

## Chapter Six

### Women in the Yorùbá Religion and Globalization

Yeye Chief (Mrs.) Doyin Olosun-Faniyi (b. 1962)<sup>314</sup> is a Yoruba priestess who participates in the globalization of the Yoruba religion, traveling to other countries, teaching about Yoruba religion, and initiating new devotees of the *òrìṣà*. She is the adopted daughter of the Austrian artist and adherent of Yorùbá religion, Iya Susanne Wenger (1915–2009), known in the Yoruba religion as Adunni Olorisa (“adored one of the orisa”) of the Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove in Osogbo, Osun State. Susanne Wenger arrived in Nigeria in 1950. Prior to coming to Nigeria, she was an artist who exhibited her works in Paris, Zurich, and other parts of Europe. Wenger’s primary effort in Nigeria for many years was to collaborate with local artists and workers on the construction, renovation, and preservation of shrines and sculptures in the Osun-Osogbo grove along the Osun River.<sup>315</sup> Her efforts led to the recognition of the Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) in 2005. She died at the age of 93 in Osogbo. Yeye Chief Doyin Olosun-Faniyi lived with and worked closely with Adunni Olorisa from the time she was five years old, and she consequently grew up enmeshed in Yoruba religious sensitivities.

Yeye Chief Doyin Olosun-Faniyi is a priestess of Osun and an *ìyánífá* with many years of experience in Yoruba religion in Nigeria and the diaspora. She consults, mentors, and performs different rituals as occasion demands in many countries worldwide. Olosun-Faniyi’s first awareness that Osun was worshipped beyond Nigeria occurred when she was nine years old, with the visit of a Puerto Rican Osun priestess, popularly called Iya Sonta, who lived in New York City. Iya Sonta was a friend of Iya Adunni Olorisa, and annually visited her residence on Ibokun Road in Osogbo to initiate adherents (*omo-òòsà*) to Osun worship.<sup>316</sup>



**Figure 14. Yeye Chief Doyin Olosun-Faniyi, wearing *òrìṣà parapò* beads, in front of her house, also a museum for her mother Susanne Wenger, on Ibokun Road in Osogbo next to the fence by artist Adebisi Akanji, 2015.**

**Courtesy of Yeye Chief Doyin Olosun-Faniyi and Moussa Kone.**

In 1993, Olosun-Faniyi made her first trip outside Nigeria as an Osun priestess on official duty to Portugal. She went to perform rituals for a Portuguese Osun adherent who remained barren after many years. According to Olosun-Faniyi, she had to travel with the ritual items needed because such items were unavailable in Portugal. She identified a flowing river in Portugal to which necessary ritual prayers were made to symbolize Osun River, in line with the Yoruba stance we saw earlier that *omi gbogbolò 'sun*, “all waters are Osun water.” The trip was a success. The woman became pregnant shortly thereafter, and the child was named Osuntoyin, meaning “Osun is worthy of praise.” Since then, Olosun-Faniyi has travelled to many countries in the Yoruba diaspora, including Germany, Austria, Brazil, the United Kingdom, the United States, Ghana, and Togo, to perform religious duties. These include divination for clients on

diverse existential issues, mentoring of omo-oosa, holding workshops and seminars on aspects of Yoruba belief system, and offering sacrifices if they are prescribed by Ifá divination.<sup>317</sup>

The need to make ritual items, religious objects, and services available to every adherent of Yoruba religion who needs them in Yorubaland and the diaspora opens wide the doors of commercialization. Olosun-Faniyi sends fashion items with Yoruba religious themes and religious items out into the diaspora for sale. She is the originator of *òrìṣà parapò* beads, which signify the unity of all orisa that should be emulated among adherents of different deities in Yoruba religion. She has students in Germany, Austria, and the United States with whom she is in constant communication and with whom she exchanges visits regularly. Yeye Chief Olosun-Faniyi's life experiences illuminate the effects of globalization on Yoruba religion, its adherents, and practices. They also demonstrate women's agency, activities, and leadership in religious, economic, and leadership roles among the Yoruba.

