
SYNCRETIC MOTIFS IN IYAYI SOCIETY OF THE ESAN, EDO STATE OF NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Quite often, it has been said that the authentic mores of a people can be extracted from their traditional religious beliefs. This is so because a great number of scholars have the assumption that traditional religious societies do not yield so easily to forces of acculturation occasioned by western education, Christianity and effects of urbanization. This statement is proved wrong in this setting as this study reveals that as a deliberate attempt to upgrade this one-time traditional religious society, frantic efforts have been made to merge practices of adjacent beliefs so as to tilt more towards Christianity. This paper explores the use of music in the achievement of their intentions. This is evident in the texts of the songs examined in this study. In it one could see the attempt to collapse the divide between the Christian and traditional worship in a bid to attract more members. It is therefore suggested that in this modern epoch, some of these religio-musical fields should be periodically reappraised so as to be able to palpate the trends in practice from time to time.

INTRODUCTION

Iyayi society has in the last two decades attracted scholarly attention of some personalities such as Egharevba (1968), Ailenbata (1992), Echekwube (1994), Aluede and Omoera (2009a), Aluede and Omoera (2009b) Aluede and Omoera (2010) and Aluede (2010). In these works, Iyayi society has been referred to as a spin-off of Osenughegbe religious movement, Iyayi cult, the dancing prophets of Esan land, Iyayi spiritual church of God to mention a few. This paper attempts a definition of syncretism, discusses in details through the use of review of related literature and photographs, discernible elements of syncretism in their activities. In recent times, cultures of the world are on the wheels. In this movement there are incidents of borrowing and adaptation of music, religion, costumes and style of worship from here and there. This suggests that Iyayi society has begun to yield to such forces. In this vein, this study examines Iyayi in its earliest forms and in the 21st century Esan. It is intended that this study will also document and analyse some of their songs which are laced with elements of syncretism and those evident in their regalia thus contributing to the bibliographic resources of religious syncretism in Nigeria.

ORIGIN OF IYAYI SOCIETY

Iyayi in Esan means "I believe" or "faith in God", (Iyayi Osenebua). It is a spin-off of Osenughegbe religious movement, which drew the gathering of a large population from most parts of the province to Ogba River port village, near Benin City, to hear the message of Prophet Idubor. This movement continued into the late 1930s, spreading among the Edo speaking peoples in Benin, Esan and Kukuruku divisions of the province (Uyilawa, 2005). However, in 1926 Prophet Idubor was jailed and a decade after Iyayi, as a name was adopted to register the Esan rib of the movement.

THE ORIGIN OF SYNCRETISM IN IYAYI SOCIETY

Osenughegbe religious movement changed into Iyayi for fear of arrests similar to the situation in Benin; hence, a decade after the arrest of Osenughegbe (Idubor) the high priest in Benin, a different name was adopted to facilitate registration (Aluede,2008). In an attempt to validate the authenticity of this opinion, some issues emerge. Firstly Clarke (1935) acting on behalf of the Chief Secretary to the Nigerian government referred to Iyayi Society as the "Memorial Christian Iyayi Society" in what looks like a letter conveying permission to freely worship thus:

His Excellency, the Governor of Nigeria has approved in accordance with memo No 23610/133/67 dated in Lagos 28th December, 1935 through the Chief Secretary as follows: Certified that there has been and will not be fear of persecution of the Ishan Iyayi society member on account of his religious beliefs by administrative officers or Native administrations and that members of the society have nothing to fear provided they keep the law (Clarke1935:1).

The foregoing memo, may create doubt as to whether Iyayi is a Christian society or a traditional religious society that it is known to be. Iyayi society has never been a Christian organization but because the Roman Catholic had had inroads into the area, the community regarded the Iyayi as fetish. To change this idea, Iyayi worshippers hid under the refuge of Christianity to alter the real name of the society. Who came first to Irrua? Iyayi society or the Roman Catholic Church? Specifically, it is reported that: By 1903, efforts to establish schools were intensified though before this time, attempts were made, it was not easy for them to get their way through since they were preaching against African traditional religion which the people of Esan could not do away with (Aluede (1983:8).

