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RELIGION AND AWON MASS-MARRIAGE FESTIVAL IN SHAO TOWN, 1900–1994: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

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Abstract

This paper highlights the historical development of religion and famous Shao Awon Festival in Shao, 1900 – 1994. Shao town before the coming of Islam and Christianity was a traditional religious society. This society incorporates various deities and various gods and goddesses. It was against this background that Islam and Christianity perhaps came to reform. However, scholars did not do much even though religion and culture are very important within Shao town and Nigeria generally. Therefore, this paper applies use of both primary and secondary sources to achieve the aim of this work. In the development of Awon Mass-marriage festival in Shao, many comments have been made concerning its humble beginning particularly by the adherents of both Christianity and Islam. Consequently, the religious reforms met it and this makes it spectacular. In this study, we have found out that both Christianity and Islam came to serve as checks and balances for the conduct and operation of Awon mass-marriage festival in Shao. The paper concludes by advocating that there is the need to retain our good cultural heritages in the face of modern religious reforms.

Key Words: Mass-Marriage Awon, deity, Tradition, Religion

Introduction

Marriage is a kind of union which lakes place between a man and a woman. This confers a child with a socially recognized father and mother. Thus, the institution of marriage differs from society to society. What may be seen as being

illegitimate in one setting may be regarded as legitimate by the other depending on what is acceptable to that society. It must be critiqued that whatever garb this sacred institution wears in our society, there is always a proof to believe that it perpetuates itself in our society and any move towards its disintegration is being forestalled. In Yoruba traditional society and in Shao in particular, for instance, marriage is seen as the aspiration of every normal adult who attains the age of maturity. Thus, every man or woman who reaches the age of marriage but decides to remain unmarried will not be respected and may not even be trusted with a post of responsibility. Therefore, marriage is very significant in every society as a means of preserving and for continuity of human race.

But the question is, why do people get involved in marriage? This is because Africans believe in procreation to ensure that kinship continues to survive. Like the Western societies, Africa has integrated love in marriage since the time in immemorial. But love alone cannot sustain marriage relationship particularly if that love cannot produce children among couples. To make the marriage legal, bride wealth is paid and to further allow the husband make claim to the children. In this respect, certain items could be produced locally or services rendered by the bridegroom and his entire family. These items include goats and cattle. The payment is normally done once or be done by instalment. Within the African societies, a man could decide to marry more than two wives, otherwise known as polygyny. For instance, between African system that practices polygyny and Western states, polygyny gives credence to male domination not love as proclaimed by the Westerners.

For instance, during the agrarian time, there was great reliability on labour as the way of expanding production. Many homes depended on labour embarked upon by children. Thus, women became potential weapon not only for the expansion of the family but also for catering for household wealth and prosperity generally.

Geographical Location of Shao Town

The ancient town of Shao is located in the East by Yelu Hills and through Babomogba hills in the West. To the North and

South wind the Rivers Moro and Awon concurrently. Shao town is located on the world map of longitude 4° 35E and latitude 8° 35Nand has some unique qualities. One, it possesses a very lasting cultural heritage andtwo, it is characterized and mystified with an annual festival fiesta. The city is predominantly festivals society as there are many of them associated with the town. There are Egungun festivals that are celebrated during the months. The Sango and Obatala festival takes place in August and followed almost immediately by the Awon Mass-Marriage festival in October which forms the focus and centre of this article. Thus, the place of plurality cum mass-marriage system in the history of Shao cannot be overemphasized. The *Dodika* Masquerade is available which is also an extension of Awon festivity. The people love for tradition has continue to promote the image of the mass-wedding festival (Oke, 1).

A Brief Historical Foundation of Shao Town

The ancient town of Shao was reported to have been founded during the time when the old Oyo Empire was at the height of its power. But the exact date and particularly the year of its founding has been lost to history, so to say. Perhaps, it may be correct to state that the town came about as a result of the collection of small but independent area units that were established by the various hunters or warriors. This could be as a result of insecurity and the immediate need at that time to look for a peaceful settlement elsewhere outside Oyo (Jimoh: Oke, 1). The first settlers in the ancient city of Shao were believed to be four hunters. They were, AjankiAlaa, IbooOlareele, Ajakitipa and Papala. These four hunters were reported to have arrived Shao from the old Oyo Empire on hunting expedition. On their arrival, they pitched tents at different areas now called Shao. All the same, the year of this hunting expedition has not been ascertained. Although oral evidence suggests that the town might have been founded around the 16th century (Oral Evidence, 2019).