Globalization is a term that refers to "increasing global connectivity, integration, and interdependence in the economic, social, technological, cultural, political, and ecological spheres."<sup>318</sup> Globalization has proven to be a decisive factor in prevailing trends in all ramifications of human experience in recent times. The advent and process of globalization across different sectors have been marked by controversies, with arguments made for and against the phenomenon. Some highlight the positive influences of globalization on different spheres of human endeavors. According to economist Jagdish Bhagwati, statistics show the stupendous increase in world trade and GDP (gross domestic product) after opening of markets to global trade. Bhagwati argues that globalization has benefited the poor because trade enhances economic growth and growth reduces poverty. Participation of women in the workforce and in other aspects of life has also improved.<sup>319</sup>

However, globalization also creates challenges for countries and their citizens. As reported by Ahmadu Ibrahim, economist T. A. Oyejide notes the negative impact of globalization as including "the erosion of sovereignty, especially on economic and financial matters, as a result of the imposition of models, strategies and policies of development on African countries by the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the World Trade Organization." Ibrahim concludes that "globalization for [the] most part does not facilitate the establishment of the economic conditions necessary for genuine democracy and good governance to take solid roots and thrive."<sup>320</sup> In addition, Ibrahim states that as a result of the

“cultural domination from outside that goes with globalization, African countries are rapidly losing their cultural identities and therefore their ability to interact with other cultures on an equal and autonomous basis. . . .”<sup>321</sup> Thus, the concept and manifestations of globalization remain complex and contentious, including their influence on religions worldwide.

Globalization significantly affects Yoruba women in religions on the African continent and in the diaspora. The impact of globalization on Yoruba women can be discerned in cultural erosion and heightened immersion in globalized popular culture disseminated by media. Moreover, in Nigeria there is dwindling appreciation of African cultural values such as respect and hospitality in interpersonal relations. The outcome of these developments is a lack of transmission of Yoruba values in the socialization of children. On the other hand, Yoruba women who are adherents of Yoruba religion experience globalization through opportunities to interact with adherents of Yoruba religion in the diaspora for the purposes of social networking and religious mentorship. Oftentimes, this has resulted in international travels for Yoruba women. Moreover, as a consequence of globalization, women who are active in Yoruba religion have had opportunities to conduct commercial ventures such as the sale of beaded handicrafts, traditional batik, and items such as kola nut and bitter kola to orisa worshippers in the diaspora.

## Globalization and Religion

Religion is an agent of globalization in structure and practice. The relationship between religion and globalization is marked by tension, though these forces operate as partners in some settings. Religion and religious organizations are influential throughout the world, while “religions previously isolated from one another . . . now have regular and unavoidable contact.”<sup>322</sup> Globalization serves religion through its many tools of communication and travel such as information technology, migration, and the media. “For example, websites provide information and explanations about different religions” while videos and television supply “visual religious teachings and practices.”<sup>323</sup>

According to sociologist David Lehmann, the interaction between religion and globalization manifests in two ways: one, it “brings old practices to new groups in new settings” (“disembedding” the practices and beliefs from their indigenous setting); and two, it “intensifies transnational links among groups similar in their practices, and creates networks and sometimes

even tightly-knit communities of people” across vast distances, and across “boundaries of language, ethnicity and race.”<sup>324</sup> Both manifestations of globalization noted by Lehmann are true for Yoruba religion in Nigeria and the diaspora, especially in the existence and relevance of African-derived religions such as Santería, Candomblé, and Haitian Vodou in the diaspora and increasing connections of Yoruba priestesses and priests with orisa worshippers throughout the world. The spread of religions is predicated on human agency, which is also crucial to the process of globalization. However, the process of globalization often threatens the distinctive features of a religion and this results in tensions that may be resolved through syncretism (blending elements of different religions) or adaptations. Thus, any religion that is affected by the process of globalization cannot remain static. As noted by religious studies scholar Asonzeh Ukah:

In the last four centuries—or in the course of all the phases of interpenetration of Africa . . . —African religions and other religious systems derived from them have crossed boundaries, deserts and oceans drawing diverse populations and cultures in Europe, the Americas, parts of Asia—and of course Africa itself—into a unique globalized religiouscape. Thus, African religions are an important structure and vehicle of contemporary globalization.<sup>325</sup>

