

The Refection of Voodoo in Toni Morrison's *Sula* and Tade Adegbindin's *The Saint*

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Abstract

Despite the existence of Islam and Christianity, lots of Africans and their displaced relatives in America tend to retain certain ideas associated with traditional religion, such as voodoo, occultism and magic. This paper traced and examined these ideas in Toni Morrison's *Sula* and Tade Adegbindin's *The Saint*. The paper exposed how some Africans African-Americans blend Christian practices with voodoo, magic and occultism. It highlighted how religious perception varies in these communities. Also, the paper exposed the category of people that regards voodoo and occultism as relevant religious traditions even in the twenty first century. As text-base, the study relied on textual materials: the primary and the secondary texts. The study found that many Africans and African-Americans practice syncretism.

Keywords: Voodoo, occultism, myth, magic and syncretism

Introduction

Religious ideas in whatever form are indispensable condition in human life. It is very rare to have any historical record or archeological evidence which proves that a particular human race existed in some parts of the world without one form of religion or the other. In my opinion, even the so-called “pagans” are given the label not because they lack religion, but because they refuse to accept the religion of the majority. In short, religious ideas existed in all parts of the world throughout human history. Just as people evolve certain modes of production; they also develop certain kind of religious ideas and practice. Archeological research shows that history of religious idea goes back many hundreds of thousands years— to lower and middle Paleolithic periods. Archeologists, Edward Burnett (1832-1917) and Herbert Spencer (1820-1932) found some evidence of intentional and well arranged burial of the dead dated about (50,000-13,000 BCE). They also found evidence such as symbolic artifacts from Middle Stone Age sites in Africa, which suggests the existence of religious practice on the continent.

In the present and in the past, religion is perceived in many different ways. In the past, different perception led to the emergence of the myriads of religious traditions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, the list continues. In the present, perhaps due to the impact of modernity, religion is not only perceived differently, but also doubted and rejected by some people. Today, while some old Africans and African-Americans revert to the traditional religion, many young people openly declare themselves atheists. It is pertinent to observe that the teachings of the masters of suspicion: Karl Marx (1818—1883), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844—1900) and Sigmund Freud (1856—1939) have a huge impact on peoples' religious perceptions, including young Africans and African-Americans. The three philosophers named above regard religion as false consciousness, whose purpose is to deceive, oppress and subjugate people. Marx for example, argues that social structure of any human society is not natural but constructed by some

people in order to subjugate others. Marx is remembered for popular statement against religion: “religion is the opium of the people”. Like Marx, Nietzsche rejected the belief that religion has a divine origin. Nietzsche encourages the masses to reject any form of faith. On his own part, Sigmund Freud argues that “religion is an illusion and it derives its strength from its readiness to fit in with our instinctual wishful impulses” (33).

African Experience

The great majority of African people are either Muslims or Christians; but then it is common knowledge that many of them still tend to look back to their former traditional religious practices. Akin-Okiko Akinmayowa and Abbas Aremu Rahman claim that many Africans, though are either Christians or Muslims but they still mix up their religious practice with some elements of African Traditional Religion (ATR) (27). Akinmayowa and Rahman observe that “although huge numbers converted from African Traditional Religion into Islam or Christianity, many of them make a return to the practice of ATR or patronize it together with Christianity or Islam” (28).

African--American Experience

Historically, African Americans were taken to America as slaves. Many of them lost their religious identities in the strange land. Though some Muslims among them retained Islam for a short time; others remained believers of one kind of African Traditional Religion or the other. In most cases, their masters imposed Christianity on them. Many of them decided to change their religion when they got their freedom; some returned to Islam and others to traditional religion. Many of those who remained in Christianity tended to practice a syncretized form of Christianity (Christianity mixed with traditional practices). Yvonne P. Chireau observes that many “African- American clergymen showed an inclination towards Voodoo” (54). Chireau narrates a story of an African-American pastor who made several unsuccessful attempts to attract people to his church. One day as the pastor was seated in his house; a

conjurer came to him and asked him about his source of worries. The pastor told the conjurer about his failure to get many people attending to his church. The conjurer asked the pastor if he could accept a luck charm from him. The pastor accepted, and the charm was fixed for him. To his surprise, the following week, his Church was over-crowded with people. From then on, the pastor began to practice voodoo alongside Christianity.

