

**RELIGION, LAW AND MORALITY IN PRECOLONIAL SOCIETY:
EXAMPLE OF ANCIENT ILE-IFE KINGDOM IN YORUBALAND****Authors & Affiliations****George Olayeye Olatayo, Ph.D**Department of Religious Studies
& Philosophy

Faculty of Humanities

Redeemer's University Ede

Osun State, Nigeria

olatayogo@run.edu.ng /

+234 7035698070

ORCID: 0009-0005-2880-4689

Abstract

Ile-Ife is one of the ancient towns in Yorubaland, southwestern Nigeria. The town is believed to be the cradle of Yoruba culture, civilisation, religious beliefs, and artistic craftsmanship. The town holds enormous significance in the cosmological explanations of Yoruba creation myths, which lend credence to the heroic deeds of Odùduwà, the progenitor of the Yoruba people. Evidence from oral traditions and ethnographic accounts of Yoruba people's religious beliefs, social life, history, political development, and economic growth exemplifies the roles and contributions of the Ife kingdom as an autonomous empire with distinct political hegemony. However, little attention has been given to the administration of law and morality in the precolonial milieu of the Ile-Ife kingdom. Utilising descriptive and historical content analysis of library resources and secondary sources, the findings revealed that during the precolonial era, Yoruba culture and indigenous practices established strong social mechanisms for communal morality and strict compliance with indigenous law through several ritual practices. The paper concludes that all forms of social problems and acts of indiscipline in society today are the result of moral dereliction and a flagrant disregard for native laws.

Keywords: Indigenous religion, Law, Morality, Precolonial, Yoruba, and Ile-Ife kingdom.

Introduction

Ile-Ife's precolonial social structure had a mechanism that influenced moral obedience among its citizens and residents, from the family and village levels to the town level (Olatayo and Olatayo 2026). The structure was also put in place to punish individuals who act contrary to the community's inherent values and norms. This enhances peaceful coexistence among the people in the town and its neighbourhoods. Today, society faces a moral crisis that has adverse effects on the town and its residents. Accordingly, Olatayo (2025a) argues that bastardisation of the cultural ethos has greatly affected the moral institutions handed down by the progenitors to the inhabitants of some indigenous Yoruba towns that have ancestral explanations to the Yoruba social and cultural identity (Olatayo 2025a). The parents and elders who have customary rights to inculcate moral responsibilities and value systems in their children no longer seem competent to do so because they are also an embodiment of immorality and, at some point, lack the moral

capacity and time to fulfill that role. Some even seem to be ignorant of the standards and morality of a cultured society. The focus of this paper is the need to resuscitate morals in our society. There must be respect in homes, schools, places of worship, social institutions, and the entire spectrum of society. The society should also reward good morals to promote peace, tranquility, and progress.

Throughout history, the law has evolved primarily to control social behaviour and establish high moral standards. In Ile-Ife, like other Yoruba towns and cities, the individual is much less amenable to social control in the formation of public opinion than when the individual is in a village, and it is much less so in any large cities and towns than in small towns and villages. (Fadipe, 1970:30). Ile-Ife, in the precolonial time, referred to the entire Ife-speaking environments and neighbourhoods which have now been constituted into four main local government areas, namely, Ife central, Ife north and Ife east, and Ife south local government areas in the present Osun State. Nobody was above the law in all these communities. As a native rule, one could not afford to be indifferent to the rules and regulations guiding the conduct of society. As a result, different moral mechanisms were put in place to punish lawbreakers. This paper examines how laws and morality contributed to maintaining law and order in Ile-Ife during the precolonial period.

Conceptual Analysis of Law in Precolonial Ife Kingdom

Law is understood to be one of the social engineering that are pronounced and expounded in the sociological school of jurisprudence (Babalola, 2020). The purpose of social engineering is to build an efficient, free, peaceful, and egalitarian society, grounded in faith, liberty, and social justice, with the rule of law applicable to all. The structure requires regular upkeep and maintenance to prevent friction, violence, disunity, and waste in society (Fatoye, 2005). Precolonial law in Ile-Ife was a reflection of the spirit of the people who evolved it as law and the manifestation of the common consciousness of the people.

