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Toward Confluence of Yoruba and Christian Beliefs in Egúngún (Masquerade) and Father Christmas: A Comparative Symbolic Analysis

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Abstract In Africa and among the Yoruba Christians in particular, the orientation that there are divergences in their religious beliefs sometimes result to religious intolerance culminating to religious conflict. Therefore, this study investigated the beliefs on the *Babakérésì* (Farther Christmas) and *Egúngún* (Masquerade). *Egúngún*, is a religious event whereby, the spirit of the dead and ancestors interact with the living and Father Christmas is an annual Christian Festival. However, Farther Christmas, as a socio-religious event has not been related to any form of Yoruba *Egúngún*. This gap is filled by this study. This study employs cultural approach, which implies the social power that encodes culture in a society, using comparative method. Cultural and religious elements of *Egúngún*- the divinity of the ancestors, are compared with Nicholas and/or Santa Claus and Father Christmas to establish their relationship. It is found out that religious elements of *Egúngún* are related to Father Christmas and Nicholas and/or Santa Claus in symbolisms- the spirits of the dead, ancestors or saints manifest in human to bless the children. It is equally found out that, *Egúngún*, Nicholas and/or Santa Claus and Father Christmas are imitated, especially in voice by the traditional and Christians during Christmas and *Egúngún* festivals, apart from the fact that both festivals are celebrated annually. This study concludes that, there are convergences of beliefs on Father Christmas and *Egúngún* mediated by the spirit of the dead- ancestor inhibits in human-being. The two religions teach the same values in different modes and, therefore, the worshippers should tolerate one another by peaceful co-existence.

Keywords: *Egúngún*, Father Christmas, Christianity, *Ifá*, Catholics, religion, culture.

1. INTRODUCTION

In Africa and among the Yoruba in particular, the introduction of new religions majorly Christian and Islam have pose some challenges to the indigenous or cultural ways of life (Olupona 1999). This is the case with *Egúngún*, an indigenous Yoruba religion on the ancestor's festival celebrated in annual festivals. However, the advent of Christian religion

among the Yoruba Christians has introduced a new dimension to the understanding of the indigenous ways of life. The new religious teachings on Farther Christmas relegates and denigrates the religious values in *Egúngún*; believing that the two religious practices are parallel to each other. The investigation by this study on the symbolisms of *Egúngún* and Father Christmas would however, increase our understanding to the fact that both *Egúngún* and Father Christmas are in commentary relations.

Religion has been one of the influencing factors that precipitates conflict and unrest in Africa and the entire world. To the uninformed religious believers, the new religious rites such as Father Christmas is an acceptable form of religious festival at the expense of the indigenous form, forgetting that, without the old the new cannot emerge. As a result of the religious disparities created by the foreign missionaries, “there is an intellectual ferment and a clash of ideas between the advocates of traditional belief systems and the proponents of newer ones. The situation is often extremely complicated, because both traditionalists and modernizers are themselves divided on many points, while others favor various blends of the old and the new. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many western intellectuals thought these older faiths would simply die out as their adherents came to recognize the ‘obvious’ superiority of western creeds” (Lenski & Lenski 1987, p. 380). Relating this opinion to the presence of Farther Christmas among the Yoruba Christians, there is need for re-orientation among the Christian believers to the effect that both old and new are related. It has been observed that “throughout history, human societies have established and maintained relations with one another” (Lenski & Lenski 1987, p. 51). Meaning that, relating the new cultural (religious) form to the old- indigenous form as undertaken by this study is not strange. The level of human relation with one another is activated by various cultural activities and events. Therefore, accommodating the old and new can bring peaceful and lasting co-existence towards sustainable development.

The aim of this study was to establish that the Yoruba *Egúngún* is related to Farther Christmas. The objectives of the study were to examine how the spirit of Nicholas and/or Santas is being celebrated in Farther Christmas of the present time and how the spirit of the dead- ancestor is being celebrated in *Egúngún*; to relate the use of costume as a symbol of the presence of *Egúngún* and red cloth on Farther Christmas; to relate the audience of *Egúngún aláre* or *onijó*-entertainer Masquerade and Nicholas, Santa Claus and Farther Christmas with the love of the children and to relate change of voice from human to *Egúngún* and human to Father Christmas

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

Background to *Egúngún* and Farther Christmas

Egúngún is the “*oriṣà* who symbolizes all of the dead ancestors of a lineage” (Simpson, p. 49). The history of *Egungun*¹ as one of the major or universal Yoruba divinities can be traced back to the time immemorial; when the divinities are believed to have descended from heaven to the surface of the earth. The period is believed to be close to the time of creation because, the Yoruba divinities played active roles in creation (Adeoye 1985). Therefore, the period predates the period of literacy. It is through *Ifá* literary corpus² that the Yoruba ancient histories including divinities and creation are evinced.

