

THE CREATIVITY AND IDENTITY OF IJESA "OSOMALO" IN THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND CHRISTIANIZATION OF YORUBALAND IN SOUTH-WESTERN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The Ijesa people of the present Osun state of Nigeria were known as *Osomalo* in the 19th century because of their ingenuity and introduction of trade shift merchandize in Yorubaland. As textile traders, they were found in the nooks and crannies of the geographical area. Apart from the niche they created for themselves in trading, they were also responsible for the introduction of Christianity to many towns and villages in Yorubaland. They were seen as successful business men and women because of their doggedness, total commitment to a course they believed and determination to succeed in any endeavour of their choice. Many Ijesa people became pacesetters in the propagation of Christianity in areas where they were found in course of their businesses. Many of their children are seen as Church leaders in the Mainline, African Independent Churches and Pentecostal Churches in the 21st century in Nigeria. The traits found in their forefathers were embraced by the younger generation and this has led to the establishment of flourishing churches within and outside the shores of Nigeria.

Keywords: Creativity, *Osomalo*, Christianization, Yorubaland, Itinerant traders.

MAP OF IJESALAND IN OSUN STATE, NIGERIA



Introduction

The objective of this paper is to examine the creativity and identity of Ijesa people of South-western Nigeria in textile trading as a major business and their contribution to the expansion of Christianity in the 19th century. Many of them were itinerant traders and pioneers of Christianity in many towns and villages in other parts of Yorubaland and beyond. The political headquarters of Ijesaland is Ilesha where the Owa Obokun is presiding with his Chiefs. Ilesha was founded in C.1500 and is the largest town in Ijesaland. Ijesaland is located in the present Osun state, Nigeria, with six local government councils, namely: Ilesha West, Ilesha East, Atakumosa East, Atakumosa West,

Oriade and Obokun. There are Obas and Chiefs in other subordinate towns, such as, Ibokun, Ijebu-Ijesa, Erin -Ijesa, Ipetu-Ijesa, Esa-Oke, Esa Odo, Ilase, Osu, Ibokun, Idominasi, Ikeji Ile and Ikeji Arakeji. Other prominent towns in Ijesaland are Erinmo, Erin-Oke, Odo, Ifewara, Igangan, Ibala, Iloko and Ijeda. According to Ogunbile, "Ijesaland is approximately sixty-seven square kilometers, bounded by Ile-Ife and Osogbo to the west, by Ekiti to the east, by Igbomina to the north and by Ondo and Ile-Oluji to the south"¹. Investigation has shown that many Ijesa traders visited the above neighbouring towns and villages to trade and they played active part in evangelizing the communities. According to Ayodeji Olukoju, "But whatever was their faith and calling, the Ijesa in their homeland, and in the Yoruba and wider diaspora, added value to the home and host communities through their peculiar thrift, diligence, doggedness and perhaps a sense of manifest destiny"².

Definition of Terms

The key terms in the title of the paper are: creativity, identity and Christianity. The word creativity has been defined as "the ability to use your imagination to produce new ideas"³, while the term identity is described as "someone's identity in their name or who they are"⁴, it may further be described as "the qualities and attitudes that a person or group of people have, that make them different from other people". Christianity in this context was the gospel of Jesus Christ which was introduced in three phases in the area. The Mainline Churches came to Ijesaland before the end of the 19th century; while the *Aladura* or African Independent Churches were introduced between 1920's and 1960. And the Pentecostal Churches emerged as from 1970's in leaps and bounds.

The creativity and peculiarity brought about in the economic spheres of life by Ijesa textile traders in the 19th century is what is being emphasized by the Nigerian government in the 21st century in the areas of self-employment and productivity. In other words, the achievement of over two hundred years ago in Ijesaland is what the Nigerian University Commission (NUC) is emphasizing as entrepreneurship, whereby emphasis is laid on creativity, and self-employment for the teeming young graduates in the Nigerian universities. For instance, at the Kwara State University, Malete, Nigeria, the University is known as a University for Community Development, whereby entrepreneurship is taken as a general course by all the students irrespective of the area of discipline. So also at Joseph Ayo Babalola University, Ikeji Arakeji (JABU), where the school authority claims that the teaching of entrepreneurship was first introduced in any Nigerian Universities. One is not surprised at this because the University is located in Ijesaland where the issue of *Osomalo* trading enterprise has a long history and tradition. The site of the University is also significant because it was the location where Joseph Ayo Babalola, a prominent and a leading torch-bearer of Christ Apostolic Church (C.A.C.) was called by God as an Apostle⁵.

