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Reformed Ogboni Fraternity in Yorubaland: Engaging Politics to Maintain Religious Unity

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Abstract
This study examines the progress of the movement known as the "Reformed Ogboni fraternity in Yorubaland" in the context of religious pluralism in Nigeria. Yoruba traditional religion historically emphasises public ritual practices involving communal participation, festivals, and visible expressions of devotion to various divinities. However, the expansion of other religions has reshaped the religious landscape to the detriment of traditional religion. This research investigates how adherents of the Reformed Ogboni Fraternity in Yorubaland survived the hurdles faced from other religions, especially Christianity and Islam, which engaged in aggressive evangelism to convert everybody into their faith. Previous studies have done little on this topic of discussion. Primary and secondary sources were used to elicit information. The work finds that Malleable Methods adopted by the Reformed Ogboni fraternity movement in Yorubaland greatly assisted them to progress rather than going into extinction. This research concludes that indigenous religious movements in urban Yorubaland continue to demonstrate resilience through institutional improvisation, cultural tolerance and selective visibility. Therefore, the research recommends adaptation rather than retrogression to demonstrate resilience in existence and survival. This research will help upcoming generations of adherents to negotiate their identity within both the modern education system and traditional religious structures.

Key Words: Rituals, Seclusion, fraternity, Pluralism & Religion

Introduction

Background to the Study

In Yorubaland, the word "Ogboni" means a mature-minded person, a word used to describe a person with versed knowledge of a subject matter. Religion in southwestern Nigeria reflects centuries of interaction between indigenous Yoruba belief systems and foreign religions, particularly Christianity and Islam. Among the Yoruba, the traditional religion centres on reverence for the Reformed Ogboni fraternity in Nigeria, the deity of wisdom and divination within the Divination religious system. Estep (1986), in his renaissance and reformation title, opined that reformation begins by identifying lapses in the existing religion which could be a

pointer for the Reformed Ogboni fraternity is considered the witness to human destiny and a central figure in Yoruba cosmology and moral philosophy.

The Yorubas, a major ethnic group in southwestern Nigeria, where Christianity and Islam have become dominant in public sphere, education, and social institutions. This dominance has influenced how indigenous religious groups express their beliefs. One such group is the Reformed Ogboni fraternity, an organised religious movement rooted in Divination tradition that emerged in the early twentieth century.

The Ogbonis, at the inception of the activities of the colonial masters, came alongside other groups such as Freemasonry, Odd Fellows, Shelperdry, Forestry, among others. The interview conducted by the researcher revealed that the sole aim and philosophy of the Ogbonis is religious unity: that all religions worship the same God by whatever name He may be called. This testimony by HRH (Dr.) Isaac Atanda Ogunlade, the Oluwo of Iledi Amos Oyewale, Abede area of Ogbomosoland, aligns with narrations from volume 6, 2024 of Reformed Magazine. Therefore, the Ogboni groups from the colonial era were in charge of governance; they do not tolerate nonsense, they preach straightforward behaviour, and they were against thuggery, theft and other vices. Their teachings emphasise charity and chastity to make a good man better, a good Christian a better one and a good Muslim a better one. All the rules of the Ogboni are to love one's neighbour as oneself and to do to others what one would want others to do to him/her.

Historically, the rituals of the Reformed Ogboni fraternity in Nigeria were performed publicly through festivals, dances, and community worship. However, contemporary adherents increasingly adopt discreet forms of religious expression. This paper investigates how and why this transformation occurred and analyses the malleable methods that allow the movement to survive in a religious pluralist country like Nigeria.

Previous studies on the subject matter earlier wrote on the difference between cult and occultism, religious caucus, and the circle of malpractices. Historically, many scholars had previously written that to cohabit a community calls for religious tolerance accrued to religious pluralism, which tends to the multi-diversity and dynamism of African culture of cohabitation, the propelling force to peaceful living; in that, Yoruba Traditional Religion is tied to the culture of *"ancestry"*- this was also noticed by Whaling (1986), that they cannot be easily erased to maintain the balance of existence cum survival. As expository as the works of these scholars were, none had been able to properly discuss the malleable methods of the Reformed Ogboni fraternity in the world of religious pluralism, which is the vacuum this study seeks to fill.