Having discovered each other in different locations, the hunters started to relate to one another. Hence the derivation of the name "*Shao*" that is in Yoruba Language "*Ejeki a saarawa jo ki a jumomaa ho po,* "meaning" let us come nearer together and

related together". In not far distant time, the issue of leadership emerged between them. They found it extremely hard to nominate a leader among themselves since perhaps they were *primus interpares*. first among equals). But to this problem, Alafin Abiodun proferred a solution by appointing prince Olanibo to preside over the affair and rule the town accordingly (Sulaiman, 3 – 4).

History of Traditional Religion and Mass-Marriage Festival in Shao before the coming of Christianity and Islam

What is religion? Is it a set of dogmas, mythological beliefs or mere rituals? Is it a mere slogan? It is cult? Is it a body of rule and regulation formulated by some individual or group of individuals? It is ritualistic worshiping and no more? Is it a mantra for turning poverty into riches? Is it a money purchase for paradise? "If it is all this then at best it is one's personal affairs, the modernist will say and further adds; since it is my personal affairs, you need not bother about it" (Idris, 574). Khan argues that "all religions lay down rules for the spiritual as well as temporal guidance of man as much as in his relations to society as in his relations to his soul or to the ultimate realities" (Khan, 127). Therefore, religion is the belief in and worship of a God or gods.

The Shao town has been noted for its traditional belief system in religion. The people were arch-devotees to various gods and goddesses as this was an extension of Yoruba larger society. Among the famous deities venerated in Shao include the following *Sango, Ifa, Egungun, Ogun, Ikosin* and *Orisa-Oko* and so on. Before the arrival of Christianity and Islam in Shao, the people of the town were die-hard traditionists as they involved effectively in the worship of various deities around the year. This was followed by excitement and merry-making activities. In *Egungun* festival of the town, there is usually a period put aside for this yearly festival of the deities. The *Egungun* involved the festival that is celebrated for the reincarnation of the dead relatives and their reappearance to those living. This is usually celebrated around March and April of every year but *Ikosin* is a biennial festival celebrated hand in hand with *Egungun*. Women could participate in *Ikosin* cult.

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Another notable deity in Shao town is the *Orisa-Oko*, the goddess of harvest whose followers were mainly women but with chief priest called *Aare Osoko*. This is usually celebrated in July and August of the year. It is a festival heralding the new yam with pounded yam and melon soup (*egusi*). This was followed by *Sango*, god of thunder and lightning. *Sango* found its way into Shao through *Ekerin Mogba*who was reported to have followed Olanibo, one of the princesses of Shao from Oyo. *Ogun* festival in Shao was usually celebrated at any time within the year. *Ogun*, which means god of iron, has three segments. First, was the *Ogun-Onibon* portrayed by gun, *Ogun-Okuta* depicted by stone and *Ogun* of snake charmers. It is usually famous for gathering of hunters of all sorts who tested their magical powers in the front of the spectators (Oke, 69 – 74).

The Shao society was essentially a traditional society but the word traditional was used to distinguish the indigenous West African religions from the non-African religions. This was also used to portray the methodology of cultural transmission that was rendered down verbally from one successive generation to another. The West African society was severally mention as traditional by the sociologists as simply one with no literary background. But this society depended on oral method of tradition through its past experiences. Consequently, while this shortcoming was noticed, and replete of non-reading and writing habits, the society was derogatorily described as non-literate society. Having said this, all the members of this society participated and shared the same concept of religion. Therefore, being a member of the society and to any religious group was akin to one another (Aponsah, 7).