The history of *Egúngún* starts with the memory of *Lágbóókùn* who is believed to be the *Egúngún* divinity. His memory is kept “alive” by the followers and worshippers till today among the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria. With the “departure” of *Egúngún*- *Lágbóókùn*, the eldest son, *Ológbòjò* became the first human *Egúngún*. This is why Yoruba people say “*Ológbòjò ni baba Eégun.*”³ That is, *Ológbòjò* is the father of Masquerades. *Lágbóókùn* is *Egúngún* progenitor, while *Ológbòjò* was first human *Egúngún*. This means, *Egúngún* is more associated with the male gender. The *Egúngún*'s guide is known as *Alágbàáá*. A man puts on costume- *ẹ̀lúkú Eégún* “Masquerade’s cloth” which

¹ A Masquerade

² *Ifá* literary corpora are historical mythical, philosophical, ideological, social and religious documents rendered by *Ifá* priest. It contains sixteen major chapters with numberless or uncountable verses that relate to all human, non-human and supernatural histories, including God’s relationship with all creatures.

³ Ibid

“transforms” him to a divinity-being. Any *Egúngún* worshipper under the cover of this cloth is believed to symbolized an ancestor; believing that, an ancestor has come on a visit to the earth. Respects and honors due to divinities are accorded to the human- *Egúngún*. “Egúngún ni àwọn Yorùbá npè ní ‘Ará-òrùn-kinkin.’ Ìgbàgbọ̀l àwọn Yorùbá nipa òkú òrùn nipé ẹ̀límí wọn kò jìnà púpọ̀ sí ayé àti pé nwọn le mú wọn wá si ayé” (Daramola & Jeje, p. 265). That is, *Egúngún* is regarded as a visitor from heaven- the sacred one from heaven.⁴ The Yorùbá believe that, the spirits of the dead are not far from the earth, and they can be invited by the living, that is on a visit. Therefore, *Egúngún* festival is one of annual events set aside to commemorate the dead- ancestors. This event creates an avenue for continuity of existence, interaction between the living and the dead that brings communion⁵ between the past and the present among the Yoruba.

Like human-beings, there are different human nature or character among the ancestors, which brings about different types of *Eégún* among the Yoruba; depending on the *Eégún* and the followers- which may be family or community. For example, *Olólù* is popular and associated with Ibadan, Oyo State of Nigeria, while *Gelede* is popular among the Egbádò of Ògùn State of Nigeria. Some *Eégún*⁶ are known for entertainment: *Eégún aláré*, magic performer: *Eégún Onídán*, trouble maker: *Eégún jàndúkú* et cetera (Adeoye 1985, p.138). There is also *Eégún Alágbó* as contains in *Ifá-Ọfún* corpus; owns by the hunters (Odegbola 2014, p. 775). However, the type of *Egúngún* examines by this study is *Eégún Onijó*- Masquerade for entertainment and dance. This type of *Egúngún* is associated with the children with which Father Christmas who engages in dance among the children.

Among the Yoruba people of Southwestern Nigeria, Father Christmas is called *Baba Kérésì*. The history of Father Christmas will be incomplete without the history of Saint Nicholas and Santa Claus who are believed to have given “give birth to” or “metamorphosed to” Father Christmas.

The American Santa Claus, the most famous Christmas gift-bringer, is only 200 years old. This Christmas figure has now become popular all over the world eclipsing other figures including the British Father Christmas. This name “Santa Claus” evolved from the Dutch use of the name St Nicholas (270-346). The Dutch used “Sinter Klaas” as a shortened form of “Saint Nikolaas” (i.e. Dutch words for Saint Nicholas). Parallel to the American Santa Claus, there are similar Christmas figures in other parts of the world; they are Father Christmas figures, Christmas papa, Saint Nicholas or St Nikolaas, Sinterklaas, Kris Kringle, Pere Noel, Baba Noel, Joulupukki, Babbo Natale, Weihnachtsmann, Saint Basil and Father Frost (Kizhakkeyil 2009, p. 36).

