


## Cultural Interaction: An Overview of the Interconnectivity Between Jewish and Yoruba Traditional Cultures

Okediji, Solomon Adebayo PhD <sup>1</sup>; Olorunleke, Olufunmilayo Patience PhD<sup>2</sup>; and Adedigba, Funmilayo Adebisi<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of History and Religious Education, Emmanuel Alayande University of Education, Oyo, Oyo State, Nigeria. <sup>2</sup>Department of Christian Religious Studies, School of Arts and Social Sciences, Kwara State College of Education, Ilorin. <sup>3</sup>Department of Religious Studies, Faculty of Humanities, Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo.

Corresponding author: [adebayookediji2005@gmail.com](mailto:adebayookediji2005@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

Culture is probably one of the most important social factors in human existence and it has its roots in the history of a people and defines the identity of the group. It is said to be the complex whole of man's acquisition of knowledge, morals, beliefs, arts, custom and technology, which are shared and transmitted from generation to generation. This paper delves into the interaction between the cultures of Biblical Jews and Yoruba of Africa. It further explores the possibility of historical contact between the two societies which engendered the pronounced interconnectivity and convergence of culture. The study employs multidisciplinary approach incorporating historical, anthropological and socio-cultural methodologies to objectively reconstruct the relevant events of the past through analysis, synthesis and verification. This among other things should enhance peaceful co-existence and socio-economic development between the two societies. Then paper discovers that cultural interaction and interconnectivity as we have it between the two societies and this should serve as a catalyst for peaceful co-existence which in turn encourages bilateral developmental activities. It recommended that the two societies under study should discard cultural practices that are harmful to humanity, especially that constraint development. On the other hand, cultural practices which engender development and peaceful co-existence be promoted.

**Keywords:** Culture, Jews, Yoruba, Traditional, Religion.

### Introduction

There are so many factors which bind human beings together in the world-over. The most prominent of them all is culture. In the thought of Akong'a (2003), he asserted that, from a social and psychological point of view, culture is probably one of the most important social factors in human existence. On the part of the Anthropologists, they unanimously submitted that, without culture, there can be no society, and without culture and society, there cannot be humanity. And that is why high premium is placed on culture in most of the human society.

It is not an overstatement to note that, the two societies under study, the Yoruba in Africa and the Jews are predominantly the people of culture. Both are known to have rich and vast

cultural values and heritage. Lange (2004) opined that, the Yoruba of Nigeria have been described as “the outstanding people of ‘Black Africa’ with respect to their myths”. He averred that, despite their geographical location, the Yoruba value their culture with the highest respect. To him, the Yoruba identified as “a people of culture”. The Yoruba are of the largest cultural groups in Africa. Their outstanding and unique aspects of Yoruba culture include the prominence of drumming in their music and their distinct hierarchical style that follows the structure of their families (Muscato, 2021). Yoruba race indeed epitomizes great postures, decency and decorum in cultural values. Thus, throughout the years of socialization processes, and upbringing of the Yoruba child, he or she is given the right cultural values of the Yoruba race, to produce a man or woman of impeccable posture, decency and decorum. Invariably, culture is imbibed in Yoruba children from cradle and they live with it throughout their life time.

It has been said that, Jewish culture is among the oldest in the world (Hebrewpod101, 2022). As asserted by Torstrick (2004), Jewish culture covers many aspects, including religion and worldviews, literature, media, art and architecture, traditional dress, attitudes to gender, marriage and family, social customs and lifestyles, music and dance. This culture has survived from exile to almost being diminished during the Holocaust. Interestingly, Jewish culture has much to share with the world around them.

This study, therefore, delves into the interaction between the Biblical Jewish culture and Yoruba of Africa. It will further explore the possibility of historical contact between the two societies which engendered the pronounced interconnectivity and convergence of culture. The study employs multidisciplinary approach incorporating historical, anthropological and socio-cultural methodologies to objectively reconstruct the relevant events of the past through analysis, synthesis and verification. This will among other things enhanced peaceful co-existence and socio-economic development between the two societies, and the nation at large.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The cultural interaction between Jewish and Yoruba traditional cultures presents a complex and intriguing field of study, marked by historical encounters, diasporic movements, and shared cultural elements. Despite the evident interconnectedness between these two cultures, there remains a gap in scholarly research that comprehensively explores the extent, nature, and implications of this interaction. This gap inhibits a thorough understanding of the dynamics at play and the impact on both cultures. This study sets to fill this gap.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The main purpose of this study is to examine the interaction between the cultures of Biblical Jews and Yoruba of Africa. Specifically, the study:

- i. Discussed the theories of origin of the Yoruba and Israel

- ii. Identified areas of cultural interconnectivity and convergence between the two societies
- iii. Determined the possibility of historical contact between the Jews and the Yoruba which engendered cultural interconnectivity.