Another peculiarity and distinctiveness of Ijesa people in the 19th century was displayed in the *Kiriji* war or *Ekiti-parapo* war against Ibadan oppression which eventually led to an internecine war in Yorubaland. The war became a stalemate and was settled by the British Colonial power and Christian Missionaries before the end of the 19th century⁶. Ogedengbe Agbogunboro the leader of Ijesa army played a prominent and

active role in the war. The Ijesa warrior leader died in 1910. There is an expression to show the commitment of Ijesa to wars:

"Ijesa re, arogun yo;

Ye s'o gbodo foo kan 'mo Obokun"!

Meaning:

This is Ijesa, who rejoices when he faces war;

Who dare molest the offspring of Obokun!⁷

Ogungbile quoted Ebenezer Babatope, a political icon in Ijesaland, in describing the identity of Ijesa people, thus:

The Ijeshas (sic) are a warrior- group- militant in battle and never say die while prosecuting whatever course they may believe in. The Ijeshas (sic) hate to see people persecuted unjustly. They hate oppression, injustice and naked tyranny. It was these factors that led the Ijeshas (sic) to join forces with the Ekitis (sic) in the Kiriji war of the 18th century⁸.

The role of Ijesa people in the 19th century internecine war had been discussed in our earlier paper titled: "War and Peace: An Examination of the Role of Christian Missionaries in Kiriji war in Yorubaland in the 19th Century"⁹.

Many itinerant traders from Ijesaland served as *Osomalo* in different parts of Yorubaland, such as, Ile-Ife, Ondo, Akure, Ilorin, Ijebu Ode, Abeokuta, Offa, Ora Igbomina, Igbaja, and beyond. Omole opined that "the Ijesa Osomalo traders were to be found (within Nigeria and) ... in other West African countries like Ghana (then Gold Coast), Benin Republic (then Dahomey), Cote de Voir (then Ivory Coast), Cameroun, Niger, Senegal, Sierra-Leone, Upper Volta and Guinea"¹⁰. In other words, the Ijesa textile trading became an International business.

Who was an *Osomalo*?

The word *Osomalo* is literarily interpreted as "*Oso ni maa lo ki ma fi gbo oo mi, loni*" meaning, "I shall remain squatting until I have collected the debt owned me (my money), not later than today"¹¹. Investigation has shown that the word is offensive to some educated Ijesa people of today; while some of them appreciated the ingenuity of their fore-fathers in business activities. They believed that, it is like engine oil that lubricates and renew engines to function adequately and appropriately. Therefore, it is a term that distinguishes the Ijesa people from other sub-ethnic groups in Yorubaland. Omole opined that "originally considered as a term of abuse to characterize the aggressive Ijesa textile traders, the word "Osomalo" is tied to the process of debt collection¹².

Many scholars in the fields of History, Sociology, and Religion have written on the history, political, religious and socio-economic life of Ijesa people. Samuel Johnson

(1921), J.D.Y. Peel (1983), Olowokure and Femi Adewole (1998), T.M. Ilesanmi (1985), L.Omole (1991), D.O. Olayiwola (1993), Rotimi Omotoye (1997), Ogungbile (2006), Ademowo (2008), and Jawondo (2015).

Omole further said:

Ijesa were determined to develop a new type of commercial warfare which, for want of a better name, has been called "Osomalo", in which they were now to employ all the skills and energies previously devoted to physical combats to promote legitimate trade. This Osomalo trading system with its inbuilt principle of instalmental payment was the most important single contribution of the Ijesa to the economic development of Nigeria. It is indeed, remarkable that the Ijesa had pioneered this revolutionary development of instalmental payment of merchandise long before the hire purchase system, which is akin, was introduced in Britain. One can rightly say then that the Osomaalo system was a distinctive Ijesa contribution to world civilization as it was developed independently of outside influences¹³.