It was further reported that European gifts to chiefs in the area resulted into gifts of parcels of lands to the Europeans for building of schools and churches. In the same vein, Ailenbata (1992:18) observes that "the Catholic Church though a Western religious movement first came to Irrua before the Iyayi spiritual movement". This view is also corroborated by Okoduwa (1997) when he said that by 1900, the people of Esan were already making contacts with the Europeans who visited them from time to time, particularly on Sundays. Their type of education was first brought to the youths and adults through Sunday school activities.

WHAT IS SYNCRETISM?

Syncretism is the marriage of two or more opposite beliefs in philosophy or religion. According to Encarta dictionaries (2008), it is a combination of different systems of philosophical or religious beliefs or practice. Syncretism could be defined simply as a reconciliation of different belief systems. It is a known fact that culture is dynamic. Although it has been the opinion of most researchers that traditional religious practices do not lend themselves to forces of modernity in terms of worship, performance practice, contextual use of songs and rituals. If put side by side, a critical appraisal of Iyayi practices then and now reveals a high dose of borrowing and adaptation in their *modi operandi* from other foreign

religions. In a bid to ensure continuity, retain clients and worshippers, a lot of changes have been introduced. These changes in practice will be discussed under elements of syncretism in the nomenclature of the devotees, in Iyayi worship, in Iyayi temples, in Iyayi costumes and in music to mention but a few.

ELEMENTS OF SYNCRETISM IN IYAYI NOMENCLATURE

It is well established that Igbe religious movement of Delta state is the precursor of Osenughegbe religious movement of Benin province which gave birth to Iyayi society which is presently under investigation. According to Nabofa (1973, 1996 and 2003), the leaders of the different arms of Igbe religious movements are referred to as priests. This nomenclature, Priest or Chief priest was also used for a long time for Iyayi leaders. This opinion is also evidenced by Okojie (1994:222) when he said:

The influence of this movement (Osenughegbe) spread around rapidly and from all parts of Benin and the Esan country people flocked to Ogba to hear this man who dispelled the fear of jujus and spirits, setting the people free. Those made Oga (priests) went home to spread the gospel according to Idubor.

Echekwube’s remark is also informative in this discussion. Talking about one of the leaders of Iyayi society which he interviewed on the relevance of the mirror, he reports: mirrors are used in decorating their place of worship and if it had any role to play, the Chief Priest, Ighedosa stated that the mirrors were simply for decoration (Echekwube, 1994:6). The use of mirrors is not the subject of immediate attention now but how the leaders of the society are known and addressed. Leaders of Iyayi society have always been known and identified as Priests and Chief priests even up to the 1990s.

The desire to bridge the gap between traditional and other forms of Christian churches led them to bear prophets and prophetesses as now being found in Esan towns where the societies are located. This trend has led to the renaming of the society in some areas as “The memorial Christian Iyayi Society” or “Iyayi Spiritual Church of God” to mention but a few. One of Iyayi worship songs, “*Orea yi shoshi*” is transcribed and translated below.

5. OREAYISIOSI

The image shows two staves of musical notation in G major (one sharp) and 8/8 time. The first staff contains the melody for the first line of lyrics: "O-re-a - yi-sio - si 'se a so tie o". The second staff contains the melody for the second line of lyrics: "o se no bu la kpa na mie bhagbon". The lyrics are written below the notes.

Text in Esan

Oare ha yi shoshi
Ose a so tie o
Osenobula kpa
na mien bha gbon

Translation

Even though it is in the church
 It is God one calls on.
 It is only one God
 that is found in the world.

