded to Peter's sermon at Jerusalem.³⁹ The flamboyance of their anniversary procession was not only an enactment of the earlier angelic encounter; the publicity enjoyed could not have resulted in anything less than the formation of a denomination:

...Moses Orimolade and his 'energetic assistant Captain Abiodun' sat together in a go-cart under a canopy very similar to that used at Corpus Christi and inscribed with a motto celebrating the power of the Trinity. Twenty-four elders with stars as ornaments on their clothes and long staffs accompanied them, followed by 3000 members. They made their way to Balogun Square and as the moon appeared, the leader 'delivered the usual message of Christ and his love.'⁴⁰

Both Odunlami and Akinsowon therefore transcended the gender barriers created by mission Christianity, as they moved from background roles in the church to become leaders of independent groups, which started out as part of the Anglican Church.

Although Yoruba Christian women defied evangelical traditions by taking on public roles, and the church accommodated and encouraged them in their role of leader or preacher, women nevertheless encountered restrictions on available leadership roles. No woman had yet become an official catechist or pastor in the mission churches such as CMS, Baptist or Methodist. Nevertheless, these restrictions did not preclude women from manifesting charismatic gifts such as visions, dreams and faith healing,

³⁹ Cf. Acts 2: 14 – 47.

⁴⁰ Peel, *Aladura: A Religious Movement among the Yoruba*, p. 75.

which were significant ways in which Yoruba Christian women expressed their spirituality.

Adaptation of Primal Healing Practices in Yoruba Christian Women's Spirituality

Even though Peel, an English scholar, Deji Ayegboyin and Ademola Ishola, African scholars and others,⁴¹ emphasise the place of healing in the formation of African indigenous churches, this study draws out the significance in terms of the development of Yoruba women's spirituality. Although both mission and primal Yoruba spirituality gave pre-eminence to healing, the structures and methods adopted were different. While mission spirituality carried out its medical ministries by establishing dispensaries, healing in Yoruba spirituality was never separated from other religious activities. Thus, Samuel Crowther (jnr), who received apprenticeship training in Freetown and later read Chemistry and Anatomy in King's College London⁴² operated the mission's dispensary in Ake, Abeokuta between 1851 and 1861.⁴³

While mission spirituality separated the roles of medical practitioners from those of missionaries or preachers, in Yoruba spirituality, the same priest or priestess led the worship and healing rituals. For example, Akere, the influential *Yemoja* priestess referred to in chapter three, was renowned for offering sacrifices to the river divinity on behalf of her clients, whose concerns ranged from sicknesses to childlessness.⁴⁴

⁴¹ See Peel, *Aladura: A Religious Movement among the Yoruba*; Ayegboyin and Ishola, *African Indigenous Churches*.

⁴² See CMS/CA2/L2 H. Venn to Irving 23 August 1854. See also CMS/CA2/L2 Parents Committee to H. Robbin 22 December 1855.

⁴³ CMS/CA2/032, S. Crowther Jr., Journal Entry, 1861 – 1862.

⁴⁴ Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, p. 46.

Therefore, while both traditions emphasised wholeness of body, soul and spirit, the methods and approaches adopted differed.

Even though various missionary bodies established medical missions in Yorubaland such as the Baptist Medical Centre in Ogbomoso and the Wesleyan Methodists' Wesley Guild Hospital in Ilesha, medical services were not easily accessible to women because the facilities were totally inadequate when compared to the need of the period. In 1919, there were only eleven hospitals in what was then called the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria. The University College Hospital in Ibadan admitted 480 patients in the 1918-1919, out of which only 18 were women.

According to Peter Clarke, statistics of the medical care delivery at the University College Hospital in the first three decades of the nineteenth century indicate why faith healing was more popular, especially after the adaptation of Christianity had taken place and adopted aspects of Yoruba spirituality were accepted within the Yoruba Christian community. Colonial medical records reveal that 32 of the 480 patients were European males with no female attendee; 18 were African women, while the remaining 448 were African men.⁴⁵ The staffing levels were extremely low with one day-nurse and one night-nurse caring for them; hence the mortality rate of about 7 per cent was not out of proportion.⁴⁶ Thus, hospitals were grossly inadequate to meet the needs of the people, especially the ailments created by the influenza epidemic in the critical war years. Faith healing was the only option for most Yoruba people.

⁴⁵ Blue Book, Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria, 1919, cited in Peter Clarke, *West Africa and Christianity* (London: Edward Arnold Publishers, 1986), p. 170.

⁴⁶ Blue Book, Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria 1924 and 1926, cited in Clarke as above.

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⁴⁶ Book, Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria 1924 and 1926, cited in Clarke as above.

In this situation, Sophie Odunlami resuscitated women's role in primal society when women such as the mythical Moremi were prompted to respond to the social problems confronting their communities. Odunlami's responses were motivated by the closure of churches, schools and hospitals as a result of the devastating effects of World War 1 in 1918. The withdrawal of many foreign missionaries to their home countries, leaving the doors of church buildings locked greatly enhanced the process of adapting Christianity to Yoruba culture. Odunlami therefore joined the local congregation in Ijebu Ode to explore new avenues for the survival of the people, but also for the survival of the mission churches.⁴⁷ Thus, Rev Gansallo's action in locking up Saint Saviour's church added further encouragement to the Yoruba community in Ijebu Ode to join the crusade for adaptation that had started in the 1880s.

Ironically, however, women who had been kept in the background were as 'the pillars that the builders had rejected' who then became spiritual agents for the survival of the church in Yorubaland. Although the church sexton, Daddy Ali, took over the physical leadership of the Ijebu Ode congregation which had to meet under the tree in front of the locked church building, spiritual leadership emerged in the person of Sophie Odunlami. Under the condition of uncertainty Daddy Ali had a religious experience in which he consecrated his life unto God's service⁴⁸ and gathered the scattering flocks, while Sophie Odunlami gave them spiritual leadership and nurture reminiscent of women's religious leadership roles in traditional society.⁴⁹ It was in the midst of these uncertainties that Odunlami a schoolteacher, based in near- by Isonyin,⁵⁰ had a dream

⁴⁷ Ayegboyin and Ishola, *African Indigenous Churches*, p. 66.

⁴⁸ Clarke, *West Africa and Christianity*, p. 190.

⁴⁹ Geoffrey Parrinder, *West African Religion* (London: Epworth Press, 1949), p. 165.

⁵⁰ Isonyin is about five miles from Ijebu Ode. Ayegboyin and Ishola, *African Indigenous Churches*, p. 66.

in which she received instructions to use prayer and rainwater for the cure of the prevalent influenza.⁵¹

Although Odunlami instantly became a spiritual leader, the process of healing, which elevated her from mere membership of a church into a co-founder of a denomination, increased the popularity of adapted Yoruba Christianity, because the antidote she prescribed found widespread acceptance. Again, it is argued here that while the powers she exercised were not conferred through official sources, they reflected a high level of personal spiritual development, which accounted for her continued relevance and influence in the society. Thus, Odunlami's spirituality thrived through a combination of informal leadership, an esoteric knowledge and mystical practices in religion, which powers were all exercised for the overall good of the community.⁵² In the face of limited medical opportunities for women, the best option open to them was what later became known as faith healing, spearheaded and popularised by Odunlami. As she travelled the length and breadth of the Ijebu country, passing on the message, many people received their healing and her charismatic gifts drew large followings, thus encouraging attendance at the prayer meetings in Ijebu Ode⁵³ and building confidence in adapted Christianity.

Although, as far as mission practices were concerned, Odunlami's healing process was unorthodox, nevertheless, it was timely and it demonstrates another important aspect of the Christian adaptation of primal healing processes for the ailing bodies and yearning souls and spirits of Yoruba women. To the Yoruba, for whom religion was

⁵¹ It is estimated that over ten million lives were believed to be lost to the influenza which ravaged the whole world with effects far more devastating than those of the war. For more details, see, Ayegboyin and Ishola, *African Indigenous Churches*, p.65.

⁵² Olajubu, *Women in Yoruba Religious Sphere*, p. 66.

⁵³ Peel, *Aladura: A Religious Movement among the Yoruba*, p. 62.

not effective unless it yielded concrete values, resulting in a better life during this earthly existence, allegiance to the Supreme God in times of life crises must produce corresponding rewards such as healing, material blessings and children. Thus, Odunlami tapped the spiritual resources of primal society to quench the spiritual thirst of Yoruba who had become Christians.

Yoruba Christianity thus merged together the spiritual leadership of pastor, preacher and teacher with those of a healer, such that the gifts in an individual are called to function simultaneously for the advancement of the church. Adaptation was therefore critical for the survival of Christianity, especially to sustain it when its missionary forebears had to retreat in time of war, leaving no organised spiritual options for the people. If Christianity failed to meet the existential needs at this crucial time in Yorubaland, the chances of its survival among women were very slim given that the principal reason for the choice of a religion was its ability to meet adherents' existential needs.

If Yoruba Christian women had not responded appropriately by adapting the healing processes to meet the extremity of their needs during the epidemic, they would surely have forsaken Christianity. Therefore, by adopting the healing patterns of Yoruba primal society, Odunlami fulfilled the essential function and purpose of religion for the Yoruba, offering an adapted Christianity allowed Yoruba women to function as women had done in Yoruba traditional religions.

Well before assimilation gave way to adaptation, it is important to note the expectations of the Yoruba in times of sickness and missionaries' responses to those

needs. Despite the existence of Crowther Junior's Dispensary in Abeokuta, people, Christians and non-Christians still thronged to traditional spiritual authorities, such as 'Akere', the priestess of 'Yemoja', for holistic healing, because their sicknesses were not only of the body, but also of the soul and spirit.⁵⁴ However, when there was any accident or emergency, the first port of call was the mission compound, because the Yoruba does not separate between spiritual and physical wellbeing, rather, they assumed that every missionary was competent to administer medical care.⁵⁵

Whereas many missionaries often felt obliged to meet the medical needs of the people, apart from the Ake clinic run by Samuel Crowther (jnr), mission stations such as Badagry, Ibadan, Ogbomoso and Ondo had to improvise whenever the needs arose. Thus, for many years, Allen, though not a trained surgeon, performed major surgical operations in Ibadan mission station, such as sewing up the stomach of a man who was attacked by one of his brothers during a heated argument.⁵⁶ However, such daring practices soon ceased as different mission bodies started medical missions by building hospitals, such as the ones in Ibadan, Ogbomosho, Ilesa and in far away Eku.