Thus, the questions that bother this research are: What notable features distinguish the malleable methods employed by the Reformed Ogboni fraternity in Yorubaland; what conditions necessitate the importation of the aforesaid malleable methods; and what notable effects do the malleable methods have on the aforementioned religious sect? The aim of this study, therefore, is

to critically analyse the malleable methods of the Reformed Ogboni fraternity in the world of religious pluralism. Specifically, the study substantiates some of the Reformed Ogboni fraternity's malleable methods, investigates the aiding factors for the adoption of the aforesaid methods, and reveals some culturally inclined methods. The method applied is qualitative analysis, which consists of critical analysis of secondary data collated from books, journals, dictionaries, religious encyclopedias and internet sources. Nevertheless, primary data were also collected and collated from a series of interviews carried out among various members of the Ogboni.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in "Religious Adaptation Theory**"** and "Religious Economy Theory". Needleman and Baker (1978), in their writing, helped the researcher to understand the explanation of the above theories in use. The first theory helps to explain how certain religions adjust their practices in a world of religious pluralism. Religious Adaptation Theory further explains how religious traditions modify their structures, practices, or expressions to survive changing social and cultural contexts. Scholars argue that religions are dynamic systems that respond to pressures such as modernisation, globalisation and competition with other religions.

According to Anyebe (1989), Yoruba religion has historically demonstrated flexibility in response to external influences, particularly Christianity and Islam. Instead of disappearing, indigenous religious practices often transform in order to maintain relevance within new social conditions. In the context of the Reformed Ogboni fraternity, adaptation can be seen in the movement's shift from open communal rituals to more discreet forms of worship. This adaptation allows practitioners to maintain their religious selfhood while avoiding social stigma in a religious pluralistic country like Nigeria.

Meanwhile, religious economy theory is associated with scholars such as Abraham Maslow theory of hierarchy of needs which explained people's sense of belongingness to certain society in a way to coin religion as operating within a competitive marketplace where different religious groups compete for followers. In such a marketplace, dominant religions tend to shape public religious culture. Minority religions must therefore adopt strategies to survive. These strategies may include: institutional restructuring, selective public visibility, borrowing organisational forms from dominant religions and seclusion of ritual practices. The transformation of the Reformed Ogboni fraternity in Yorubaland reflects these dynamics. As Christianity and Islam became dominant in public life, the movement adopted institutional features similar to churches while simultaneously reducing the visibility of traditional ritual practices.

Together, these theories provide a useful framework for understanding how indigenous religions haggle survival within pluralistic but unequal religious environments.

Literature Review

Protestants, according to Murphy (1949), averred that removal of the pressure of adhering to an authorised system of ancient belief did not alter this emphasis significantly. The so-called free churches and mosques, and later, liberal Christians and Muslims, for whom individual assent supplanted churches/mosques' authority, continued to press for the authentic belief, which continued to be a haunting imperative. Among the latter, especially where the legacy of Christian/Muslim faith as expressed through Scripture or church/mosque doctrine seemed unavailable, the appeal of religious experience, to science, to philosophy, even sociology and psychology, became ways of attaining security in belief. However, Anyebe (1989) posited that the lure of certainty has perennially been with us, either in the form of an appeal to the biblical/quranic or creedal/surat word or to the reasoned word as informed by science and/or philosophy, leading to the return of the seemingly old religion and its reforms, especially the Ogboni fraternity in Yorubaland. According to Oesterley and Robinson (1930), in all of these efforts at attaining security or even certainty in belief, the issue of religious pluralism has emerged, though it has not always been in focus and certainly not always to the fore, but has now come to the fore with particular urgency in recent years, and the research means to contribute in that effort not simply as an historical inquiry but as one that is being fruitfully tackled within various disciplines where the dimensional and contextual character of our knowing and experiencing is being seriously attended.