### Conceptual Clarification

#### Culture

Etymologically, the origin of the Latin word *cultura* is clear. It is a derivative of the verb *colo* (infinitive *colere*), meaning "to tend," "to cultivate," and "to till," among other things (Tucker, 1931). It can take objects such as *ager*, hence *agricultura*, whose literal meaning is "field tilling." Another possible object of the verb *colo* is *animus* ("character"). In that case, the expression would refer to the cultivation of the human character. Consequently, the Latin noun *cultura* can be associated with education and refinement.

Akong'a (2003) opined that, culture is extensively misunderstood. And one of the misconstrued ideas about culture imagines that, culture is what is exhibited in museums. This would resist to being historical fossilized material objects. According to Hofstede (1997), "culture is the collective programming of mind which distinguishes one group of people from another". This definition placed emphasis on more fundamental variable of mental attitudes besides the common definition of culture in the form of music, dress, dance etc. The submission of Harrison and Huttington (2002) is more subjective. Culture is defined as the system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviours and artifacts that members of the society use to cope with their world and with one another, and that are transmitted from generation to generation through learning. Bentley – Henson, Turner and Chapel (2021) lend credence to the above submission when they asserted that, culture is the holistic combination of learned and shared beliefs, values, and practices that create cohesion in a group and is the core concept within which anthropologists work. It is dynamic; evolving based on the needs of the people within it and as one culture comes into contact with another.

Abdullah (1998) opined that defining culture could be a very tactical issue. Culture in its broadest definition, refers to that part of the total repertoire of human actions and its products, which is socially acquired as opposed to genetically transmitted values. In the scientific usage, the word culture is the total way of life of a people. And more specifically, culture is defined as the complex whole of man's acquisition of knowledge, morals, beliefs, arts, custom and technology, which are shared and transmitted from generation to generation. Thus, according to Familusi (2012) asserted that, culture is made up of the customs, traditions, beliefs, bahaviour, dress, language, works of art and craft, attitude to life among others, which varies from society to society and suggests that cultural values are largely relative. Culture comprises far more than music, dance, artifacts and the like. Our culture is our world view that is fundamental to whom we are, where we have come from and where we are going. Our culture is everything in us and around us that defines us and shapes us.

A critical consideration of these definitions indicates that, culture has both material and non-material dimensions which is acquired by every member of the society. To this end, it is an aberration to label any society or an individual as “uncultured”. There is no society or an individual without culture. It is equally noted that, culture is universal and dynamic. Cultural dynamism occurs when the culture of a people is modified over time just as the killing of twins or human beings for ritual is almost a thing of the past in Nigeria of today (Abdullah, 1998).

### Theories of Origin of the Yoruba and Israel

According to Mbiti (1969), the Yoruba people, who occupied the southwest of Nigeria, are highly researched ethnic group in Africa. The people can boast of a rich cultural heritage, manifested in their history, sociology and philosophy. Ayandele (2004) asserted that, the Yoruba people of Nigeria occupy the south-western region of the most populous West African country comprising six geographical states: Oyo, Osun, Ondo, Ogun, Lagos and Ekiti. The Yorubas are also found to be indigenes of Kogi and Kwara states of North-Central Nigeria. According to the New World Encyclopedia, the Yoruba (*Yorùbá* in Yoruba orthography) are one of the largest ethno-linguistic groups in Sub-Saharan Africa. Yoruba constitute about 21 percent of the population of modern-day Nigeria, and they are commonly the majority population in their communities.

Many scholars have postulated various theories in respect of the origin of the Yoruba. To some, the Yoruba people emanated from Mecca or Arabia, others claim that the Yoruba people came from Egypt or Israel. Hence, Afolayan (2004) pointed out that, despite the vast population size and other achievements, the writing of the history of their origin is still in contention. The work of Samuel Johnson is worth of note in the origin of the Yoruba. In his view, Agai (2012) opined that Samuel Johnson in his work traced the Yoruba origin to Yoruba cosmogony oral tradition which connected its source to the ‘East’. As a result, many Yoruba people especially those he interviewed thought that the ‘East’ meant Arabia or Mecca. The Yoruba are said to have sprung from *Lamurudu*, one of the Kings of Mecca. However, Johnson (1921) contested the general association of the East with Mecca. He said that the East might have meant Egypt and not Mecca. He further expressed the view that the Yorubas are not of Arabian origin: ‘the Yorubas are certainly not of the Arabian family, and could not have come from Mecca...’ He said that there is no Arabian record that proposed that the Yoruba people originated from Mecca. Johnson preferred to associate the Yoruba origin with the Egyptians and Christianity in particular. In a research conducted by Agai (2012), he highlights a few weaknesses of the theory of the Arab origin of the Yorubas, but does not in any way argue in favour of an Egyptian origin of the Yorubas.