There is no doubt that Shao town like any Yoruba town is endowed with many cultures. But the prominent among these cultures is the Awon Mass-Marriage festival. This is an annual event during which all girls are given a free hand marriage to their various fiancés. The evidence of the exact date during which this festival was founded is obscure. But one may play safe to say that it started after the foundation of the town in the 16th century. Awon, according to a legend, was believed to be a fairly woman with only one breast whose emergence was

shrouded in misery among the people of Shao. This mysterious woman was reported to have arrived during the period of Ohoro Olanibo, the great-grant father of the present Ohoro. The woman was reported to have spent just eighteen days and she left the people. This woman was said to have been seen off by the then Ohoro and his chiefs through a path followed by the strange woman. This woman commandeered *Boo* one of the chief hosts of Awon goddesses to remove the bush and the path (Sulaiman, 7).

On getting to a spot, she stopped and while bidding the Ohoro and his chiefs good-bye, she mentioned that her name was "Awon" and said that the chief would never see her again but she would give a charm to the chief so as to build a strong settlement provided they would call the settlement Shao-Awon. That was how the name was derived and named after the newly established settlement. She asked the chief that a day be set aside every year to commemorate her presence among them and that irrespective of religious affiliation, wedding should be done en-mass (Sulaiman, 8).

The Advent of Islam and Christianity in Shao

Islam entered in Shao in 1872. The touch bearer of Islam in Shao was *Baagan*Ayinla, an illustrious son of the town who reportedly came from Lagos after the demise of his father. He was initially a trader who had trade transactions with wealthy Muslims perhaps this influenced him to accept Islam. When he arrived Shao, he started his Islamic propagation work. He was able to carry his nephew Adeniran who also accepted Islam. These two adherents of Islam built the *gi-gi* mosque located at the Bolude quarter of the *Ode-Are* Ward Shao. *Baagan* Ayinla faced many hostilities from the people of the town who were idolaters at the time of introduction of Islam into the town (Saliman, 5).

But in tracing Islam into the town of Shao, Wole Oke attested to the fact that *Baagan* was the torch bearer of Islam in Shao, like the first account but the only contradiction was the time of inroad of Islam into the town which is suggested to be 1920. Fundamentally, another superior account stated that Shao people used to be idolaters before they were exposed to Islam.

This came about during the 19th century particularly, during the reign of the first Emir of Ilorin, Emir Abdulsalami 1831 – 1842. While it is not here to contest the superiority of Ilorin over Shao concerning Islamic entrenchment into Shao, there is need for further effort to elucidate and give proper account of Islam into Shao (Saliman, 13).

The development of Christianity in Yorubaland started in fifth decade of the 19th century. The first Christian missions were the Methodist in Abeokuta in 1842 led by Thomas Birch Freeman and the Church Missionary Society (C.M.S) in the same Abeokuta in 1843 championed by Henry Townsend. In 1860, the Baptist Thomas J. Bowen followed suit and built centres in Lagos. However, Yorubaland had missions presence before the coming of the Adventist Missions in 1914. In other words, other Christian missions predated the Seventh day Advents in the country. This ministry was led by Elder D. C. Babcock who arrived Nigeria through Lagos in 1914. He had worked in Sierra Leone in 1905 with Dauphin and S. Morgue. Babcock turned his attention northward and reached places as Jebba on the Niger River about 600 miles from the coast. Babcock made similar efforts at Erunmu, Lalupon 16 miles northeast of Ibadan.

The Seventh Day Adventists further carried their missionary works farther inland and founded their station at a placed called Shao in 1915. The new site was located seven miles away from Ilorin Emirate of Northern Nigeria. It must be stated that Babcock preferred to stay in Ilorin but he was not welcomed by the Emir then because Christianity then was suspected as trying to convert Muslims of the Northern region to the Christian faith. The Seventh Day Adventists Mission made effort to establish schools particularly Boarding Schools in Shao near Ilorin which later produced artisans. In a similar manner, the Sudan Interior Mission later to Evangelical Church of West Africa founded churches in Shao and build primary schools in Shao in the year 1962 (Agboola, 1 – 2).

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The Importance, Status and Prospect of Awon Mass-Marriage Festival in Shao

The day for which the festive preparations are usually done starts around 9am when the entire family of the *Iboo* of Shao. Chief Oyelowo Omirinde, pays a traditional homage to his counterparts in the Awon compound that houses the Awon shrine. The festival comes up either in October or the early part of November each year. During the period of any festival, as many as eighty and up to one hundred spinsters are married in the festival. Accordingly, the marriage day of the festival is not determined by any sole authority. Rather this comprises many participants, more importantly, the Awon priest known as *"Baba Alawon"* and the Iboo as the chief host (Oke, 96 – 97).