Returning to Odunlami, her response to the ravaging effect of influenza in 1918 went beyond a mere humanitarian gesture as it forged a connection between biblical Christianity and Yoruba communal values and ethics. Whereas mission spirituality had placed more emphasis on healing through medical science, Yoruba converts found greater relevance in the faith healings demonstrated in the New Testament. For example, in the 1850s when Akere, the *Yemoja* priestess discussed extensively in

⁵⁴ See CMS/CA2/061 T. King, Journal 15 September 1855. See also CMS/CA2/032 S. Crowther Jr., Journal 25 September 1855.

⁵⁵ CMS/CA2/019 W.S. Allen, Journals, 24 June 1877; 16 Oct, 1885.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

chapter three stood beside the river in Abeokuta to heal the people, Samuel Crowther (jnr) found a parallel in her water healing and Jesus' healing of the man by the pool of Bethesda.⁵⁷

Even though Crowther would not recommend Akere whom he referred to as 'a deceiver', nonetheless he drew attention to similarities between Yoruba spiritual healing and New Testament faith healings. While Sophie Odunlami did not consult with the Yoruba oracles, her importation of Yoruba spirituality was based primarily on faith healing. Odunlami's action is reminiscent of the selflessness of a healer, a quality Christians find in Jesus' miracles, and Yoruba oral history concerning Moremi, who gave up her only son for the survival of her community, as highlighted in chapter three of this thesis. Thus, while missionaries used medical ministries as a means to an end, Yoruba Christian women perceived both physical and spiritual healing as major ends of Christianity.

Finally the adaptation of primal healing processes affirms the sacredness of life over and above Church tradition or even traditional religious tradition. Yoruba women were consistently drawn to the primal healing pattern as reflecting the sacredness of life, which was important for the continuity of the lineage and preservation of the race. For example,

Ijebu women flock in great numbers to Ilesha to Babalola to get blessed water. The roads to Ilesha and the market are chock-a-block with lorries which have brought passengers in from a distance.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ CMS/CA2/032 S. Crowther Jr., Journal 25 September 1855.

⁵⁸ 'Faith Healer Babalola and *Aladuras*, Operations in Oyo Province', November 1931, cited in Clarke, *West Africa and Christianity*, p. 169.

It is not difficult to deduce therefore that adaptation of primal healing patterns within Christian practices led to the influx of women to the healing ministry of Christ Apostolic Church in Ilesha, under Joseph Babalola who was using 'blessed water' to heal in 1931.

Whereas infant baptism was a major practice of the Anglican Church,⁵⁹ when Odunlami's panacea for the deadly epidemic failed to stop the death of many children, rather than giving it a medical interpretation, converts perceived it as a divine rejection of infant water baptism. Such spiritual interpretation can be traced to the fact that the group derived its spiritual nurture from the Faith Tabernacle in the United States of America that opposed infant baptism.⁶⁰

As much as adaptation renewed the hope of Yoruba women that what their primal spirituality was being revived, it had its own challenges. For instance, whereas Sophie Odunlami's prayer group felt comfortable remaining within the Anglican Church, their overt criticism of infant baptism, a major distinctive practice of Anglicanism led to their expulsion.⁶¹

While the hospitals offered treatment for the physical symptoms being presented, the spiritual healing offered in the *Aladura* churches took into consideration every aspect

⁵⁹ Columbo Stewart, 'Christian Spirituality during the Roman Empire (100-600)', in Arthur Holder, *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality* (Oxford, Blackwell publishing, 2005), p. 77.

⁶⁰
⁶¹ Peel, *Aladura: A Religious Movement among the Yoruba*, p. 63. This led to the group, which started out as Precious Stone, later affiliated with the Faith Tabernacle, finding solace in the doctrinal beliefs of the American church. However, the inevitable parting of ways happened and finally they became an independent denomination taking the name 'Christ Apostolic Church' in 1922. For more details see O. Oshun, 'The Pentecostal Perspectives of the Christ Apostolic Church', in ORITA vol. 15, 2 Dec. 1983, p. 105.

of the people's spirituality, which included the social, cultural and spiritual contexts.⁶² Ishola and Ayegboyin were apt in asking why the male African missionaries who constituted the formal leadership of the church at this time were at a loss in responding to the challenges other than in their characteristic militant ways.⁶³ The missionaries' ambivalent response to the evolving adaptation was because their focus was on eschatological concerns rather than on existential matters.

Thus while Yoruba men were busy wresting leadership from the foreign missionaries, women's concern was how to adapt Christianity to respond to the existential needs of the society and enlist them in the ministry of healing the body, the soul and the spirit. It is here argued that the exclusion of women from a ministering role was to ensure that they were also excluded from the church hierarchy and power structure. Nevertheless, women such as Odunlami, though prohibited from the pulpit renegotiated spiritual resources that were practically important for meeting the spiritual needs of the people and enlisting them in meaningful worship of the Supreme God through Christ.

Odunlami therefore, demonstrated charismatic gifts and the kind of authority which 'people actually do take notice of and follow, consistently acknowledging it to be legitimate'.⁶⁴ Women in the African Independent churches thereafter freely contributed to policies which shaped the church and provided a sense of direction for congregants. The adaptation process can be summarised in the words of Geoffrey Parrinder:

⁶² H. Callaway, Women in Yoruba tradition and in the Cherubim and Seraphim Society. In O. U. Kalu (ed.), *The History of Christianity in West Africa* (London and New York: Longman, 1980), p. 329.

⁶³ Ayegboyin and Ishola, *African Indigenous Churches*, p. 66.

⁶⁴ Peel, *Aladura: A Religious Movement among the Yoruba*, p. 244.

In independent churches they are prophetesses and prayer leaders, as in the old religion they would have been priestesses, mediums and exorcists.⁶⁵

The predictions of Samuel Crowther therefore became a reality that Christianity would only thrive in Yorubaland if the primal beliefs, attitudes and practices could be refined to remove 'folly and superstition of idolatrous worship' in all its ramifications.⁶⁶

Thus, the struggle to make Christianity a Yoruba religion began when Yoruba women took their destiny into their own hands and reaped the greatest benefits when Christianity was adapted to suit Yoruba cosmological worldviews. The rationale behind Yoruba women's adaptation of Christian spirituality can be discerned in the centre of value and meaning for Christian converts, which derived from Yoruba cosmology, because spirituality is closely tied to the question of meaning. The possession of spiritual insights, therefore, led to women's wider influence on Yoruba spirituality that had become critical for unveiling meaning in Yorubaland.

Adaptation of Ritual Objects, Dreams and Spiritual Agencies

The most critical problem that Yoruba women in mission churches had was their attachment to symbols. This is due to the fact that conversion did not remove the significance and meanings attached to some of the ritual objects. Thus, while the Bible and the Primer were basic books used for consistent spiritual growth and discipleship, non-converts saw them as Yoruba women's object of power. Whereas some Yoruba women surrendered certain ritual objects of power in the traditional Yoruba religions as a proof of conversion, spiritual attachments to some other rituals

⁶⁵ Parrinder, *Africa's Three Religions*, p. 165.

⁶⁶ Cited in E. K. Ekechi, *Missionary Enterprise and Rivalry in Igboland: 1957 – 1914* (London: Frank Cass, 1972), p. 24.

objects from their former religions did not totally disappear. One of the most persistent objects, which did not lose its original significance, even among Christian converts was water. Hence, T. J. Bowen noticed an unusual attachment Christian converts had for water as he baptized his converts.⁶⁷

Therefore, despite the marked differences between Yoruba ritual processes and Christian liturgy, Yoruba converts transferred some of the former meanings attached to ritual objects and their functions to their practice of Christianity. Some ritual objects from Yoruba primal religions survived missionaries' attempts to give the Yoruba a form of Christianity that was alien to their worldview. However, physical objects such as water, and spiritual experiences, such as dreams and visions, were brought to life again through adoption of some ritual objects as Christianity became a Yoruba religion.

Water as Ritual Object in Yoruba Christian Women's Spirituality

For female divinities in particular water was one of the strongest ritual objects through which connections were made with their worshippers. Although the worshippers of goddesses of rivers such as *Oya*, the goddess of the Niger, or *Yemoja*, the mother of fishes, were both male and female, water was one of the strongest objects by which they were identified. Thus, water not only featured prominently in the myth of origins of divinities such as *Oya*, the shrines of female divinities were always located close to the rivers associated with them. Only in a few exceptions such as in the cult of *Obatala* did female divinities maintain contact with their members through some other ritual objects. For example *Afala*, the mother of Samuel

⁶⁷ Bowen, *Adventures and Missionary Labours in Several Countries in the Interior of Africa from 1849 – 1856*, p. 97.

Crowther, who used to be a priestess of *Obatala* before her conversion, along with other adherents, maintained her connection with the divinity through their ritualized white attire, which symbolised purity of thought and action.⁶⁸

Although Yoruba converts encountered water in a different context in mission Christianity, the notion of water as a powerful ritual object, which had its origin in the primal religions, did not disappear. Rather, the belief that water had the potential to convey healing was blended into Yoruba Christian spirituality. Yoruba converts thus, reverted to their beliefs in the potency of water, which became prominent in Yoruba Christian women's spirituality. Even though water had a different form of significance as a ritual object in Christian spirituality, its application in African spirituality and as a ritual object transcended its use for baptism by immersion in the Baptist tradition and by sprinkling on the forehead in the CMS churches. Hence, it was disconcerting to the missionaries when Yoruba converts attached extraordinary meanings to water.

Whereas in Christian spirituality, baptism with water constitutes the Christian rite of passage into the Church, in Yoruba spirituality, it was an agent of healing, and preservation, as Afolabi Ojo, an African scholar explains.⁶⁹ Therefore, water featured prominently in the religious experiences of Yoruba Christians, particularly in resolving crises such as sicknesses and peace in fractured communities. Hence, during the 1918 epidemic, Odunlami adapted the function of water in the primal religions into Christian prayers, thus making it function as a healing agent.

⁶⁸ Jeanne Decorvet and Emmanuel Oladipo, *Samuel Ajayi Crowther: The Miracle of Grace* (Lagos: CSS Bookshops, 2006), p. 60.

⁶⁹ Afolabi Ojo, *Yoruba Culture: A Geographic Analysis* (Ile-Ife and London: University of Ife and University of London Press, 1966), pp. 163 – 165.

The massive success that greeted Odunlami's use of water as a Christian ritual object of healing therefore stemmed from the primal understanding of water where it was both loved and feared. It was regarded as a blessing when a town was situated near a flowing river or sea; hence the river was worshiped, not because of its value in supplying sea-foods and serving as a major means of transportation, but because of its value for spiritual healing. Secondly, women were closely identified with the river cults as many water divinities such as *Osun*, *Yemoja*, *Oya* and *Otin* were female.⁷⁰ Membership of these cults also cut across gender, even when the divinities and leadership were strictly female.