Yorubaland is one of the largest and most historically significant tribes in Nigeria because demographic features of the population favour it as the largest ethno-cultural group. The Reformed magazine volume 6 of 2024 published that, since the nineteenth century, it has served as a hub of cultural interaction, trade, and religious exchange. Christian and Muslim missionary activity expanded rapidly in Yorubaland during the colonial period, particularly through organisations such as the Church Missionary Society. Mission schools, churches and hospitals became central institutions shaping urban life. Many churches have their base in Yorubaland. Orthodox Churches like the Global Anglican Church, Methodist Church Nigeria and the Roman Catholic Church as well topped in the Christian religious movement. As Christianity and Islam spread, many Yoruba families converted while still maintaining certain cultural ties to traditional religion. Chadwick (2001), in his early reformation title, noticed that the dual religious identity may be evident, thus creating a complex religious landscape in which indigenous religious adherents had to haggle for their place.

In Yorubaland, in contemporary urban communities, Christianity and Islam dominate public religious expression through large Church/Mosque buildings, mass evangelism and media presence, but notably, traditional religious adherents, including members of the Reformed Ogboni fraternity, often encounter challenges such as social stigma associated with traditional

worship, pressure from family members who have converted to Christianity or Islam, limited public space for indigenous ritual activities and the like.

Moreover, Gaer (1953) claimed that certain conditions encouraged adherents to practice their religion more privately. Yorubaland has long been a major centre of Christian and Muslim missionary activities in Nigeria. Mission schools, churches, mosques and modern institutions have reinforced Christian/Muslim influence in social life. As Christianity expanded, traditional religious practices were increasingly stigmatised as pagan, idolatrous or incompatible with modernity. This social pressure produced several consequences, which include: decline of public traditional rituals, conversion of many Yoruba families to Christianity/ Islam, social marginalisation of traditional adherents, internal transformation within indigenous religious groups.

Within this context, groups like the Ogboni fraternity, according to Beaver (1982), compared the time of ancient religious development, where adherents were compelled to devise new ways to practise and present their faith. Nigeria, in West Africa, as a dynamic religious centre, has historically served as one of the most important cultural and political centres where Yoruba clergy like Venerable Archdeacon Reverend Thomas Adesina Jacobson Ogunbiyi, a scholar, founder and reformer, began the wave of change that eventually became reformation in the activities of the Ogboni fraternity.

Before the introduction of Christianity and Islam, religious life in Yorubaland was largely shaped by Yoruba indigenous religious practices. These practices involved the worship of various Divinities, reverence for ancestors and ritual consultations through the Ifa divination system. Among the most revered spiritual figures within this religious system is Orunmila, the custodian of divine knowledge and the central deity associated with Ifa divination. Religious rituals during this period were highly communal and visible. Festivals, sacrifices and processions were often performed in open spaces and public squares. Such activities reinforced communal identity and cultural continuity. Nielsen *et al* (1988), related activities of Ogboni memebrs to the pre-modern China which in many cases, shrines and sacred spaces were located within family compounds or neighbourhood centers, making traditional religion an integral part of daily life. Several historical districts in Yorubaland were closely associated with indigenous religious practices which were embedded in community life, practiced openly without significant social restrictions.

However, P. Matheson, (2001), viewed that, the religious dynamics of Yorubaland like any other geographical locality began to shift significantly during the nineteenth century with the arrival of Christian missionaries. Missionary organizations such as the church missionary society established mission stations, churches and schools throughout the region. These institutions played a major role in promoting Christian teachings and Western education. Mission schools

became especially influential because they offered literacy and new opportunities for social advancement. As increasing numbers of Yorubaland residents enrolled in these schools, many individuals gradually adopted Christian beliefs and practices. Over time, Christianity became increasingly visible in public spaces through church buildings, evangelistic campaigns and large congregational gatherings. This development contributed to the gradual marginalization of traditional religious practices in the public sphere.