Law consists of a broad and relatively undefined range of efforts to maintain the social order (Elias, 1994). Nevertheless, maintaining law and order requires widespread social involvement from everyone, depending on the nature and extent of the social organisation prevalent in the area (Jemiriye, 2007). Accordingly, Machan (2003) maintains that law is one of the institutional systems common to all societies, regardless of their level of development. It is not just an attribute of human corporate existence but also a cultural phenomenon that embodies cultural distinction. Law is considered a living governing system constructed through present and historical debate and moral consensus among the Juries, and more generally, applicable to all citizens within the same social system (Machan, 2003). This system is used to maintain order, integrity, righteousness, and justice in everybody's life. Individual actions or events can be put to the test in the court of competent jurisdiction to review, investigate, and prosecute the culprit if it is believed that there has been a breach of morality, that is, a violation of law, or if the moral implication of law is questioned (Machan, 2003).

Meanwhile, a verdict is a lawful determination of guilty, and a guilty party has committed an immoral act (Falola and Akinrinade, 2003). Morality is not seen as a constant, essential 'truth' but as a series of values influenced by cultural context. It is the acceptable behavioural pattern of an individual in society (Babalola, 2020). The concept of morality concerns the rightness of behaviour or actions of individuals, groups, or the society at large. Thus, the morality of a class would concern the right beliefs or principles approved and recommended for the class in question (Oke and Esikot, 1999). If all laws are a reflection of the moral system, then it would follow that laws change to reflect the values of whoever makes the laws. This has been the case throughout history. Well, in a community that respects and has made provisions for protecting individual

rights, the adversity of human life has nearly free rein (Machan, 2003). A society where laws have become the answer to all human problems, laws get completely confusing, and many people begin to be concerned with nothing other than avoiding violating the law, it is very likely to see ethics referred to as the laid-down rules that guide morality (Afe, 2024). This implies that all laws are reflections of morality. Akinawonu (2006) suggests that some laws prevent murder, kidnapping, maiming, false accusation, and inappropriate imprisonment, as the case may be. This is because, these acts are considered wrong by the overwhelming majority of society's population. At some point in human history, this was not the case. Ajisegiri (2005) adds that in ancient times, there were many slaves, and an enslaved person could be killed at the whims and caprices of his master. It was considered amazing to give the enslaved people implements of war and watch them fight to the death. They called them gladiators (Ajisegiri, 2005:75). This form of human-on-human cruelty was despicable and devalued human life. For them at that time, this form of killing or murder was not only quite legal, but was considered great entertainment because it was by the pagan values system of the people.

In the precolonial Ile-Ife, morality existed. That is, the act of doing what is right. The sense of what to do and what not to do has been with men from time immemorial. Morality is a social phenomenon and is not merely an individual discovery within a given society. Among the Ile-Ife people, a subethnic group in Yorubaland, morality is as old as man and the city itself (Afe, 2024). Morality is a cultural pattern and behaviour that regulates the relationships among members of society, while sanctions are predicated on the society (Bankole, 2005).

Morality from the onset reflects an understanding that people do not live as isolated individuals but as gregarious social beings. For them as a social group, some rules guide their conduct to maintain an orderly social life. In the same discrete sense, the evolution of laws represents man's unique development of understanding of his society and his efforts to ensure the cohesiveness of the society in which he found himself (Jemiriye, 2007).

However, morality in Ile-Ife in this context refers to the traditional social norms and customary laws of the Ife kingdom, also known as native and natural laws. These are unchangeable laws of nature that govern everybody. Falola and Akinrinade (2003) assert that traditional laws are inherently developed within the culture of the people and their native intelligence, and that enacted laws modify them; essentially, they should closely correspond with them as much as possible (Falola and Akinrinade, 2003). Traditional laws are closely associated with morality and historically influential versions, with the intentions of God (Babalola, 2020). It attempts to identify a moral aspect of life to guide the state's lawmaking power. An immoral act or law cannot be acceptable in a well-modernized organised society like Ile-Ife, where law and morality form the basis as well as the bedrock of the society's morality, social norms, and indigenous values system (Labeodan, 2023). To achieve this, the community has a well-structured traditional and judicial system of administration of justice (Babalola, 2020). For example, the Emèsè council is a traditional court of justice in the palace of the *Ooni-risa* (*Àròlé of Odùduwà*), where the traditional monarch, who is the spiritual and, at the same time, the religious head of the kingdom, and other members of the community constitute the jury (Olatayo, 2025b). Also, another traditional court where justice is administered traditionally is called '*Ogun-laadi court*' and *Oke'mogun* shrine (Olatayo and Olatayo, 2026). This is where the paramount system of justice adjudications in the native court is dispensed through the ritual instrumentality of oath-taking and swearing by traditional elements and ancestral powers (Babalola, 2020). At the same time, the modern high court is located beside the

Ife Central Local Government Council Secretariat, along the Ife-Ibadan Expressway. Both the native and modern courts are to identify and enforce the moral aspects of life to guide the state's civil lawmaking body in its statutory functions. Immoral acts or laws cannot be acceptable in a well-informed city like Ile-Ife, where law and Morality form the basis of people's corporate existence.

