

# Cultural identity in the throes of modernity: an appraisal of Yemoja among the Yoruba in Nigeria

Adetunbi Richard Ogunleye<sup>1</sup>

Department of Religion & African Culture, Adekunle Ajasin University  
Akungba-Akoko Ondo State, Nigeria.

oguntunbi@gmail.com; arogunleye@yahoo.com

## Abstract

*Culture is a complex and dynamic phenomenon through which a particular group of people is identified. Thus, each Nigerian community possesses certain unique cultural traits which uphold the solidarity of the community in a changing situation. Each community is conditioned by its natural environment to produce gods or goddesses that will serve as agents of subtle coercion so that people can adhere strictly to the culture of their land. Yemoja, a prominent river goddess among the Yoruba, is one of the divinities that people anchored on to live as people of distinct cultural traits. This work therefore aims at giving an appraisal of the influence of Yemoja on the socio-cultural and economic development in Nigeria and the consequences of her neglect in this modern age. It concludes on the note that, although the society is dynamic and culture is not static yet, we must not lose our identity in transition.*

**Keywords:** culture, identity, modernity, appraisal, Yemoja, Yoruba, Nigeria

## Introduction

Culture, popularly known as *asa* among the Yoruba, is a total way of life through which a particular group of people is identified. It contained within itself those features which guaranteed the survival of its people (Etuk 2002:19). Thus, a thorough examination of the African indigenous cultures vis-à-vis their belief systems is necessary, especially in this age of 'modernity', which is innovative as opposed to what is traditional or handed down. It is through this process of investigation that the peculiarity and uniqueness of each ethnic group will be identified. It is the pursuance of this cultural identity that led to a situation in which different African people came up with various movements such as: 'negritude' for the French speaking countries, 'African Personalities' for their English counterparts and later 'Authenticity' in Zaire (Dimo 2001:155). The major aim of these movements is to sustain an idea of the cultural roots of African people that they felt were being severed by colonialism.

African communities, which are regarded as a stronghold of belief in divinities, have myriad forms for these deities. Many Africans, in spite of their contact with foreign religions, still anchor their communities on the belief in divinities and feel it is important that, as a people, they live in this way. These divinities, which have their abode mainly in natural phenomena such as mountains, valleys, oceans, and like, preserve cultural values that give meaning to the identities of individual and community (Ogungbile 2001:113). Consequently, the Yoruba are typical yet also unique as an African community that holds each area of nature under the charge of a specific divinity appointed by Olodumare, who is the Supreme Being (Idowu 1982:1). For instance, there is a divinity in charge of procreation, another in charge of farm land, while another is in charge of thunder storms, and the like. It is important to note here that, while all the ethnic groups believe in Olodumare, each group still has a favourite *orisa* that is worshiped by the majority of the people without prejudice towards the worship of other *orisa* (Imasogie 2008:1).

Among the numerous divinities that inhabit these natural phenomena is Yemoja, a hydrogenous goddess among the Yoruba people at home (in Nigeria) and in diaspora. This study, therefore, explores the phenomenon of Yemoja deity among the Yoruba people and its role in asserting Nigerian cultural independence and to point to the fact that, even though there may be other identifying symbols for society, the Yoruba religio-cultural aspect provides a greater distinctiveness that traditionally marks its communities (Dimo 2001:157). Before fully embarking on the phenomenon of Yemoja, it is fitting to discuss briefly the Yoruba people in Nigeria.

## The Yoruba in Nigeria

The Yoruba people, who constitute one of the major ethnic groups in Nigeria, are mostly found in south-western Nigeria. They cover the whole of Ogun, Oyo, Ekiti, Osun, Lagos, and substantial parts of Kwara and Kogi States (Owoeye 2005:26). A fair percentage of the Yoruba populace inhabit the south-eastern part of the Republic of Benin (Dahomey) and Togo. Furthermore, Yoruba communities can be found globally. For instance, there is a group of Yoruba known as *Aku*

1. Richard Adetunbi Ogunleye PhD is a Lecturer in the Department of Religion and African Culture, Adekunle Ajasin University, Nigeria.