### Globalization and Yoruba Religion

The globalization of Yoruba religion may be attributed to many interrelated factors. Yoruba diaspora scholar Olabiyi Babalola Yai identifies three phases in the globalization of Yoruba religious traditions: West African, Atlantic, and Post-Atlantic.<sup>326</sup>

The West African Period involved social interactions, including commercial activities and spread of Yoruba religion, among different neighboring societies, such as those of the Edo, Yagba, Itsekiri, Nupe, Ibariba, Igbo, Igala, Fon, Ewe, Gun, Akan, and others.<sup>327</sup> Influences of Yoruba culture and religious traditions survive among these West African peoples. This is especially true of Ifa divination practices, which could be described as “the most ‘globalized’ indigenous religious tradition in West Africa.”<sup>328</sup> Additionally in West Africa, Yoruba religion

encountered Islam through the trans-Saharan trade, as reflected in the content of Ifa in which there is a chapter named Odù Ìmàlè, the Muslim chapter, also called Odù Òtúá.<sup>329</sup>

The Atlantic Period refers to the experiences of Yoruba people during the years of the transatlantic slave trade and enslavement in the New World. It was a horrific collective experience, and Yoruba utilized survival tactics to preserve themselves and their Yoruba religion. As we have seen, Santería, Candomblé, Haitian Vodou, Orisha (Shango) in Trinidad and Tobago, and other African-derived religions were developed during the Atlantic Period through the interaction and blending of Yoruba religion with the religions of enslaved Central Africans, other West Africans, and religions of indigenous Americans within a context of Catholic European colonialism.<sup>330</sup> These religions have many aspects that are derivatives of Yoruba worldview and religious practices, including deities, language of worship, music, songs and incantations, and dance.<sup>331</sup>

The Post-Atlantic Period began in the late twentieth century, approximately in the 1980s, with the more recent diaspora of Yoruba throughout the world as well as converts to Yoruba religion coming to visit or live in Yorubaland in order to learn and be initiated in the religion. Yoruba religion as it is practiced in Yorubaland exists in the diaspora, with investments of time, intelligence, and money by cultic functionaries of Yoruba religion from Nigeria. The Post-Atlantic Period involves converts to Yoruba religion from among Yoruba people, other Africans on the continent, and in the diaspora, people with African and non-African ethnic backgrounds.<sup>332</sup>

These three periods delineated by Olabiyi Babalola Yai are connected by migration, education, media, and transborder economics that have variously influenced the globalization of Yoruba religion. In addition, tourism and the use of new media technologies have facilitated the introduction of Yoruba belief systems and practices to the countries of the diaspora. Worthy of mention is the recognition and declaration of the Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove as a World Heritage site and Ifa oracular practice as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO.<sup>333</sup>

Globalization as Experienced by Women in Yoruba Religion

Women encounter and facilitate globalization through Yoruba religion in diverse ways. Female adherents, who may be priestesses of an orisa or who may be worshippers, are involved in the sale of religious items such as kola nuts, alligator pepper, and fashion items on the internet. Moreover, some women specialize in the prescription and sale through the internet of different types of herbs to heal ailments. Women's prominence in business enterprises are often effective means of globally propagating, sustaining, and publicizing Yoruba religion. Examples of such enterprises include the Aṣẹ Ire website of Dr. Funlayo Easter Wood (Iya Funlayo), an African American iyanifa and priestess of Ọbàtálá whom we met in Chapter Five,<sup>334</sup> through which she offers divination services (including orisa-inspired tarot card readings) and spiritual counseling. Other examples of websites related to Yoruba commercial ventures include Yoruba Imports,<sup>335</sup> which provides Yoruba artworks, religious items, and foods, soaps, and oils; Owa Afrikan Market,<sup>336</sup> which provides items related to Ifa and orisa, and African herbs used in Yoruba and Yoruba-derived religious rituals; and Orisha Marketplace,<sup>337</sup> which offers herbs, consecrated orisa shrines, religious objects, medicines, charms, baths, prayer flags, sacred stones, and many other items. Women play important roles in the administration and operation of these websites. Similarly, women leaders in Yoruba religion in the diaspora offer spiritual consultations and training in Europe, South America, and North America. Women operate websites where consultation services and sale of fashion items and religious paraphernalia in Yoruba religion are available.