Interface Between Law and Morality in the Precolonial Ife Kingdom

The people of the Ife kingdom, like other people in Yoruba communities in the pristine and precolonial era knew how to effectively run their orderly society, where laws and moral codes were deployed and strictly adhered to. To achieve this, the people are known for the spirit of fair play, sincerity, justice and equity before the advent of British imperial rule (Adetunbi, 2015). In the the precolonial Ife kingdom, the judicial system was not partial but rather potent in asserting the truth,, and it was was fully decentralized,, with virtually everyone involved in the process.

The Òònì-risa in Council, or the traditional council of the monarchs, was the highest court of arbitration. The council comprises Òònì, the *Àrólé Odùduwà*, *Olofin Atéwónró*, who has absolute native power to preside over the council of the six paramount chiefs of right and left hands, such as *Obálúfè*, *Lòòdókó*, *Láwarikán*, *Olojudo*, *Osórun*, and *Emèsè* (Olatayo and Olatayo, 2026). The council was the highest court in the land and the final court of appeal, except for the king's special prerogatives. As a judicial body, the council dealt with disputes between chiefs and between parties from different quarters, villages, and farm settlements in the Ife environs (Adetunbi, 2015). Before the advent of the modern European court system, both the judicial and security systems of the Ife kingdom were established under the imperial majesty of Òònì, and crimes were effectively detected and checked. That is why Yoruba people would say “*Eti oba nile, Eti Oba loko*” meaning 'king hear is everywhere'. This implies that the king extensively relies on the feedback from the people to determine and inform his decision on any matter before him. Anyone who violated the law and defied the monarch's decisions and native norms would pay dearly for their misdeeds (Elias, 1975). Those who committed acts of immorality are looked at with culturally disdained eyes. They were often seen as outcasts who desecrated the land and committed an offense against the community. The punishment for the crime committed ranges from banishment from all cultural rights and ancestral privileges, dethronement, paying a heavy fine as a ritual sacrifice to appease the gods and ancestors and in some cases, total excommunication from the community (Labeodan, 2023; Olatayo, 2024).

The precolonial judicial system in the Ife kingdom began at the family level, under the family head known as *Baálé*, meaning 'family head'. The oldest man in each family usually assumed this role with the title of Baale. He is the head of the family, responsible for resolving minor family issues within the family system (Afe, 2024). When the family head considered it necessary, he would invite other elderly members to assist him in settling the issue or dispute brought before him. The judgment dispensed always depends on the nature of the dispute brought before him. The guilty person or party may be asked to pay the fine of kolanuts, palm-wine, tubers of yam, or hens (Afe, 2024: 35). The person may be reprimanded or even asked to apologise to his or her partner. The *Baálé* of a household was responsible for maintaining order within the family and its dependents. He settled all minor disputes among those under his control, but if the matter involved the subordinates or another household, it was taken to *Baálé*, the village head, or the quarter chief, who was responsible for the peace and order within the area. If it were an ordinary or minor crisis, the *Baálé* would settle it; but if it were serious, he had to refer it to the *Baálé* for necessary judicial action (Elias, 1975).

The court of the family head also assisted in bringing to book any culprit within the compound who had committed serious crimes that could only be tried by the higher authority and court system. In this court, no fees are charged, and fines are rarely imposed (Afe, 2024). Its purpose was not necessarily to punish the guilty person. Rather, it was a way of reconciling the aggrieved party and persuading them to maintain the peace in the family and solidarity among the kinship. At the family level, the family head would preside over the council with other elders. A decision was usually reached not only in the interest of the disputants but also in the overall interest of the family. There was usually the consciousness not to wash the family's dirty linen outside. Therefore, disputants were cajoled by family sentiments to accept the proposed courses of resolution in the interest of their ancestors and to save the family's image (Adedeji, 2001).

Furthermore, the next is the court of the ward chief or village heads and leaders, which has the power and jurisdiction to entertain all civil cases involving persons belonging to different family compounds and quarters within the same community in the village setting. Cases in which both sides of the disputants belonged to the same extended family compound and which got out of hand in the Baale's court would be heard in the court of the village heads as an appeal case. Apart from all these, the village court head conducted a preliminary investigation into the case at hand whether it is within his court jurisdiction or not (Falola & Akinrinade, 1996). This often included the matrimonial cases, adultery and allied family matters, such as debt, land matters, divorce cases, which were transferred, after the preliminary investigation and hearing, to the court of the Òòní in council.