The issue in the above narration is that of debt recovery and business tactics in the selling of wares to interested buyers. They were able to demonstrate how a business could be effectively managed without much involvement of the police or intermediaries.

Lessons from *Osomalo* Business Tactics by Business Institutions and Individuals in Nigeria

There are many significant lessons to be learnt from the *Osomalo* business tactics by economic institutions and business class in Nigeria in the 21st century. For example, in the Banking industry in Nigeria, there are many failed banks because of bad management and defaulting customers who took loans without commensurable collateral; which often resulted into bad debts, insolvency and folding up of banks. At times, a lot of resources and time are wasted on recovery of loans and bad debts by the Banks and Finance houses. Most often, there is collaboration and unholy alliance between the debtors and the law enforcement agencies which may eventually result into non-payment of the debts. In fact, the law court which should be a final arbiter or hallow of justice may not be reliable because of compromise, injustice and adjournment of cases *indefinitum*. It was a business strategy of the time which actually paid off and beneficial to the *Osomalo* in recovering some outstanding debts. There is always a paradigm shift in historiography. We may agree that the methods to be adopted and acceptable may slightly change in the 21th century.

The debt collecting agencies at different levels in Nigeria and modern entrepreneurs have much to learn from the uncompromising tactics of Ijesa *Osomalo*. To some people, the tactics adopted by them was brutish, oppressive and un-dignifying. We believe that the game of the time was to make profit, produce good results and make appreciable dividend. It is observed in Nigeria today, that there are collaboration, aiding and abetting in looting of government property. In view of this Nigeria has become a country where "nothing works". The economy is in comatose, bribery and corruption is the order of the

day. This has forced many companies to relocate to neighbouring countries, such as Ghana and Republic of Benin. Apt examples are Vintage publishers in Ghana and Topmost Limited in Lome.

The success achieved by Ijesa traders in textile industry distinguished them from other sub-ethnic groups in Yorubaland and earned them the appellation *Osomalo*. The textile business of Ijesa people was complemented by the flourishing business of Syrians and Lebanese known as *Koraa* in *Adeti* Quarters of Ilesa up till the middle of the 20th century. This collaboration has remained imperishable in the economic history of Ijesa people.

The Osomalo and the Propagation of Christianity

Coupled with textile trading, the *Osomalos* made some initiatives in pioneering the spread of Christianity wherever they were found as itinerant traders. Many of them became initiators and founders of different Christian denominations in the 19th and 20th centuries. However, at the close of the 20th century the textile trading became anachronistic and unprofitable because of new economic development in Nigeria. Many of the early traders went back home to start farming and engaged in petty trading.

The paradigm shift was seen in the area of establishment of Churches, especially the Aladura and Pentecostal Churches. In fact, many of the successful and flourishing churches in Yorubaland in particular and Nigeria in general were founded or being led by Ijesa people. For example, the late Timothy Obadare founded the World Soul Winning Evangelistic Mission (WOSEM). He was an indigene of Ilesa town. Pastor D.O. Babajide, a co-worker of Pastor Joseph Ayo Babalola, was an indigene of Ilesa, Pastor William Kumuyi, the founder of Deeper Life Christian Church came from Erin Ijesa. Pastor Enoch Adejare Adeboye, the General Overseer of the Redeemed Christian Church came from Ifewara, while Pastor Kayode Abiara, the founder of *Agbala Itura* and General Evangelist of Christ Apostolic Church is an indigene of Erinmo Ijesa. Prophet Samuel Asolo is the Primate and founder of Christ Followers Church is an indigene of Ijeda Ijesa. His Church is located along Ikorodu road in Lagos. The late Prophet S.A. Fakeye, the inter-religious preacher and founder of Cherubim and Seraphim Church, Ayo Ni O, along Apapa Oshodi Express road was based in Lagos before his demise, and Prophet Oduyemi, the founder of Bethel Wonderland, Lagos, and Pastor Joseph Okunola Oludare of Christ Trumpeters Church, Ilesa. In the Anglican Church, Late J.A.I. Falope was the pioneering Bishop of the Anglican Diocese of Ilesa in 1974, Bishop Awosan retired in Oke Osun Anglican Diocese, Gbongan, Bishop Olowokure retired in Akoko Anglican Diocese and Bishop James A. Oladunjoye is presently the Lord Bishop of the Anglican Diocese of Owo.