The Impact of Christianity and Islam

There is no doubt about the fact that Christianity and Islam pre-dominate religious space in West and in the Near East respectively. With over two billion followers, Christianity is the major religion on earth. In 2015 Frank Newport claims that 75% of the people the United State of America tilt towards Christianity. In Nigeria according to The Fact-book, Muslims represent 51.6%, Christian population is about 46.9% while followers of Traditional religion is about 9%. In 2015 the Pew Forum claims that Muslims population is 50%, Christians represent 48.1% and Traditional religion stands at about 8.6% of the total population of the biggest country in Africa. In Southern part, especially in South-east of the country, Christianity is the dominant religion. Islam dominates Northern part.

However, despite the dominant status of Christianity in both USA and Southern part of Nigeria, sentiment for other religions exists. Traditional Religion is still relevant in some communities of Southern Nigeria as well as among some African-Americans. It is evidence of the situation highlighted above that this paper examines in *Sula* and *The Saint*.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study. Thus, all data are drawn from written materials: primarily, the two literary texts, namely *Sula* and *The Saint* provide the basic substance of the literary analysis. Other important sources are critical writings on religion, especially three religious traditions: Christianity, Islam and Traditional Religion.

Theoretical Framework

Folklore can be studied from numerous theoretical perspectives, such as Humanistic, Psychological-Psychoanalytic, Structuralist, Etiological, Empirical and Anthropological. This study applies the anthropological theory on the two texts (*Sula* and *The Saint*) in order to examine the relevance of Traditional Religion among some Africans and African-Americans. The famous anthropologist, Malinowski advanced and advocated for the use of anthropological theory in the study of human customs and beliefs. Using anthropological theory enables sociologists to uncover the origin of human beings as well as their beliefs and customs. Like anthropologists, sociologists and ethnologists attempt to trace people's beliefs in all forms as embedded in literary texts such play, poem and prose-fiction. Geoffrey Stephen Kirk (qtd in Ahmad Babajo, 32) claims that elements of folklore such as myth, magic and rituals associated with voodoo and other forms of Traditional Religions can be traced in texts, and effectively examined using anthropological method. Since human memory is limited, certain folkloric items cannot be orally narrated; thus the need to peruse through written documents, including literary and historical texts (Babajo, 33). However, Kirk suggests that before attempting to find folkloric elements in any text, a researcher needs to have good knowledge about the subject. Babajo opines that "myths, legends, customs, beliefs, rites and rituals are important components of folklore" (34). In 1975 American Folk-life Preservation Act defines folklore as:

...the traditional expressive culture shared within the various groups in the United States: familial, ethnic, occupational, religious, regional; expressive culture includes a wide range of creative and symbolic forms such as custom, belief, technical skill, language, literature, art, architecture, music, play, dance, drama, ritual, pageantry, handicraft; these expressions are mainly learned orally, by imitation, or in performance, and are generally maintained without benefit of formal instruction or institution (Public Law 94-201).

Taking the above ideas and guide into consideration, this paper highlights the reflection of voodoo as well as other metaphysical entities such as magic and occultism in *Sula* and *The Saint*.

Definition of the Key terms

In order to ease understanding the study, selected terms such as voodoo, occultism, myth, magic and syncretism have been defined. First, voodoo, as folkloric element is characterized by mythical narratives about deities, the purpose, origin of life, and so forth. Cambridge Dictionary (2021, updated edition) defines voodoo as religious tradition which involves magic originated in Africa. According to Merriam-Webster (2021, updated edition), voodoo is a form of religion originates in African ancestral worship polytheism. Voodoo is has connection to ancestral oral tradition passed on from one generation to another. It involves rituals such as worship to mythical and legendary figures. It originally associated with Yoruba, Ewe and Fon people of pre-colonial Nigeria. Voodoo was introduced to North and South Americas in the cause of slavery and indenture. While occultism is any theory or practice that involves a belief in or knowledge about supernatural forces. Occultism encompasses phenomena such as spirituality, magic, mysticism, and so on. Unlike, voodoo, occultism is a non-religious metaphysical idea. It is practiced as underworld agency— a kind of astrology and natural magic.