in Sierra Leone, another group of Yoruba is found in Cuba by the name *Lucumi*, while some can still be found in distant Brazil as *Nago* (Falokun 1992:194). All these areas referred to formed what was known as the Yoruba nation before the European partition of Africa (Olatunde 1996:4). With regard to geographical location, the Yoruba country lies roughly between latitude 6° & 9°N and longitude 2°30' & 6°30' East. Its area is about 181,300 square kilometres (Olatunde 1996:4). Numerous Yoruba live beyond this area. However, the geographical location of the Yoruba defined above is regarded as the people's traditional homeland. The Yoruba people were predominantly traditional worshippers of divinities before the advent of both Islam and Christianity in the land. It is pertinent to state here that the real keynote of their lives is not only in their noble ancestry or in the past deeds of their heroes but also in their religion. Their lives hinge on this religion (Idowu 1982:5). For the Yoruba people in Nigeria, Yemoja is the maternal *Orisa*, whose domain is the ocean, and who is one of the popular divinities by whom people live as people. Bolaji Idowu described Yoruba people as incurably religious. He writes,

In all things, they are religious. Religion forms the foundation and the all governing principle of life for them. As far as they are concerned, the full responsibility of the affairs of life belongs to the deity; their own part in the matter is to do as they are ordered through the priests and diviners whom they believed to be the interpreter of the deity (Idowu 1982:5).

From the above quotation, one can say that the religion of Yoruba permeates the people's lives so much that it expresses itself in multifarious ways. As a result of the Yoruba's wide religious experiences they strongly believe in Olodumare (God) and in the existence of divinities known as *Orisa*. This pantheon of divinities consists of many gods and goddesses among which Yemoja is one.

### **Yemoja among the Yoruba: meaning and origin**

The name 'Yemoja' is a contraction of three Yoruba words *Yeye-Omo-eja*, meaning 'mother of fishes'. She is a river goddess identified with the river Ogun in Ogun State, Nigeria. Yemoja is an *Orisa* (divinity) originally of the Yoruba religion that has now become prominent in many Afro-American religions (Mattijs 2009:31-48). She is recognized, honoured, and worshipped not only in Africa but also in Brazil, Cuba, Haiti, Uruguay, and other parts of the world. There are a series of variations in the name of this goddess according to various localities, because Yemoja went with the members of the Yoruba tribe when they were captured and taken to various areas throughout the world as slaves. She then became very popular and well known in their midst.

She was given different names and was even honoured in Bahia as the Candomble goddess of the deep seas (Mattijs 2009:37). Since Afro-American religions were transmitted as part of a long oral tradition; there are many regional variations on the goddess's name. For example, the goddess is known in Africa, especially among the Yoruba people in Nigeria, as Yemoja. In Brazil, she is known as Yemoja, Lemanja, and Janaina (Hale 2009:53-56). In Cuba she is known as Yemaya, Yemoya, Yemoyah, and lemanja (Delatorre 2009:114). In Haiti, she is known as La Sirene and Lasiren (in voodoo), while she is known as Yemala, Yemana, and Yemaja in the United States. The same goddess is known as Lemanja and Yemalla in Uruguay and the Dominican Republic respectively (Mattijs 2009:37). Elsewhere, Yemoja is syncretized with other deities including Diosa de Mar, Mami Water, Mermaid goddess of the sea, and the like (Ray 2009:38). These variations establish the fact that Yemoja is a water goddess that is known and recognized worldwide.

### **Yemoja worship**

Yemoja is one of the important divinities believed to have been brought into being by Olodumare (Idowu 1982:169). She is a prominent deity that was naturally endowed with an abundance of patience, and she is attached to the River Ogun in Abeokuta, an ancient Yoruba town in Ogun State, Nigeria (Adeoye 1985:226). It is not clear whether the river Ogun preceded Yemoja or if Yemoja brought the river Ogun into being so that she could create a headquarters as a seat of her government. Whichever was the case, the Ogun River has come to be accepted by the Yoruba as the 'headquarters' of Yemoja. From her throne there, she manifests herself in any other body of the water. This probably prompted B.C. Ray to describe Yemoja as 'Mami Water' (Ray 2009:38) meaning, mother of water.

There are several mythical narrations of how Yemoja has shown mercy and benevolence to drowning swimmers, victims of accidents on the waterways, and even fishermen (Ray 2009:38). These acts of benevolence attracted beneficiaries and other would-be beneficiaries to the goddess as worshippers. Worship, from the Yoruba perspective, is an imperative factor that stands out prominently. It is an inner urge in humans and its origins could be traced back to a basic instinct which was evoked in humans by their encounter with the 'numen' (Daudu 2001:62). The Yoruba believed that there is a power that dominates and controls the unseen world in which they feel themselves enveloped. It was this power that was made, by intuition, according to E.B. Idowu, the 'ultimate determinant of Destiny' (Idowu 1982:107). Worship in the Yoruba religion, especially Yemoja worship, is essentially ritualistic and liturgical. The rituals follow a set,

fixed and traditional pattern. 'The way it is done,' continues Idowu, 'is the guiding principle, whether worship is public or private' (Idowu 1982:108).