Saint Nicholas who is known for his generosity to the children “though any documents from the time of his actual life have been lost to time and the general chaos the Roman Empire found itself in at that time” (Sullivan 2018, p. 2). A story has it that he performed miracle by bringing three dead children back to life again. “Nicholas, seeing through this masquerade, made the sign of the cross over the pickled children, and brought them back to life. This story was so popular in the Middle Ages that the children began appearing in his iconography, forever linking the saint with the protection and love of children” (Sullivan 2018, p. 2). As a result of Nicholas generosity and kindness coupled with the power to perform miracles, he became a “celebrated Saint”, although, challenged by the “Protestant Reformation kicked in, the celebration of saints as a whole began to decline in those regions of Europe which had broken away from the true faith” (Sullivan 2018, p. 2). However, “while reverence for St. Nicholas persisted in the Catholic world” (Sullivan 2018, p. 2) the event of celebrating Nicholas was shifted to the Christmas period generally known for the period of the birth of Jesus Christ and the giving of gifts to the children. This happens,

⁴ All the body of *Egúngún* is usually covered in cloth- *Egúngún* costume, believing that, the dead must not be physically seen. The costume serves as a veil that keeps the face and nakedness of the dead covered.

⁵ A spiritual interaction.

⁶ The same as *Egúngún*. This is sometimes written as a result of some phonological processes that have taken place in the production of the name.

As Europe became Christian and Christmas replaced the pagan winter festivals, several pagan elements lingered on in the Christian celebration as well. By celebrating Christmas at the same time as the traditional winter solstice festivals, Church leaders increased the chances for Christmas to be popularly embraced. But it became difficult for them to direct a celebration devoid of pagan remnants. By the Middle Ages, Christianity had, for the most part, replaced pagan religion. At Christmas, believers attended church and then celebrated raucously in a drunken, carnival-like atmosphere similar to today's *Mardi Gras* (Kizhakkeyil 2009, p. 5, p. 184).

This results to creating an innovation “to produce a new figure of Christmas, Santa Claus. An anglicization of the Dutch *Sinter Klaas*, a Father Christmas-like figure known among Dutch Americans at the time, this new iteration was divested of any religious connotations, and existed solely as an embodiment of the new meaning of the holiday” (Sullivan 2018, p. 2.) It is, however, observed that, events on Saint Nicholas, Santa Claus and Father Christmas are never supported, reported or recorded in the bible and therefore, can be regarded as a social matter; nonetheless, the association of Saint Nicholas, Santa Claus and Father Christmas and his influence on the religious life of the Catholics in particular and Christianity in general cannot be overemphasized.

The period of celebration is “when people expected the arrival of longer days and shorter nights after the winter solstice in the Northern Hemisphere. It seems that the early Church introduced the Christmas celebration in order to entice pagan Romans to become Christians without surrendering their own winter celebrations. Since several prominent gods and goddesses of fertility, love and war, *Sol Invictus*, Ishtar and Mithra, had their birthdays celebrated on or around 25 December, the Church started the celebration of Jesus birthday as Christmas on the same day. This helped to gradually replace the pagan celebration (Kizhakkeyil 2009, p. 174).

The advent of Christianity in Yoruba communities has, however, made them canvass that their belief on Farther Christmas is superior to the indigenous belief on *Egúngún*. This belief spreads to some other foreign religions such as Islam and Buddhism in addition to Christianity among Africans in general. As a result of the presence of the new religions, “there were a number of important developments in the religious sphere. The most important by far was the emergence and spread of three new religions, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. Each proclaimed a *supernatural or universal faith* and each succeeded in creating a community of believers that transcended societal boundaries. In the older religions, people's beliefs and loyalties were determined by the accident of birth. Where one lived determined the god or gods one worshipped, for the prevailing view was that there were many gods and that, like kings, each had his own people and territory” (Lenski & Lenski 1987, pp. 195&6).