Hence in using water for spiritual purposes, Odunlami harnessed the potentialities of her Yoruba spiritual background which gave her the authority to speak for the Transcendent and combined it with her Christian background of prayer and evangelism. She thus adapted Christianity uniquely by presenting new forms of spirituality derived from both traditions. The positive response of converts and non-converts alike affirms the argument here that adaptation of Christianity to suit Yoruba women's spirituality was a success.

Although mission Christian teachings and dogma prescribed water only for the purposes of baptism, the earlier meaning, function and significance continued to dominate the practices and beliefs of African indigenous churches. It was important in the formation of the spirituality of many of the founders of churches such as the Cherubim and Seraphim (C & S) movement and the Christ Apostolic Church. It is

⁷⁰ Olajubu, *Women in Yoruba Religious Sphere*, pp. 77 – 88.

instructive that adaptation of water as ritual object was not a uniquely women's experience in early Yoruba Christianity. Moses Orimolade, the founder of C & S, for instance, obtained partial healing to his crippled leg when he acted on the vision he had received to use water from a flowing river as a cure⁷¹ in a similar way to the healing of Naaman's leprosy through washing in the River Jordan.⁷² Therefore, the adaptation of the use of water reflects a reinterpretation of Christian beliefs and practices within the dual contexts of the Yoruba cosmological worldview and the Scriptural text of the Old Testament.

Dreams and Revelations in Yoruba Christian Women's Spirituality

Dreams constituted an important part of Yoruba Christian spirituality, which Christians reverted to when faced with crucial life decisions. As Mbiti points out, such dreams are taken as revelation when they surround a dead but respected ancestor or family member.⁷³ In 1891, Akinyele, a second generation Christian, took his decision not to work with the governor of Lagos, based on a dream in which his mother pre-warned him.

...in the night I had a dream. I saw my mother who died in 1891, coming to me in a dream. She came to remind me of the promise I had given. The day before I left home in 1888, my mother prayed with me in our home. As I knelt before her she made me promise that I would do only God's work, in His church. She made me promise on my knees, if you please. That was the most wonderful point in my life. After that I could not sleep the whole night.⁷⁴

Ordinarily, evangelical missionaries disregarded religious experiences such as dreams and personal revelation. The adaptation of Christianity however restored this major

⁷¹ Peel, *Aladura: A Religious Movement among the Yoruba*, p. 59.

⁷² Cf. II Kings 5: 10 – 13.

⁷³ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1969), p. 229.

⁷⁴ Christopher Steed and Bengt Sundkler, *A History of the Church in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 736.

resource by which the Yoruba in the traditional society expressed their fears or demonstrated courage, sorrow or joy. The fact that many Yoruba Christians adapted their faith in line with their worldview discredits the intellectualists' theory of conversion, which claimed that world religions provided answers to the question of meaning, which the primal religions failed to do.⁷⁵ Indeed, every religious tradition adapts its theology and spirituality in order to respond to changing social contexts as Peel and Laitin argue in the case of traditional Yoruba religions.⁷⁶

While women gave a large space in their spiritual maps to the symbolism of dreams and visions, evangelical missionaries reserved a psychological interpretation for it. The Yoruba saw dreams as spiritual markers and guides useful for taking decisions. Secondly, Yoruba women adjusted the gaps of meaning created in the psychological dimensions by introducing dreams and visions, which constituted a large space in their spiritual maps. For example when Abiodun Akinsowon, in 1925 saw the vision of what God was about to do, Moses Orimolade did not deride her because of her young age. Rather in a similar way that Prophet Eli supported young Samuel and nurtured him to become the next spiritual leader of Israel, Orimolade gave Akinsowon the needed spiritual guidance and cooperation that led to the formation of Cherubim and Seraphim in Yorubaland.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, p. 231 – 232. Mbiti claims that the gaps left by African Traditional Religions were not being filled by world religions.

⁷⁶ Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, pp. 152 – 154; Laitin, *Hegemony and Culture: Politics and Religious Change among the Yoruba*, pp.48 – 50.

⁷⁷ Peel, *Aladura: A Religious Movement among the Yoruba*, p. 75. Both Orimolade and Akinsowon are credited with being the co-founders of the Cherubim and Seraphim Church.

Angelic Visitation and Adaptation in Yoruba Christian Women's Spirituality

Adaptation of Christianity in Yorubaland contained natural and supernatural elements. Whereas first-century Christians would hardly deny the reliability of angelic visitations, only an adapted Christianity offered such opportunity to the Yoruba, and women were in the forefront of these experiences. Even before contacts with missionaries Yoruba cosmology recognised the existence of malevolent and benevolent spirits. The origins of Yoruba belief in angels and spiritual agencies was therefore rooted in both the Bible and Yoruba culture. Turner, in his evaluation of Western perspectives on dreams and vision states:

Are the biblical and African worlds merely primitive as compared with ourselves? Or is it rather that the Bible is indeed a 'book of all cultures', and that in its ceasing to speak to our culture at this points we learn more about ourselves than we do about our scriptures? Perhaps what we lack at this point is suggested by the intriguing advice of a leader of an independent church to his members when he exhorted them 'to learn to dream like a Christian'.⁷⁸

The formation and early life of the Cherubim and Seraphim movement owed so much to the adaptation of Christianity. Abiodun Akinsowon's encounter with an angel marked a turning point, not only in her spiritual worldview but also in adding a new dimension to Yoruba women's life map and Yoruba cosmology. The seriousness with which members of the C & S movement refer to both Akinsowon's encounter with the angel, who she believed followed her home from the annual Corpus Christi procession in Lagos on 18 June 1925, and the vision she had in a trance has initiated a belief in angelic encounters as a recognisable part of Yoruba women's spirituality.⁷⁹ These experiences cut across the mainline denominations and the African Independent Churches.

⁷⁸ Turner, *Religious Innovation*, pp. 206 – 207.

⁷⁹ Peel, *Aladura: A Religious Movement among the Yoruba*, pp. 71 – 72.

In a typical missionary fashion of rationalizing all experiences, Akinsowon's pastor, Rev. T. A. J. Ogunbiyi of St Paul's Breadfruit, who was also the Archdeacon of the Anglican church in Lagos interpreted the whole experience as hallucination. In contrast, those who had shared in the vision of adaptation, such as Moses Orimolade engaged with the young girl's experience spiritually. Thus, Ogunbiyi, who lacked the spiritual resources to handle such an experience, simply prayed for her and left her in a semi-conscious state for many days. Such was the nature of struggles that Yoruba women went through in their bid to incorporate their cosmological worldview into their spiritual journey as Christians.

Christianah Abiodun Akinsowon did not go back to her Anglican church after recovering from her experience because a new spiritual orientation had started in the African Independent Churches, with its foundations firmly established in Yoruba belief in both positive and negative spiritual agencies. Secondly, the Anglican Church, which would not shift in its spirituality until much later in the twentieth century, which is outside the period being considered, discounted the place of angels and spiritual beings, and thus lacked the cultural and spiritual resources to handle such esoteric experiences.

Conclusion

Yoruba women's encounters with the missionaries resulted in significant conversion but the evangelicals were reluctant to accommodate any of the former religious practices by which the Yoruba society had functioned before the 1840s. Although the methods adopted by missionaries to assimilate Yoruba women did not fully provide immediate answers to the yearnings of their converts who were under the heavy yoke

of personal, family and community pressures, they prepared them sufficiently enough to become Christians. While it is true that Christianity is an inclusive religion, which is much unlike the traditional Yoruba religions, inflexibility in the way Christianity should evolve in new missionary centres disrupted the growth of holistic Christianity among Yoruba women. Thus, Yoruba women provided the answers to the almost half a century of struggle for Christian practices that would stimulate the spiritual sensibilities of the Yoruba and direct their mind towards God rather than the gods, in three major ways discussed in this chapter.

Yoruba women established a rationale for adaptation through its origin and purpose; they adapted their gender role to promote the Christian cause, while being true to their culture and worldview. Furthermore, Yoruba women adopted traditional healing processes in their search for meaning within Christianity; and finally, they adopted the use of Yoruba ritual symbols and spiritual agencies to fulfil their quest for meaning within Christianity.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

In 1842, before Yoruba women had encountered mission Christianity, there was a distinctive Yoruba women's spirituality: by 1930, a distinctive form of Yoruba Christian women's spirituality existed that had been shaped and formed by women. This summary statement is a fitting conclusion to the central argument in this thesis that the conversion of Yoruba women from their traditional religions to Christianity did not automatically invoke a new spiritual orientation. Although Yoruba women were the first to respond to the Gospel message, as women converted to Christianity before men,¹ they had great difficulties being assimilated into the missions' mode of Christianity because it did not take their culture and worldview into consideration.

The goal of Yoruba women, as shown in this study, was to make Christianity a religion of the Yoruba so that the Yoruba people would begin to reap the full benefits of becoming Christian. Hence, three decades after their conversion, adaptation of Christianity had become evident as Yoruba women's response to making meaning within the context of their culture and worldview. Thus, they adapted their gender roles from the traditional religions to the practice of Christianity, adopted traditional ritual symbols for Christian worship, and incorporated traditional ways of making meaning and reaching towards the Transcendent within African Christianity.

Overall conclusions of this investigation of the development of Yoruba women's spirituality as they responded to missionaries' influence, throughout the eventful period of 1842 to 1930, will be set out in response to three pertinent questions. First,

¹ Peter B. Clarke, *West Africa and Christianity* (London: Edward Arnold Publishers Ltd, 1986), p. 63.

what was the significance of the four main phases that marked the transformation of Yoruba women's spirituality in this study? Secondly, did Yoruba women's Christian spirituality finally emerge as a result of adoption or adaptation of Christianity? Thirdly, was it Yoruba primal spirituality that absorbed mission spirituality or vice versa, or was it a fusing of the two spiritualities, which Peel describes succinctly as 'a two-way process of mutual assimilation' of religious cultures?² Cognisance is taken of the fact that some aspects of the four phases of Yoruba women's Christian spirituality subsists in current Yoruba Christianity. Such vital vestiges of the encounters between Yoruba women and the missionaries raise questions about the state of Yoruba Christian spirituality since 1930, which are briefly set out at the end of this chapter.

The Significance of the Four Phases of Yoruba Women's Spiritual Development

The four phases adapted in this study from Humphrey Fisher's three stages of religious conversion – namely quarantine, conflict, assimilation and adaptation – have enabled the evaluation of the development of Yoruba women's spirituality in this thesis. While progress through the phases occurred on different timescales in different missionary locations, use of these fourfold categories allows analysis of the nature of influences upon Yoruba women during the distinct phases, and also brings into focus Yoruba women's own agency in shaping Yoruba Christian women's spirituality. For instance, while missionary encounters began with the arrival of Thomas Birch Freeman, the pioneer Wesleyan Methodist missionary at Badagry, along the coast in 1842, Abeokuta had its first contact in 1842 with the arrival of Freeman,³ 1842 and

² J. D. Y. Peel, 'Gender in Yoruba Religious Change', in *Journal of Religion in Africa*, vol. 32, no. 2, May 2002, p. 137.

