DADAKUADA: THE CRISIS OF A TRADITIONAL ORAL GENRE IN A MODERN ISLAMIC SETTING

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1 Introduction

African traditional genres today are in a crisis of survival. Like traditional African religions, they are being confronted by the proselytising religions of Islam and Christianity, and are gradually being metamorphosed according to new models. One such genre is Dadakuada, a traditional form of oral art in Ilorin, which originated from Egungun, the Yoruba masquerade cult. Today, however, Dadakuada hardly possesses any trace of its origin. The Dadakuada poets now deny their roots, in an effort to conform to orthodox Islamic values which are dominant in Ilorin. My intention in this article, therefore, is to examine the position of Dadakuada in the context of the modern Islamic city of Ilorin.

2 The Origin of Ilorin

Ilorin was founded in the early 17th Century by Ojo-Isekuse, a Yoruba hunter. One account says he came from Oyo-Ile in the former Oyo empire. Another account, however, insists that Ojo was from Gembe-Ilotta, near Eji. Because of the persistent wars in Oyo-Ile, more people migrated from there to Ilorin, making Ilorin their permanent home. Others—Nupe, Hausa, Fulani and Malian migrants—came from the far North to settle in Ilorin later in the century. During these times, cults of Yoruba deities were well-established. The first set of Northern immigrants, who were Muslims, then introduced Islam to Ilorin. There were many Yoruba converts, and a Yoruba Muslim leader, Solagberu, was popular around the area of the town called Oke-suna.

The next phase in the history of Islam in Ilorin was the establishment of an Islamic emirate system in 1823 by Shehu Alimi.
According to one account, Alimi came as an army commander of Dan Fodio's jihad movement to conquer Ilorin for Islam. According to another, Alimi had settled in Yoruba towns around Oyo, and was invited by a warrior in Ilorin called Afonja to bring his soldiers to help him bring down the Alafin of Oyo. This was promptly done, and the people of Ilorin were impressed by this singular successful action of Alimi and his Muslim army. Later, however, friction developed when Alimi tried to convert Afonja to Islam. Afonja was then eliminated and Alimi's first son, Abdul Salam, became Emir in 1823, marking the establishment of an Emirate Council in Ilorin. It was after the emergence of the Emirate that Abdul Salam swore allegiance to, and obtained a flag of authority from, Abdullahi Dan Fodio, the Emir of Gwandu in the Sokoto Caliphate. According to a third account, it was Afonja himself who invited Alimi to rule. Alimi declined the offer on the grounds that his mission was purely religious and not to ascend the throne. Nevertheless, he sent for his first son, Abdul Salam, who later became the first Emir of Ilorin.

3 Oral Poetry in Ilorin before Islam

A variety of Yoruba oral poetic forms were practised in Ilorin. These included the Egungun masquerade chants called Iwọ and the poetry of hunters and members of the cult of Ogun, called Ijala. Others included Dadakuada, Asa, Rara, Oriki, Agbe, Ese ifa, Iyere ifa, Owe, Ekun Iyawo, Alo apamo and Ofo or Ogede. Some of these forms of poetry are performed in conjunction with religious cults and rituals. Iwọ, for example, is chanted by the masquerade and its attendants during Egungun performances. The songs include praises of the Egungun cult as well as praises of and prayers for the people, bringing them tidings of good hope. According to Babalola, there are two categories of Ijala, one chanted by Ologun beggars and the other by trained Ijala artists. The Ologun beggars perform strictly on command from the Ifa oracle, while the trained Ijala artists perform on occasions such as weddings, child-naming ceremonies and house warmings. Both Ese Ifa and Iyere Ifa are purely Ifa divinatory chants and are usually performed by Ifa cult members. Finally, Ofo or Ogede are mystical chants meant to activate charms, orders and commands. Such poetic forms thus constitute what Ruth Finnegan calls religious poetry.