Unlawful and Immoral Practices in the Precolonial Ife Kingdom

In the precolonial Ife kingdom, theft and other forms of stealing were considered abominable and morally wrong. For example, it was forbidden for anyone to take another person's farm produce, steal bush meat from another person's trap, or kill another person's domestic animal, such as a goat or hens, for whatever reason without informing the owner, and such acts and actions are considered immoral. Also, murder was an evil act. It is morally wrong to take another person's life without a just cause. Shedding innocent blood is an act of desecrating the land with an innocent soul's blood. Also, both rape and adultery were against the traditional laws and social norms in the precolonial Ife kingdom. The Òòní would hear any rape-related cases in the council at the market square. The guilty person would be fined, and the injured victim would receive the fine; the amount was often a sum of two bags of cowries. Buttressing this claim, Olatayo (2025b) argues that it was a morally right action to show hospitality and lend a helping hand to the physically challenged and disabled person who is incapacitated to do something. This was often referred to as Omolúwàbí ethos (Olatayo, 2025b). The person with impeccable character is referred to as the Omolúwàbí.

In cases where the guilty were recorded more than once for the same culprit, such a person would be sold into perpetual slavery (Adedibu and Oke, 2026). In case of adultery, most of the cases of this nature were always settled at the family or village level, but where the litigant appealed to the Òòní court, compensation of ten cowries would be the fine of the offender to the victim and the offender must not try to seduce any other women again in the village for a certain period of years. Adultery with the chief's wife would carry a more severe penalty, and such an offender would be considered as an undesirable person in the community. Anyone who dares to commit adultery with the wife of Òòní or Obalúfè, the second in command in the kingdom, would be killed at the shrine (Arifalo, 2007).

Adegbaaju, (2010) opines that the practice of witchcraft was also considered immoral in the precolonial Ife

kingdom. Whenever a case of witchcraft was reported, the king and his council of chiefs were the ones to hear the case at the market square. Anyone found guilty of practicing witchcraft would be given the poisonous plant leaf called '*Obo*', sassafras leaf, to eat and swallow the juice thereof (Adegbaaju, 2010). This ritual function would be administered by the traditional high priest, whose duty was to oversee the town's religious functions and ritual practices on behalf of the king and his chiefs. He was also in charge of the palace's religious functions. A (female) Witch would be asked to eat seven pieces of sasswood-leaf, '*Obo*' leaf, while a (man) Wizard would be asked to eat nine pieces of the leaf. The belief was that if the suspect committed the offense, the person would first vomit and then confess to the wickedness he or she had done before the person would die. The body of the person would be dragged to the special sacred forest, often referred to as *igbó igbálè*, meaning 'forbidding forest for ritual functions,' so that the soul of the person would be tortured by the evil spirit of the forest. (Arifalo, 1996).

Furthermore, it is immoral to play with the oath-taking ritual process in the ancient Ife kingdom. The dreaded shrines and grooves of secret societies, cults, priests, and priestesses of ancestral guides and nature-spirits, among others, under the traditional social order, commanded so much public confidence that oath-taking for whatever reason was considered a serious issue in the kingdom (Akinjobi, 2019). Furthermore, to be a debtor was considered an act of immorality. As a result, the following customary means of execution for the recovery of the debt owed were put in place. The creditor would send someone to the debtor's house to stay there until the debt was fully paid. This system in the Yoruba language means (*dogo*), *that is, a person sent to recover the debt by all means*. The person sent for debt recovery has the right to eat the debtor's food, by taking it by force from him if he would not offer it to him peacefully. The person would be wearing the debtor's clothes without his permission and constantly abusing the debtor until he paid the debt he owed his creditor. Meanwhile, it was forbidden for the debtor to raise his hands against this person. If the debtor in any way tried to respond or retaliate against the abuses of the person sent to recover the debt owed, his retaliation would be considered a public offense, and he would be punished, in addition to the payment of the debt owed to his creditor (Akinlawon, 2006). Another means of loan recovery is through *Edan*. This is a ritual staff mounted with the sacred image of *Edan-Sango*, the divinity of thunder. The king and high chiefs used it as the symbol of traditional authority. Whenever the king's servants brought this ritual staff to someone's house, it symbolized the king's presence, and that person was to go to the palace to receive an invitation.