However, according to Lucas (1970) and Oyebade (2004), Samuel Ajayi Crowther and Father J. J. Williams associated the Yoruba origin with Israel. Rossikki (2017) asserted that, Hugh Clapperton in 1820s reported a work by Sultan Bello, the Caliph of the Sokoto Caliphate, where he opined that the Yorubas were descended from a Canaanite tribe in Palestine. Samuel Johnson also made allusion to this submission. Olasupo (2014) in his

work, *Black African Jews* claimed that certain African tribes are traceable to Jewish race. In the book, he stated that, the Ijebu are Jews, and more significantly also that, Queen Sheba of the Biblical narrative was buried in Oke-Eri in Ijebu. This work was motivated by the declaration made by the Awujale of Ijebu land on his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday anniversary in 2006 in an interview granted by *The News Magazine*, in which he categorically stated that, the Ijebu are Jews (Oluwalana, 2016).

Muscato (2022) opined that, the Yoruba are bound together by a common progenitor called Oduduwa, a common language, and a rich spirituality. According to Yoruba mythology, their people descended from a god-hero named Odua, sometimes spelled Oduduwa, who helped create the Earth and was the first to live upon it. Yoruba society to this day is kinship-based, with each clan claiming a common ancestor, and Odua is seen as the ancient ancestor of all Yoruba clans.

According to Weitzman (2017), the Jews have one of the longest continuously recorded histories of any people in the world. Many scholars have written on this subject. Many of the scholars traced the origin of the Jews to the Bible; others depended on archaeology and genetics. They came up with different theories, explanations and historical reconstructions. However, the focus of this study is not to do an elaborate discourse on the origin of the Jewish race, but to briefly trace their background. Hanukoglu () pointed out that, the people of Israel (also called the "Jewish People") trace their origin to Abraham. Abraham, his son Yitshak (Isaac), and grandson Jacob (Israel) are referred to as the patriarchs of the Israelites. All three patriarchs lived in the Land of Canaan, which later became known as the Land of Israel. The people of modern-day Israel share the same language and culture shaped by the Jewish heritage and religion passed through generations starting with the founding father Abraham (ca. 1800 BCE). Thus, Jews have had a continuous presence in the land of Israel for the past 3,300 years.

### **Areas of Cultural Convergence between the Yoruba and the Jews**

According to Agai (2015), the theory of Hebraic or Jewish origin proposes that the Yoruba culture is a product of Jewish culture. Oyebade (2004) asserted that Samuel Ajayi Crowther, the first African bishop, is one of the earliest writers to propose that the similarities between Yoruba and Israelite cultures are indications that Yoruba culture originated in Israel. Apparently, there are areas of common ground, culturally, between the Yorubas and the Jews especially in the passages of life. These will be briefly discussed.

### **Birth and Naming of Children**

The Yoruba and Jews attach great importance to child bearing. To the two traditions, bareness is an unpleasant condition. The importance of children in ancient Israel may be inferred from the law of levirate marriage, which provided for the continuance of the family line even at the demise of an elder brother (Deuteronomy 25:5-10, Psalms 127:3-5). The Yoruba culture equally places high premium on children as the outcome of any marriage. Any successful marriage in Yoruba society is expected to be fruitful. This codified thus,

*olomo ni o ni oko* (A wife who has a child is the husband's owner). According to Igbafen (2017), this proverb describes a woman without a child as insecure in her marriage. The arrival of a new baby is welcomed with excitement and jubilation. Hence, the Yoruba will say that: *bi mo ba dagbalagba ti mo ba darugbo, omo mi ni yoo sin mi* meaning, when I grow old and died, my children will give me befitting burial. They also say that *omo niyun, omo ni ide, omo ni aseyinde to ba di ale* meaning children are precious rubies, children are like brass, children take care of the house for parents in old age and after death. *Ina ku a fi eeru boju; ogede ku a fi omo re ropo, ojo ti a ba ku omo eni ni wo ile de ni* (when fire is out, ashes replaces it, when the banana tree dies, it replenishes through the young ones; when one dies, it is the children who replace one). These and other related Yoruba wise sayings, according to Ayokunle and Mofeyisara (2019) portray children as more valuable than wealth.