One typical Ijesa culture which was identified by Ogungbile in his study: "is that of hard-work and dogged determination to succeed.... The typical Ijesa personality is industrious, liberal, fair, but positively defiant"¹⁴. The above quotation has been interpreted variously about the Ijesa people. However, it is noted that many of the above mentioned Ijesa Christian leaders demonstrated the attributes and qualities in their Christian leadership.

The Beginning of Christian Missionary Activities in Ijesaland

Christian Missionary activities in Ijesaland were in three phases. The first attempt was the Mission Churches led by the Church Missionary Society (C.M.S.), later known as the Anglican Church. The Yoruba mission was based in Abeokuta which became the sunrise within the tropics. Henry Townsend the leader of Church Missionary Society played a prominent and significant role in establishing the Church in Abeokuta and beyond. Other missions were equally based in the community and from there sent out missionaries to the hinterland. For instance, David Hinderer, of the CMS was the first white missionary in Ibadan in 1851¹⁵. He made his first visit to Ilesa in 1858 and was received warmly by Owa Ofokutu, the then Owa Obokun of Ijesaland. David Hinderer later sent a freed slave named Vincent Agbebi, a CMS evangelist to complement his earlier mission and Christian activities in the town¹⁶. It is necessary to note that the first Christian Owa in Ilesa was Oba Haastrup Ajimoko I. He assisted the Church Missionary Society to stabilize and enjoyed Christian monopoly for about forty years. It was in 1898 that Oliver Griffin, the Methodist superintendent and Revd. H. Atundaolu, an Ijesa indigene and ex-slave responded positively and quickly to the invitation of Haastrup Ajimoko I¹⁷. The disagreement of the Owa with the CMS was on the issue of polygamy. The CMS insisted and taught the doctrine of one man one wife which was against the practice of an African man, especially an Oba who occupied a dignified and a respected position in the community! Other freed slaves from Brazil and Sierra-Leone who settled in Lagos also assisted in the Christianization of Ijesaland. For example, Dorocho, one of the richest men of his time, Calisto a great Roman Catholic, went home to establish the first Roman Catholic Church at Oke Padi, Ilesa in 1914¹⁸. The African Church was established in 1917 with the support of Owa Atayero who gave the church a spacious land and they dedicated their building in 1921.

An important legacy which the churches introduced to Ijesa people was western education. The Mission churches started with the establishment of primary schools. The Anglican mission established St John's Anglican Church and St John's primary school at Iloro, while the Methodist church, Otapete founded the Methodist primary school, Otapete and the Roman Catholic Church, established St Mary's Catholic Primary school in Ifofin, Ilesa¹⁹. It was an eye opener for the Ijesa people who embraced Christianity to train their children in western education. Again, coupled with their travelling far and wide gave them the opportunity to be enlightened, sophisticated and civilized. Osomalo migrants became very influential in their businesses and saw the prospect of acquiring western education. This made them to send their children and wards to school whether at home or abroad. In fact, many Osomalo became agents of evangelization and founders of churches in course of their trading. The *Osomalos* often visited home at least twice in a year to contribute to the development of their communities. This culminated in the establishment of *Egbe Atunluse*²⁰ in 1920's in Ilesa which established the first secondary school known as Ilesa Grammar school. The school has produced many eminent and great Nigerians, such as the late Justice Kayode Eso, former Lagos state Governor Kayode Jakande etc.

One factor that assisted the *Osomalo* in the propagation of the gospel and in trading was the learning of the language of their host communities. Language is a powerful instrument in evangelism²¹ and trading. According to Ogungbile "Their acquisition of host's languages helped in effective communication in their businesses, it became also a ready instrument for evangelism"²². This strategy was effectively used in the Northern part of Nigeria that was dominated by the Muslims.