³ CMS/CA1/0215, H. Townsend, Journal Entry, 'Mission of Research', 29 December 1842.

1845 with the entrance of the CMS agents, Gollmer, Crowther and Townsend.⁴ Ogbomoso and Ijaiye began to have missionary presence with the arrival of Thomas Jefferson Bowen of the Baptist mission in 1854 and 1855 respectively,⁵ while J. A. Maser, a German and Edward Roper, an Englishman, both agents of the CMS initiated missionary contact with Ondo in 1873.⁶

While women in Badagry, Abeokuta, Lagos, Ijaiye and Ogbomoso had moved from the phase of quarantine to conflict and in some places, assimilation, it took the active influence of colonialism, which had already started with the annexation of Lagos as a colony in 1862 to break the barrier of isolating Christian missions from Eastern Yorubaland.⁷ The sheer force and influence of the colonialists in bringing peace to many war torn areas of Yorubaland made the people more receptive to missionaries, thus reducing the span of influence of the local leaders.⁸ The experience of *Lisa* (the ruler) of Ondo, who came in contact with missionaries for the first time in 1873,⁹ indicates that the presence of colonialists facilitated missionary work in Ondo. The ruler of Ondo's attempt to quarantine the missionaries by stopping women from associating with them through trade was short lived as it was important for him to belong to the new power bloc, thus bringing the quarantine phase to an end.¹⁰

The quarantine phase is the response of women and Yoruba leaders to attempts by missionaries to destabilize the spiritual equilibrium of the Yoruba society. Hence, it is

⁴ CMS/CA1/0215, H. Townsend, Journal Entry, 'Mission of Research', 29 December 1842.

⁵ T. J. Bowen, *Adventures and Missionary Labours in Several Countries in the Interior of Africa 1849 - 1856* (London, Frank Cass and Company Ltd., 1968), p. 182.

⁶ CMS/CA2/068, J. A. Maser, Journal Entry, 'Journey to Countries East of Lagos', December 1873.

⁷ These include places such as Ondo, Ilesha and Ekiti.

⁸ Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, p. 250. See also David Laitin, *Hegemony and Culture, Politics and Religious Change among the Yoruba* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 37.

⁹ CMS/CA2/068, J. A. Maser, Journal Entry, 'Journey to Countries East of Lagos', December 1873.

¹⁰ CMS/CA2/078 Charles Phillips, Journal Entry, 10 July 1877.

marked by women's resistance to missionaries disregard for and erosion into the core values of Yoruba, as typified by their rejection of Allen's criticism of their views on the 'motherly rock'.¹¹ The quarantine phase became even more effective because there was a meeting of minds between the Yoruba leaders for whom women were strategic in their role as nurturers of the *orisa*, and the women themselves whose hope of continuing to be an effective part of leadership in the society faced a threat once they converted to Christianity. Therefore, Yoruba women actively quarantined missionaries, rather than simply respecting the injunctions made by male Yoruba chiefs, in a bid to protect women's important role in traditional society as well as their core values, which informed their primal spirituality.

Although a major significance of the quarantine is that it afforded missionaries a unique opportunity to witness and observe the pre-contact religious and social life of Yoruba women, they failed to utilize the advantages they had. They were unduly critical of the role of women in religious, social and political leadership such as Akere, the *Yemoja* priestess,¹² Efunsetan¹³ and Madam Tinubu.¹⁴ The ritual practices in which women functioned as leaders were interpreted as the 'absurdity of *Yemoja*', and whatever made meaning to Yoruba women in their relationship with one another and to the Transcendent was dismissed as 'irrational' by the missionaries.¹⁵

While missionaries tended to underrate the influence of women in traditional society, women's role in primal religions, culture and society formed the bedrock of Yoruba

¹¹ CMS/CA2/018/16, William Allen, Journal entry, 15 May 1859.

¹² CMS/CA2/061, T. King, Journal entry, 15 September 1855.

¹³ Samuel Johnson, *The History of The Yorubas*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1921), p. 391.

¹⁴ CMS/CA2/04, S. Crowther to H. Venn, 30 September 1856.

¹⁵ E. g. CMS/CA2/082, I. Smith, Journal entry, 12 September 1855.

women's spirituality. Thus, losing sight of whatever laid at the background of Yoruba women's spiritual consciousness was a major hindrance to the transmission of Christianity into Yoruba society and transformation of Yoruba primal spirituality. 'A new scheme of faith', Robertson Smith, an English scholar argues 'can find a hearing only by appealing to religious instincts and susceptibilities that already exists'. He argues further that such a task cannot be easily attained 'without taking into account the traditional form in which all religious feeling is embodied, and without speaking a language, which men accustomed to this old form, understand'.¹⁶ Smith's argument is consistent with the proposition in this thesis that Christian conduct and worship practices had to acquire a Yoruba meaning if Christianity would be accepted as a religion of the Yoruba.

Even though missionaries had ample opportunities of interpreting critical aspects of Yoruba spirituality, which could have become useful for their evangelistic strategies, as evidenced by Hinderer's visit to some local chiefs in Badagry in 1849,¹⁷ they failed to appreciate the centrality of women's roles in ritual. Thus, quarantine of the missionaries by Yoruba women and Yoruba leaders generally, sought to protect fundamental aspects of Yoruba traditional religion, where women played a vital role, albeit these were obscure to the missionaries.

First, oral tradition establishes that both women and men functioned complementarily as divinities, ancestors and priests/priestesses in Yoruba traditional religions.¹⁸

Secondly, women, as well as men could symbolize divine power in the traditional

¹⁶ W. Robertson Smith, *The Religion of the Semites* (London: A & C Black, 1964), p. 2.

¹⁷ CMS/CA2/049/95 D. Hinderer, Journal Entry, Friday 22 June 1849.

¹⁸ See G. J. Afolabi Ojo, *Yoruba Culture: A Geographical Analysis* (London: University of London Press Ltd, 1966), p. 165.

religious systems.¹⁹ Thirdly, women were central to family sacrifices to the extent that without the wife many family sacrifices would be rendered unacceptable. Therefore, a more accurate perception of women in Yoruba spirituality, philosophical concepts and culture would have reduced tensions during the period of quarantine and created an avenue for Christianity to become a Yoruba religion.

Another major significance of the quarantine phase is that it converted family relationships into evangelistic advantages, with respect to the returnee Yoruba Christians who returned to their families, thus subverting the impact of the isolation of European missionaries. Although the phase produced the least number of converts by European missionaries, the maternal instincts of many mothers for their estranged returnee children moved them to great length to 'forsake all' and reunite with them upon returning to Yorubaland. Evidences of reunion abound in the archives.²⁰

Although, what women and the Yoruba leaders were trying to protect in the quarantine phase seemed to be lost as a result of their encounters during the conflict and assimilation phases, rather than look up to a largely male missionary group to restore the place of women in Yoruba culture and worldview, women took their destiny into their own hands as they revived many of the lost privileges. Thus, by 1930, women refused to take the back bench in matters of religion and society. Hence, they assumed a frontline role in responding to a community concern, which came in form of an epidemic that had a devastating effect on the community. Secondly, as they would have done in traditional religions, they had distinct roles as leaders in mission churches and joint founders of *Aladura* churches. Thirdly, as was their

¹⁹ Olajubu, *Woman in the Yoruba Religious Sphere*, p. 65.

²⁰ Sarah Tucker, *Abbeokuta; or Sunrise within the Tropics: An Outline of the Origin and Progress of the Yoruba Mission* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1853), pp. 89 & 90, 150.

pattern in traditional religions, they reintroduced and adapted the use of water to suit their purposes for healing and redefined what constituted a Christian home, taking into consideration the role of Yoruba culture, which accommodates polygyny as a system of marriage.

Unlike the quarantine phase, Yoruba women's primal spirituality faced its greatest challenge during the conflict phase of its development as they were directly confronted with ideas that clearly stood in opposition to their culture and worldview. This came about when missionaries adopted an effective means of breaking the barrier created by women and the leaders of through aggressive itinerant preaching, dialogue with women and attempting to resolve the differences in some of the core issues in spirituality through the Scriptures. Missionaries' strategy of adopting open air preaching, visitation, argumentation and disruption of ritual practices, proved effective in meeting women who had successfully distanced themselves from missionaries in the earlier period of quarantine.

A major importance of this period derives from the fact that it brought Yoruba women into significant contact with missionaries, thus exposing the differences between their beliefs, attitudes and practices and those of the missionaries. It became obvious that such divergences were as a result of culture and cosmological worldview. Nevertheless, the traditional boundaries that resulted in quarantine persisted as the theme that resonated constantly in the conflict between Yoruba women and missionaries was missionaries' rejection of Yoruba religious plurality demonstrated

by the pantheon of gods. Conflict between missionaries and women non-converts in the middle of their ritual was a common occurrence.²¹

Even though conflict offered an immediate advantage for Yoruba women converts to gain more knowledge of the various doctrines that were of primary importance for developing Christian character, it presented a number of challenges to Yoruba women's spirituality. A major divergence is Yoruba concept of *orisa* being mediators between God and humanity, and missionaries' insistence on exclusive monotheism.

The conflict phase of spiritual development of Yoruba women's spirituality also reveals women's deep-seated beliefs in the Yoruba concept of *ori*, which has its source in one of the myths of creation, remaining one of those beliefs that resist all attempts at transformation in Yoruba worldview, both among Christians and non-Christians. In current understanding, the concept has been stretched to include references to women's head as the essence of their creation that must be given all due respect and honour. Thus, women pour encomiums on their heads as they wash, plait or adorn their hair in ways reminiscent of what Bowen noticed of Yoruba women's dressing in the 1850s.²² Although the conflict phase opened up contacts with Yoruba women and their objections and protests revealed their deep seated beliefs and practices, it did not remove or replace those fundamental traditional beliefs and practices. That crucial aspect is reserved for the Church.

The assimilation phase of Yoruba women's transformation is the most strategic in terms of Christian formation of converts. Although women were successfully

²¹ See for example, CMS/CA2/043 C. A. Gollmer, Journal Entry, 15 June, 1854.

²² Bowen, *Adventures and Missionary Labours in Several Countries in the Interior of Africa*, p. 158.

assimilated through effective discipleship, church liturgy and literacy programmes, denominational policies of each of the denominations hindered effective transformation of spirituality of some Yoruba women.

