THE DIALOGUE WITH THE LIVING:
BIOGRAPHY IN THE ORDER OF A CHRISTIAN'S
FUNERAL SERVICE IN YORUBA SOCIETY

BY

OLATUNDE BAYO LAWUYI
(Oyo State University of Technology, Nigeria)

This article intends to fulfil two aims. The first is to present a biography and provide a short analysis of it, with a view to assisting other scholars in the use of this hitherto unexplored source of data. The biography that is analysed is a written document, part of an elaborate ritual that celebrates the rites de passage of the dead. It is more than simply a vehicle for the dissemination of knowledge, it is also a document of religious value: the concern is for bringing religious values and ideals to the surface of the mind, for integrating them consciously with the personality, in a more explicit and more personal way which can be regarded as a documentation of a certain attitude towards death.

The biography has a narrative structure; one which implies two coordinated accounts: one, of the beginning, the course and the ending of human development; the other, of the nature of the cultural order. The cultural order relates inwards towards the main parts of the text and outwards towards the social context within which the text was produced. Far from being secondary narratives about data on self or collective development the structure of the narrative itself establishes what is to count as data; what is to be taken as certain in order to develop a coherent account of lives and technical practices.¹

The second aim of the paper, thus, is to explore the relationship between religion and life history, with particular emphasis on religion as the ‘other’, the significant interlocutor, whom the self addresses. Religion here refers to faith in the ‘other world’, a belief that personal drives and initiatives relate to salvational doctrines of the great world historical religions. The specificities of a cultural tradition, therefore, are analysed in terms of a religious tradition.
While the study of Yoruba death has already been developed in a number of important directions, we propose a somewhat different approach to its study.

The approach is prompted by the following questions: What are the socio-cultural variables underlying the conception of a ‘good’ life? What is the link between this good life and religion? Is it institutional, as for instance church religiosity, or instanced by a particular religious vision, as for example evident in Judaism and Christianity with their stress on an other-worldly future, an *Endzeit* of ‘absolute perfection still to be experienced’? The development of this approach has two advantages. First, it provides insight into the process of ‘indigenization’ of the world religions. Second, the way religion may control mood and disposition towards the socio-cultural order can be grasped from what is essentially held as the link between ‘good life’ and religion.

The data for this paper were 30 Orders of Funeral Services collected from colleagues, friends, and relatives. There were no restrictions as to sects of religion, age of the deceased, professionalism, or town of origin. The bulk of the data, however, was of Protestants—Baptists, Methodists and Anglicans. This is not to say that the use of Order of Funeral Service is limited to Protestants. It just happened that many of the colleagues, friends, and relatives were Protestants. Even then, the trivial way in which the ‘Order’ is held, not as an historical or religious material, but as a species of junk literature, precluded many people from keeping their copies. As soon as the church ceremony is over, the copy collected may be destroyed. Several factors are responsible for this action. First, the Order contains some set phrases, prayers, and music which makes an ‘Order’ just like any other in the people’s collection. Second, materials for consumption, eating, are wrapped in any available papers and the pages of the Order come in handy. Third, the printing is sometimes so hastily done that the material itself is unreadable. Fourth, most people consider it as informational material and would want to believe that once it had been read, it has been digested. There is no need to make other references to it since, presumably, it has no academic value. In contrast, those who object to any or most of these attitudes to the ‘Order’ keep them as souvenirs. An example of biography in an Order of Funeral Ceremony is this.