



THE IMPACT OF ISLAMIC RELIGION ON YORUBA
CULTURE: ISSUES AND PROSPECTS

BY

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for the degree of Master of Arts (Islamic and Other
Civilizations)

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ABSTRACT

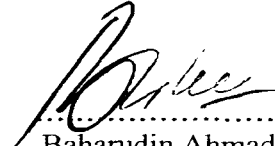
This research examines the impact of Islamic religion on Yoruba culture. The study starts with a general introduction of the work. It discusses the nature and forms of traditional belief among the Yorubas. It states in detail the Yoruba religious philosophy and the concept of God, and their objects of worship. This allows us to comprehend the transformation that develops later. Likewise the study emphasizes the extent to which Islam has penetrated and influenced Yoruba communities. It is significant to note here the flexibility of Islam and its ability to accommodate various aspects of the Yoruba traditional way of life. This work also highlights the spread of Islam, its impact, and the influence it has where rapid conversion has taken place. It also explains syncretism in the belief and practice of Islam in Yorubaland, and the challenges of Christianity toward Islam and its aim of establishing Western education in Nigeria. The study compares the Yoruba traditional lifestyle and the Islamic traditions. It shows that Islam contributed positively to the Yoruba culture, especially in three important ways: through the establishment of Islamic education, Islamic organizations and Sufism. Thus, the spread of Islam to the Yorubaland is a positive thing to the Yorubas since it has uplifted their status and prestige.

خلاصة البحث

يهدف هذا البحث دراسة تأثير الدين الإسلامي على ثقافة اليوربا. استهلت الدراسة بالمقدمة العامة لهذا العمل الأكاديمي، ناقش فيها الكاتب المعتقدات التقليدية الموجودة في المنطقة (قبل الإسلام)، كما تناول الباحث بالتفصيل فلسفة اليوربا الدينية ومفهوم وحدة الوجود ومعبوداتهم. وقد اعتبر الباحث أن فهم هذه الأشياء يساعد على استيعاب التحولات الفكرية، والأيدلوجية التي وقعت لاحقاً. علاوة على ذلك، فقد تناول البحث أيضاً مدى تغلغل الإسلام وتأثيره علي مجتمع اليوربا. وفي هذا الصدد، يمكن ملاحظة سماحة الإسلام ومرونته وقدرته على استيعاب الجوانب المختلفة من الثقافات التقليدية لشعب اليوربا وطريقة عيشهم. لذا، فإنه من الأهمية بمكان تسليط الضوء على انتشار الإسلام، وأثره خاصة في الأماكن التي حدثت فيها سرعة الاعتناق للإسلام. كما أوضحت الدراسة أيضاً التوفيق بين المعتقدات التقليدية والممارسة العملية للإسلام في بلاد اليوربا. إضافة إلى ذلك، فقد درس أيضاً التحديات التي تواجه الإسلام من النصارى وتغلغلهم من خلال التعليم الغربي في نيجيريا. لقد كشفت الدراسة من خلال المقارنة بين الثقافة الإسلامية والثقافة المحلية الموروثة مساهمة الإسلام الكبيرة في حياة الناس في هذه المنطقة خاصة في ثلاثة جوانب مهمة، وهي؛ إنشاء المدارس الإسلامية، والمنظمات الإسلامية، والتصوف. وتوصل الباحث إلى أن انتشار الإسلام في ديار اليوربا أثر بصورة إيجابية وبناءة في الثقافة المحلية في المنطقة وشعبها وبالتالي رفع مكانة هذا الشعب وهيبته كشعب له كيان.

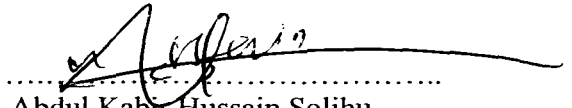
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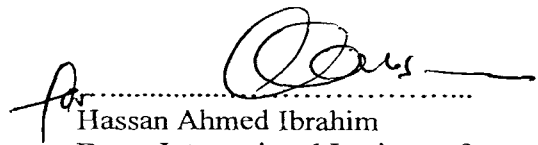
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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degree at IIUM or other institutions.