Unlike occultism, myth is not a practice, but it is central to folkloric tradition that consists of tales and other forms of irrational oral narratives typical of traditional society. Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines myth as any traditional story of “ostensibly historical events” which is used to unfold part of the world view of a society, and explain a practice, belief and natural processes. A main character in every myth is a supernatural being such as god, demon, witchcraft, and so on. And then magic is another important element of voodoo; but unlike voodoo, magic is a practice of manipulation of natural or supernatural causes. It is believed that magicians do communicate with metaphysical world.

Magic is neither a religion nor science but can be understood in the balance of the two systems. Any violation of natural process could be considered a magic.

Literally, syncretism means blending of two or more different things so that they can exist together. Related to religion—i.e religious syncretism refers to any fusion of different religious beliefs and practices. Religious syncretism is about combining two different belief systems in order to form a new religion. An example of religious syncretism is the blending of African traditional religion with Christianity to form a new Christian denomination such Cherubim and Seraphim.

Elements of Voodoo and Occultist Traditions in Christianity

There is lot of evidence in the two literary texts that Christianity predominates both African American and Southern Nigerian communities. However, many people are still interested in one kind of Traditional Religion or the other. On one hand, *The saint* reveals a high propensity of practicing Traditional Religion by both young and old people despite the gigantic influence of Christianity in Southern Nigeria. On the other hand, *Sula* exposes how Traditional Religion of African origin is still being practiced in America alongside Christianity.

Voodoo Tradition in *The Saint*

Baba Agba cares not about the religion of the majority. He believes Esu is the most powerful god worthy of worship. After all, many Christians come to him secretly asking for Orunmila's intervention in their social, political or economic problems. Baba Agba's compound is always visited by all classes of people. For instance, at the beginning, we see five people— four of them men and one of them a woman. They come from distant places relatively, wait for so long waiting for Baba Agba to attend to them. One of the men is a rich Kongila (contractor). The contractor is here not for anything but appreciation for a contract he has won supposedly by the power of Orunmila. Another of the four men is a banker, named Ajala. Ajala is afraid that some people may harm him

owing to his huge wealth. He is said to be richer than even the bank he is working for. For this reason, he comes to Baba Agba looking for protection from Orunmila. The only woman on attendance is there because her husband is dead, and the husband's relatives try to take all his possessions. She wants Orunmila to help her in her plight because she wishes to enjoy herself.

Using religion to make money is not limited to traditional religion; Christian men of God also do. Like, Baba Agba, many people come to Pasto Ladepo asking him to pray for them due to one problem or the other. For example, a federal minister comes to Ladepo asking him to pray so that he will be chosen as vice president. Millions have been given to Ladepo for such prayers even though he practically does nothing like prayers.

While Ladepo is a famous and dedicated Christian, Aremu prefers Baba Agba's Traditional religion which seems to be more practical than Christianity. Aremu says he is not interested in Christianity; instead he wants to worship Orunmila, and acquire his wisdom. Even as a small boy, Aremu insists on learning the wisdom of the religion. Baba Agba calms him by saying, "there is still time for you to learn the wisdom of Orunmila" (8). But then he promises to teach Aremu how to convey sanctifies to the gods when the time comes. Aremu will not listen to anyone like Iya Olobi who often advises him to go to the city and acquire modern education. He prefers being in Alabata. Aremu believes as Baba Agba always says, "The gods live in Alabata, Baba Agba says they give us protection. Baba Agba says the city is full of evil men, people who carry guns and kill without mercy" (10). This explains one of the reasons that Baba Agba sticks hard to Voodoo and Occultism. By implication, Baba Agba rejects Christianity because the city dwellers practice the religion but still do all evils acts against one another. Baba Agba once tells Aremu that city people especially the politicians despite their Christian belief, are liars and deceivers. "Whenever a politician makes a promise— like solving all your problems— you tend to believe him and

hope that your good tidings are coming, your miseries come to an end. "Then you wait and wait and wait for his oath to be fulfilled, until a disease creeps into your empty heart" (7). Baba Agba here means to say his son's claim is wrong; it is the Christian God who is useless and unworthy. And Aremu believes in this fact. Thus, despite his father's efforts to convince him that Christianity is the only way of life, and the only true religion for human kind, Aremu is not satisfied with Christianity; instead, he is convinced Baba Agba's religion is more powerful and rather practical. As an indication of the power of traditional religion, Aremu has once told his father that he is not surprised about the successes in the church as Baba Agba's gods have since announced that that (his) Ladepo's name will be heard everywhere. Ladepo rejects the prophecy by saying "only God sees tomorrow" (31) even though God has never revealed to him any future event.