While some policies are common to them, it is pertinent to note that each of the three major Christian denominations that were at the centre of Yoruba conversion to Christianity in the nineteenth century had distinctive church polity informing their respective denominational spirituality. The Southern Baptists' spirituality reflected the autonomy of the local church, and the notion of priesthood of all believers, with 'soul competency' as the foremost characteristic.²³ Wesleyan Methodists emphasised the lesson the Wesley brothers first learnt from their Moravian mentor, Peter Boehler, that salvation is experiential,²⁴ while Anglicanism made a strong distinction between clergy and the laity.²⁵

Although denominational fundamentals were not fully operational in the early stages of Church formation in nineteenth-century Yorubaland, they were a strong influence on the missionaries' interpretive frameworks. The traditional Yoruba worldview was thus ignored because Western missionaries and their westernized Yoruba peers considered Western forms of spirituality to be superior to Yoruba traditional means of making meaning. This thesis follows Horton in rejecting the view that Yoruba spirituality had to be exchanged with mission spirituality in order to gain an 'inner feeling' of God's presence.

²³ Paul H. Harrison, *Authority and Power in the Free Church Tradition: A Social Case Study of the American Baptist Convention* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), pp. 18 – 19.

²⁴ J. Ernest Rattenbury, *The Conversion of the Wesleys* (London: The Epworth Press, 1938), p. 77.

²⁵ All three denominations in the forefront in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Yorubaland were influenced by the long history of Western theology.

Missionary Attitudes to Women's Roles

The inflexible attitude of missionaries who arrived in Yorubaland in the early years of the 1840s and 1850s contributed significantly to the delay in assimilating Yoruba women fully into Christianity until almost half a century later when women took up the task of adapting Christianity to suit Yoruba spiritual expression. A case in point was the event in Abeokuta in 1854 where both the English and German missionaries condemned Akere's spiritual healing and found nothing useful that could be integrated with Christianity in her activities by the Ogun River.²⁶ However, Samuel Crowther Junior, a Yoruba missionary saw some virtues in what Akere was doing and likened it to Jesus' healing at the pool of Bethesda.²⁷ Another instance of assimilation and approval by a Yoruba missionary was when James White encouraged women converts in their composition of native airs. Although the westernised Egba Christians queried such incorporation of traditional spirituality, Henry Townsend saw virtue in their contextualisation of Christian hymns.²⁸

Another problem that hindered the development of Yoruba women's spirituality was the delay in allowing female missionaries into Yorubaland, due to the Victorian church ideal of keeping women out of church politics.²⁹ Much earlier in the century, the London Missionary Society's Robert Morrison, the Protestant to China had pleaded that '...some unmarried ladies of experience and education...' be sent for the purpose of teaching English and religion '...to pagan girls'.³⁰ By the time the CMS, WMMS and the Southern Baptist eventually emulated the Morrison's principle

²⁶ CMS/CA2/082, Isaac Smith, Journal 12 September 1855. See also CMS/CA2/068 J. A. Maser, Journal 13 August 1855.

²⁷ CMS/CA2/032 Samuel Crowther Jr., Journal 25 September 1855.

²⁸ CMS CA2/085 H. Townsend Journal Entry 29 August 1857.

²⁹ Melissa Turner, 'Protestantism' in *Women Issues Then and Now: A Feminist Overview of the Past Two Centuries*, 2002, p.1.

³⁰ CWM South China, Incoming correspondence; Box 2/2/D, Letter dated 7 September 1824.

towards the end of the nineteenth century,³¹ the church in Yorubaland had already adopted the stance of silencing women.

Although missionaries' wives operated boarding schools in their homes, not much was done in the aspect of promoting the development of Yoruba women's spirituality. For instance, Anna Hinderer in Ibadan overtly criticised Yoruba folklore, in which the children were gathered together under the moonlight to hear the stories by which the Yoruba had preserved their culture and worldview. On the contrary she organised outdoor games for her students.³² Similarly, although Yoruba missionaries of the CMS, Daniel Olubi in Ibadan, and Samuel Pearse in Badagry supported women's adaptation process, their wives held background roles, to preserve their relevance within the mainline church. Thus, it can be argued that both the missionaries' wives and the female missionaries who began to arrive already had a policy to comply with. The end result was that Yoruba women did not receive direct missionary support until the fullness of time when they began to contextualise Christianity to make it a religion of the Yoruba.

Although there is a gap in time between Luther's reformation and nineteenth-century missionary activities in Yorubaland, there is a correlation between the two, in that missionaries from the Protestant traditions were products of reformation. It is argued here therefore that, the subordination of women had a long historical root in the reformation. While many of the highly revered theologians of the Protestant Church

³¹ Rosemary Seton, 'Open Doors for female Labourers: Women Candidates of the London Missionary Society, 1875 – 1914', in Robert A. Bickers and Rosemary Seton, *Missionary Encounters: Sources and Issues* (Richmond: Curzon, 1996), p. 51.

³² Anna Hinderer, Journal entry, November 30, 1859, in Hinderer, *Seventeen Years in Yoruba Country: Memorials of Anna Hinderer*, p. 205.

tradition, such as Luther, defined faith as 'living, creative, active, powerful',³³ they nevertheless relegated women to the background in church affairs. However, it is argued here that in the same way as the faith of the Western Christians was active, so were the traditional and cultural practices of Yoruba women who did not see themselves as subordinate to men in the religious sphere.

The most fundamental policy common to the three denominations, which women rejected was their negative stance towards the baptism of women in polygamous marriages. This constituted a major aspect of church and family life. Many women affected by it moved out of mission churches to found and take an active role in Yoruba indigenous churches, where polygamy was permitted. Following from the observations made in chapter three, Yoruba women continued the struggle to preserve their role and identity until the opportunity came for them to revive the traditional identity of women in Yorubaland, thus marking the adaptation phase.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of the first three phases of transformation of Yoruba women's spirituality rests on the reasons for which each woman converted. Three groups of converts are identified in this work. While the first group of converts, who were from the quarantine phase were those who re-established family ties, such as Afala, Crowther's mother,³⁴ Mary Ije,³⁵ and the family members of William McCormack.³⁶ Such conversions, which were based on sentimental considerations of family kinship and reunion, appear suspect, when critical issues that go beyond conversion challenge the decisions. Crowther's mother's intention to make a sacrifice

³³ John Dillenberger, *Martin Luther* (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, Anchor Book edition, 1961), p. 24.

³⁴ Cited in Jean Decorvet and Emmanuel Oladipo, *Samuel Ajayi Crowther: The Miracle of Grace* (Lagos: CSS Bookshops, 2006), p. 59.

³⁵ Tucker, *Abbeokuta; or Sunrise within the Tropics*, p. 149.

³⁶ Jean Decorvet and Emmanuel Oladipo, *Samuel Ajayi Crowther*, p, 59.

to the gods for fulfilling their predictions over her son, shortly after her reunion with her son casts a shadow of doubt on the reliability of her conversion and definitely confirms her allegiance to her traditional process of making meaning.³⁷

The second group of women converts were those who converted for what David Laitin terms utilitarian objectives,³⁸ whose considerations had nothing to do with restoration of family and kinship ties. Rather they stood to gain wealth, health and progress, following their conversion, which was not an enduring purpose either. Peel also identified this group as moving along with the political currents in order to obtain power, position and material benefits.³⁹ Thus, discipleship and other assimilation programmes, though effective for establishing denominational emphases, did not bring about contextualization of Christianity, which is relevant for effective transformation of spirituality.

The third group of Yoruba women converts were those whose conversion was based on a deeper level of conviction, those who made a complete break of allegiance from their former beliefs, and physically surrendered the totems of their former religions. Women such as Matilda Suada⁴⁰ and Oyindala⁴¹ had to sacrifice family relationships to identify with their new faith.

It is here argued however that, conversions that were based on sentiment as well as assimilation programmes were not strong enough to compensate for Yoruba women's

³⁷ Ibid, pp. 59 – 60.

³⁸ David Laitin, *Hegemony and Culture: Politics and Religious Change among the Yoruba* (London: The University of Chicago Press Ltd, 1986).

³⁹ Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, p. 250.

⁴⁰ CMS/CA2/029 S. Cole, Journal Entry, 21 December 1876.

⁴¹ See Bowen, *Adventures and Missionary Labours in several Countries in the Interior of Africa*, p. 158.

yearning for some of the practices in the primal society. Nevertheless, as Yoruba women became acquainted with Christianity, they desired spirituality that offered solutions to their myriad of problems gave them an authentic feeling of worship and was mindful of their role and identity in the traditional religion and society.

However, as Christianity entered into its sixth decade in Yorubaland, the social and political contexts of Europe and America took most of the foreign missionaries away from Yorubaland, thus offering an opportunity for Yoruba women to build on earlier occasional adaptations in a more thorough way, to give Christianity a Yoruba identity. Hence, women demonstrated their spirituality through practices that revealed a reincarnation of their role, identity and functions in the traditional society. Sarah Harden, the wife of Joseph Harden, son of an American slave who migrated to Lagos from Sierra Leone in 1857, is a clear example of women who adopted and blended the Baptist policy of the 'priesthood of all believers' with the Yoruba concept of womanhood to revive the traditional role of women in Yorubaland. The absence of foreign missionaries, who returned to America as a result of the American civil war, emboldened her to hold a frontline role in the church, supervising the work of the Baptist mission in the period between 1860 and 1875. Although her husband died in 1864 and she was neither a missionary nor a pastor, Sarah's evangelistic work transcended the barriers of gender in the mission church as many people committed their lives to Christ through her, and she ministered to those who became orphans through the tribal wars.⁴²

⁴² Travis Collins, *The Baptist Mission of Nigeria: 1850-1993*. (Ibadan: Associated Bookmakers, 1993), p. 13

The events that unfolded, beginning from the 1880s, indicated that the fullness of time was near for Yoruba women to take up the challenge of giving Christianity a Yoruba identity, by adopting some of the practices in Yoruba traditional religions. Yoruba women's adaptation of Christianity went a long way to confirm that the aspirations of many of the female communicants were not only prophetic, they were also realisable. Hinderer, for instance recorded a nursing mother's dilemma and prophetic perception of the future of Christianity for second generation Christians:

Visited some of our communicants this afternoon. When on my way I was joking with a woman about her little child, which she carried on her back. The woman told me: my child you shall have as soon as it is able to learn, for our children must learn the word of God, but we old people are too old for changing our country fashion.⁴³

By the 1880s, Yoruba women began to adapt Christianity to suit their cultural roles in society and promote the Yoruba cosmological worldview. Their hope that their children would give Christianity a Yoruba meaning soon helped build a momentum towards the phase of adaptation. The adaptation stage was never to stop anymore, because, beginning from the African Independent Churches, which emerged out of the mission churches into the Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal indigenous missions, women became more innovative in the patterns of adaptation. It is imperative therefore, before drawing certain conclusions, to seek an answer to the question: which of the two religious strands became adapted, Yoruba religions or Christianity?