One important thing to be noted before the worship of Yemoja can take place is moral and ritual cleanness. The priestesses in particular and worshippers in general must be ceremonially clean. Failure to observe this personal condition could lead to ritual defilement. For instance, a menstruating woman must not stay in Yemoja's shrine. This is the major traditional taboo (*Eewo*) that prohibits menstruating women from approaching the shrine or touching sacred vessels of Yemoja, but when they are not actively bleeding they can still participate fully in the religious ceremonies. This is the main reason why the head priestess of Yemoja, known as *Iyaji*, must be a woman that has reached the stage of menopause. Another *Eewo* is taking photographs at the shrine of Yemoja during worship or annual celebration without permission. If anybody takes a snap secretly without permission, either there will be no picture at all or the camera will be damaged.

There are levels and categories of worship in Yemoja worship. These are daily worship, regular worship on the sacred days, annual and special worships. The daily worship in some cases takes place in the morning at the household shrine which may contain one or two emblems of Yemoja. It is simple and private in nature. It is a means of saying 'good morning' to her. For this type of worship, the worshipper only needs to offer kola nuts, after which she will make her request of the goddess. After this, the kola nut is split and cast before the goddess to determine whether her worship is accepted or not and whether the day will be good or not. When she is sure of a positive response from the goddess, she joyfully concludes the worship by placing a lobe or two of the kola nut on the shrine, eating part of it, and storing the rest for visitors (Idowu 1982:108).

The second type of worship in the cult of Yemoja is the regular worship on her sacred days. It is important to note that this type of worship is more elaborate and usually involves a community of worshippers. Although the actual ritual follows practically the same pattern as the daily one, there are some important details that make it distinct. The worship on the sacred day normally takes place at the major shrine of Yemoja is situated on the riverbank. The sacred day of Yemoja comes about every fifth day. Very early on that day, the cult ushers, known as the *emeguns*, will fetch water from the river into a sacred pot of the shrine and tidy the shrine in preparation for the arrival of the worshippers. On their arrival, gifts of food, drink, and payment of vows are presented to the goddess. At this point, the head priestess (*Iyaji*) will take over by leading them in ritual prayer to the goddess. During this time, she will offer sacrifices to the goddess. This includes processed maize (*egbo*), white bean meal (*ekuru*), snails, sugar cane, and kola nuts. After this, she will make petitions on behalf of the worshippers to the Orisa. Then they split and cast off the kola nut (*obi*). If all is well by the omen, everyone is happy and they all dance in the presence of Yemoja. This type of worship is often concluded with sharing kola nuts among the worshippers and final words of blessing from Yemoja through her priestess (Adeoye 1985:226).

Moreover, there is a type of worship known as 'special worship.' This is an occasional worship, organized at any time of the year whenever the need arises. This type of worship can be a demand of Yemoja. When she is demanded for a worship from an individual or a particular family, it is Yemoja herself that will determine the ritual and offering. In addition, special worship can also be called for when someone is about to embark on a special project such as building a house or going on a journey. This type of worship is necessitated by the fact that the Yoruba are generally incapable of starting any venture without consulting the oracle (Adewale 1988:92). In addition, people organize special worship for Yemoja to ask for special blessings for children, prosperity, and victory over an enemy or any of the manifold situations of life (Idowu 1982:112). For all these, *Iyaji* (the head priestess) will be in attendance at the shrine going all the time.

Finally, another type of worship in Yemoja's cult is the one connected with the annual festival of the goddess. The festival is known as *Odun Yemoja*, meaning Yemoja's festival. It is an occasion for rejoicing and thanksgiving. What distinguishes worship during the annual festival is the elaborate programme connected with the celebration. People come out in their best and give out their best. The celebration normally takes place at the Yemoja's shrine. The offerings are mostly for thanksgiving, and the meals constitute an opportunity for communion between the goddess and her 'children' (*omo Yemoja*) on the one hand and then among the 'children' themselves on the other hand. In fact, it is a special time for covenant renewal (Idowu 1982:110). The ritual materials remain the same on the sacred day: *egbo* (processed maize) *ekuru funfun* (white bean meal), *ireke* (sugar cane), vegetables, snails, *pap*, kola nuts, water, and the like.