Ladepo realizes that Aremu's attitude towards Christianity is negative. The more he preaches Aremu the more he becomes skeptical about Christianity and everything associated it. As a matter of fact, Aremu abhors city life where Christian faith is stronger, and where it flourishes. Should he die, he has no successor; that marks the end of his family reputation as well as the church venture. Thus, he decides to send Aremu to a seminary in London through his English friend, named Mr. Ferguson. He wants Aremu to study Theology and return to Nigeria as a trained pastor. Rather than theology, Aremu studies Occultism in London: It regarded as non-religious supernatural ideas. This is an indication that Aremu is not ready to work with his father in the church. He feels that religion is a personal thing. Aremu's decision has torched Ladepo so much that he decides to forsake Aremu. Ladepo seems to go out of his mind. He laments:

.... many sons would answer me in his place. He is not relevant now as far as I am concerned. I can name hundreds who are prepared to steer the Zion train after me! Then what is the relevance of a rebellious fool? A fool, enslaved by some aberrant philosophies, mortgaging his own eternity. Do I need to sit here and watch this

fool insult me, the most revered pastor Ladepo? No! I won't allow this fool to sever my spiritual history with his ungodly vulgarities (82).

Clashes between Voodoo and Christianity

In *The Saint*, being the majority, Christians of Alabata village community treat traditionalists with contempt. They (the Christians) regard the traditionalists such as Baba Agba as oblivious and inferior beings. They consider themselves the best in every aspect of life. They often insult the gods of the Traditional religion. For example, pastor Ladepo often looks down upon his biological father, Baba Agba (14). Ladepo pours lots of insult on the god of the village Traditional religion, named Esu. Ladepo's son, Aremu testifies his father calls Esu many strange English names—Lucifer, Satan. “You called him a liar” (28). Ladepo considers the Traditional religion nothing but the culture of witches as well as useless and unworthy fetish thing. The Christians according to Ladepo do not need fetishes any longer because the blood of Jesus Christ suffices to provide protection and means of survival for the Christian family all over the world. “Forget about those fetish things you have learnt in Alabata. You are now a Christian. Son of a respected pastor, and you have to keep this at the back of your mind. Forget all have learnt about Esu and about the witches” (28—29). Ladepo asks Aremu to accept God and have absolute trust in Him because, “with God everything is possible” (30). It seems pastor Ladepo assesses the love of God on his servants by the material prosperity they have. He believes that the wealth he acquires and the surge of people in his church are due to God's love and favor for him. He tells Aremu that:

God has elevated me in the eyes of thousands and you should be proud of this and choose to live your life after me. You witnessed how people continued to throng to our church. Why? Because they have been witnessing and experiencing miracles— signs of God's presence. Testimonies have continued to increase, numbering a hundred and six today.... (30).

When Baba Agba dies, Ladepo states that it is unfortunate for his father to die as a pagan. By this, Ladepo suggests that his father will not be welcome in heaven but in hell. According to him, Baba Agba has been possessed by Satan. When some members of his Church –Bolade and Effiong talk with him about the need for honorable burial for Baba Agba, Ladepo argues that needs not make any burial arrangement for his father “I have no burial arrangement in my mind; a true man of God wouldn't have any” (54). Ladepo states that a man of God like him should always condemn Satan even if the Satan is his father. By implication, Ladepo has rejected Baba Agba, and thus cannot take part in his burial.

Christians feel their religion can never comprise any of its doctrines and practices. After all, the Bible is a genuine revelation from God in heaven. Ladepo says, “We need to serve God with all we have— our time, our strength...” (20). Ladepo preaches that “serving God is not an easy thing, and it takes so much to be a virtuous man: you need a fair measure of temperance, determination, self-discipline and all that” (53). Ladepo stresses that one has to choose between Christian God and Pagan Satan. He says “I chose God— that is devotion” (53). Ladepo's father has since chosen Satan. Not only has he refused to take part in Baba Agba's burial, but after the burial Ladepo has decided and burnt Baba Agba's material legacy (relics, charms and fetishes) — an act that angers Aremu to near having severe quarrel with his father. Ladepo claims that if such things are kept in the house, God will not answer the prayers of the living in it. Aremu argues that burning the stuffs is nothing by madness. According to him every item Baba Agba has left is has traditional value for the family and the village community of Alabata. Aremu maintains that the stuffs are very important even though Baba Agba is deed. “He burnt those rich relics. He burnt all traces of Baba Agba, and you see as an attempt to serve a true God! It's madness”(75).