Cultural Studies

In order to accommodate different multidisciplinary knowledge in Father Christmas and *Egúngún*, cultural approach is apt because, cultural studies are contemporary interdisciplinary field of academic study that focuses on understanding the social power encoded in religious text or culture. Because of its varied and broadening scope of knowledge, cultural studies have no specific critical methodology but borrows from some intellectual tools that are suitable to the analysis being carried out (Kennedy & Gioia 2007). That is, unlike the other critical approaches, “cultural criticism (or cultural studies) does not offer a single way of analyzing literature. No central methodology is associated with cultural studies. The term *cultural studies* refer to a relatively recent interdisciplinary field of academic inquiry. This field borrows methodologies from other approaches to analyze a wide of cultural products and practice A single approach will miss too much; will overlook important aspects of culture not perceptible to that particular angle of vision. A multiple approach will pick up an insight here and a piece of knowledge there and more or culture will enter into the inquiry” (Kennedy & Gioia 2007, pp. 665-6). It is believed that, an approach that has broad perspectives like cultural studies will be relevant to better analyze the cultural and religious elements being investigated by this study.

Cultural field was first defined by the Centre for Contemporary Studies, Birmingham University, Britain in 1964 as a graduate programme to expand literary approaches to wider perspectives of historical, cultural and political issues. Raymond Williams (1921-1983), a Welsh socialist of the centre was of the view that; literature and works of arts cannot

be separated “from other kind of social practice” (Kennedy & Gioia 2007, p. 665) Religion here is believed to be a social practice that relates to the cultural field being expanded by Raymond Williams. He called the approach cultural materialism which was later described as cultural criticism and cultural studies. The study focuses on the Marxist and Feminist criticism along the techniques of historical criticism with political analysis based on social class, race and gender issues.

Although, in theory, cultural studies’ critic might employ any methodology but in practical sense, it lends from the “deconstruction Marxist analysis, gender criticism, race theory, and psychology” (Kennedy & Gioia 2007, pp. 665). Among questions that are of concern for cultural approach are: “what class created a work of art and what class (or classes) served as its audience” (Kennedy & Gioia 2007, p. 666). Work of art or cultural activity is to be observed and analyzed along with performers and the audience. For instance, the *Egúngún* and Father Christmas are to be related along with the children who are the audience.

Among the many things that cultural studies borrowed from gender criticism and race theory is a concern with social inequality between sexes and races. It seeks to investigate how these inequalities have been reflected in the texts of a historical period of a society. The “social inequality between sexes” being canvassed by the cultural approach advocates is relevant to examine *Egúngún* and Farther Christmas festivals as there are gender and social inequality in *Egúngún* and Father Christmas because, both are majorly male gender bound⁷ activities, especially among the Yoruba people of Nigeria.

Method

Comparative method was used to relate the symbolisms of *Egúngún* to Father Christmas. It has been established by sociologists that,

“comparison is basis of all scientific knowledge. A scientific understanding of anything depends on comparisons of it with other things. To understand a pine tree, we have to compare it with other kinds of trees, and then compare trees with other kinds of plants, and plants with other forms of life, noting the similarities and differences involves in such comparison and using them to draw inferences about their causes and consequences. Only in this way we can begin to understand what a pine tree is and why it is as it is” (Lanski & Lenski, 1987, pp. 3 -4).

By comparing the symbolisms of *Egúngún* and Father Christmas, their relationship would be established. Two or more things including human-beings and cultural events are described as related by shared cultural elements. The relative factor(s) or elements may take complete or partial forms. In a complete form, all the related elements are realized in the other. In the partial form however, there are selected elements in the other.

3. RESULTS

The result of this study validates that there is synergy in the religious symbolisms of *Egúngún* and Father Christians. The belief of the Christians generally and in particular the Catholics on Father Christmas are epitomized in the Yoruba belief on *Egúngún*. The significance of relationship between *Egungun* and Father Christmas demonstrate that the two religious events or festivals have the same goals in common There is partial formation of the new (Farther Christmas from the old (*Egúngún*). The relationships between the old and the new form are described along costumes used by *Egúngún* and Farther Christmas. The use of costumes- *eku Egúngún* and Father Christmas is to prevent the faces of *Egúngún* and Father Christmas from being known or exposed to the children in particular and the public at large. The difference between the two costumes is that, while the color of *Egúngún* costume can be of different colors, that of Father Christmas costume is mostly in red color. Likewise, *Egúngún* entertains the children freely without payment. However, some payments are made for Father Christmas to bless and offer gifts to the children. Therefore, one can say that Farther Christmas event is commercially induced. That is, children who are unable to pay may be denied of visiting or seeing Farther Christmas. This is why a place is set aside as grotto (usually closed) for Father Christmas,