Thus, the mass wedding festival is a great unifying force among the people of Shao. It is the strong believe of the people especially the brides that any marriage contracted outside the Awon festival suffered two handicaps. One, that such marriage is not respected by the people and that it has no benediction of Awon and the ancestors of Shao. The mass marriage is economical too because parents preferred to send their daughters into wedlock than making prohibitive demands from the would-be in-laws. In some situations dowries are not taken at all, while in the cases where they are taken, they are just token amounts (*The Guardian*, 9).

It is true at least to some extent that the mass wedding is very rich in culture which the Shao people on one hand, and Nigeria generally cannot afford to loose to western bastardization. All the same, some modern-day religionists do not see anything sacrosanct about the festival. They portrayed it as being idolatry as a result of the Awon carvings. Furthermore, it may be mentioned that the mass marriage is not a check on polygamy, but it has positive effects on the divorce rate. Married women seem to co-operate with their husbands to prevent situation that may warrant divorce. The reason is simple. It will be difficult for them to be remarried through the mass wedding (Herald, 9).

The level of promiscuity, and its attendant problems are so high nowadays in Nigeria that the mass marriage is seen as

mere cosmetics and rituals. In the halcyon days, all girls and boys in the entire Yorubaland and Shao town in particular were expected to be virgin until the last day of their marriage. The *Alarina* (intermediary) will work towards the examination of the bride to ascertain whether she was a virgin or not. But in the present time the trend has changed. The level of Westernization cum civilization has brought some traits of infidelity into the scene. Both boys and girls 'go into each other' without any respect whatsoever to the traditional authority. This shameful act results into the unwanted pregnancies and of course sometimes untimely death of the teenagers. This has been a threat to the cherished traditional festival of Awon mass-marriage in Shao and Nigeria in general.

It is obvious that the festival might have attracted many important personalities both within and outside the town of Shao in particular. However, the festival could be turned into a gigantic state, national tourist attraction. This may be achieved if the State Culture gives a helping hand. It is hoped that with greater publicity and good organization, the Awon Mass-Marriage festival in Shao may well become a focal point of tourists every October of the year.

Table 1 Number of Women Married so far During Awon Festival in Shao 1958-1994

S/No	Year	Number Married
1.	1958	80
2.	1968	52
3.	1969	60
4.	1970	52
5.	1971	60
6.	1972	44
7.	1973	35
8.	1974	30
9.	1975	32
10.	1976	26
11.	1977	23
12.	1978	25
13.	1979	21
14.	1980	22
15.	1981	23
16.	1982	17
17.	1983	14
18.	1984	17
19.	1985	15
20.	1986	18
21.	1987	13
22.	1988	15
23.	1989	11
24.	1990	12
25.	1991	12
26.	1992	11
27.	1993	08
28.	1994	10

Source: Dr. Yahaya Eliasu, 2018.

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Mass-Marriage Festival in Shao: Islamic and Christian Viewpoints

The issue of polygamy in Yoruba land in particular remains an interesting one. Generally, many people have the believe that monogamy was a Christian missionaries importation during the active missionary endeavours in Africa. This was not so because it was based on European culture superimposed on the African converts. This polygamy was perceived as being traditional or barbaric, whereas monogamy was seen as modern and foreign institution. This perhaps was gradual beginning of conflict and rivalry between polygamy and monogamy. When the Christian missions started their works, it was difficult for them to permit certain traditional culture amongst which was the mass-marriage in Shao and in a general Yoruba society.