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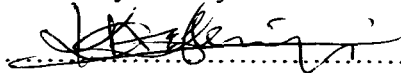
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**THE IMPACT OF ISLAMIC RELIGION ON YORUBA CULTURE:
ISSUES AND PROSPECTS**

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This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Alhaji Yusuf Adeniyi and Late Mrs. Ajarat Aike Adeniyi who brought me up from illiteracy to the world of knowledge.

“My Lord ! Bestow on them your Mercy as they did bring me up when I was young.”

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CAN	Christian Association of Nigeria
CMS	Church Missionary Society
FOMWAN	Federation Of Muslim Women's Association in Nigeria
JNI	Jama'atu Nasril Islam
MSS	Muslim Students Society
WIN	Women In Nigeria

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND

The Yorubas regard religion as an aspect of culture. Like in most African traditional societies, there is a common belief in one Supreme God who manifests His essence in variety of spirits and natural phenomena. In Yoruba traditional religions, God is worshipped in many ways and through various deities, which control these spirits and natural phenomena.

The Yorubas live in southwestern Nigeria, Republic of Togo and Republic of Benin. They have developed many designations of different artistic forms including mask making, beadwork, weaving, metalwork and pottery. Most of these artworks are made in order to honor the gods and ancestors. To the Yorubas, there are more than 401 known gods, and there are many artworks and sculptures production owing to the immensity in the number of gods. The Yorubas have equally been likened to the ancient Greeks with reference to the multiplicity of gods and deities in their culture as well as their notion of the hierarchy of gods and structure of existence.¹

The religion of the Yorubas and Islam had been in contact before the arrival of Christianity in the 1840s.² The earliest accounts of contacts between the Yorubas and the Islamic religion belong to Muslim merchants and missionaries who ventured into Yorubaland in search of settlement and in order to propagate the new faith and to convert the Yorubas from animism in the early eighteenth century.

¹ Toyin Ayeni, *I am a Nigerian, Not a Terrorist*, (Indianapolis: Dog Ear, 2010), 54.

² Joel E. Tishken, Toyin Falola and Akintunde Akinyemi, *Sango in Africa and African Diaspora*, (U.S.A: Indiana, 2009), 298.

During the colonial period, Christianity was introduced to the Yorubaland. As a result of this, Islam and Christianity became dominant religions. However, despite their strong influence on the Yorubas, indigenous beliefs still continue to manifest itself in the practice of Islam and Christianity in the area. This has resulted in a situation where indigenous beliefs, practices and customs have penetrated or have been adapted to Islamic and Christian practices by Yoruba Muslims and Christians. This is often referred to as syncretism.

The contact of Yoruba traditional religion with Islam, and the importance and extensive effect that Islam has had on Yoruba culture, has enjoyed elaborate studies in scholarly literature. Although there are substantial records and studies on the spread of Islam among the Yorubas beginning from 1820s, the emergence of Ilorin as a frontier state and as a springboard for the Jihad of Usman dan Fodio southward remains engaging aspect of the history of Islam in Yorubaland.³

Islam has strong influence on its devotees and, therefore, controls the ways of their life. It is able to succeed because of its spirituality. It propels or encourages its adherents to develop an inclination that makes them to confront the force of secularism. This spirituality of Islam motivates them to change the society around them, and this can be seen in their ways of thinking and empirical understanding of realities.

Furthermore, one aspect of Yoruba life in which Islam has had a great impact is education. In most Yoruba communities in southwestern part of Nigeria, both elementary and higher Islamic educations are taught. These schools spread all over the southwest of Nigeria particularly in areas where Islam has great influence. With

³ Issac Adejoju Ogunbiyi, "The Search for a Yoruba Orthography since the 1840s: Obstacles to the Choice of Arabic Script," *Sudanic Africa*, vol. 14, (2003): 79.

modernization, some of these schools have been combining Islamic teachings with Western education.

In West Africa, the Yorubas are one of the most resourceful people, though the study is still in progress to determine their size in population but they constitute a very important and spiritual force with long standing influence. In view of the foregoing, it becomes necessary to try to understand their ideas, development, past experience and aspirations.