Although *Ishoshi* is non-existent in Esan, according to Ofosu (2001:78), "*Ishoshi* is the Urhobo word for church. In Esan *Otue* is the standard vocabulary equivalent for Church. One may ask; If Iyayi society has been seen and addressed as church *ab initio* why would a song like "Even though it is in the church, it is God one calls on. It is only one God that is found in the world" be composed for worship in it? The answer to the question above remains a simple one. In 1935 Iyayi members referred to their worship centre as meeting place. The known Esan word for this meeting place is *Oguose*. *Oguose* is an abridged version of *Ogua no so Ose* which means God's compound or God's temple. When in 1994, Rev. Fr. Prof. A.O. Echekwube referred to "Chief Emakhu as the head of the church at Igueben" (1994:6), the people themselves saw this as a seal and accreditation of their activities as not just similar but the same.

ELEMENTS OF SYNCRETISM IN IYAYI WORSHIP

A study of traditional African religion vividly shows its penchant for resistance to white rule in Africa. Essien (1962), Rotberg et al (1970) and Wilmore (1984) have discussed in great detail, religion and nationalism, religious protests for power and religion and black radicalism. From their studies, one could easily see that in Africa, religion has eclectic features. This same phenomenon was spotted in Osenughegbe movement which is the precursor of Iyayi society hence Uyilawa (2003:373) remarked that: Osenughegbe moment was an indigenous religious movement which provided a medium for peasant resistance after all their indigenous political leadership institutions had been co-opted into the colonial state machinery.

Over half of Iyayi practices are yet to be documented, and so a critical examination of their songs and performance practices during worship opens the windows into their beliefs. We have identified one of their songs as rather it is political. The song is notated and translated below.

7. **ORIANORIAEBHOLO**



ORIA NO RIAE BHOLO

TEXT IN ESAN

Ene riae bholo
 ko ko gbo lea
 eriae bholo
 ene riae bholo
 ko ko gbo lea
 eria ebho

TRANSLATION

whoever is spoiling this land
 let's join hand and kill him
 whoever is spoiling this land
 whoever is spoiling this land
 lets join hands and kill him
 whoever is spoiling this land

This song addresses those political leaders who go to offices to highjack the people's will by being in affluence while the electorates are in abject poverty and penury. From the text of this song, it is obviously of political flavour. The song calls for collective drive towards the destruction of the evil individuals in their communities.

Beyond this, is the trend of now praying through Jesus Christ and reading selected portions of the holy Bible during worship. This practice is not restricted to Iyayi society alone, reporting a similar scenario in Malawi; Friedson (1996:46) says that: Today some Nchimi (traditional healers) have retained this sense of divinatory power connected to the Bible and have incorporated it into healing. ... Lubemba sometimes augmented her divination by holding a Bible and randomly turning to a page, reading a passage, and interpreting it in the context of a patient's problems.

ELEMENTS OF SYNCRETISM IN IYAYI TEMPLES

In some Iyayi temples today, One finds Christian almanacs with the Photographs of Jesus, Mary and other saints, Candles in place of *Igun* (a traditional oil lamp which burns endlessly in the temple), anointing oils in place of palm kernel oil and chaplet and scapulars now worn by devotees or devotees' children in the temples during worship (As could be seen in the photograph below).



This photograph was taken in the temple of the Chief priest Odiale Iyonagbe in Irrua. The girl holding a baby is the priest's daughter.

ELEMENTS OF SYNCRETISM IN IYAYI COSTUME

Iyayi society first came into Esan land through the efforts of Owegbe, Umale, Ehimegbe, Udebhu and Ehizotu Ojelua. When it first came into Esan land, it came with a generally accepted dress code. For men they looked like turbaned Moslems and the women wore white blouses on top of two wrappers. Between then and now, a lot of changes have taken place and the current dress pattern have tilted with greatly towards what may be found in the African churches. While their men's costume could pass for a Benin chief but for the absence of beads and a Roman Catholic priest but for the very long cape the women's could as well pass for a newly baptized Christia