With the growth of Christianity and Western education, public attitudes toward indigenous religion began to change. Traditional practices were sometimes portrayed by Christian converts as pagan, idolatrous or incompatible with modern life. These perceptions created several challenges for practitioners of Yoruba traditional religion. This poses social stigma toward individual openly practicing indigenous religion. Likewise, family tensions, especially in households where younger members converted to Christianity or Islam. This however caused the public ritual visibility to be reduced as traditional religion adherents sought to avoid criticism. Despite these challenges, indigenous religion did not disappear. Instead, many adherents adapted their practices in order to continue their religious tradition within changing social circumstances.

Meanwhile, the reformed magazine published that, according to history, the reformed Ogboni fraternity was championed by the Venerable Arch-Deacon Reverend Thomas Adesina Jacobson Ogunbiyi, Commander of British Empire, the Licentiate of Theology and an Honourable Member of the Legislative Council, the Arch-Deacon of Lagos (1921-1929), an Isale Eko indigent of Lagos State. According to a reformed magazine, the history of the Reformed Ogboni Fraternity was relayed to the Church and Christianity. The noble order was founded by the reverend gentleman whose name was mentioned above, a well-educated and highly learned person in the knowledge of Christianity in the early days of Nigeria. His colleagues relied on him for the spread and sustenance of Christianity amid African Traditional Religion, which was the sole religion at the time.

Christianity came to Nigeria hand in hand with British Fraternities. The British fraternities became very fashionable in those days to the extent that everyone at that time wanted to belong to Freemasonry or a lodge. The reality on the ground was how to blend the typical African with Christianity. This was the genesis of the thought to visit the ancient Fraternity of the Ogboni. Ogboni is as old as the Yoruba race. It was the same Reverend Ogunbiyi and Canon C.W. Wakeman, the erstwhile secretary of the Church Missionary Society, who founded the Lagos Company of the Boys Brigade in Nigeria. Ogunbiyi later introduced the Harvest Festival celebration into the Anglican Church in 1910 at Holy Trinity Church, Ebute Ero in Lagos. In 1913, he also founded the Lagos Keswick Convention for revival services, whereby Methodists, Baptists, the Salvation Army bound together to exchange pulpits and later metamorphosed to

form Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) in 1943; the reformed Ogboni was also as at 1914 founded alongside at Obun-Eko, Lagos Nigeria.

However, the malleable methods employed by the Ogbonis were notable in the sense that traditional Yoruba religion is deeply communal and performative. Rituals often occur in public spaces and involve music, dance, and festivals. One example is the Ifa festival, where adherents danced to eulogise Ifa as a form of worship and communication with Orunmila. These ceremonies strengthen communal bonds and reaffirm shared cultural identity. Public rituals historically served several functions, such as communal worship and celebration, cultural transmission across generations, spiritual communication with deities and reinforcement of Yoruba heritage. Thus, Parrinder (1971) affirmed that the visibility and communal participation were central elements of traditional religious practice. Therefore, strategic seclusion, in the context of Yorubaland, became an important survival method for adherents of Yoruba traditional religion, particularly those affiliated with Reformed Ogboni Fraternity. As Christianity and Islam have become highly visible and influential in public life, traditional religious groups have increasingly adapted by relocating certain ritual activities from open public spaces to more secluded settings.

In his research, Oberman (1994) illustrated that strategic seclusion, which refers to the deliberate modification of religious practices in order to reduce public visibility and avoid social tension, stigma or conflict within a dominant religious environment, is necessary to understand the reformational roots and ramifications of evolving religion. In pluralistic societies where one religion holds social or institutional dominance, minority religious groups may choose to conduct their rituals in more secluded, controlled or symbolic ways. As Christian discourse sometimes portrays indigenous religions negatively, adherents of Ifa traditions have had to haggle their place within a Christian-dominated public sphere.