This study will therefore attempt to explore the influence of Islam on the Yoruba culture, a subject that has hitherto not been deeply studied, and has consequently suffered significantly from guesswork and speculations.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Islam was introduced into Yorubaland through the efforts of Muslim traders and itinerant scholars. The local traders who transact business with these Muslims were enticed to the religion as a result of their honesty much as the scholars were able to draw people around themselves as a result of their knowledge and efficacy of their prayers. Since new ideas are like pregnancy which is easy to conceive but difficult to deliver, the nascent religion started attracting the attention of practitioners of traditional religion particularly their priests as well as political leaders. This is natural, not only because Muslims were converting their members but equally as a result of their campaign against their practices. The impact of Islam had begun to be felt such that they felt the need to check its growth in order to protect their religion and culture.

So, in order to check the advance of Islam, several sanctions were imposed on the nascent Muslim community which includes social deprivation, economic boycott and relief from political authority for those who wielded such power before their

reversion or conversion to Islam. In spite of all these mischief and scheming, trial and tribulations, Muslims remained firm and undaunted as they held onto their religion even at the expense of their lives. The advent of British imperialists rather than alleviating their problem aggravated it the more. The missionaries who followed these colonialists were equally hostile to Islam and the Muslims as the only obstacle or the stone wall on their way to evangelize the whole of the land was none other than Islam and the Muslims. To compound the situation, while the hegemony in the land rests with British imperialists, the establishment and management of schools was exclusively preserved by the missionaries such that nobody could go to school unless he was converted. This constituted a very big obstacle for Muslims as a result of the fact that only those who were educated in the missionary school were respected by the authority and also the ones to whom employment were offered. It is therefore, obvious that both colonialism and evangelism are twin sisters working towards one and the same objective, that is, Christianization of their colonies as well as the exploitation of their available resources.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study therefore provides answer to the following questions:

1. In what ways has Islam impacted on Yoruba culture?
2. What are the challenges facing Islam and the Muslims in Yorubaland?
3. What are the panaceas to the challenges?

1.4 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To explore the Yoruba traditional religious beliefs.

2. To highlight strategies that led to the conversion and spread of Islam in the early Nineteenth Century and the rivalry between Christianity and Islam in the area.
3. It also aims to compare the life style of Yoruba beliefs and the practice of Islam.
4. To examine the findings of the impact of Islamic religion on Yoruba culture.

1.5 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To achieve the objectives of this research, a historical, sociological and analytical methodology is adopted. It deals with the full description of the impact of Islamic religion on Yoruba culture. This study is based on library and archival findings, as it is more identical and qualitative in nature than quantitative. The study makes use of relevant literatures on Islamic issues and its influence on the Yoruba culture.

1.6 LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

The comparative studies are very sensitive field. Scholars in these areas or fields must be extremely honest and specific. In this case, the study of this research is based on Yorubas of southwest of Nigeria and will cover the impact of Islam on their cultures starting from the advent of Islam in Yorubaland till the 20th century.

1.7 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Islam and the Yoruba culture in the southwest necessitate explanation because of the religion scripture (*Al- Qur'an*) which channels the understanding of the Yoruba towards recognition of the truth about oneness of God.

Traditional beliefs had blindfolded the people in early days and truth of oneness of God was a misery. Islam overpowered the culture when people were properly taught of Islam in its finest form.

Western education played vital role in the life of most Yoruba and promote advancement through Christianity which was forced on many youth that were willing to be educated. Because of these, the significance of Islam and its practice rapidly spread from the north towards the south by Uthman Dan Fodio.

1.8 LITERATURE REVIEW

It is an undisputed fact that some aspects of Islamic studies in Nigeria contributed several valuable research, particularly, those works which are related to the field of religion in Nigeria. The literature review of this research will cover the traditional belief of Yorubas, the encounter of the Yoruba traditional religion with the two world religions, and the establishment and spread of Islam in Yorubaland.

The valuable joint study of Grinker and Steiner provides the readers with detail the finding of Yorubas for spiritual guidance and protection; they did not restrict their ideology to gods in the Yoruba religious alone, but they also searched and discovered with confidence and comfort the potential advantages of other world religions⁴. Therefore, the Yoruba beliefs are regularly produced and reproduced through individual action. This work is useful to understand the Yoruba's ideology of the religious beliefs.