### **Names Given to Children**

The Yoruba places high premium on the names given to their children, they do not just give names to children. The Yoruba adage says, *ile ni a wo ka to so omo ni oruko*, that is, the situation in the house is considered before a child is named. Also, they will say, *oruko omo ni ijanu omo*, that is, the name a child bears determines his or her character. Hence, the names are embodiments of meaning and highly symbolic. As a result, children are not just given names. The same is applicable to the Jews. Name bearing is equally symbolic and important to the Jews. According to Udoye and Cyril (2011), Hebraic thought sees name as representing the whole person, and a change of name indicates changes in personality and relationships. Thus, name is part of dynamic presentation of self to others. It is the invisible representation of the visible. The names of children among the Jews are culturally conditioned and reflect different times, seasons, situations and circumstances. For example, Isaac (meaning- Laughter) was named by Abraham because God made him laugh; Jabez (meaning- sorrow) was so named because he was given birth in pain. Like the Yoruba, the Jews also given names reflecting natural phenomenon, such as; river- Moses meaning "drawn from water", Peter, which means Rock. The Jews equally shared common belief with the Yoruba that, a child lives his or her name. The reaction of Abigail to her husband's foolishness, ".for as his name is, so is he, Nabal is his name, and folly is with him..." (1 Samuel 25:25), alludes to it.

### **Circumcision of the Child**

This is another area of cultural similarities between the Jews and the Yoruba. It is highly treasured in traditional life. Circumcision involves cutting off the foreskin of the boy's male organ, while clitoridectomy involves cutting some portion or the entire clitoris of the girl's female organ. In both cases, according to Mbiti (1992), blood is split, and the operation is very painful. And this is significant and symbolic to the child and the family.

### Circumcision

The Jews, in the same vein, were commanded by God to do circumcision especially for the male child as a mark of covenant (Genesis 17:10-14). From Abraham till the present time, circumcision (Hebrew- *B'rit Milah*) among the Jews is performed on the eighth day after the infant's birth and is followed by a celebratory meal known as *seudat mitzvah* (Gollaher, 2001). It is considered as the most important and central commandments in Judaism. Like the Yoruba, it is more than just physiological operation; it is a religious ritual through which male babies are formally welcomed into the Jewish people. But principally, it connotes God's covenant with His people.

### Marriage

The Yoruba people attached much importance to marriage because to them, it is a long life affair. And that is why proper procedures are followed. The family is adequately involved in all the stages of the marriage process. In the Yoruba people's view, marriage is an affair of more than two people. Before proceeding with marriage arrangements, families conduct thorough investigations into the backgrounds of the prospective spouses. This includes verifying their histories to ensure they are free from criminal activities or diseases. Assuming that everything is in order, the formal and legal betrothal period begins. During this time, according to Fadipe (1991), the boy usually abstained from having sexual intercourse with his fiancée for this length of time. This is borne out of the fact that, virginity is highly priced among the Yoruba. Also, as far as possible, a meeting with either her fiancé or any of his known relatives must be avoided. And when it becomes unavoidable, she covers her face with cloth.

Yoruba marriage ceremonies are elaborate affairs, marked by the payment of bridal price by the groom's family and the performance of subsequent rites. The ceremony known as *Idana*, in which the husband paid the dowry took place. On the day the bride will move to the groom's house, usually in the evening, she receives advice and blessings from her parents and elders in the family. After this, some young men are already stationed to escort her with the procession to the husband's house. The procession comprises of the bride's associates (*egbe iyawo*), two wives from the bride's extended family and the bridesmaid, usually her niece or a first-cousin. All these remain with her until after the ordeal of the bridal night. At the break of the day, the virginity of the bride is confirmed. The time of merriment, feasting and winning begins after the bride had been found *virgo intacta*, while if found *non virgo intacta*, the ceremony is hurriedly and quietly wound up, and potential shame for the bride and her family.

It is interesting to note that, marriage among the Jews takes almost the same pattern with the Yoruba. Marriage is highly valued in Jewish culture and wedding is one of the most cherished occasions in the life cycle. Besides the sacredness of marriage upheld by the Jews which is referred to as, *Mikdash M'at*, "a small sanctuary" where God dwells; marriage is a Jewish act, a commitment to the continuity and vitality of the Jewish community. According to Sachauss (2023), among the Jews, marriage was not an agreement between



two individuals, but between two families. After negotiation and agreement by both parties, the payment of dowry by the father of the groom to the father of the bride known as *mohar* follows. Subsequently, the betrothal and wedding ceremonies began.