During the ritual proper, *Iyaji* the head priestess leads all the devotees in ritual worship. The worship often starts with the invocation of Yemoja; her name and appellations are called. She will be invited to pay attention to her 'children.' Next, a rattle will be sounded so as to attract the attention of the goddess. This will be followed by pouring libations either on the ground or on the shrine. Next, the head priestess will pray for all the worshippers, particularly for peace, health, fruitfulness and long life. Immediately afterwards, kola nuts are split and cast before Yemoja to ascertain what the goddess

has in stock for her devotees in the New Year. After the head priestess decodes the message from Yemoja which in most cases is a positive one people are usually jubilant and the *oriki* (praise song) of Yemoja will fill their mouths as follows:

Yemoja pele elewi odo	Hello, Yemoja, the queen of the ocean
Iya olomo wewe	Mother of little children
Yemoja ore agan	Yemoja the friend of barren women
A pa ekoro yi ilu ka	You who slithery flows round the city
A gbe iyawo ma se ana	You who marries without engagement
Orooroo a ro omo si ite	You are the fertile source that produces children in great number.
A je osinsin ma da gbese	You who eats vegetable in excess without running into a debt
Ni Oroki ni n ki o si	That is why oroki sends greetings to you
Abi Ni Odegun ni	And even Odegun
Alawoye ba mi wo temi	The great care taker, take care of me
Oro ti i woo mo ti i wo iya	The spirit that takes care of both mother and children
Ore agan bawo ni temi	Friend of barren women, what about my own?
Agba ma jumalase okuta	The great one that cannot be surpasses
Ogbon-in gbon-in ra omo bi oke	The powerful one that rounds people like mountain
Otete omo a te leyin bi oke	The beautiful one whose back is as flat as mountain
A ji pa bi elete	The great defender of her people
A se obun gba aayo	You who turns dirty people to favorite ones
Ilare jumobi si aye	The worthy one of the world
Yemoja ko je baun	Yemoja you are worthy indeed
Bi oniyan ko ri omi gbekele	If there is no water to be relied upon
Oniyan ko le gunyan	Pounded yam cannot be produced
Bi oloka ko ri omi gbekele	If there is no water to rely upon
Oloka ko le roka	Powdered food cannot be produced
Bi Alagbado ko ri omi gbekele	If there is no water to rely upon
Alagbado ko le gun ogi	Maize producers cannot grind maize
Ki a to pe yoo su eko	Talkless of producing pap
Emi ti gbekele obinrin gidi	I have a goddess to rely upon
Ti i je Yemoja	Her name is Yemoja
Yemoja ni iya olomo	Yemoja is the mother of children
Orisa odo ni iya agan	The river goddess is the mother of barren woman
Yemoja ni yoo ba mi se e	Yemoja will do my own for me
Ore agan se o mo pe	You friend of barren women
Emi ko le e da a se	You know I can not do it alone.
(Adeoye 1985:226-227).	

This praise song can be accompanied by drumming and clapping of hands, and the people present will all join in the singing. It is during this praise song that people eat and drink with the hope that the coming year will be prosperous for them. Throughout the period of worship and feasting, there is always a noticeable reverence on the part of the devotees. This is simply because the meal symbolizes communion and fellowship with the goddess herself (Imasogie 2008:37). It is also interesting to note that during Yemoja celebration, the worshippers often put on unique dress. This time, they put on garments of blue or white colour with silver trimmings and at the same time put on beads or necklaces of a blue or red colour. This dressing often adds aesthetic values to the celebration while the non-adherents look at them with admiration.

### **Benefits associated with the worship of Yemoja**

There is no such thing as a value-free action (Igboin & Awoniyi 2006:57). Any action in whatever form has an effect on both the actor and the society. Thus, the benefits derived from Yemoja by her devotees, especially in the recent past, are numerous. As mentioned earlier, especially pregnant women are attracted to Yemoja simply because she is seen as their patron deity. First among the numerous benefits attached to Yemoja worship is the provision of children. Yemoja is regarded as a goddess who grants children to women. Among the Yoruba, the importance attached to children in marriage cannot be over-emphasized (Adasu 1985:19). It is more of a religious and a theological problem than a psychological one. Barrenness on the part of a woman is seen as a bad omen in the family and such a woman will be treated with disdain. Apart from this, a childless person stands the risk of not having a befitting funeral ritual (Imasogie

2008:17). This is an unbearable thought to traditional adherents. The implication is that such a person will be eternally cut off from his relatives. To avoid this embarrassing situation people seek solution to their fertility problem from Yemoja, a deity associated with life, fertility, and creation.