In most cases, this ritual staff would be used to collect a big debt owed by someone. It is taboo to refuse to answer the invitation whenever the *Edan* is brought to someone's house (Jemiriye, 2005). This is considered a public offense for disregarding the king's invitation and that of the traditional authority. If the king's emissaries found no one in the house, the ritual staff would be placed on the entrance of the debtor's house. This implies that no one would be allowed inside the house except to report to the king's palace first. However, the *Edan* ritual staff would be removed only when the debt is fully paid. (Arifalo, 1996).

Another means of debt recovery was by confiscating the debtor's property. If the debt was long-standing and the creditor could not wait any longer for his debtor to pay, the creditor could resort to seizing his debtor's property until he fully paid the amount he owed. The debtor has no right to say so if this was the wish of his creditor. The creditor would inform the king and chief that since his debtor could not pay his debt, his property had been seized from him, and the king would sanction the request until the debt is fully paid. In some cases, if this happened, a fine would be paid by the debtor for the intervention of the king and chiefs before he could

pay. Thus, if at the end of the day the debtor could not pay the money despite all the recovery steps taken, then the king may decide to sell the debtor into slavery on the application of the creditor (Ayoade, 2022).

In the precolonial Ile-Ife kingdom, communal life was highly entrenched among the people in the society. Everyone was living for the collective good of their community. It was a taboo to do something against the common good of the community because the ancestral spirit is believed to be on guard and watching over the community at all times. Therefore, when someone was offended, the offender would be warned to desist from such wrongdoing, and if the offender showed the attitude of recalcitrance, he would be summarily punished. A society's code of conduct, which enshrined social morality in the society, was entrenched. It was generally believed that gods and ancestral spirits were always ready to fight the people's cause, and the gods, as well as the ancestral spirits, would rain instant justice on any erring member of the community. Noted for a high level of symbols of traditional authority, the Ife people held their king in high esteem. All the chiefs and elders were equally respected. It was a taboo to disrespect or speak evil of the king, his chiefs and elders in the community. Though they were also kind and loved people, they, however, did not tolerate any assault or harassment from anyone in the community or from outside (Afe, 2024).

Impact of Religion, Law and Morality in Precolonial Ife Kingdom

Religion played a prominent role in shaping the communal lives of the people of the community. That is why it is believed that there are four hundred and one gods that are controlling Ile-Ife. It is also believed that every day in a year is for the ritual performance for the gods except for a particular day that is set aside and free from ritual performance. No one is permitted to know the set-aside day. Indigenous religion, its traditions and spirituality hold sway with strong influence in the Ife kingdom to date. At no time are the indigenous religious norms declining because of the influence of foreign religions of Islam and Christianity. Ile-Ife is considered the religious and political headquarters of Yorubaland (Akinrinade, 2004). Every indigenous religious worship that was migrated beyond the shore of Ile Ife and Yorubaland was first practiced at Ile Ife. This is because myth has it that all gods descended from the heavenly realm at Ile-Ife when Olódūmarè sent them to come and create the earth. Thereafter, they migrated to different parts of the world. Therefore, it is asserted that the cradle of the Yoruba race is Ile Ife. This is one of the reasons indigenous religions of Orisa worship and ancient civilisation started in Ile Ife (Akinawonu, 2006). The people of Ile-Ife are known to hold their spirituality as a matter of life and great concern. Religion often dictates the seriousness with which it takes life. This often forms the basis of their belief, which basically formed one of their cardinal customary heritages that have sustained the Ife kingdom through all the ages (Adedibu and Oke, 2026).

In the ancient Ife kingdom, each divinity had its premier shrine and grove, with a handful of devotees. With this, indigenous religious beliefs represented a major element in the societal moral code. Everybody had their belief in a god, and some traditional taboos guided their activities within the community. For this, social and religious lives were shaped and structured on how to appease the gods and thank the divinities for their vigilance while problems were presented to him for solution. Among the notable gods in Ife kingdom were, *Ogun, Sango, Obatala, Osun-Shegese, Esu-Elegbara, Orunmila, Olokun, Oya*, these are the religious and spiritual forces that regulates social norms in the community (Olatayo and Olatayo 2026:26). The gods blend yesterday of the people with their future as they guide them towards their tomorrow and future endeavours. When people are spiritual, they are able to intuit or perceive the tangible through their senses. The good and the bad become relevant terms when a person stands face to face with neutral deities. In this instance, what

someone will or will not do becomes a personal moral issue. Once someone moves from spirituality, which is a sense of having the nature of the spirit, to a systematic approach to the supernatural, then, religion is embraced. Religion develops an intellectual process whose goal is the betterment of society. When people have religion, they determine that something is believable and worthy of systematic reverence. At the right hand or side of divinities are morality and its consciousness. Morality is virtuous conduct and the judgment that arises from the good or the bad of human actions. As long as what is produced conforms to the standards of ethical character, then one can be said to be moral. Adefarasin defined Morality as:

...the consciousness of right and wrong in human behaviour and the consequent observance of such rules of conduct for the primary purpose of harmonizing the interest of the individual with those in the society (Adefarasin, 2018: 57).