Yoruba Women's Spirituality: Adopted or Adapted Spirituality?

Gaining converts among Yoruba women was not an easy task after it had become obvious that culture and cosmological worldviews had come into a direct

⁴³ CMS/CA2/0/049/95 David Hinderer, Journal entry, June 30, 1849.

confrontation with the beliefs of mission spirituality. The greatest problem that Yoruba women encountered was not exchanging polytheism for monotheism, as some Yoruba women converts willingly denounced any association with the *orisa* and expressed faith in one God. However, Yoruba women continued to seek means of restoring the old landmarks of their role in religion and society, which mission Christianity attempted to remove, until they finally adapted Christianity and adopted some ritual objects in the primal society and religions.

Relinquishing the *orisa* totally was a major change in Yoruba women's spirituality, because Yoruba cosmology permitted looking to other goddesses/gods to obtain whatever was needed. Although there were some taboos, 'dos' and 'don'ts', which must be observed when crossing from one religious territory to another, the Yoruba would not discriminate between one *orisa* and the other. Thus, the hope of reward, which was a major function of religion to the Yoruba made it mandatory for the individual to participate in the worship of other goddesses and gods in the traditional society. Polytheism, therefore, was not an abnormality to the Yoruba who were open to religious options.

Similarly, it is being argued here that Yoruba women's objective was not to engage in a leadership tussle as could be argued for men, in the case of Ladejo Stone and the schism in the Baptist Mission in the nineteenth century.⁴⁴ The way Sarah Harden relinquished her leadership role as soon as missionaries returned to Yorubaland after the American civil war,⁴⁵ shows that Yoruba women's interest was not in wresting leadership from the hand of men, but in giving attention to issues of community

⁴⁴ Collins, *The Baptist Mission of Nigeria: 1850-1993*, pp 23 – 25.

⁴⁵ Collins, *The Baptist Mission of Nigeria: 1850-1993*, p. 13.

interest. Yoruba women's goal was to gain acceptance and admittance into the mainstream of the church, and to participate in seeking and obtaining divine favours from the Transcendent to whom they looked for procreation, prosperity, providence and the survival of the race.

Therefore, Yoruba women converts to Christianity from 1848 were making major adjustments in their spirituality by surrendering all the items that aligned them with their former religions to be destroyed. Ordinarily, Yoruba women thought that a complete end had come to their former religions and a new dawn had set in with their allegiance to Christianity. However, the disruption of their cultural roles, modes of worship, patterns of prayer, and perceptions of dreams, visions, and divinations soon confronted their new faith, bringing back the nostalgic feelings for their role in the traditional religion and society.

Thus, although many women converts remained steadfast in the face of persecution by Yoruba leaders, such as the Lisa of Ondo in 1873, denouncing polytheism turned out to be but the beginning of Yoruba women's spiritual movement into Christianity. Missionaries soon began to measure the levels of faith through the attitudes and practices of Yoruba women converts, looking out for 'the religion of the heart' couched in Western values, cultures and philosophies. While some missionaries favoured adapted spirituality, their actions were not consistent with their propositions, because no concrete steps were taken to implement their suggestions.

Both Henry Venn, the secretary of the CMS and T J Bowen, the pioneer Baptist missionary in Yorubaland were categorical in their objections to Church practices that

contravened the values and cultures of the Yoruba. Venn's vision that the Yoruba Church would develop to replicate the character of the Yoruba nation was more than a spiritual reflection, it was prophetic, considering the emergence of the African Independent Churches and manifestation of primal spirituality from the 1880s. Venn proposed adapting spirituality to give Yoruba meaning to Yoruba Christianity:

Let a native Church be organised as a national institution...As a native Church assumes a national character, it will ultimately supersede the denominational distinctions which are now introduced by foreign societies...Every national Church is at liberty to change its ceremonies and *adapt* itself to the national state.⁴⁶

Thus Venn's vision for the Yoruba church, which is reflected in his proposition of self-propagation, opposed every form of cultural dominance.

Bowen, in a similar vein calling for an interpretation of Yoruba polytheism, compared the *orisa* with the 'Roman saints, who stand between God and the Catholic',⁴⁷ especially the Roman Catholics' concept of intermediary gods, which Jesus stands for in the communities of Christians.⁴⁸ He emphasised the urgency of seizing on the Yoruba understanding of the mediatory roles of *orisa*, to teach the concept of Christ being the saviour of the world and mediator of Christians:

Nothing but correct views of the mediation of Christ can correct this natural obliquity of the human heart. Could we convince the heathen that Jesus Christ was a better mediator than their idols, they would be converted.⁴⁹

Unfortunately, none of Bowen's views could be translated to practical missionary approaches either by himself or the Baptist denomination. While he argued for

⁴⁶ Cited in William Knight, *Memoirs of Henry Venn*, (London: n.p, 1880), pp. 285 – 6. (Italics on 'adapt' is for emphasis).

⁴⁷ Bowen, *Adventures and Missionary Labours in several Countries in the Interior of Africa*, p. 310.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 312.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 327 – 328.

contextual Christianity in one breath, in the other, he was intolerant of women's dress, which was an essential aspect of their cultural expression. He contends that

They are almost, and in some things, altogether destitute of modesty...Although females wear three wrappers, two from the waist downward, and one over the shoulders, which might conceal the whole body, the upper one is thrown off at will, without exciting either thought or attention.⁵⁰

Notwithstanding missionaries' spiritual perspectives, Yoruba women converts were at the forefront of adapting mission beliefs and practices in a way that suited their core values, culture and process of making meaning. In the spirit of Venn's 'three-selves', which did not set boundaries for 'national character', women began to challenge mission church's power structures. They repudiated background roles which Christianity assigned them in the church and society, and publicly preached and taught the Gospel, as they were doing in the traditional religions. Thus the roles of Sophie Odunlami and Abiodun Akinsowon of the CMS, who were instrumental to the formation of the Christ Apostolic Church and Cherubim and Seraphim respectively, were consistent with Yoruba character of upholding dual roles in religion and society.

Similarly, although Venn advocated that 'every national Church is at liberty to change its ceremonies and *adapt* itself to the national state' he did not anticipate the effect his proposition would have on marriage institution, as many of the women converts were already married to polygamists. While the men converts who agreed to renounce relationship with other wives and keep only one, had their full Church membership status reinstated, wives of polygamists suffered a major set back as they did not qualify for baptism, which was the first step to full membership of the Church. This action however signalled a major problem for transformation of Yoruba women's

⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 287.

spirituality because many of women were from polygamous compounds, thus excluding them from the church's assimilation programmes through which Christian spirituality was formed and shaped.

Although Samuel Crowther, a Yoruba missionary whose mother was from a polygamous setting and had been baptized in 1848, opposed the CMS policy of zero tolerance on polygamy and made spirited efforts to make a case for the baptism of women from polygamous homes, his plea was unsuccessful. What further complicated the matter was that the Christian emigrants from Sierra-Leone who were expected to be the foundation of the church in Abeokuta had succumbed to the influence of the local people. Missionaries wondered at their 'following the evil custom of the country', and accumulating for themselves 'a plurality of wives.'⁵¹ Therefore, Henry Venn, the secretary of the CMS and Bishop Weeks' of Sierra Leone categorical clamping down on polygamy appears justifiable, considering that some of the *Saro* returnees who claimed that they were taking the gospel light to Yorubaland had fallen prey of the polygynous system.⁵²

Thus, while women may be seen as victims of cultural circumstances over which they had no control, their involvement in the formation of independent Churches is a positive move to address the issues of cultural relevance, subordination of women and polygamy, which stood in the way of a Yoruba church with national character and identity. Women's role in redefining Christianity was also an attempt to remove the hindrances placed in the ways of spiritual growth of women in the mission churches.

⁵¹ Tucker, *Abbeokuta; or Sunrise within the Tropics*, p. 41

⁵² CMS/CA2/031 See the Tract 'Christian Marriage in African Society', 1857.

The fact that Yoruba women had to begin the process of adaptation tends to show that missionaries' propositions were only sound in principle, but lacked the necessary follow up. For instance, African missionaries' propositions, such as those of James Johnson and Samuel Crowther, for a Yoruba church that had strong links with indigenous and cultural heritage were never implemented by the CMS. Although Crowther advocated for contextualization of Christianity to preserve national identity, but redeem defective beliefs and practices,⁵³ full implementation of his idea did not come until his death on 31 December 1891.⁵⁴ Crowther however demonstrated his conviction by adopting Yoruba language to present the Gospel through extensive translation of the Yoruba Bible and other Christian literature. This was the same principle Mary Slessor adopted in Old Calabar where she tried to give new meaning to old understanding of women spirituality.⁵⁵

Yoruba women however reaped the fruit of the labours of the Yoruba missionaries, such as James Johnson who adjudged various translation works as the greatest achievement of the Yoruba mission and envisaged that they would 'influence the religion, the coming literature, the thought, the language, the phraseology and the life of the country, if it is diligently and extensively used.'⁵⁶ Thus in his time as Superintendent of the Yoruba Native Church, Johnson promoted practices that reflected Yoruba spirituality. His concerns for an African Church that would not be 'an exotic but a plant [which is] ...indigenous to the soil'⁵⁷ led to giving Yoruba names to babies at baptism.

⁵³ CMS/CA3/04, S. Crowther, A charge delivered at Lokoja in 1869.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ David Livingstone, *Livingstone's Missionary Correspondence, 1841-1856*, I Schapera, ed. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961), p. 42.

⁵⁶ CMS/ CA2/056 J. Johnson, Report to CMS Secretary, 30 January 1875.

⁵⁷ CMS/CA2/056 The Rev James Johnson, Report on Otta, August 1877.

Yoruba women's spirituality was greatly influenced by James White, a Yoruba missionary and promoter of indigenous spirituality who adopted Yoruba arts, hymns and music for church growth. White's admiration for the aesthetic intuition of the Otta people, where he worked as a CMS catechist for twenty years, led to his elaborate evaluation of Gelede, one of the most powerful cults in Otta, which was celebrated to appease the power of female witches.⁵⁸ While not commending Gelede as a way of controlling witches, White sought for a way of adapting the vibrancy and animated worship patterns of the non-converts.