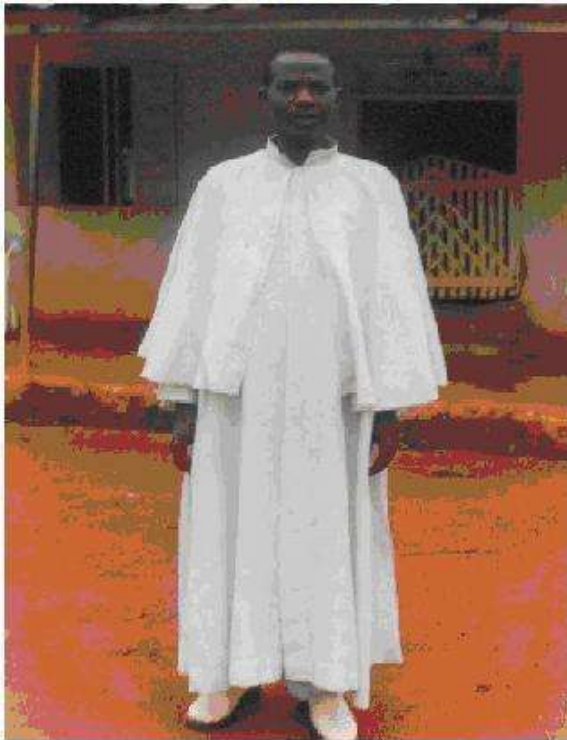


Owegbe Ohue



Philip Ehebholoria Ojelua

Between then and now, a lot of changes have taken place and the current dress pattern have tilted with great rapidity towards what may be found in the African churches (please see the photographs below for emphasis).



Ukose, Robert U. Ojelua is the head of the Iyayi Spiritual Church of God in Usugbenu, Irrua headquarters.



Oga Alice Omonkhomion.

ELEMENTS OF SYNCRETISM IN IYAYI SONGS

Ab initio in this study, it was remarked that Iyayi is a traditional religious society. In Esan, God is *Osenobua*, other gods or deities are *Ebo*, a priest or priestess is *Ohen* and a witch doctor, herbalist or native doctor is *Obo*. Surprisingly though, this society believes they are serving the true God and that nothing or rather no amount of trials will make them seek the faces of *Obo*. This idea is epitomized in the song below.

4. IBHAYOBOSUMEN



Text in Esan

Ibha yo bo sunmen-o
Sumen-o
Obo isa ne re men
Su men bhona

Translation

I do not want to herbalist to lead me
lead me
It is the Lord's hand
which will lead me in this

A critical study of the Bible shows that it is ornamented with the concept of casting our cares upon the lord. This phenomenon is further expounded in phrases such as the lord is our

shepherd (Psalm 23), the lord is our refuge (Psalm 91) and the lord is my deliverer. In a similar vein, the ministry of the lord, Jesus Christ was that devoted to healing such accounts are scattered all over the New testament Bible in Matthew 8:13,12:15 & 22,14:14, and 15:30, and Luke 4:40,5:15,6:17,13:14 to mention a few. In line with this conception, Iyayi devotees have contextually crafted or tailored their songs towards Christian ideals. Thus the song *Ose Obo* encapsulates Christian ideals in their song texts. The song *Ose Obo* transcribed and translated below.

OSE OBO

Text in Esan

'se Obo ni so tieo
 'se Obo
 Me hi mo len
 'bo bhe bheo
 'se Obo

Translation

God is my doctor which I call
 God is my doctor
 I do not have
 any other doctor
 God is my doctor

In this song, we see God as being addressed as their own doctor and that they have none else. Can this view be totally correct in principle? Apart from trying to trying to adopt or merge traditional belief with Christian belief, is the African or Nigerian not ambidextrous in worship? Africans are said to be partly Christians, Moslems, and partly believers in traditional religion. When life is smooth they align with the church and during trials they seek help from traditional sources. Healey et al (1997: 294) confirms this in the words of a Zairian poet as he quotes an excerpt thus:

“O unhappy Christian mass in the morning witch doctor in the evening, amulet in the pocket Scapular around the neck”.If the assertion above is true of Africans-Christians, it will not much of arrant surprise to observe that traditional religious devotees in Africa incorporate all sorts of traditional divinatory techniques whose roots are in other forms of belief. Today an Iyayi priest can be in two or more cults as the case may be. These tendencies to me negate their supposed philosophy which is embedded in their songs.