By 1888, for instance the earliest Anglican ruling was rendered at a place tagged Lambeth Conference where a decision was taken that anybody who engaged in mass-marriage or polygamy must not be baptized but his wives might be admitted. According to 1938 International Missionary Council, the church must affirm its insistence on monogamy. For this was not an issue to be resolved by the individual but through approval of God for the people he gave redemption hand in hand with purification through Christ.In the same vein, Islam allows plurality of marriage. However, this must not be done under strict and exceptional situation. Infact, in this situation, nobody should marry more than four wives without equal treatment of the wives (Doi, 255 – 256). The Qur'an says: *"If you fear you will not be able to do or deal justly with them, then marry one wife"*. If a Muslim marries more than one wife, he must ensure that he maintains absolute equality between them. He must provide for them and the children and must spend equal time with them particularly amongst his wives during conjugal relationship. The prophet was reported to have said in one of his prophetic sayings that:

> *"A man who marries more women than one and then does not deal justly with them will be resurrected with half of his faculties*

paralyzed"(Quran 4, V: 4).

In accordance with Islam it is fundamental to continue to preserve very high values through righteousness. Thus, permission to marry above one wife at the same time is a vital provision made particularly during emergency. This is particularly important in order to safe-guard our society against sexual promiscuity. The permission for this polygamy has been abused over years especially by some Muslims. This has been so because it has been used to satisfy sexual passion in accordance with the tradition of a particular society. Fundamentally, a large number of Muslims in Yorubaland have decided to marry more than one wife in line with the Yoruba tradition and not in conformity with religion. This may perhaps be true of Shao society that promote the plurality of marriage system in line with the traditional believe system without any law of Christianity and Islam guiding its operation. This brought many criticisms upon its operation in the town in the recent time.

Impact of Religion upon Shao Traditional Society

First and foremost the early missionaries had the feelings that the African was necessarily evil and armed with cruel and unreasonable method. Hence, he must be weaned from these attribute. The missionaries had the belief through their various experiences and observations that life itself did not appear clearer to him. In their own perceptions, ritual, murder, human sacrifices, cannibalistic activities were enough to throw away the entire system. Unlike the police that checked crimes that were repugnant to the law of justice, the missionaries were reputed to have developed requirement for entry into Christendom. Amongst such was the total alienation from customs, and initiations of various ceremonies which was considered very important in the development of African education. In addition, dancing a very significant aspect of aesthetics life, marriage ceremony and payment of dowry. Others were the polygamy which was very vital to the traditional African system, secret societies and indeed ancestor worship among other things considered sacrosanct with the system.

There were other areas of worship such as ancestor worship, witchcraft, and witch doctoring, nudity, semi-nudity,

African names and numerous funeral celebrations and ceremonies. Therefore, total rejection of the old order was a condition to the acceptability of the new religion. It was against this background that a spokesman for the International Missionary Council said this:

> *The missionary is a revolutionary and he has to be so, for to preach and plant Christianity means to make a frontal attack on the beliefs, the customs apprehensions of life and the world and by implication because tribal religious are primarily social realities on the social structures and bases of primate society. The missionary enterprise need not be ashamed of this, because colonial administrators, planters, merchants, western penetrations, etc, reform a much more severe and destructive attack (Coleman, 97).*

The contribution of this study is to validate the wedding festival as a practice that is still alive. However, the wedding is not a jamboree where men go and pick the women, they must have been contracted following traditional maternal rites. The celebrants only come out on the wedding day which is usually the grand finale for celebration. That does not stop the husband from contracting another bride in subsequent year but we may have an instance where two brides are given to marriage to one man in the festival. It is still being practiced up till today (Oral Evidence, 2020).

Conclusion

This work traced the history of religion and Shao *Awon* Festival. It is true that the two modern religions, namely, Christianity and Islam have brought many reforms, influences on Nigerians and Shao in particular. We are also aware of different condemnation made by the Christian mission and Islamic performance. They called our societies different names as cultic, barbaric, fetish after planting these famous religions on us. We must also be proud of our cultural heritage. For instance, the Shao Awon Marriage, has promoted unity in the Shao town. It is a ground for the preparation of motherhood and fatherhood.

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The festival is the story of a people preserving their traditional culture. Thus, Awon festival is strictly a cultural phenomenon and indeed the historical antecedents of the people. And this should be seen in the light of the people who cherished their cultural heritage and at the same time they are ready to preserve its sanctity. Although it is true that in the process of preserving the festival, it has run foul to some Western influences. All the same, the myth rather than reality and the circumstances that have surrounded the formation of the mass-marriage is still a bickering ground among erudite scholars.

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