In a world filled with different religions, Moore (1914) historically opined from a religious anthropologist's view that strategic seclusion does not necessarily imply abandonment of tradition; rather, it reflects a pragmatic adjustment aimed at preserving religious selfhood while minimising confrontation with dominant religious groups. One such malleable method can be seen in the transformation of traditional Ifa worship associated with Orunmila. Historically, rituals honouring Orunmila were often performed publicly within community spaces and were widely integrated into the social and political life of Yoruba societies. However, the rise of Christianity and the expansion of Pentecostal churches in cities such as Ibadan have altered the religious environment. Urban environments are often characterised by intense religious diversity and competition. Scholars of religion have observed that minority religious traditions frequently develop malleable methods in response to dominant religious institutions.

The Reformed Ogboni fraternity, like any other minority group, employed several methods of strategic seclusion to sustain their religious practices while adapting to the broader Christian environment. Among these are: change of ritual locations**,** the use of signs and symbols**,** closed-ended participation**,** and dynamic scheduling. Rather than indicating the decline of the Reformed Ogboni fraternity, malleable seclusion demonstrates the resilience and adaptability of Yoruba religious traditions. Religious traditions are dynamically evolving; they respond to changing social conditions. In the case of Reformed Ogboni Fraternity in Yorubaland, malleable seclusion allows adherents to preserve key aspects of religious spirituality, including worship activities, ritual knowledge and communal gatherings, while adjusting to the realities of a Christian/Muslim-dominated public arena. Those malleable methods ensure the continuity of traditional religious knowledge across generations despite social pressures.

The transition from public ritual to malleable seclusion among reformed Ogboni fraternity reflects a conscious adaptation to social realities. Malleable seclusion refers to deliberate efforts to reduce public visibility while maintaining religious practice. Meanwhile, several factors contributed to this shift. Among them are: social stigma, urbanisation, religious competition, and the protection of sacred knowledge. Mainline churches were the earliest Christian denominations established in western Nigerian, the Yorubaland through missionary activity. These churches tend to emphasize structured liturgy, theological education and formal church governance. Examples include: Global Anglican Church, Methodist Church Nigeria, Roman Catholic Church and Baptist Convention of Nigeria. These churches established many of the early educational institutions and hospitals in Yorubaland and played significant roles in shaping the western Nigeria social development. Likewise, the African Independent Churches emerged during the early twentieth century as responses to both colonial missionary control and the desire to express Christianity within African cultural contexts. These churches often incorporate elements of indigenous spirituality such as healing, prophecy and spiritual deliverance. For, instance, consider Cherubim and Seraphim Movement Church and Celestial Church of Christ. These churches are known for their vibrant worship styles, prophetic ministries, and emphasis on spiritual protection.

Similarly, in the late twentieth century, Pentecostal and charismatic churches have experienced rapid growth across Nigeria, especially in Yorubaland. These churches emphasise spiritual gifts such as speaking in tongues, prophecy, healing, and deliverance. Prominent examples include: Redeemed Christian Church of God, Living Faith Church Worldwide, Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries and Deeper Life Ministry. These churches often attract large congregations through energetic worship services, media outreach, and strong emphasis on personal spiritual experience. However, the adherents in the Reformed Ogboni fraternity, rather than allowing the movement to disappear, adopted several malleable methods. These malleable

methods demonstrate the resilience of Yoruba indigenous religion. And instead of vanishing under Christian dominance, the religion is transforming.

This made the transformation from public ritual to strategic seclusion represent a haggle between tradition and modernity, as deduced from Parrinder (1987). This therefore made the reformed Ogboni in Yorubaland employ several contextual methods. The following malleable methods helped the Reformed Ogboni fraternity to survive odds; they include: liturgical contrast and comparison, documentation, intellectual engagement, tradition and cultural restructuring, and selective public appearance**.**

Discussion

The research does not ignore the use of knowledge in the sense in which they relate to the process of conversion via initiation. Having formed the Reformed Ogboni Fraternity (ROF), the converted, according to the Reformed Magazine, Volume 6, 2024, its adherents then had the ease to relate with the adherents of other religions, just as the members of foreign fraternities. It is now relatively clear that the role of Freemasonry in building the early church was profound; similarly, the Ogboni members were effectively in charge and control of communities. Pre- and post-independence Nigeria had experienced strong influence of the membership of the Reformed Ogboni fraternity. The ROF, without gainsaying, is famous among socially inclined people; it became a legal entity duly registered under Nigerian law in 1943. Their practices have upheld native customs and symbols which make man better in the understanding of his/her faith. The perception of religion is abstraction. In philosophical discourse, this would mean the envisagement of whatever is practicable to awareness through philosophical views orchestrated to address its reality abstractly. The researcher was concerned and had to assess the Ogboni rite and ritual procedure critically as it pertains to theological inquiry.