⁷ *Egúngún* and Father Christmas Performers are usually males. For example, no female can be Father Christmas

so as to prevent those that haven't paid from being entertained. However, *Egúngún* is not seen from *igbàlẹ̀*- the shrine and to the shrine where, his final movement ends. There is also relationship in the voice of both *Egúngún* and Father Christmas. This is done to imitate the voice of the ancestor and martyr with the belief that it is not human-beings performing but the supernatural-beings. Both *Egúngún* and Father Christmas perform by changing their natural voice. This is done so that children and the entire public will not know the person under the costumes since human-beings can be recognized or identified by voice. There is also relationship in the symbolisms of the outcomes of *Egúngún* and Father Christmas performances. To offer gifts either in form of substance or blessing in prayers and miracle performance. The entertainment can be in an open place and can be by moving around the streets or communities. However, it is more convenient in an open place to give gifts and to individually receive blessings by the children.

4. DISCUSSION

As explained earlier, the belief surrounding *Egúngún* festival is premised on the interaction between the dead and the living. During the period of *Egúngún* festival, someone⁸ who puts on a *Egúngún* costume is believed to be one of the ancestors. He dresses and comes out of *igbàlẹ̀*.⁹ His coming out from *igbàlẹ̀* is signaled by someone calling him three times; and as he calls

Egúngún the third time and Egúngún answers: Or ! Orr!! Qrrr !!! ... The man impersonating Egúngún emerges from the shrine room wearing the costume...and talks in a queer voice. He is not possessed, but the uninitiated think that it is the voice of an ancestor. With the coming of the answers, the drumming and the dancing begin" (Simpson 1980 p. 51).

Egúngún's appearance to the public is believed to be the appearance of the dead- ancestor. As a result of this belief, all regard, respect and honor are accorded him. Voice sound of *Egúngún* above is imitated by the voice of Father Christmas as coded in poem entitled *A visit from St Nicholas* (also known as *The Night Before Christmas* or *'Twas the Night Before Christmas*) throws further light to the relationship between St Nicholas or Santa Claus, Father Christmas and the *Egúngún*.

Santa lives at the North Pole.
...Santa comes but once a year.
...All Santa can offer is HO HO HO
(Kizhakkeyil 2009, p. 40).

This is done to pretend that the ancestor or saint is speaking. That is, the speaker will not be recognize or known by his voice. By this strange voice the ancestor (in the case of *Egúngún*) and saint (in the case of Father Christmas), "their reality and presence in the community are duly acknowledged and honored" (Ejizu 2007, p. 9).

Although, the ancestors are dead, the Yoruba believe that, death is not an end to relationship and interaction; as there are channels or media of communication and interaction between the dead and the living. That is, "death is merely a veil as the dead still interact in some inexplicable ways with the living" (Adetugbọ 2001, p. 7). To Africans, ancestors are not dead, buried and gone forever. They inhabit the spiritual world and still take active interest in the affairs of their families. There is strong belief that physical death does not put an end to existence. In short, they act as intermediaries between their living descendants and the *òrìṣà* or *Ọlọrun*. Among the Yoruba people, it is believed that the present generation is linked with the past, by the celebration of *Egúngún* festival. The ancestors or *orìṣas* are 'gap bridging' between the living and the dead Yorùbá ancestors with the belief that "physical death does not put an end to existence" (Kayode 1984, p. 5).

⁸ The person is supposed to be in the status- height, fat/thin of the real dead ancestor.

⁹ The groove or shrine.

Although, there are other channels that allow for accessing the ancestors;¹⁰ *Egúngún* festival is unique; because the period of the festival is devoted and dedicated to all the ancestors. ¹¹ However, *Egúngún* that is associated with the children with which Father Christmas is related is majorly examined in this study. The appearance of *Egúngún* is applauded by the children who followed him around to be blessed by prayers. “Àwọn Ọmodé yòò máa sá telé àwọn egúngún kiri...nìpa mí mú Egúngún jáde bá yí ní àwọn Yorùba nfi hàn pé ibáṣepọ̀ kò le tán l'áàrin ara ọ̀run àti aráyé” (Daramola & Jeje 1967, p. 265). That is, the children will be following the masquerade about... by making the masquerade to come out like this, the Yoruba belief about an unending relationship between the dead and the living is established.