Otta women not only took advantage of White's openness to adapting Christianity to suit their worldview, they also introduced local musical instruments, through which they resolved some aspects of their traditional practices as they expressed their Christian faith in ways that reflected their cultural heritage:

While meditating on what way music can best be taught, so that men and women, adults and children, can unite with heart and voice, the thought came into my mind that the Otta are spoken of as superior to the {other} tribes of Yoruba nation in these things...Our converts, when heathens, certainly had hymns and songs of praise in honour of their gods - might they not also, now that they are Christians, compose songs and hymns in honour of the GOD of Gods and Lord of lords?⁵⁹

Women were therefore drawn to White's strategy, taking active interest, not just in singing to honour God, but going further to compose hymns.

The adaptation in Otta was so successful that a woman White described as 'a poetess and a musician' who approached him for treatment of a bad sore, started to compose

⁵⁸ CMS/CA2/087 J. White, Journal Entry, 31 December 1855.

⁵⁹ CMS/CA2/087 J. White, Report for Half-year to 25 March 1861.

hymn while receiving treatment.⁶⁰ Although many women converts became evangelists, proclaiming the Gospel through songs in towns and villages in popular tunes to the admiration of non-Christians, the songs' lack of theological depth drew the attention of missionaries. White had to rearrange a particular composition encouraging people to go to Church 'for the future benefit of our children', changing the ending to 'for the sake of our salvation.'⁶¹ White therefore struck a balance with Otta women, promoting the composition of native airs without compromising the evangelical doctrines, which emphasised salvation of souls over and above earthly rewards.

In current Christian spiritual practice, such innovative spirit, demonstrated by Otta women under the leadership of James White, has not abated as women spontaneously compose popular songs which reveal their beliefs and practices. Although such songs are 'mainly prayer and praise and express the theology that corresponds to the African people's spirituality,'⁶² they reveal women's real life experiences which inform their relationship with one another, as well as the Transcendent. Themes of such songs reflect a desire to overcome a real or imagined enemy thus.⁶³

However, the right note of caution derived from James White's example to preserve the theological depth of popular songs is instructive for all spiritual leaders and Yoruba Christian women today. In a bid for songs to reflect the experiences of

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ CMS/CA2/087 J. White to H. Venn, 12 July 1856.

⁶² Mercy Amba Oduyoye, 'The Empowering Spirit of Religion', in Ursula King, ed., *Feminist Theology from the Third World: A Reader* (London: SPCK, 1994), p. 371.

⁶³ 'Ota mi di taya moto, iya ni o je de Kaduna,' meaning 'My enemy now becomes the tyres of my vehicle, May he suffer from here to Kaduna.' This is a very popular chorus in many Yoruba speaking churches, which reveals their evil wishes for the enemy.

women, care should be taken to represent the spirit and character of the teachings of Jesus Christ, who best exemplifies the ethos of Christianity.

The focus of adaptation was not a resuscitation of Yoruba traditional religions; its emphasis was in the adoption of aspects of African worldview into Christianity. For instance, Ajaka, the grandson of Olota, the king of Otta dropped his local drums for a new life in Christ. 'For them [the Ottas]', White observes, 'it was necessary to drum the attributes of the various deities and awake them to be propitious to them.'⁶⁴ Having been won over by White's musical innovation, Ajaka converted to Christianity, hoping that his drum would be an innovation in Christianity.⁶⁵

Although Ajaka agreed that drumming had some spiritual connotations in Yoruba traditional religion that could not be contained within Christendom, nevertheless, he slipped back secretly to beat his drums, while White applied extreme caution and wisdom to overlook some of Ajaka's spiritual 'lapses':

Finding that a direct answer would be repulsive to his feelings and occasion a relapse (for he loves it as his god and actually sacrifices to it) I told him not to be in a hurry about that, but he should not beat it on the Lord's day. For a while Ajaka did sometimes secretly break this rule, but found that if he did it for any length of time, the leather would break, as if 'God saw him and his hand was against him'. So he gave up drumming on Sundays.⁶⁶

Mission spirituality, on the other hand, did not attach any extraordinary meaning to Western musical instruments. Mrs Hinderer often referred irreverently to the instrument being taught in the boarding schools in Ibadan as the 'dreary

⁶⁴ CMS/CA2/087, J. White to H. Venn, 12 July 1856.

⁶⁵ Drumming among the Yoruba was more than making music. It had spiritual connotation of reaching out to the Transcendent and one another in a profound way, with praise and adoration, expecting reciprocity of favours and benefits. Caroline Oliver, *Western Women in Colonial Africa* (London: Greenwood Press, 1982), p. 103.

⁶⁶ CMS/CA2/087, J. White, Report for Half-year to 25 March 1861.

harmonium'.⁶⁷ James White's wisdom paid off as Ajaka willingly surrendered his drums six months later and refused a cash exchange offered by Henry Townsend.

When Townsend offered to pay for the drums, Ajaka's response showed not just religious conversion, but a sacrificial adoption of a new spirituality. He states: 'Abraham of old sacrificed his only son to God, I have no child but give this [his drum].'⁶⁸ James White's ability to persuade Yoruba women and men to give up certain aspects of their worship practices is not only ingenious; it also marked a remarkable adoption of a significant Christian theology and mission spirituality.

Thus, White's success in blending Yoruba spirituality through the composition of songs and hymns in the tune and language of the Yoruba was not only effective for transformation of Yoruba spirituality; it also drew admiration and stimulated the interest of other missionaries. When Henry Townsend visited Otta in 1857 and requested converts to sing some of their compositions to him, he found them to be 'Christian hymns' with profound theology in spite of their 'words and tunes being of native composition...'⁶⁹ Samuel Crowther likewise described White's initiatives as songs 'of suitable Scriptural composition of their own adapted to their native airs.'⁷⁰

However, in other instances, attempts by some sections of the missionaries to remove the influence of culture in Yoruba women convert's spirituality produced negative effects and resulted in major set backs in the task of transformation of spirituality. These are evident when missionaries continued to seek means of civilizing African

⁶⁷ Anna Hinderer, *Seventeen Years in the Yoruba Country: Memorials of Anna Hinderer*, 4th ed., C. A. & D Hone, eds (Surrey: Billing and Sons Printers, 1877), p. 290.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ CMS/CA2/085, Henry Townsend, Journal Entry for 29 August 1857.

⁷⁰ CMS/CA3/04, S. Crowther to H. Venn, 6 November 1866.

cultures, losing sight of the fact that they were products of different social and cultural backgrounds and they had the responsibility of ensuring that Christ incarnated in Yoruba culture also. Yoruba women converts were however adamant on adapting Christianity to suit their own worldview. This became a major concern for a section of the missionaries who insisted that Western Christian cultural heritages on dressing, food, language, singing, folklore, dancing, prayer, customary greetings and child naming ought to be reflected in the evolving Yoruba church. Converts who did not conform to their ideal of dressing were regarded as being 'heathen'.⁷¹

Missionaries who were persistent on westernizing Christianity had no boundary or limitation in their expectations. Converts were expected to conform to Western patterns of eating and social habits, which was regarded as evidence of civilization. A tea party thrown by a missionary at Badagry to celebrate his wedding anniversary was considered as a 'token' of civilization for Africans to emulate:

Could our friends but behold the very interesting sight which presents itself and witness the evident token of civilization...they would be delighted.⁷²

Such missionaries had incurable cultural superiority, which was often seen as an attempt to subjugate the Yoruba cultural expressions and portray everything African as heathen.⁷³

Thus, it is here argued that Yoruba women adopted the basic Christian doctrine of monotheism, gave up polytheism and integrated Christian theology into native airs and evangelical doctrines of salvation. They also adopted Yoruba arts, hymns and

⁷¹ Bowen, *Adventures and Missionary Labours in Several Countries in the Interior of Africa from 1849-1856*, p. 158.

⁷² Rev. S. Annear, Journal entry for 20 October 1844 (Methodist).

⁷³ Laitin, *Hegemony and Culture, Politics and Religious Change among the Yoruba*.

music, while polygamy and women's place in the church and the society remained unresolved. This leaves us with the question of whether or not 'leaf' became 'soap', thus fulfilling what missionaries anticipated as the goal of spirituality.

Did 'Leaf' Become 'Soap' in Yoruba Women's Spirituality?

Peel used the metaphor, 'leaf become soap' to explain the gradual process by which Christianity became a Yoruba religion, its relevance for transformation of women's spirituality are examined more carefully as this investigation is concluded. It is here proposed that women were particularly important for the fulfilment of the aspirations of the missionaries because of their special roles in religion, family and social life of Yoruba for 'leaf' (Yoruba spirituality) to become 'soap' (mission spirituality). Therefore as mission work moved from one phase to another, it is important to evaluate how much Yoruba women exemplified the aspirations of the missionaries for a religion of the heart.

Christian spiritual traditions imported from Europe, America, Nova Scotia, Sierra Leone and Gold Coast were incapable of responding to the state of Yoruba women as they coped with their roles within the society and derived meaning to life. Although Peel's categorization of the inconsistencies of converts who still had an eye in the traditional religion as a product of the 'social environment' and 'second generation' syndrome⁷⁴ is plausible, the argument here is that fundamental elements of the Yoruba culture and worldview were responsible for the outcome of Christian spirituality.

⁷⁴ Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, p. 252.

Two events in 1856 and 1881, which Peel examined in his conversion theory,⁷⁵ serve as a bridge, in this thesis also, through which the metaphor of ‘leaf’ becoming ‘soap’ can be effectively applied to the developments in Yoruba women’s spirituality. While an old man, in 1856 reassured a Yoruba missionary, James White, that ‘leaf’ would only become ‘soap’ after a prolonged period of bonding,⁷⁶ conversely, it was a Yoruba missionary, Luke who used the metaphor in 1881 while persuading an old man that only by remaining long enough could he enjoy the benefits of Christianity.⁷⁷

Therefore, the leaf/soap metaphor is relevant for delineating between the aspects of Yoruba women’s spirituality that gave way to mission spirituality as women encountered missionaries in Yorubaland and the ones that consistently resisted change. Since Yoruba leaders successfully reduced contacts between missionaries and women to the barest minimum levels during the quarantine period, ‘leaf’ therefore did not have much contact with ‘soap’ in the 1840s. Secondly, persecution of converts in the 1850s at Abeokuta effectively checked spiritual development in the missionaries’ fashion. Women converts were compelled to play their role to the *orisa*, while men went back to *Ifa*.⁷⁸ This way, ‘leaf’ was again effectively kept apart from ‘soap’.

Yoruba women, leaders and the missionaries share the responsibility for the lack of contact between ‘leaf’ and ‘soap’ in the 1840s and the 1850s. On occasions where missionaries made conversions, major lapses on their part accounted for failure of the leaf to stay on the soap. For example, Bowen’s failure to baptize Oyindala, his first convert in Bi-Olorunpelu kept ‘soap’ and ‘leaf’ apart, although she fulfilled all the

⁷⁵ See Ibid, pp. 248 – 249.