Second, Yemoja worship is observed to purge and purify the community. This is one of the reasons for the call for 'special worship'. During this worship, atonement is made for the misconduct believed capable of bringing calamity to the community or the land as a whole. It is a common feature of every traditional ruler of the Yoruba community to have his own priest (Babalawo) at his disposal that could be called upon at any time to consult Ifa (the Yoruba god of wisdom) when there is any problem. For instance, if there is a breakout of an epidemic in the town or when a god or goddess is angry with men, it is the babalawo that is called upon to determine, through divination, the cause, the remedy and the necessary sacrifices to appease the god or goddess and for the atonement of the people's misconduct.

Third, the celebration of traditional festivals such as Yemoja's festival reveals many concepts, beliefs, philosophies, and thoughts of the Yoruba community. The Yoruba people are deeply rooted in religious beliefs and culture. This view, according to G. Ikuejube, negates the myopic conclusions of the early European anthropologists who wrongly concluded that Africans knew no religion until the emergence of foreign religions such as Islam and Christianity (Ikuejube 2000:26). In fact, before colonialism and its related religions emerged in Africa, every African and indeed every Nigerian was an ardent traditionalist. Atheism was unknown, and every Nigerian practised religious worship from childhood, grew up with it into adulthood, and practised it daily at every stage of his life (Alana 1993:207). During the Yemoja festival, young people learn more about the Yoruba's religion and culture, and are initiated into the value system, norms, and ideals of civil society, which is important for the preservation and continuity of culture and society.

Moreover, Yemoja worship promotes moral standards. Apart from the preservation of values and norms enshrined in the people's culture and traditions, the celebration of the Yemoja festival also serves as one of the social sanctions used in the enforcement of morality. Yemoja is regarded as a divinity of morality that purifies both heart and body. In every stratum of human life, a particular form of ethics is put in place. Though it may vary from one culture to the other, these ethics still serve the same purpose. Thus, the Yoruba have found it necessary to introduce elements of subtle coercion in the performance of their ethical duties. This is very important because a society without a solid ethical foundation will disintegrate into moral decadence and its consequent vicious effects on political, social and economic life (Asaju 1997:89).

Furthermore, Yemoja enhances a corporate type of existence. The Yemoja shrine serves as a centre of unity and binds the worshippers together. Thus, a member does not live her life alone. She is a member of the corporate body. Even by the doctrine of the Yoruba theology, humans are believed to be in a covenant relationship with fellow members of the same cultic group and society at large. The implication of this relationship is that any harm done to one member affects other members. Thus, it is necessary for every member to seek the wellbeing of one another and avoid any action that may offset the peaceful atmosphere of the society (Adewale 1988:49). In the long run; this communal spirit brings cohesion and harmony into the society. When one member is sorrowful, others share in her sorrow. Likewise, when one rejoices, others share her joy. Material things are owned and shared together (Adewale 1988:49). With all these aspects, Yemoja worship enhances oneness and helps, to a large extent, rid the society of evil.

Economically, the celebration of the Yemoja festival is of great importance to the Yoruba people. During the festival, which climaxes during the harvesting period, all types of people from various background and occupations are present. Participants include fishermen, farmers, traders and even travellers. It is generally believed that through the celebration the goddess is appeased, and the land is blessed. As a result, the land will bring forth good fruits and abundant harvest. During the festival, prayers are offered for the increase of the farm products (both cash and food crops) that sustain the Yoruba people. Prayers are also said to safeguard them from road hazards such as accidents, armed robbery, and theft while on business trips. Fishermen also pray against shipwrecks and displeasing Yemoja while on duty. During this annual festival, produce merchants are warned about the consequences of engaging in fraudulent acts, such as cheating with the scale: the goldsmith is reminded of the consequences of defrauding customers with his balances; and market women will think twice about using rigged tins for measuring commodities such as grain and flour.

