

'Idols', 'superstitions' and the 'prince of darkness' – Linguistic re-mapping of the Yorùbá pantheon in 19th century missionary correspondence

Hostile and vilifying descriptions and stories of local spirituality and rituals abound in the reports and journals written by European and African missionaries from nineteenth century Yorùbáland (Southwest Nigeria). Yorùbá missionary Thomas King, for example, talks about an òrìṣà, a local deity, as “the prince of darkness, whom, like the Athenians, [the devotee] is ignorantly worshipping” (from journal extracts, ending 25th December 1850). While Paul in Acts 17:19-25 sees the Athenians' Unknown God as an indication of the Christian God's presence in the people's consciousness, King refers to 'the prince of darkness', the devil, in the disguise and shape of an òrìṣà. The use of pejorative and deprecating language meant a linguistic re-mapping of the Yorùbá pantheon as 'idols' and 'superstitions', which profoundly affected how the local deities were perceived in the emerging Yorùbá Christian communities. In this paper I show that through the process of re-interpreting the òrìṣà as demons and the devil of the Judaeo-Christian texts and beliefs, these deities did not have to be abandoned by the converts but could instead be incorporated into Yorùbá Christianity, albeit as adversaries. I also show that for Yorùbá missionaries, former òrìṣà worshippers themselves, this linguistic 'othering' served as an in-group marker, aligning them with their European colleagues by vilifying their former deities. I argue therefore that the pejorative, 'othering' language concerning the òrìṣà thus did not serve to turn the local population's hearts away from them; rather, through the linguistic re-mapping of the òrìṣà as idols to be rejected, as demons to be fought, they could be integrated into the new faith, thus remaining a continued reality.