The first ceremony of the wedding is that the bridegroom's "friends" went, usually by night, to fetch the bride and her attendants to the home of the groom (John 3:29, Matthew 9:15). The bride is waiting and get ready, eagerly expecting her bridegroom. The friends of the bride performed the duties of robbing the bride and adorning the house. She and those who escorted her came with mule or porters articles of furniture and decoration for the new home. As at this moment, the bridegroom is absent at the house of a relative or friend. In the evening, the bridegroom's friends congregate to escort groom home. When he indicates that it is time to go, all rise up, and candles and touches are supplied to those who are to form procession, and they move off. While the bride and her friends (virgins) waiting for the bridegroom, a period of relaxing and drowsy waiting sets in, there is tendency for them to sleep off (Parable of the Ten Virgins - Matthew 25:5). Thereafter, the Bridegroom arrival will be announced. While approaching the bridegroom's house, the women in the entourage take up the peculiar cry of wedding joy that give s warning to those waiting with the brides that it is time to arise and light up the approach, and welcome the bridegroom with honour (Matthew 25: 6-7). Immediately the bridegroom entered, the door will be shut (Matthew 25:10). This will now be followed with winning and dining.

### **The Practice of Levirate Marriage**

This is another common cultural practice between the Jews and Yoruba people. Levirate marriage is a type of marriage in which the brother of a deceased man is obliged to inherit his elder brother' In the Yoruba traditional society, levirate marriage was viewed positively rather than detested since it was a mechanism employed by culture and the society to provide and cater for widows and their children. The levirate marriage in African religio-cultural settings is an accepted institution, which requires that a man becomes the husband of a deceased elder brother's widow. Okediji (2022) opined that, this systematic arrangement is put in place by the Yoruba to re-absorb the widow back into the family to ensure the continuity of the deceased lineage in the family. Even, if the deceased did not have any child before his death, through levirate system, the deceased's wife will raise children for the dead husband.

In Judaism, there seems to be a semblance between the Hebrews' concept of levirate marriage and the Yoruba. The imposition of levirate among the Jews is seemingly restricted to a situation in which both brothers reside in the household and where the deceased has no son to succeed him. It is justified in terms of the need for him to have an heir so that "his name may not be blotted out of Israel" (Deuteronomy 25:5).

### **Death, Burial and the Hereafter**

Yoruba are of the strong conviction that life here is not interminable – death is the necessary end, it will come when it will come (Awolalu, 1980). It stands between the world of the



spirits, between the visible and invisible. And since men are only sojourners on God's earth, no matter how long a person lives, death must come as a necessary end. According to the Yoruba religious thought, the rituals of transition from the point of death to an ancestors take many forms. The dead who merited joining the cult of ancestors are given betting burial rite.

In the Jewish tradition, the body of the deceased is prepared for burial, followed by funeral and mourning period. It was the obligation of a Jewish family in the biblical times to care for their dead and bury or entomb them. There are three major stages to preparing the body for burial among the Jewish: washing of the body with clear water (*rechitzah*), ritual purification (*taharah*), and dressing (*halbashah*). The body is wrapped in a simple cloth shroud or robe (for men, a *kittel*), preferably white and of linen (Rohatyn Jewish Heritage). All the burial rituals discussed above share common ground with the Yoruba burial rite.

## Conclusion

The interaction of culture between the Jews and Yoruba has been explored in this paper. It also delved into the theories of the origin of the Yoruba and Israel. Many scholars have postulated various theories in respect of the origin of the Yoruba. To some, the Yoruba people emanated from Mecca or Arabia, others claim that the Yoruba people came from Egypt or Israel. It is crystal clear from the submission of this study that, there are areas of cultural interconnectivity between the Jews and Yoruba of Nigeria. This could be probably traced to origin of the two societies. It is believed that the understanding unraveled in this paper should facilitate robust bilateral relationship between the two societies, especially in the areas of religion, social, economic, education and technology.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are therefore made:

- The two societies under study should discard cultural practices that are harmful to humanity, especially that constraint development.
- On the other hand, cultural practices which engender development and peaceful co-existence be promoted.
- The two societies should maximally explore the benefits of their cultural interconnectivity to facilitate bilateral developmental programmes, especially in the areas of Agriculture, education, medicine among others.

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