From the above excerpt, there is one outstanding principle that is held by many practitioners of the Yoruba religion and faith system. This is the necessity of the power of offering a sacrifice. Offering ritual sacrifice to the ancestral spirits and deities is an act of obedience. To be morally good is primarily conformed with the ability to accept sacrifices and obey. In other words, it is necessary to make a sacrifice and be obedient to the requests of the sacred text. Not only were the sacred text and ritual performance essential, but there were also several prohibitions and taboos that forbade bad habits and bad conduct in society. These sets of wisdom are contained and retained in Ifá, which confirms that higher powers can regulate the good and the negative occurrences in one's life. Fatoye (2007) argues that deities, as natural and neutral forces, impose positive and punitive choices on the paths of people's spiritual and religious lives. People must use their sense of Morality to determine what choice they will make (Fatoye, 2007). Hence, free will is therefore optional for people to make based on their moral instincts. Given this, one can argue that religious dogma essentially informs the sense of morality, having prepared necessary foundations for societal ground rules and norms that formed the basis for the laws. The sense of determining right and wrong about a situation comes from religious beliefs, which inform the moral consciousness and ethical lives. In other words, religion is a point of view, and morality advances societal well-being. In order to eliminate sacrilegious acts from the sacred communications and rituals, those who have spiritual acumen must incorporate morality and respect into social activities.

Furthermore, apart from religious life in ensuring moral behaviour, the Ifè kingdom also had corrective measures for lawbreakers. This was in the form of a song during Olójó and Obalúfè traditional festivals by using different groups and age grades, as well as women who would be singing and dancing around the ritual places in the kingdom at night. On the final day of their singing and dancing around the sacred places, they have the authority and immunity to abuse and castigate anyone who is a known wicked people and evildoer in the community without any hindrance. They were also known for preaching Morality and good character through their ritual songs and dancing. However, on the other hand, moral virtues were also celebrated during the ritual songs and dancing. Adefarasin (2009) notes that those who have contributed to the community's growth and development would be praised and eulogized. People who were suspected of witchcraft or some other evil practices would be warned to desist from their antisocial activities. Names of those who have committed serious crimes would be mentioned to the public in front of their houses (Adefarasin, 2009). This system of social control was effective in the olden days. In fact, some of those who were identified as evildoers and criminals during the ritual song and dance either packed out of the kingdom voluntarily or eventually

committed suicide (Ajisegiri, 2007).

Folklore also served as a means of enforcing law and Morality in the ancient Ife kingdom. Most of the stories taught morals and served as guides to societal conduct in the land. Folklore, in its broadest sense, is the part of the culture, customs, and beliefs of a society that is based on popular tradition. The community produces it and it is usually transmitted orally or by demonstration. According to Olatunji (1992), folklore could take the form of music and drumming, which are freely used by the people (Olatunji, 1992). The traditional leaders who had performed creditably would be praised with the drum. This would inspire him the more and at the same time instill moral consciousness in the people. The poet also preached against immorality through their poem recitations.