On the political scale, the celebration of Yemoja festival plays an active role in the Yoruba political system. The prevalent system of government in Yoruba land is monarchical; at the head of each monarchical state is the king (*oba*), a highly respected traditional ruler (Ajayi 1993:17). Before any king can be enthroned, it is a common practice among the Yoruba for the traditional chiefs to consult the oracle through their priests and priestess. The purpose is to confirm the candidacy of the aspirant and to determine which rituals should be performed. In a community where Yemoja is worshipped, it is the goddess, through her priestesses, that will determine the right candidate and the appropriate coronation rites. This regular consultation does not stop at installation; the king-elect must present annual gifts during the festival to appease the goddess as this will herald good government and a long reign. Also, in the case of an outbreak of epidemic in the town, it is the head priestess of Yemoja that is called upon to find the cause, the remedy, and perform the

necessary sacrifice (*ebo*) to appease the goddess. The priestess does the same thing to end drought and famine that could ruin the inhabitants of a particular town (Ajayi 1993:17). These are some of the benefits attached to the Yemoja worship before the influence of modernity on Yoruba people in recent years.

### **Yemoja worship in recent years**

One of the two things that often happen to religion through the ages is either modification with adaptation or extinction. The former is common to religions throughout the world (Idowu 1982:203). Nevertheless, the Yoruba religion is growing in the African diaspora (Tishken, Falola & Akinyemi 2009:1). Though their forefathers were colonised politically in the past, the offspring would not allow themselves to be colonised religiously. There is no living religion that has not been influenced by other cultures, which often leads to modification in its tenets. With reference to Yemoja worship among the Yoruba people in Nigeria, fear about declining membership, especially with the influx of modern technologies, religions, and cultural ideas, has been expressed in recent years. Idowu state that, upon cultural contact,

It is certain that a people whose culture has come into contact with another culture from outside can never really be the same again. The culture is either enriched in accordance with its power to withstand the assault of other culture while assimilating something of their best qualities or impoverished because of its weakness in consequences of which it succumbs to them by losing its own genius (Idowu 1982:13).

Indeed, the influence of Western culture has negatively impacted on African religion and cultural heritage among the Yoruba. The next section examines some factors militating against Yemoja worship among the Yoruba people in Nigeria.

### **Militating factors against Yemoja worship**

Prominent among the factors that are mitigating against Yemoja worship among the Yoruba people is 'modernity'. This refers to the cultural conditions that set the terms for all thought and action in a particular culture (Wilson 1987:18). From historical antecedents, no culture ever remains static: it either influences or gets influenced by other cultures. Modernity then explicitly identifies an openness and commitment to the new as opposed to the old. No doubt, modernity has improved people's knowledge of the universe and the ways in which people live. Today we can use modern resources to build roads and bridges, to travel faster, to communicate with the entire world, to use the Internet, and the like. These are indeed beneficial advancements to mankind (Dopamu 2000:197). However, the encounter of Yemoja worship with modernity in contemporary Yoruba society has caused a major setback in the celebrations in honour of the river goddess. It is a pity today that modernity and the influence of foreign culture have brought a degree of unbridled liberty, looseness, and moral carelessness in human behaviour. Commenting on this development, D. Asaju laments that:

People have watched their long cherished ethical code, virtues and traditions eroded by the new ways of life characterized by sexual laxity, indiscipline, moral ineptitude, disrespect, divorce and violence (Asaju 1997:96).

Prior to the influence of modernity, the indigenous worship was erroneously described as primitive, outdated and not meant for modern and civilized people. However, it is interesting to note that many modern and civilized people today still practise traditional religion (Abiola: 2001:26).

Coupled with the influence of modernity is the emergence of Western civilization and urbanization. With the exposure of Yoruba people to Western civilization, some see it as beneficial in the sense that it has brought international exposure to their culture and religions (Akhilomen 2000:130-133). Others, by contrast, see themselves as enlightened and unable to be involved in indigenous worship like Yemoja worship. Also, as a result of urbanization, people have moved away from the security of the village to big towns, often in search of employment. The villagers and older generations are the last stronghold of Yemoja worshippers among the Yoruba. It is not uncommon these days to meet priestesses who are completely ignorant of their own cult, largely because most of them have returned home after a long absence during which period they lost contact with the practice (Ajayi 1981:119). With the influence of Western civilization, Yemoja worship has been described as barbaric and primitive. This attitude no doubt has affected the value system of the Yoruba people. Adeoye Lambo laments,

I think many things were wrong with Nigerian in that the value system has collapsed and we've got no other substitute. We've been dangling between the traditional and the so-called sophisticated western mores and value system and we had not even got to the other end before the traditional one collapsed, so we are in a total vacuum (Lambo 2000:24).