The book of Salamone and Adams was to show that in Africa, the Yoruba people are no less religious than others in cultural groups. The authors discussed that the traditional belief system was so well established and arranged in the Yoruba

⁴ Roy Richard Grinker and Christopher Burghard Steiner, *Perspectives of Africa: A reader in Culture, History and Representation*, (UK: Blackwell, 1997), 288.

society before the unauthorized and oftentimes antagonistic introduction of missionary of Islam and Christianity.⁵ This work is relevant to this study because it explains that the Yorubas are purely traditional believers before the advent of foreign religions.

The significance of Sarah's work is not so much in the language affinity from which she proved to have obtained between oral and written religious text. She argued in her work that the divination of the Yorubas is a text- based system of knowledge, despite the fact that its text is completely oral. Notwithstanding its orality, the divination text is also symbolised by the relative quality of literate religious texts⁶. She furthers that religious texts, for instance, those of the Holy Qur'an are indubitably comprehensibly fixed, very clearly and in great detail. At the same time, it can be argued that oral religious text, such as Ifa text, are not indisputably the same as previous recounting. She finally remarks that both written and oral religious texts are easily influenced by change of interpretations that are duplicated from generation to generation because of their enormous value for cultural stability.

Meanwhile, Paden discusses that, some of the traditional leaders in the fourth Republic's Yoruba towns in southwest of Nigeria are Muslims. However, most of them continue to perform or preside over the rituals and traditional customs.⁷ He furthers that, in other parts of Africa particularly in Nigeria, many regard the developing role of traditional Yoruba rulers a stabilizing force, both in the religious and political domains.

The work of Olupona and Rey demonstrates the encounter of Yoruba traditional religion and Islam. They suggest that, in the history of religion in

⁵ Frank A. Salamone and Walter Randolph Adams, *Exploration in Anthropology and Theology*, (Maryland: University press, 1997), 132.

⁶ Sarah C. Humphreys, *Culture of Scholarship*, (U.S.A: University of Michigan, 1997), 369.

⁷ John N. Paden, *Muslim Civic Cultures and Conflicts Resolution: The Challenges of Democracy*, (Washington, D.C: The Brookings Institution, 2005), 100.

Yorubaland, the Yorubas facilitated and paved the way for the accommodation of Yoruba politico-religious values in the practice of Islamic religion by Yoruba Muslims.⁸

Laitiri emphasized on the effect of syncretism between the Yoruba traditional believers and the practice of Islam. He further explains that some Muslims who involved in syncretism were highly influenced by Yoruba divination; these categories of Muslims developed a parallel system and thenceforth asserted that both the Yoruba traditional beliefs and Islamic religion were originated from Arabia.⁹

Ethnic and Cultural Diversity in Nigeria, this valuable book was written by Offoha and Sadiku. In this book, the authors emphasize how Islam made rapid improvement in Ilorin, northern part of the Yorubaland. On the other hand, the Christianity developed faster in the southeast. The authors also highlight in their book that, the ideology and philosophy of these religions are totally difference. As a reason of this, Islam is different proportion to Christianity because the former seemed to consider and accommodate some of the Yoruba culture more than the later¹⁰. Islam tolerated and agreed with some of the Yoruba social structure. For instance, it permits polygamy and religious protective supplications.

From Africa to Zen: An Invitation to World Philosophy, this book was jointly written by Solomon and Higgins. Interestingly, the authors discussed the commitment of indigenous religious believers in their religions. They mention in their book that in the seventeenth century, Islam and Christianity came to Yorubaland, and the

⁸ Jacob Obafemi Kehinde Olupona and Terry Rey, *Orisa Devotion as World Religion: The Globalization of Yoruba Religious Culture*, (Madison: Wisconsin, 2008), 202.

⁹ David D. Laitiri, *Hegemony and Culture: Politics and Religious Change among the Yoruba*, (U.S.A: University of Chicago, 1986), 85.

¹⁰ Ullunma Okehie Offoha and Matthew N.O. Sadiku, *Ethnic and Cultural Diversity in Nigeria*, (Trenton: Africa World, 1996), 130.

indigenous religion thereafter experience extensive adaptation into both religions¹¹. The traditional religion continues to exist through some change as effected by contact with the world religions. The Yoruba people have achieved in accustom to the world religions to meet their needs, though some Yorubas retain their own cultural identity to a remarkable extent.