Elements Voodoo Tradition in *Sula*

Like in *The Saint*, in *Sula*, a form of voodoo tradition called “National Suicide Day” (09) is started by a Christian man called Shadrack.

Shadrack is a World War I veteran who appears to have gone crazy owing to trauma. National Suicide Day is neither known in Christianity nor in Islam. The tradition is observed every 3rd of January in an all-black neighborhood called Bottom atop the hills. The neighborhood has gotten the name Bottom from a particular slave owner who promises to free the slave and allocate to him a good “bottom land” in the valley but not until he finishes a tedious task. When the promised time comes, the slave master is hesitant to be parted with the land. He then decides to give him a plot on the hills on the claim that the plot atop the hills is near to the God. Suicide becomes a popular convention of the Bottom community. Once living condition becomes unbearable, the people take to the streets, parading and chanting suicide slogan. The tradition leads the death of many people. More often than not, Shadrack shouts that:

People should kill themselves or each other if they want to.

The residents are disturbed at first, but eventually National Suicide Day infiltrates the consciousness of the community, becoming a part of the routine of their lives (43).

National Suicide Day is born out of trauma associated with war experience and fear of death. This tradition of National Suicide Day becomes an important aspect of Shadrack's effort to compartmentalize his fear of death into a single day. Apart from Shadrack, other characters such as Tar Baby, Sula, and so on are so influenced by the practice that they often engage in deep thought in order to extract meaning of their life experiences. From the commencement of suicide day, most people look at Shadrack with a lot of disdain, suspicion and even hate. But as time goes on,

the people took less notice of these January thirds, or rather they thought they did, thought they had no attitudes or feelings one way or another about Shadrack's annual solitary parade. In fact they had simply stopped remarking about the holiday because they had absorbed it into their thoughts, into their language, into their lives (5).

Shadrack's tradition appears to have similarity to some form of Yoruba

pre-colonial Traditional Religion. It should be realized that National Suicide Day involves sacrifice of human life similar to the tradition of human sacrifice associated with Yoruba Traditional Religion. Olatunji Ojo argues that human sacrifice is a means of communication with the divine and the dead ancestors in some Yoruba pre-colonial Traditional Religion.

There are also elements of African Traditional Religion in the magic and conjure practices by Ajax's mother. Ajax grows up to be well attached to his conjure mother. As time goes on, Ajax begins to show interest in the tradition. Initially, Ajax's passion is not due to belief in conjuring but because of the habit he acquires in dealing with his mother, who inspired thoughtfulness and generosity in all her sons. His mother is indeed a powerful conjure woman, blessed with seven adoring children. Her source of joy and happiness is to bring her some conjure materials like hair, underclothing, fingernail parings, white hens, blood, camphor, pictures, kerosene and footstep dust that she needs. At times, she orders for Van-Van, Devil's Shoe String, Chinese Wash, Mustard Seed and the Nine Herbs from Cincinnati. She knows about the weather, omens, the living, the dead, dreams and all illnesses. She makes a modest living with her skills. If she gets any teeth or ever straightens her back, she will be the most gorgeous thing alive, worthy of her sons' worship for her beauty alone; if not for the absolute freedom she allows them, and the weight of her hoary knowledge.

Conclusion

The two literary texts—*Sula* and *The Saint* depicted that despite family influence and societal imposition, some people tended to hold a world view contrary to what was popularly accepted in a community. In particular, the two texts showed that though the impact of Christianity and Islam was very formidable, but some imprints of African Traditional Religion were maintained by some Africans and African-Americans. For example, in *The Saint*, Aremu was born into a Christian family of Nigeria but he preferred his grandfather's traditional belief – an African

religion that was considered an obsolete pagan way of life. Likewise, in the midst of Christianity, Shadrack initiated a form of Voodoo tradition, called National Suicide Day in which he encouraged people to sacrifice their lives. In addition, Morrison depicted Ajax's mother as a powerful conjure woman who was capable of performing rather unbelievable magic. Thus, in both *Sula* and *The Saint* exposed the prevalence of syncretism in Nigeria and America in the twenty first century.

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