The above quotation has adequately described the recent situation with reference to Yemoja worship among the Yoruba.

Another contributing factor is the influence of Western education. With the introduction of Western education, schools and colleges were opened and people were taught to read and write. However, the attitude of the educated Yoruba towards Yemoja worship is not encouraging; they often describe it as outmoded. Susan Wenger is an Austrian

woman living in Osogbo since 1950 who has devoted herself to the Yoruba traditional culture and religion; she is known by the Yoruba name Aduni Olorisa. She reports that literate Africans (Yoruba) were educated to hate and despise their own culture. She advises the Yoruba people to cherish their cultural heritage (Adeniyi 1996:6).

Next, we will consider Yemoja worship's encounter with science and technology. The contact of modern science and technology with religion at the initial stage was not outright conflict. In fact, the contact helped confirm some religious claims (Aderibigbe 1998:84). Even in modern Nigeria, the importance of science and technology to religion and culture cannot be over-emphasised. The scientific discoveries over the years have helped in the preservation and propagation of religion. For instance, festivals, revivals, and healing services are often televised rather than being held locally.

However, the negative effect of science and technology on religion and African cultural heritages, of which Yemoja worship is one, has caused a major setback to the worship of this indigenous deity. The social and cultural changes embarked upon by the science and technology in recent years have led to views that indigenous practices are primitive and a 'rejection' of the scientific age. The development of technology has made life more comfortable for people. However, few farmers will pray to the goddess for fertility when fertilizer is available to make their crops grow well. Belief in this deity tends to be limited to times of distress when she is generally seen as a source of solace.

Moreover, the incursions of foreign religions, especially Christianity and Islam, have de-emphasized the significance of traditional religion among the Yoruba people. (Ajayi 1981:120). The impact of these two religions upon African religions is apparent in the breakdown of the ancient practices, with few exceptions such as enthroning an oba (king): people, irrespective of their religion, will come to grace the occasion. This is what J.K. Olupona refers to as 'Civil Religion.' (Olupona & Hackett 1991:265-281). With the advent of these two religions, Yemoja worship is seen as idol worship. In addition, ardent adherents are discarding their native names to take on foreign names. They wear foreign dress, and speak and sing in foreign languages. The old fear of this water queen has been replaced by the notion of a God who is slow to anger and even ready to forgive sinners. In Ekiti, one of the ancient Yoruba communities, the Christian missions and their Muslim counterparts have admonished their converts against customary matters so that they would not backslide (Olomola 2002:22). In the place of traditional practices, Western dress, food, and social practices, such as western marriage are promoted.

Lastly, there is the inevitable factor of death. Death carries away from time to time those who are custodians of this indigenous worship. Apart from the priestesses, the elders, who also act as custodians of tradition, are subject to death and the limited powers of memory. As one generation after another passes away, the tradition becomes remembered in lesser and lesser detail; naturally, distortions and dislocations set in (Idowu 1982:81). These factors have negatively affected Yemoja worship in contemporary Yoruba society.

### **Towards cultural revival**

Prior to the emergence of the colonial era in Nigeria, the primordial culture was an isolated ethnic culture. Each ethnic group considered its culture to be superior to the culture of others. Nevertheless, scholars such as J.D.Y. Peel (2000), cited by Olupona (2009: xii-xiii), have expressed a cosmopolitan view of the Yoruba culture. However, the colonial masters, the British, had no intention of developing a cultural identity for the country: on the contrary, they encouraged the British cultural norms to override those of Nigerians. The Western education imparted to Nigerian children also ensured gradual rejection of traditional values, customs, and religion of the people (Balogun 2001:207). It even became fashionable, especially among the Western educated elite, to adopt the British way of life (Awe 1989:18-19). For a cultural revival to occur, people must be conscious of their past and quickly identify themselves with their cultural heritage. In an attempt to revive cultural identity among the Yoruba, there must be a cultural reawakening. Macaulay, Soglo, and other exponents of cultural renewal have noted renewed interest in African ways of life (Ukhun 2000:17). The Yoruba people must take pride in their culture and must be ready at all times to identify themselves with it. Since African cultures in their entire ramifications cater to the needs and interests of Yoruba existentialist problems, they should be given a prime place. The Seventh International Congress of Orisa, Traditions, and Culture held in 2001 in Ile-Ife, the cradle of the Yoruba race, was a fitting step towards cultural revival and identity among the Yoruba. According to the President of the Congress, Professor Wande Abimbola, its purpose is to bring together people who are interested in the promotion and propagation of African religion (Yemoja worship inclusive), culture, and tradition (Abiola, 2001:26).