Proverbs were important and widely used among the Ife people as with other Yoruba groups. A proverb is the apparent truth reflecting human experiences, and always refers to a social situation. It is this social context that determines the sense or meaning of a particular proverb (Sheba, 2006). A proverb is a wise saying of African people that teaches moral lessons and the essence of life. Proverbs are intelligent, expressive thoughts that are derived from the accumulation of experiences of people about their lives over the years and are intended to give moral instructions. For instance, Ife people have different proverbs to correct, reproof, rebuke and warn people on different occasions. For example, Ife people would say, *Eni ti ba nyo ile da, enikan gannaganna a se won*, meaning that whoever deliberately breaks allegiance with gods would definitely experience sudden calamities (Adedibu and Oke, 2026). Another one says, *Iyan ogun odun a ma jo ni lowo*. This means, 'no matter how long it takes, nemesis is inescapable, it would definitely catch up with one who does wrong things'. Also, another one says *Ojo ore pe asiwere gba gbe*. This means that, when kindness and charity take the longest time, people often forget the good gesture easily. Another one says, *Ko si eni ti o gbo ede Ayan, bi ko se Eni ti O mu opa ilu lowo*, meaning that no one understands the language of the talking drum better than the expert maestro who holds the drumming stick. These proverbs are some of the examples of several others which emphasised the fact that, it is virtuous to do good which is the hallmark of morality in human society.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that there were strong connections among religious belief, morality, and law in the precolonial kingdom of Ile-Ife. For the Ife people, it is believed that law is always derived from Morality. This implies that laws are practical applications of moral essence. Laws are enforced by the community, which has the customary power to use sanctioned force to prevent immorality. Also, laws are perceived as practical solutions to intended evils and wrongdoings that could befall society. It is evidence that both law and morality served as social control mechanisms to check immorality in the society of the ancient Ife kingdom in precolonial times. Law accomplished this primarily by imposing the threat of sanctions against anyone who disobeyed societal norms and indigenous value systems. It should be noted that morality also attracted incentives, with good moral behaviour being rewarded. On the other hand, bad actions resulted in guilt and disapproval, which were not acceptable to the community. It is commendable that those who contributed to the community's social, political, and economic development are praised through ritual song and dance by diverse social, religious, and political groups.

Furthermore, this paper also argued that in the precolonial Ife kingdom, religious leaders played a prominent role in ensuring that law and morality were enforced and remained an effective social control mechanism to

stabilize order and social values in the community. The religious teachings in society also frowned on criminal activities, which are considered antisocial acts. Both the religious leaders and traditional authorities in the community imposed heavy fines and punitive measures, including ritual sacrifices, on anyone who engaged in wrongdoing to enforce compliance with social ethics and moral values. The religious and traditional leaders were seen as the emissaries of the gods, occupying the fifth hierarchy in the pantheon. They were the representatives of the divine whose responsibilities were to restore peace, order, and promote cordial relationships among different people and groups in the community. In order to deal with the recalcitrant people who violate laws unwittingly in society, there were different traditional court systems where different issues could be heard and verdicts determined accordingly. This is done to promote good morals in the precolonial kingdom of Ife.

However, this is not to say that immorality was not in place, but the mechanisms were put in place to serve as checks and balances in the community. In the final analysis, this paper suggests that morals should be inculcated in young people, youths, and adults in the community, who must see it as a responsibility to communicate them to the coming generations through folktales, proverbs, and by sharing life experiences with the younger ones. Doing this would drastically minimize societal problems and social menaces.

In Ile-Ife, just like other Yoruba kingdoms and empires in precolonial times, social norms that were predicated on indigenous value systems formed the basis of Morality and standards that formed the basic laws of the society. Later, it was made clear that some indigenous laws could not pass the repugnancy test, which the British imperialists claimed must be in line with the principles of equity, good conscience, and natural justice. Some fundamental parts of the native laws were abrogated by the English legal system and subsequently replaced by the establishment of native courts around 1910 to 1915 (Elias, 1974).

References

- Adebibu, A.B. and Oke, O.P. (2026). "An Ethical Response to Matchmaking and Dating in the Yoruba Traditional Society and Digital World" *Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences*, 7 (4): 1069-1082.
- Adefarasin, V.O. (2009). "Africa and Africans: An Exposition of Religion and Morality" in Babawale, T., Alao, A., & Omidire F.A. et al (eds.), *Teachings and Propagating African and Diaspora History and Culture*, Lagos: Concept Publication, 239-445.
- Adedeji, A.A (2001). "Adjudicatory System of Customary Court in Yorubaland: A Case Study of Ancient Ife Kingdom", *Master of Law Thesis*, Submitted to: Postgraduate College, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife.
- Adetunbi, A. (2015). *A Comparative History of Christianity, Islam and Indigenous Religion in Ile Ife*, Lagos: Malthouse.
- Adegbaju, A.O. (1997). *Ife-Oodaye: The Myth and History of Creations in Ife Kingdom*, Lagos: Spectrums.
- Adegbola E.A. (1976). *Contemporary Issues in African Traditional Religion*, London: Oxford University Press.
- Afe, A. (2024). "Judicial Administration in a Traditional Yoruba Society: The Oyo Empire Experience",

Iroko: Journal of Arts and Cultural Studies, Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, Edo State, 6 (5): 112-137.