One of the peculiarities of *Egúngún* is the possession of supernatural power. Children are one of the beneficiaries, for the curing of illness, both rather common reasons for seeking help from the *òrìṣà*. If there is a pestilence, for example, smallpox, or a large number of sudden deaths or a high rate of infant mortality in a village, offerings are given to *Egúngún* and the fury of the disaster subsides...Some *Egúngún* worshippers believe that a sick child can be cured by stirring a cup of water with *egúngún* emblem and giving it to the child to drink. Or they may ask *Egúngún* to come out from the shrine and cure the illness by rubbing the child with his costume [in author's translation: (Simpson 1980, p. 49).

It is clear that, *Egúngún* is a lover of children. He ensures their good health and well-being. In the end, the children solicit for the protection and preservation of their lives from *Egúngún* to witness another year celebration.

Àwa omọ ẹ ni a pé o; a wá lati ẹ odún ẹ!/We, your children, gather here for your annual ceremony

Màà ẹ kí a pa odún ẹ;/allow us to live so that we may perform your annual ceremony every year.

Màà ẹ kí ọdún ó pa àwa náà ẹ!/Do not let us die during the year.

Ọdún kii pa ọdún ẹ run!/Those who give annual offerings do not willingly abolish the practice. (in author's translation, Simpson 1980, p. 50).

Till the present time, *Egúngún* is celebrated in a festive and colorful mood. Despite the “invasion of foreign religion, mostly Christianity and Islam, the Yoruba kept their beliefs system alive.¹²

That is, the Africans in general and among the Yoruba in particular, find an equivalent religious practice when the missionaries condemn their traditional religions in a modified form such as being observed with Father Christmas and *Egúngún*. In this situation, motifs of some indigenous belief systems as enshrined in the divinities are “transported or transferred” into their new religious way of life. This was the case during the colonial era, when the Christianity and Islamic religions were launched in Yorùbá communities. During this period, the “missionaries were determined to change indigenous institutions and behavior and thus saw themselves as Christian agents of civilization. This conclusion meant that Africans had to be thought different values, goals, and modes of behavior” (Harris 1972, pp. 202-4). They rather resisted or rejected the adoption of foreign religion than to absolutely forsake their indigenous belief systems. They were not to be swayed or dissociated from their belief system, *Egúngún* in this case.

To the Yorùbá, their religion and culture cannot be mortgaged on “new way of life” or civilization. The missionaries that brought and thought or imposed new belief systems on Africans have forgotten that, “in primitive society culture and civilization are peculiarly interdependent and inseparable. This harmony is destroyed when an alien technology is imposed on them. It destroys the media through which their native culture expressed itself. Occasionally this may

¹⁰ An ancestor may be consulted by an individual or family on the instruction of *Ifá* oracle outside of *Egúngún* festival.

¹¹ One may be instructed or directed by *Ifá* to offer sacrifice to the ancestor or *Egúngún* to appease him on certain matter and individual or family *Egúngún* can be approached as the situation demanded.

¹² See Clarke (1972, pp. 276-286)

happen through the direct introduction of an alien *culture* possessing higher prestige, as, for example, through missionaries, but generally the native is able to resist this impact” (Maciver & Page 1950, p. 577).

The period of *Egúngún* is known for the commercial benefits as many market products are sold with marginal profit. People from different hamlets and villages come to towns for the celebration. In the contemporary Yoruba societies, publicities are made on the radio and television houses in regards to the festivals. Peoples’ economic condition improve. There is food security in the society during the period. This is corroborated with the Yoruba proverb that, “*òdún eégún fẹrẹ ẹ tán ti ọmọ Alágbàá náà yòò ra àkàrà jẹ ẹkọ.*” That is, *egúngun* festival will soon be over when the son of Masquerade’s guide will also buy fried local cake to eat palp. This is because, various types of food items especially, palp and local fried cake are offered to the Masquerade as a mark of honor for the *Egúngún*.