In the song below, Ede-edede we see yet a similar trend. In the song, it is said that on daily basis, they call upon their God. They call upon Him while going to the farm, market, river and all other places depending on the creative energy of the lead singer. The theme of this

song is not in anyway different from the Christian Hymn, "Ere you woke up this morning, did you think to pray?"

31.

EDE EDE

The first system of music consists of two staves. The top staff is in treble clef with a 7/8 time signature. It contains two measures of music, each with a rest followed by a quarter note, eighth note, quarter note, and eighth note. The lyrics 'e de e de' are written below the first measure, and 'e de e de' below the second. The bottom staff is in bass clef and contains two measures of music, each with a rest followed by a quarter note, eighth note, quarter note, and eighth note. The lyrics 'i ra bo no se' are written below the first measure, and 'i ra bo no' below the second.

The second system of music consists of two staves. The top staff is in treble clef and contains two measures of music, each with a rest followed by a quarter note, eighth note, quarter note, and eighth note. The lyrics 'i ha khun gbo' are written below the first measure, and 'i ha khie ki' below the second. The bottom staff is in bass clef and contains two measures of music, each with a rest followed by a quarter note, eighth note, quarter note, and eighth note. The lyrics 'se' are written below the first measure, and 'i ra bo no se' and 'i ra bo no' are written below the second.

The third system of music consists of two staves. The top staff is in treble clef and contains two measures of music, each with a rest followed by a quarter note, eighth note, quarter note, and eighth note. The lyrics 'ji re ha khian' are written below the first measure, and 'e ji re ha khian' below the second. The bottom staff is in bass clef and contains two measures of music, each with a rest followed by a quarter note, eighth note, quarter note, and eighth note. The lyrics 'se' are written below the first measure, and 'i ra bo no se' and 'i ra bo no' are written below the second.

The fourth system of music consists of two staves. The top staff is in treble clef and contains two measures of music, each with a rest followed by a quarter note, eighth note, quarter note, and eighth note. The lyrics 'e de e de' are written below the first measure, and 'i ra bo no se' below the second. The bottom staff is in bass clef and contains two measures of music, each with a rest followed by a quarter note, eighth note, quarter note, and eighth note. The lyrics 'se' are written below the first measure, and 'i ra bo no se' below the second.

Text in Esan

Ede –ede
Ira bo no se

Translation

Day by day,
I pray unto God

| | |
|--------------|---------------------------|
| Ede ede | Day by day |
| Irabo nose | I pray unto God |
| Iha khiugbo | while going to the farm |
| Ira be no se | I pray unto God |
| Iha khien ki | while going to the market |
| Ira bo no se | I pray unto God |
| Ebi re ha lu | whatever thing I am doing |
| Ira bo no se | I pray unto God |
| Ede ede | Day by day |
| Irabo no se | I pray unto God |

CONCLUSION

In this paper, an attempt has been made to examine the origin of Iyayi society in Esanland. In doing this a picture of syncretism emerges almost immediately. This syncretic posture is palpable in the nomenclature of their places of worship, nomenclature of their devotees, the outlook of their meeting places or temples, the regalia of their devotees and the synergetic nature of Iyayi songs which is our primary concern. The study reveals that in this society, very little or no gap exists between their songs for worship and those of the Christian churches within their locales.

This paper is of the view that to say, traditional religious institutions do not yield to forces of acculturation can no longer hold sway in ethnomusicological discourse because the carriers of culture themselves are agents change. If this paper is able provoke critical reassessment of traditional religious songs in Nigeria and engender further interaction on this subject; then the aim of this paper would have been achieved.

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