Akinnawonu, B.M. (2006). "Morality in the Era of Social Transformation and Globalization" in Asiegbu, M.F. and Agbakoba, J.A. (2021). *Philosophy and Praxis in Africa*, Ibadan: Hope Publishers: 67-79.

Ajisehiri, F.O. (2005). *Principles of Indigenous Religion and Morality in Yoruba Society during Precolonial Era*. Ibadan University Press.

Arifalo, S.O. (1996). "The Social and Political Structure of Precolonial Yoruba Society", Unpublished: *Speech Presented at 67th Annual Conference on Yoruba Civilisation and Culture*

Arifalo, S.O. (2007). *Analysis and Social Comparison of Legends of Origin*, Akure: Ekimogun Press.

Awotinde, J.A. (1985). *Iwe Itan Ile Ife Ati Agbegbe Re*, Ile-Ife: Kosalabaro Press.

Awolalu, J.O. (1996). *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*, Athens: Henrietta.

Ayoade, J.A. (2022). *Religion, Taboos and Morality in Yoruba Communities*, Lagos: Onibonoje.

Babalola, E.A. (2020). *Religions and Morality in Yorubaland*, Osogbo: Oracles Publishing Press

Babawale, T. and Alao, A. (2008). "African Spirituality, Identity, Racism and Conflict" in Babawale, T., and Alao, Akin. *Global African Spirituality, Social Capital and Self-Reliance*. Lagos: Malthouse, 245-267.

Bankole, L.O. (1995). Morality and the African Worldviews: A Critical Appraisal. *Olota: Journal of African Studies*, 5 (1): 134-169.

Elebuibon, I. (2001). *Selected Ifá Teachings on Indigenous African Morality*, Rochester: University of Rochester Press.

Elias, T.O. (1975). *African Indigenous Native Laws*, Enugu: Government Printing Press.

Elias A.B. (1994). *Yoruba-speaking people of the Slave Coast of West Africa*, London: Curzon Press.

Fadipe, N.A. (1970). *The Sociology of the Yoruba*, Ibadan: University of Ibadan Press.

Falola, T. and Akinrinade, S. (2003). The Roles of Traditions and Rulers in Society: A Case Study of Yoruba Obas and Chiefs before 1960" in Aborisade, J.O. and Oladimeji A.O. (Eds.) *Local Government and the Traditional Rulers in Nigeria*, Ile-Ife: University of Ife Press, 45-72.

Fatoye, J.S. (2005). *African Proverbs and Social Norms among the Yoruba People*, Akure: Hopewell Publications.

Jemiriye, T.F. (2005). "The Concept of ESE among the Yoruba People", *PhD Thesis*, Department of Religious Studies, University of Ibadan.

Labeodan, H.A. (2023), "Moral Responsibility and Punishment in the Yoruba Society", *Orita Journal of Religious Studies*, 36 (1-2): 18-37.

Machan, T. A. (2003), "Law and Morality: Divorce, the Death Penalty and the Pope in the Spirit of John Garvey Common Wealth", *Journal of African Society for the Study of Sociology and Ethics of Religions*, 7 (3): 192-227.

- Okediji, M. (2021). *Western Frontiers of African Arts and Indigenous Knowledge on Morality*, Texas: Blackwell.
- Oke, M. and Esikot I.F. (1999). *Discourse on Elementary Ethics and Values Systems*, Ile-Ife: Obafemi Awolowo University Press.
- Olatayo, G.O. (2024). "Religious Fundamentalism: A Sociological Menace to Peace, Development and National Security in Nigeria" *Ekere Journal of Religions and Cultural* 5(2): 1-17.
- Olatayo, G.O. (2025a), "Yoruba Qbaship Institution and its New Religious Paradigms", *Filosofia Theoretical: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religion*, 14 (2): 67-87
- Olatayo, G.O. (2025b). "Appraisal of Selected Philosophical Issues in African Indigenous Religion: The Yoruba Experience", *African Journal of Religion, Philosophy and culture*, 6 (4): 317-334.
- Olatayo, G.O. and Olatayo, M.D.A (2026). "The Place and Position of Women in the Socio-Religious, Economic, and Political Development of Ife Kingdom in Yorubaland" *Abraka Journal of Religion and Philosophy*, 6 (1): 20-32.
- Olatunji, O.O. (1992). *Adebayo Faleti: A Discursive Study of his Written and Oral Poems*, Ibadan: University of Ibadan Press.
- Sheba, L.A. (2006). *Yoruba Proverbs with Feminine Lexis*, Ibadan: Spectrums.