⁷⁶ CMS/CA2/087 J. White, Journal Entry for 11 April 1856.

⁷⁷ CMS/CA2/064 M. J. M. Luke, Journal Entry for 17 March 1881.

⁷⁸ CMS/CA2/018/16, Journal of William Allen, Abeokuta, 8 May, 1865. ‘*Ifa* is nothing and consequently has no power in the world to come’.

conditions for baptism. Bowen's failure to perform the Christian rite of passage, therefore, meant that he successfully made the 'soap', but failed to wrap it up properly with the 'leaf'.

The third reason why the 'soap' (mission spirituality) could not easily absorb the 'leaf' (Yoruba spirituality) is located in the fundamental differences between the two elements. Whereas missionaries' spirituality developed within the cultural contexts of the Enlightenment and the Industrial revolution, Yoruba women were influenced by their primal religions and culture. English evangelicalism was characterized by independent human reason,⁷⁹ while communal religion dominated Yoruba practices. Evangelical maps of reality, which were essentially Calvinistic, were marked by rationalism and objectivity, while those of Yoruba women were dominated by the *orisa* and ancestors. Therefore, missionaries' scepticism concerning the religious rituals of the Yoruba during the quarantine phase blurred their vision for appreciating worship practices that were of value, significance and meaning to Yoruba women.

Thus, leaf and soap had more reasons to stay apart from each other, rather than coming together during the quarantine or confrontation phases. The major attraction between leaf and soap which resulted to a few conversions at these periods was kinship relationship, which women, especially fostered. On the other hand, the assimilation period, characterised by teaching and discipleship, resulted in major transformations of beliefs and practices of women because leaf stayed long enough on the soap. Nevertheless, assimilation invited a greater degree of persecutions between 1848 and 1860 as women's experiences were very much like those of the apostles of

⁷⁹ Philip Sheldrake, *A Brief History of Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), p. 160.

Jesus after their unusual experience on the day of Pentecost when ‘God-fearing Jews’ who had gathered for worship wondered at their untraditional behaviour.⁸⁰

A critical feature of assimilation phase was that it produced many converts who were determined to remain in the Christian faith as a result of the teachings, in spite of the persecutions of converts who deviated from Yoruba cultural practices. In Miss Tucker’s memoirs, she wrote that

Another of the baptised was Susanna Kutè. While yet only a candidate she had suffered much for her faith in Christ, and had been seized and put in chains on no other ground than her attendance at church and at the classes. Mr. Muller obtained her release through the friendly intervention of Ogubonna, and the patience and gentleness of her conduct during her trial.⁸¹

The argument in this thesis is that African women have contributed immensely to the development of indigenous Christianity, which borrowed so much from the traditional religious resources of the different communities in Africa, in this case, the Yoruba. Adaptation of Christianity was possible because, in the particular case of the Yoruba, as it is with other African communities, the people never saw ‘the God of the Christian religion as different’ from *Olódùmarè*, ‘the God they had known in their pre-Christian religions’.⁸²

Thus, based on examination of documents recording missionary contact with Yoruba women between 1842 and 1930, the argument is made here that transformation of spirituality is a distinct experience from religious conversion. Although Yoruba women converted to Christianity, many aspects of their attitude, beliefs and practices remained unchangeable. Similarly, the notion that a focus on male experiences alone

⁸⁰ See Acts of the Apostles 2: 1ff.

⁸¹ Tucker, *Abbeokuta; or Sunrise within the Tropics*, p. 150.

⁸² Mercy Amba Oduyoye, ‘The Empowering Spirit of Religion’, in Ursula King, ed., *Feminist Theology from the Third World: A Reader* (London: SPCK, 1994), p. 375.

will give an accurate picture of Yoruba Christian converts' spirituality is unsustainable. In the third place, although religion is the essence of African life, a particular religion could not fully explain the concepts of spirituality, considering that Yoruba women's spirituality had been informed, not only by religion, but also by historical, sociological and cultural factors.

Therefore, missionary contacts with Yoruba women were not just religious encounters,⁸³ but also initiated a reorientation of Yoruba women's process of making meaning in their relationships with others as well as the Transcendent. Emotional conversion did not replace existential considerations. Similarly, discipleship training, though effective for establishing denominational emphasis, did not bring about enculturation and contextualizing of Christianity for Yoruba women to evolve their distinct form of spirituality. Rather, Yoruba women themselves adapted Christianity so that by 1930 it was possible to discern a distinctive Yoruba women's spirituality.

⁸³ Robert A. Bickers and Rosemary Seton (eds.), *Missionary Encounters: Sources and Issues* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1996).

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Appendix I

Abbreviations and Glossary of Yoruba terms

Aare Latosa – the war chief of Ibadan in the 1870s

Abeokuta – A Yoruba town located among the rocks known as ‘Olumo’, a hiding place in times of war

abiku – infant mortality

abiyamo – a mother (it connotes a mother who cares for her children)

Ado Ekiti – a prominent Yoruba (town) missionary centre of the 1870s

Afala – mother of Samuel Crowther, and a former priestess of *Obatala*

agidi leaves – a specified type of leaves used to wrap *eko* (cold pap made from corn)

aiku l’ewe – life sustenance till old age

Akere – the priestess of ‘*Yemoja*’ divinity in Abeokuta in the 1850s

Ala or *ale* – a female divinity of the Igbo tribe of Nigeria linked with earth fertility

alaafia – in a general term means ‘peace’

Aladura – the term given to the praying churches established as African Indigenous churches from the first quarter of the twentieth century

ara orun – a description of *egungun* as an inhabitant of heaven

Asase Yaa or *Aberewa* (old mother) – the earth spirit of the Ashanti, a tribe in Ghana

awujo – the gathering of folk people in which they invoked the memory of the dead

Babalawo – the *Ifa* priest

Bi-Olorunpelu – the name of a town (meaning ‘if God be with us’) where the pioneer Baptist missionary Thomas Jefferson Bowen made his first convert – a female

Creole – the Yoruba colloquial description of Christians – particularly the children of *Saro* Christians from Sierra Leone

dansiki – Yoruba indigenous top for men

Efunsetan – a distinguished Iyalode of Ibadan

egungun – masquerades

eko – a famous Yoruba food known as ‘corn meal’ made from milled corn

ekun iyawo – the bridal lamentation made on the eve of marriage

Elegbara (Esu) – Devil

Erelu – a female member of the *Ogboni* (community leaders’) cult

gele – a strip of clothing women use to cover the head

Gelede – women’s cult, which was elaborately celebrated in Badagry in the nineteenth century

Ibadan – or Eba Odan is a Yoruba town of warriors that got its fame through the intra-tribal wars with many other tribes of Yorubaland

Ifa – the Yoruba cult of wisdom and divination (only few women were admitted)

Ifa corpus – poetry chanted by the *Ifa* priests

Ifa Esentaye – life journey divination

igbin – snail

Ijaiye – a Yoruba town of the famous war-like ruler, Kurumi in the advent of the missionaries in Yorubaland

Ije - (later Mary Ije) mother of Thomas King, a Yoruba missionary and first catechist of the CMS at Lokoja

Ijebu country - a prominent Yoruba country with important towns such as Ijebu Ode

Ijebu Ode - the town ruled by an Awujale, a king who became a Christian in the first quarter of the nineteenth century

ikarahun – the shell of a snail

Ikin Ifa –

Ile-Ife – a Yoruba town generally known as the spiritual headquarter of the Yoruba country

Ilesha - One of the prominent later missionary centres in Yorubaland

iro – a loose band of cloth women tied round the waist

Iyalode (mother of the community)

Iye 'malè (*Iya Imalè*) – “The mother of the divinities” or “Mother-Divinity”

Katunga – this was a name by which Oyo was known before its disintegration in the 1820s

Kumuyilo – Efunsetan's adopted son who planned her assassination

M[?]remí Ajasoro - the mythical woman who rescued Ile-Ife from the Ugbo

Oba nla – this is another name for *Obatala*

Obatala - one of the two divinities who were believed to be involved in the creation of the earth

obirin – woman (women)

Oduduwa - the progenitor of the Yoruba who was believed to be a female originally

Ogbomoso – A famous Yoruba town of warriors and traders which became the headquarters of the Southern Baptist missionaries

Ogboni – cult of leaders of the community

ogi - a type of food (commonly called pap) made from milled corn

Ogun – the god of iron was associated with hunters and black-smiths

oko etile - farming around the family compound or vicinity

Olodumare - The all-knowing Being

Olorun – a Yoruba name for God (describing God as the owner of the heavens)

Olumo rock – regarded as a goddess - *abiyamo* [a motherly] rock

omo – child

omo Oodua – the child of *Oduduwa*, a name by which all Yoruba are identified

omo osu - women who returned from their matrimonial home to live with their parents again were referred to as (the circumstantial child in the compound)

Ondo - a prominent (town) missionary centre in the 1870s

onibuuku – Yoruba colloquia description of Christians as 'people of the book'

Oniwasu – preacher

Oodua – the shortened form of *Oduduwa*

ooro – a fruit tree commonly eaten in Ibadan

Opa Oranyan – (cenotaph of a warrior called *Oranyan*) – a relic at Ile-Ife

ori – literally means ‘head’, but symbolically means ‘Creator’

oriki – praise chant (a poetic preservation of Yoruba roots)

Orisa – (the gods) Yoruba divinities, male or female, singular or plural – **Page 94**

Orisanla (or *Orisaoko*) – the god of farm or male god of fertility and reproduction

Orisapopo – the god of the gate (city guardian)

Oro – a Yoruba men’s cult through which calamities or victories are announced

Osun – a goddess of the river, more directly associated with fertility and reproduction

Osun – the name of a river in Yorubaland taken after a deified goddess of the river

? *ya* – the devoted wife of Sango who was believed to have fallen down when she learnt of the death of her husband and became a large river deified by the Yoruba

Oyindala – the first convert of the pioneer Baptist missionary in Yorubaland (Bi-Olorunpelu), Thomas Jefferson Bowen

Oyo – a Yoruba town regarded as the political centre of the Yoruba people

polygynists – men who had more than one wife

polygyny – Yoruba family system whereby men could have more than one wife

Sango – the god of thunder

saraa – ritual offering or feast

Saro – colloquia description of the ex-slaves who returned from the Sierra Leone

Shodeke, the king of the Egbas missionaries first met in the early 1840s

sokoto – Yoruba indigenous trousers for men

Tinubu – a distinguished *Iyalode* of Egbaland

Yarriba - Hausa variant by which the Yoruba country was initially identified by explorers and traders

Yemoja – (a river goddess) the deity mother of river and fishes

Abbreviations:

CMS – Church Missionary Society

WMMS – Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society

Appendix II