The Ijesa people also seized the advantage of the construction of railway from the South to the North to partake in the evangelization of Ilorin²³, Ibolu and Igbomina communities in the first decade of the 20th century. Many of them were employed by the railway Corporation as artisans. They actively contributed to the propagation of Christianity and socio-economic development of the area.

The Decline of Osomalo textile Activities and Growth of Aladura and Pentecostal Churches

The next phase of Churches after the Mainline Churches was the Aladura or African Independent Churches. As history is not static, the textile *Osomalo* trading started phasing out and becoming slowing down because of modern and more acceptable economic businesses. Many *Osomalo* traders started coming home to establish small scale industries and businesses. The educated ones started focusing on the establishment of Aladura churches and later the establishment of Pentecostal churches. The energy, commitment and dedication which their fathers used in the successful textile trading were also applied in the establishment of Aladura and Pentecostal Churches.

The first known *Aladura* or Pentecostal revival was the Great revival held at Oke Oye in 1930. It was organized by The Apostolic Church, which is often mistakenly ascribed to the Christ Apostolic Church.²⁴ Joseph Ayo Babalola who later became a prominent and a recognized leader in the Christ Apostolic Church performed some miracles to the admiration of the general public. The Pastor was an indigene of Odo –Owa, a town in Kwara State but his explosive miracle took place at Ilesa. With the eventual emergence of Christ Apostolic Church and leadership role of Pastor Ayo Babalola and divine miracles recorded made the church to become popular, recognized, influential and acceptable in later years in Ijesaland. Many church historians have documented the story of the church. For instance, D.O.Olayiwola, Deji Ayegboyin and Ademola Ishola, and C.O.Osun. There are many sons of Ijesa that joined forces with Pastor Ayo Babalola in the growth and expansion of the church. The late Pastor D.O. Babajide, Late Pastor Timothy Obadare and General Evangelist Kayode Abiara and the late Oba Stephen Adeyinka Adeosun, the Akinla of Erin Ijesa evangelized and established the church in the nooks and crannies of Ijesaland.

Another Aladura Church of note was the Cherubim and Seraphim Church which was established in Lagos through the instrumentality and association of Apostle Moses Orimolade and Captain Christiannah Abiodun Akinsowon. The latter led an evangelistic group to Ilesa in 1927. The group was hosted by a convert of the Church in Lagos named Pa S.A Samuel Adegbekun²⁵. The church is found in the nooks and crannies of Ijesaland and many of their sons and daughters are playing relevant and important roles in the

growth and expansion of the Church. One significant phenomenon about the Church is the role of women and vision that is permitted in the Church.

At this juncture, we shall focus briefly on two Pentecostal Churches widely accepted and being led by Ijesa men in this study because of time and space; these are the Deeper Life Christian Church and the Redeemed Christian Church of God.

The Deeper Life Christian Church

The Deeper Life Christian Church was founded by Pastor Folorunso Williams Kumuyi. The denomination has been studied by many scholars, such as Alan Isaacson (1990), Ojo (1992), Ogungbile (2006), and Owoeye (2007). Omotoye (2016) wrote extensively and comprehensively to correct some ideas on earlier submissions on the personality of the founder and the Church in a paper entitled: "An Overview of the Missionary Activities of the Deeper Life Christian Church in Nigeria"²⁶. Pastor Kumuyi was an indigene of Erin Ijesa, a town in Oriade Local Government of Osun State. His parents were *Osomalotextile* traders. They were members of Christ Anglican Church, Erin Ijesa and belonged to the extended Akinfenwa's family in the town. The family played prominent role in the establishment of the Anglican Church in the community. As itinerant traders, his parents went to trade in Orunto in Ijebu Ode division of Ogun state. Pastor Kumuyi attended the famous Mayflower secondary school and the University of Ibadan, Ibadan. He eventually became a lecturer at the University of Lagos and started a Bible class at his residence on campus in Akoka in 1973. The name "Deeper Life" was suggested by the members of the fellowship who were impressed and comfortable with his deeper teaching of the Bible better than where many of them were worshipping before meeting Pastor Kumuyi. The main emphasis of the Church is Holiness and Salvation. It is a peculiar Pentecostal Church because the members of the Church in tertiary institutions in Nigeria do not congregate or fellowships with other Christian groups. They meet once in a week in fellowships to listen to prepared teaching of the founder. Many literatures have been single handedly written by him.