Secondly, the Yoruba people must display a real and genuine interest in their indigenous worship, which includes Yemoja worship. In the Yoruba religious experience, religion generates power. For there to be any meaningful cultural revival, the religious foundation of the traditional culture must be taken into consideration (Akanmidu, 1993:85). Yemoja worship must not be seen as idol worship, but as an intermediary between humans and the Supreme Being. This river goddess should be seen as a means to an end and not as an end in herself. It is a religion that has provided meaning and worldview to our forefathers, and this heritage has been passed from one generation to the other over the years. Dimo

(2001:166) confirms this view when he writes that 'religion is the nourisher of culture'. In addition, as Adeyela suggests, adherents of the indigenous faith must organize themselves as a body and carry out a massive enlightenment campaign (Adeyela, 2002:20).

Furthermore, traditional rulers as the custodians and guardians of religion and culture, must rally around, support, and uplift indigenous worship among the Yoruba. During Yemoja celebrations, whether annual or occasional, traditional rulers, the head priestess, and other priests must be supported and given our concerted efforts. This is a call for an African Renaissance that reinforces African values and identity.

Moreover, theatre workers in Nigeria must be encouraged to work more on the promotion of African culture in their various performances and film productions. Actors such as Adebayo Faleti, Lere Paimo, Laja Ogunde and hosts of others have contributed immensely to the promotion of African culture and traditions through their various film productions. Medicine, divination, worship, and other African ways of life found in plays and film are an effective means of reminding the Yoruba of their rich cultural heritage in this modern age (Dopamu 1993:247). In addition, stage and film productions can openly condemn vices that have eaten deep into the fabric of our nation and praise its virtues. This will surely reveal to people the cultural values wrapped in entertainment.

In addition, ministries of culture and tourism in Nigeria must be aware of their responsibilities. Government must see to it that people appointed as ministers and commissioners of culture and tourism are not ignorant of their own culture. This is very important, because some of the ministers and government officials in charge of culture and tourism in recent years have proved to be misfits in their positions. With few exceptions, they have failed to perform as expected because they were bereft of cultural ideas (Jawolusi 2003:25). If this shortcoming can be removed, then African culture, of which religious worship is a part, will no longer be ignored, and science and technology will no longer have undue advantages over African cultural heritage in Nigeria.

## Conclusion

This study has examined cultural identity among the Yoruba people with reference to Yemoja worship. It must be appreciated that modernity and foreign religions such as Christianity and Islam did not meet Yoruba land in a religious vacuum. The people already had a religion that caters for all aspects of their lives. This religion is the expression of the total culture of the people and constitutes their overall cultural identity. However, the emergence of modernity, foreign culture, foreign religions, Western education, and science and technology has negatively affected that totality of Yemoja worship among the Yoruba. The cultural identity of the people has been struck at the very root. They were so prejudiced against the religion that offensive terminologies such as paganism, heathenism and even idolatry have been used to describe Yemoja worship. In the course of this study, we were able to demonstrate that Yoruba cultural identity through Yemoja worship needs not be sacrificed because of modernity. This paper, therefore, recommends that the Yoruba cultural identity be sustained through a genuine interest in indigenous religion like Yemoja worship, cultural Renaissance, encouragement to theatre workers, support among traditional leaders as the custodians of culture, appointing qualified candidates as the ministers and commissioners of culture and tourism.

In the final analysis, the optimism that Yoruba cultural identity shall continue to be a reality is demonstrated in the fact that Yemoja worship is no longer seen as idol worship but as an intermediary between the Supreme Being and human beings. In addition, the worship of the goddess provides society with an identity and binds them together. In effect, this points to the fact that even though there may be other identifying symbols for society, the cultural aspect provides its greatest distinctiveness. On the whole, if the recommendations towards cultural revival and sustainability are strictly adhered to, then we can be sure that Yemoja worship, one of the means through which Yoruba cultural identity is established, will stage a forceful comeback. It will reassert its influence, having narrowly escaped extinction by the fatal onslaught of modernity, foreign religions, civilization, and science and technology under the guise of acculturation. Although there may be reformation, socialization, and even absorption, all of which show that culture is not static, yet we must not lose our culture, religious heritage, and identity in the transition.

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