Among the Yoruba, the devotees of *Egúngún* direct their attentions to a collective will of the ancestors rather than to personal ones. Spirits of the dead play an active role in the daily life of the living they are sought for protection, guidance and are being consulted via means of divination. “*Egúngún ni àwọn Yorùbá npè ní ‘Ará-ọ̀run-kinkin.’ Igbàgbọ̀ àwon Yorùbá nipa òkú ọ̀rún nipé ẹ̀límí wọn kò jìnà púpọ̀ sí ayé àti pé nwon le mú wọn wá si ayé*” (Daramola & Jeje 1967, p. 265). That is, the dead, the sacred one from heaven. The belief of the Yorùbá is that, the spirits of the dead are not far from the earth, and they can be brought to the earth. *Egúngún* and *Orò*¹³ are “most important deities bearing directly on the government of the town are *Orò* and *Egúngún*” (Clarke 1972, p. 282). *Orò* and *Egúngún* are Yoruba ancestors’ cults that can be referred to as ‘twin brothers’ both manifest themselves in annual masquerader festivals. *Orò* and *Egúngún* are the “most important deities bearing directly on the government of the town” (Clarke, 1972, p. 282).

Cultural knowledge explores the impact of psychology in human practice or activities. Psychologically, the belief on both *Egúngún* and Farther Christmas is the reincarnation of spirit. That is, the spirit of the dead can live and interact with the living. It is the belief of the Yoruba that since the soul of man is immortal, it is capable of returning to earth through rebirth. That is, “reincarnation is a royal route by which departed ancestors return to earth” (Fatokun 2005, p. 134). Reincarnation has been declared by the Catholics as unscriptural, heresy and unbiblical. However, the concept “seems to be gaining a new popularity. Today, reincarnation– the belief that, after bodily death, souls are reborn in yet another body–has returned as a New Age fad, backed by marketing hype. And the doctrine is spreading so quickly that it’s raising the eyebrows of many in the Church” (Aquilina 2017, p. 1). It has however been suggested that criticism against a concept such as reincarnation should be based on biblical references (Okewande 2020).

Like *Egúngún*, image of the dead, Nicholas and/or Santa Claus is made and believed to have come back to bless the children; which eventually manifest in the image of what is globally known among Christians and Catholics as Father Christmas. As in *Egúngún* Festival, Farther Christmas is believed to have visited the world to bless the children annually.

The legend of Santa Claus goes back to St. Nicholas, the bishop of Myra, a location in modern Turkey. It is said that he frequently visited the countryside helping the poor and the sick. In the course of time, his popularity grew and he became the protector of children and sailor. In 1809 Washington Irving popularized Sinter Klaas (Santa Claus) stories by referring to him as the patron saint of New York in his book the *History of New York*. Against the British influence of Father Christmas, the popular image of Santa Claus was created by the German-American cartoonist Thomas Nast (1840-1902); by the 1880s Nast’s portrait of Santa evolved into the form that we know today as Santa Claus. Advertiser standardized the image of Santa Claus in the 1920s. In Latin American countries such as Venezuela and Columbia, people hold the tradition that Santa Claus gives toys to Baby Jesus and it is Infant Jesus who distributes them to children in their home (Kizhakkeyil 2009, p. 37).

¹³ A Yoruba twin divinity with *Egúngún*. The divinity makes use of wild-wind to work. It is a male gender divinity. No female can see *Orò* without the evil repercussions.

The above opinion clearly shows that, Like *Egúngún*, Santa Claus exist in form of an image designed by a Cartoonist and the period is not as close to the ancient time when legend and myths are reference as historical documents because of lack of accurate literacy. For example, myth is “a concept of the human mind from earliest times” (Mark 2018, p. 1). In myths, the hero, divinity or ancestor’s “actions are set in an earlier world, when the world was different from what it is today, or in another world such as the sky or underworld” (Bascom 1970, pp. 361-2). It is equally observed in this study that Farther Christmas is a human symbolism of Nicholas or Santa Claus just as *Egúngún* is an image of the dead ancestor. The perceived individuals (*Egúngún* and Farther Christmas) in this study that differentiate the person (St. Nikolas or Santa Claus or Father Christmas) from “ordinary human-being” is the change in voice, so as not to recognize the person “disguising” and the cloth- costume he puts on from head to toes, fingers and the eyes. This is done, so as not to have the belief that it is the St. Nikolas or Santa Claus under the costume.