Initially, the Church did not show interest in the establishment of schools. However, of recent there was a directive that each state headquarters of the Church in the federation should establish a model, boarding and well-furnished secondary school. In Kwara state, the school is located on old Ilorin/Ogbomoso road, while that of Oyo state is found along Ibadan/Oyo new express road. The proposed Anchor University is to be established in Abuja with a temporary take off site at Ayobo in Lagos. Studies have shown that the Deeper Life Christian Church has increased phenomenally since the introduction of the Easter and December retreat for the members of the Church. The members of the Church are provided with free feeding, free accommodation and free transportation. There is no doubt that the strategy has attracted many poor and "wretched of the earth" to the Church. It is believed by many people that the stringent teachings and tenets of the Church are difficult to accept by the "rich" and "wealthy" people. The Church is found in many villages, towns, cities within and outside Nigeria. The spirit and total commitment of Ijesa *Osomalo* in the veins and blood of Pastor Folorunso Kumuyi is a factor in the success story of the Church.

The Redeemed Christian Church of God

The Redeemed Christian Church of God was founded by the late Josiah Akindayomi, an indigene of Ondo in 1952²⁷. However; it was brought into limelight, acceptable and widely recognized within and outside Nigeria during the leadership of Pastor Enoch Adejare Adeboye, an Ijesa man from Ifewara in Osun state of Nigeria. Newsweek, an American international news magazine in its January 2009 edition listed him “as the forty-fifth most powerful person in the world”. He was further described “as remaining above the fray in faking supernatural powers and honesty”²⁸. Peter Wanger, the President of Global Evangelical Ministry spoke of Pastor Adeboye, “If I have to name the top 10 apostles in the world, Adeboye would have to be the top on the list. He goes on to say that Adeboye “represents a new center of gravity for Christianity”²⁹. According to Aderibigbe, “The emergence of Dr. Enoch Adeboye as the general overseer of the church in 1980, after the death of the founder and leader, dramatically revolutionized the church. After the initial controversy surrounding his election to the post, he introduced far-reaching measures, which transformed the church from the “little tribal church” under Akindayomi to a fast expanding and modern-day compliant church. Indeed, the church was literarily transformed from “a world rejecting” to “a world accommodating” church. This transformation, though revolutionary, was gradual and resulted from well thought out and executed strategical features”³⁰. The church was our focus in an earlier study entitled: “The Church and National Development: The Case of the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Nigeria”³¹. The contributions of the Church to the religious and socio-economic development of the country were highlighted in the study. The rapid development of the Redemption Camp along Lagos/Ibadan Kilometer 46 is ascribed to the vision of Pastor Adeboye. The temporary Redeemer University in Lagos has been moved to its permanent site at Ede, Osun state. The church is found in almost all the villages and towns visited in Yorubaland. My visit to America in April 2016 testified to the acceptance and existence of the church in many cities. I attended a branch of the church at the University of Georgia, Athens, United States of America. It is named RCCG Amazing Grace and being led by Pastor Mrs. Moradeke Abimbola Aderibigbe, a Yoruba immigrant³². The church is a good rallying point for African immigrants at Athens; a town located about an hour drive to Atlanta, Georgia, United States of America. The church is temporarily making use of the Presbyterian Students’ center for Sunday worship.

There is no doubt that the total commitment, energy and good leadership being displayed by Pastor Adeboye as the General Overseer of the church is a factor in the growth and expansion of the Redeemed Christian Church of God.

Conclusion

The Ijesa factor in the economic and Christianization of Yorubaland in particular and Nigeria in general cannot be over-emphasized because the *Osomalo* traits in the textile traders were imbibed by the Ijesa Christian leaders in the expansion of Christianity. The *Osomalo* dynamics of trading is no longer in vogue because of new economic development in the society. The strategies initially adopted have become anachronistic in the modern economic system, but there are lessons to be learnt from the episode. The

growing of Christianity in Ijesaland and the expansion of churches founded or being led by Ijesa extraction is a testimony of the fact that they have inherited the good qualities of their Osomalo fore-fathers.

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