The work of Anyebe, (1989), helped the researcher to study in the light of insight which give a process of orientation of inquiry, looking to the lived experience, brings to awareness and understanding of religion development. The word “protestant” has now become clearer to mean reformation, especially in religious activities; this orientation, for its singularity, helped out in the thematic worldview about other peoples’ faith, whereas other themes, possibly more important than practices, are involved; themes such as dimensional meaning, contextual relations, and emergent events viewed from this work have empirical realism to say that the end justifies the means. Here, the primary experience as lived is emphasised, giving to the notion of reality the connotation of a creative protest in which all life is lived. In this mode of thought, it is assumed that our immediacies occur and participate in a dimension of ultimacy, however vaguely attended to or unattended in religious tenets

An underlying thesis of this work is that an efficacy persists within the structure of experience, impelling responsiveness to redemptive energies within the creative protest. And it is the function of the response of faith to open the foundation, elementally as well as critically, to its resources and thus to avail it of a good label under scrutiny. Every religion or expression of faith, in its way, has been expressive simultaneously of a mode of witness partaking of the cultural orbit of meaning and experience in which it has arisen and of a sense of an ultimate witness to what is beyond any human experience or condition. In this context, all of them have addressed themselves to a reality, or realities, beyond the immediacies of experiences, even as they have been deeply and decisively involved in them.

Maintaining Religious Unity: The Ogboni Way

If the ROF's engagement with global politics is indirect, its approach to religious unity is direct and pragmatic. The fraternity's foundational belief system rests on three pillars: the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man and the immortality of souls. These principles are deliberately framed in Universalist terms, allowing members to remain practising Christians, Muslims or adherents of other faiths. The Olori Oluwo, the Supreme Leader, Francis Mashinoye, has stated unequivocally that being a member does not stop such members from practising religions of their choice; thus, Ogboni does not prevent you from going to the Church or the Mosque. The fraternity's constitution prohibits idolatry, and its membership is open to all who embrace faith in God without adopting fetish practices. This openness was not an afterthought; it was the result of the deliberate expansion from the fraternity's original Christian-only composition, a change reflected in the very name 'Reformed'

The political mechanism of this unity is the Iledi, the local conclave. Within these assemblies, religious and political topics are deliberately excluded from discussion, allowing members of different faiths and ethnic backgrounds to interact based on shared commitments. The ROF creates what might be called a "neutral ground" for elite socialisation - a space where a Muslim, a Christian or a traditional ruler can meet as brothers rather than as representatives of competing groups. This model has been described by scholars as a highly syncretic organisation that draws on Christianity and traditional Yoruba practices. It is not a theology of synthesis but a pragmatics of coexistence.

Conclusion

In a world where religious identity is increasingly weaponised for political ends, the ROF's model offers a counter-narrative, an institution rooted in a specific cultural tradition that nonetheless creates space for pluralism and mutual respect. Its ability to operate across Nigeria's religiously charged landscape – where Christian and Muslims frequently clash- demonstrates that indigenous fraternal structures can serve as vehicles for social cohesion rather than division. The

ROF faces persistent challenges, including widespread misconceptions that conflate it with the traditional Ogboni cult or with campus-based secret societies. As Prof. Joseph Abugu noted at the fraternity's 101st anniversary, the name Ogboni instils primordial fear and many associate the ROF with idolatry, paganism and occultism, despite the ROF's constitutional prohibition of idolatry. This reputational burden has deterred professionals from joining, weakening the fraternity's ability to serve as a broad-based platform for religious and civic unity.

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