The psychological notion of the belief behind the *Egúngún* is extended to the notion behind the Father Christmas. Like the *Egúngún* that comes out from the *igbàlẹ̀*- the shrine, Father Christmas comes from groove, popularly known as grotto. It is the image of the disguised St. Nicholas and Santa Claus is put on. Those that know the man under the Father Christmas dare say it, so that, the psychological belief behind the event will be kept. If the existence of St. Nicholas and Santa Claus is incontestable then, the popular symbolism of Father Christmas with them is contestable. The opinions of some Catholics are controversial on Nicholas, Santas and Father Christmas as x-rayed from these controversial opinions.¹⁴ No doubt that, relations between Nicholas and Santa Claus or Father Christmas can be spiritually accounted for; which is the hallmark of *Egúngún*.

In the Yoruba religious belief, the divinities descended on the surface of the earth; so they ascended back to heaven. As a result of this, there is no spot where any of the divinity was buried, they can only apotheosized. Again, the annual coming back or visitation of Father Christmas can only be spiritually accounted for as every human-being is fallible. Nicholas or Santa have died (if they ever existed). The spirit behind their belief is only being celebrated among Christians in general and in particular, the Catholics. The sounds of voice in both *Egúngún* and the Santa (as indicated above) are related. To the Yoruba people, the voice of the dead should be different from the living. Again, this is another symbolism. Father Christmas will always vary his voice in addressing the children so as not to recognize the man pretending or disguising to be St. Nicholas or Santa Claus. This is related to the Yoruba belief on *Egúnnngún* which is premised on the idea that the ancestors’ spirits commune with the living; eventhough, they are physically absent they however, interact with the living-beings spiritually. Likewise, the central belief on Father Christmas interactions with the children. That is, ancestors are organized “into human beings within the context of cultural livelihood and institutions” (Madubuiké, 2005, p. 330).

As explained about the Yoruba *Egúngún onijó* or *aláre*, the audience are mostly dominated by the children who are either blessed in prayers or meet their medical or spiritual needs. The symbolism of which *Egúngún* is believed to represent- the spiritual or supernatural-being. As a result of the perceived relations between the Yoruba *Egúngún* and Father Christmas, children are the target audience of Father Christmas who is to bless the children in prayers and in offering of gifts; believing that, such prayers and gifts are divine- which is believed to be the symbolism of Father Christmas. The offering of gifts is accounted for by legend; “the tradition linked to the legends about the charitable acts of St Nicholas created the Christmas custom hanging stockings during Christmas for receiving gifts from St Nicholas” (Kizhakkeyil 2009, p. 38). Both *Egúngún* and Father Christmas perform in the public (along the roads or streets⁰ and in an open square for spectators especially, the children to be entertained by their performances.

Another area of relationship between *Egúngún* and Father Christmas is the period of the festivals. As explained earlier on the period of *Egúngún* festival as a period of economic drive. Food items are available in quantities as it falls within harvesting period. The same is observed during the Christmas period, when Father Christmas (St Nicholas or Santa Claus) is celebrated¹⁵. It can be inferred from the opinion above that; the divinities are associated with the period of the

¹⁴ See McGrady (2018, p. 2).

¹⁵ It is observed that the period of Christmas celebration was not in December as is globally observed today.

celebration of Christmas. This might also inform the yearly coming of Santa from Northern Poles to the belief on Father Christmas.

5. CONCLUSION

This study found that the concept of reincarnation that has become controversial among Catholics in particular and Christians in general, with incarnation associated with the celebration of Father Christmas investigation of Yoruba indigenous belief about *Egúngún* (that spirits of the dead or ancestors can interact and be celebrated by the living) has mediated in the controversial belief. That is, if anything is to be celebrated in St Nicholas or Santa Claus or in Father Christmas it must be the "spiritual-being", which is the central African theological philosophy behind *Egúngún*. The presence of the spirits of St Nicholas and Santa Claus as being "transferred" or "transported" into Father Christmas is a concept derived from and equated with *Egúngún* among the Yoruba; as the celebration of Father Christmas by the Catholics and Christians have not been substantiated from the bible. One can say that the activities and symbolism of Father Christmas are rooted in indigenous religious festivals. This study concludes that African religious practices and events such as exemplified by *Egúngún* have greater influence on some Christian practices such as Father Christmas on the one hand. On another hand, Farther Christmas is related to *Egúngún* as encapsulated by this study. Adoption of African religion, especially, the celebration of the divinities such as *Egúngún* being related to the celebration of some Saints "transforms Catholic ceremony into a veritable African event" (Nescimento do Abdias 1978, p. 78), that can best be described as "African Catholicism."

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Data Availability

Data used for this research is available upon request from the corresponding author.

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