A book of Vaughan, *Nigerian Chiefs: Traditional Power in Modern Politics 1809s-1990s*, analyses and competes that general identities based on the reformed traditions of home town allegiances must assimilate necessary historical trends of the nineteenth century, especially the inconveniences of the wars in Yorubaland, and the effect of the world religions on Yoruba community. The mission of the two religions was to shape social relations in the Oyo province of the twentieth century.¹²

The work of Aronson marks another epoch in Islamic religion in Yorubaland. He emphasized that, conversely there was little impact of European in the inland area where Islam, having spread around and across the Sahara was strongest. In spite of this fact, the force of Islam and Christianity encountered in Yorubaland and nearly half of the people now belong to each of the two world religious traditions.¹³ However, in the northern part of Yorubaland the Muslim had established governmental and legal institutions.

Meanwhile, Bienen argues that the two worldly religions took root in Yorubaland in the early of the nineteenth century. Both achieved converts because they were extremely skillful at spiritual healing, they were also connected with

¹¹ Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen Marie Higgins, *From Africa to Zen: An Invitation to World Philosophy 2nd edition*, (U.S.A: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 182.

¹² Olufemi Vaughan, *Nigerian Chiefs: Traditional Power in Modern Politics 1809s-1990s*, (New York: University of Rochester, 2000), 8.

¹³ Dan R. Aronson, *The City is our Farm: Seven Migrant Ijebu Yoruba Families*, (U.S.A: Transaction, 1978), 112.

development and civilization. As a result of that, neither religion introduced and presented itself at the beginning as an exclusive alternative to the traditional religion.¹⁴

Hunwick asserts how the Yorubas are among the multifarious religious ethnic groups in Nigeria. The author states that both Islam and Christianity were authorised to spread freely in the region. In fact, the Yorubas have almost connected together the ideological gulf that separates the two religions, making it possible for individual member of the households or extended families to practice both¹⁵. He later remarks that the Yoruba have advantaged from the introductions brought to Nigeria by Islam. As a result of that, Yoruba has produced more scholars than any other ethnic groups in southern Nigeria.

The book of Falola and Genova contains several interesting account of another prehistoric Yoruba religious culture. The authors expressed that the religious and cultural institutions that maintained the production of Yoruba traditional art came under the attack of the two world religions. Furthermore, they noted in their book that Orisa worshippers and their cults were ordered to destroy works of art that Christian missionaries and Islamic clerics against the idolatry.¹⁶ Therefore, Yoruba traditional artists were convinced and ordered to stop manufacturing cults.

Gonzalez shows in her work how the Orisa tradition teaches the significance of religious tolerance. The author noted that many Yorubas perceived that this acceptance is the reason why Islam and Christianity were well received by some members in the community. The author further asserts that, the vast majority of people in Yorubaland are now belong to Islam or Christianity, but the indigenous belief are

¹⁴ Henry Bienen, *Political Conflict and Economic Change in Nigeria*, (London: Frank Cass & Co, 1985), 117.

¹⁵ John O. Hunwick, *Religion and National Integration in Africa: Islam, Christianity and Politics in the Sudan and Nigeria*, (Illinois: North Western University Evanston, 1992), 103.

¹⁶ Toyin Falola and Ann Genova, *Yoruba Creativity: Fiction, Language, Life and Songs*, (U.S.A: Africa World, Trenton, 2005), 144.

very much rooted that they often return to former traditional practices, particularly during times of dire need.¹⁷

Gordon also provided the readers with knowledge of freedom to choose whether to accept the missionaries and on what conditions and methods people could accept, reject or integrate the missionaries and their message as they saw suited. As far as communities had their freedom and authority, the impact of Christianity as a religion is limited. The author asserts that not only the Christianity was competing for the loyalty and support for the Nigerian government in the 1800s. And moreover, Islam was also expanding its influence outside of the northern part of Yorubaland. The preachers and traders, who are Muslims from Ilorin, went to other parts of Yorubaland peacefully seeking converts¹⁸. During this period, when encountered with the choice of Islam or Christianity, some Yorubas prefer loyal to their traditional religion beliefs. Also some political elites in Yorubaland avoided Islam because of their legitimacy was based on traditional religious beliefs.