Media may thus be described as contributing to the globalization of African religion. In addition to websites, these include print and electronic media, and social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp. Different apps have been developed to facilitate the globalization of Yoruba religion. It is now possible to have divination for clients on the telephone and/or through email, at a fee, which sometimes can be exorbitant.

Globalization affords women leaders in Yoruba religion from Yorubaland opportunities to mentor and guide adherents on the African continent and in the diaspora. Sometimes this may entail residency of the mentor (*iyálóòsà*, mother of orisa) and instruction of her student (omo-oosa, child of orisa) during short visits or on a long-term basis. The relationship of these two persons is similar to that of mother and child. When residency is possible for a long period, the student gets to learn a great deal about Yoruba religion and culture by memorization and participation in ritual activities at different stages. Oftentimes for students who are in the

diaspora, whether the mentor travels to a location in the diaspora or the student travels to Yorubaland, the time spent together physically is short. Attempts are made to impart as much knowledge as possible during such brief stays. Also, some women leaders of Yoruba religion from North America organize annual workshops, seminars, and competitions for young adherents of Yoruba religion in Osogbo to validate their self-esteem and knowledge in the face of intimidation from Christians and Muslims. This is especially desirable as youths who practice Yoruba religion in Nigeria are in the minority and may feel threatened by their counterparts in these religions. Thus, women are at the forefront of the management of the effects of globalization on young adherents of Yoruba religion worldwide. However, these efforts, if not properly managed, may become avenues for the crass commercialization of Yoruba religion.

Commercialization is a process involving exchange of money in any currency for services rendered, and this may be abused. The commercialization of religion may manifest on two main fronts: charges for spiritual services that may include consultations, prayers, and offerings, as well as commercial businesses of different types that are conducted by religious bodies. These may include ventures such as schools, water packaging industries, and computer centers, plus sales of soap, anointing oils, and mantles to convey blessings. Individual members of any religion can engage in such commercial activities and it will be construed as efforts to earn a living. However, when religious organizations embark on business ventures solely to make money it distracts from spiritual goals that should be the major concern of religious bodies. The ultimate aim of the commercialization of religion is profit. The commercialization of religion is a reality in Nigeria and many African countries, and this cuts across religions. For example, churches and Muslim organizations own universities in contemporary Nigeria and the school fees are well beyond the reach of an average Nigerian because the aim is to make profit.<sup>338</sup> Religion has become a lucrative business in Nigeria in which people pay for religious services rendered.

Moderate and oftentimes voluntary gifts are expected from the client to the priestess or priest in any religious setting of Yoruba religion, but exploitation is abhorred and discouraged. However, this has not totally eradicated instances of exorbitant charges for spiritual services in Yoruba religion, especially between priestesses and priests on the African continent and clients in the diaspora. But such actions are generally frowned upon and condemned. When evidence is



convincing, sometimes disclaimers stating why other adherents of Yoruba religion should not have any dealings with such a person are posted on social media platforms.<sup>339</sup>

## Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted women's agency and leadership roles in Yoruba religion in a globalized world. Globalization and religion are close knitted and serviced through migration, communication, and the media. Globalization has facilitated the relevance and influence of Yoruba religion in the host societies in the diaspora and women are at the forefront of this inventiveness.

Globalization is experienced by women in Yoruba religion through economic activities, women leaders across nations as spiritual counselors, women's utilization of social media platforms, and religious mentorship of women by women between Yorubaland and the diaspora. Some challenges emerge for women from the globalization of Yoruba religion, including commercialization of religion and related abuses of trust concerning fees charged for divination consultation, initiation, and the sale of fake products. There are reports of sexual harassment in some instances where women are compelled to engage in sexual relations as an alleged prescribed requirement for initiation into orisa worship. Also, the lack of knowledge of Yoruba language and culture remain a formidable challenge to practitioners of Yoruba religion in the diaspora.<sup>340</sup> However, there are efforts being made to mitigate these challenges

Yet, the ease of communication and travel that are part of globalization have aided the spread of the knowledge of Yoruba language and culture worldwide. The economic potential of the export of religious items that are abundant on the African continent, but are scarce on other continents, has been facilitated by the technologies that promote globalization. Globalization is fostering lasting religious and social networks of women adherents of Yoruba religion across continents.