The work of Douglas and Kaberry attempts to describe the conversion of Yorubas to Islam in the early of the nineteenth century. The authors noted that the name adopted by Yoruba Muslims themselves is Imale, while implies that the religion of Mali. In other words, the Mali traders had introduced the faith to the Yorubaland. This is likely at the beginning to the Yoruba traders and craftsmen¹⁹. They explain further that Islam was a religion of common person and of a typical low social class rather than of the state councilors and traditional rulers ; the significance of approvals

¹⁷ Migene Gonzalez, *Santeria: The Religion, Faith, Rites, Magic*, (New York: Harmony, 1994), 10.

¹⁸ April A. Gordon, *Nigeria's Diverse People: A Reference Source Book*, (California: ABC-Clio Inc, 2003), 62.

¹⁹ Mary Douglas and Phyllis Mary Kaberry, *Man in Africa, vol. 4*, (Great Britain: Tavistock Publication Ltd, 1969), 92.

acquire from the traditional religion in defining political rights and powers was an obstruction to its becoming the state religion.

Gbadamosi has done a critical analysis in his work entitled "*The Growth of Islam among the Yoruba, 1841-1908*". He provided the readers with full insight about the coming and growth of Islam in Yorubaland. He stated that, in a community such as the Yorubas, which was religious and had a wide range of different of gods, this new determined principle about God set traditional religious believers and Yoruba Muslim community to a strong disagreement with one another. The conflict of values was well dramatized in some part of Yorubaland.²⁰ He stresses that, tradition and social values strongly stood for the normal measures to be taken for the benefit of the people in the community. Therefore, these collisions did not lessen the progress and spread of Islam, instead of that, the number of open-air Muslim activities increased. And finally he remarks that, in the path of its progression in Yorubaland, Islam had to consider with these noticeable qualities, such as political hierarchy, common language and community life style all of which were to assist the rapid growth of Islam later.

Also in the same way, Doi has performed a significant role in understanding religion in Nigeria. In this work, he expresses the nature of Islam among the well-known tribes in Nigeria. He argues that, the encounter of the Yoruba traditional religion and Islam enlightens us of some possibilities to understand the position of Islam when first introduced to Yorubaland. Islam presents and proclaims belief in a Supreme Being, Allah, the Qur'an and the tradition of the prophet (S.A.W), some of which are similar to the Yoruba life style. Islam however forbids them of any

²⁰ T.G.O. Gbadamosi, *The Growth of Islam among the Yoruba, 1841-1908*, (London: Longman group, 1978), 200.

affiliation of partners with God.²¹ Therefore, since the arrival of Islam, the converts refused to join their former members in offering sacrifice to the existing deities. He remarks that, every person in a tribe in human race naturally think as a member of that society, so, like all other human beings, a Yoruba man thinks first as a Yoruba, because he is well brought up in a culture with traditions which give the society her excellent quality and characteristics.

Dana Lee Robert's book shows the readers the clear picture how Islamic influence seems to have proceeded and gave way to critical concern in the 1830s to some part of West Africa counties, and this is easily understood through the effort and impact of Islamic clerics and their writings in the 1840s and 1850s. The author finally remarks that by the mid of the century, Islam has also made significant impact on the northern part of Yorubaland, which was a recognizable quality of daily life in Yoruba coastal town such as Badagry and Lagos, and had succeeded in entering a large distance down to the Niger.²²

Lawal asserts in his study that, in the early nineteenth century, Islam has developed from a religion performed silently by few devotees into one with an open indirect royal approval. He explains further that, Islam has also transformed the economy of some Yorubas, particularly those in Lagos from subsistence into a complex and intricate slave dominated commercial system towards the end of eighteenth century had spreading influence on the success of Islam.²³

The subsequent work of Insoll contains several interesting account of prehistoric Yoruba Muslims. He expresses in this valuable work that towards the end

²¹ Abdur Rahman I. Doi, *Islam in a Multi-Religious Society Nigeria: A Case Study*, (Kuala Lumpur: A.S. Noordeen, 1992), 135.

²² Dana Lee Robert, *Converting Colonialism: Vision and Realities in Mission History, 1706-1914*, (UK: W.M.B, Eeedmans, 2008), 67.

²³ Olakunle .A. Lawal, "Islam and Colonial in Lagos," *The America Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, vol. 12, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 69.