

Comparing Concepts of God: Translating God in the Chinese and Yoruba Religious Contexts

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Abstract

This article discusses the concept of God with a focus on the translation of God in the Chinese and Yoruba religious contexts. Translating the word God is of the essence when comparing concepts of god(s). The translation of the Christian God as Olodumare misrepresents the latter. As suggested by Africanists, there should be appropriate translations for God, Olodumare, and other African gods. As a preliminary comparative attempt, this article presents a case on the introduction of God to the Chinese people. The translation of God into Chinese reflects different views regarding the correlation between the Christian God and the Chinese gods.

Keywords: Translating God, Olodumare, Chinese gods, Buddhist gods, Yoruba Religion

Introduction

The present article is a discussion about the concept of God. This issue involves controversial debates among Africanists. Deeply affected by the consequences of Christian proselytization, discourses about Olodumare, God in Yoruba belief system, are embedded in social and intellectual colonization and decolonization agendas. As a result, the discussion of African gods cannot avoid comparisons with the Christian concept of God. Such comparisons produce different interpretations of Olodumare's godhood.

As a preliminary comparative attempt, I present a case on the introduction of God to the Chinese people with a focus on the Jesuit mission to late Ming China (sixteenth - seventeenth centuries). Along with this presentation, I provide some comparative remarks on Olodumare, the Christian God, and some of the major Chinese gods. In the Jesuit mission during late Ming China, proselytizing strategies adopted by the likes of Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), Nicolò Longobardo (1565-1655), and Giulio Aleni (1582-1649), produced different views about Chinese religiosity¹. Their view about the relationship between God and the Chinese gods is a case in point. The evidence shows that the Jesuit missionaries primarily rendered God as *Tianzhu*

¹ These persons are three of the most renowned and influential figures in the history of Chinese Christianity.

(the Lord of Heaven). However, in Chinese translations of Buddhist scripture, *Tianzhu* refers to the Buddhist god *Sakra*. Informed by its Buddhist connotations, the concept of *Tianzhu* then becomes rather distant from the Christian concept of God. As Matteo Ricci adjusted his proselytizing strategies, he turned to Confucian resources for explaining the Christian God to a Chinese audience. Albeit causing heated debates among Jesuit missionaries, ancient Confucian texts played a significant role in decisions concerning how to translate the word *Deus* (God in Latin) into Chinese. The evidence shows that late Ming Chinese audiences had a variety of views regarding the correlation between Buddhist and Daoist gods and the Christian God.

In the following, the first section reviews Africanist major discussions about Olodumare. The Africanist discussion about Olodumare advocates a call for appropriate translations for the Christian God, Olodumare, and other African gods. The second section presents a case on the introduction of God to the Chinese and compares the Christian God, Olodumare, and some of the Chinese gods. The third section offers further comparative remarks on the translation of God in the Chinese and Yoruba religious contexts.

The Yoruba Concept of God: Olodumare and the Problem of Evil

The discussion of Olodumare's godhood is of the essence for addressing the concept of God in the Yoruba religion. Indigenous and Western scholarship generate different understandings of whether Olodumare is God or not. Decolonizing Africanists criticize Western anthropologists for mistakenly regarding Olodumare as less than God (IGBOIN 2014). Africanists such as Bolaji Idowu, on the other hand, argue that Olodumare is no less in essence and quality than the Christian God that was introduced to Africa (IGBOIN 2014). For Idowu, Olodumare is equivalent to the Christian God. Specifically, Olodumare is the creator as claimed in Christianity. It is noted that Idowu is faithful to the monotheistic understanding of God, explaining that God is one but perceived differently through various cultural lenses (IGBOIN 2014). Idowu's approach, however, is questioned by some other decolonizing Africanists who attempt to divest Olodumare of any Christian garb and instead put forth true understandings of Him. The Africanist comparison between Olodumare and the Christian concept of God present different conceptualizations of Olodumare's godhood. For example, Ademola Kazeem Fayemi argues that Olodumare is not God, for Olodumare is not omnibenevolent, omnipotent, and omniscient (IGBOIN 2014). However, Fayemi emphasizes that although Olodumare does not have an equivalent meaning with the concept of God, He is neither superior nor inferior to God (IGBOIN 2014). Furthermore, according to Benson Igboin, Kola Abimbola

thinks that Olodumare “could not be a Supreme Being because of ‘Its’ [eternal] co-existence with three other deities such as Obatala, Esu, and Ifa” (2014, 202).

On matters like knowledge and wisdom, Olodumare would consult Ifa. Abimbola explains that Olodumare does not have an absolute rule over other divinities (IGBOIN 2014). Regardless of these contrary views, scholars of African religions have identified that concepts of God-like attributes are not so intellectually impoverished in African religions. And some of these attributes correspond to those ascribed to the Christian God, such as omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience, omnibenevolence, etc.

The superlative attributes conferred upon Olodumare lead to a discussion about the problem of evil. The problem of evil particularly arises in Christianity and other theistic religions, where God is thought of as perfectly good. The claim of an almighty God seems to contradict the existence of evil in our experiential reality. The discussion about Olodumare’s possession of equivalent nature as God may generate a question of whether the problem of evil exists in African religions or not. E.O. Oduwole, for example, thinks that Olodumare cannot be exonerated from the problem of evil for He possesses similar attributes to the Christian God (FAYEMI 2012; ODUWOLE 2007). She also argues that Yoruba holds a dialectical worldview of good and evil. However, Ademola Fayemi challenges Oduwole’s thesis and articulates a Yoruba-African approach to the problem of evil.

Based on an extensive analysis of Olodumare, Esu, and other divinities, Fayemi argues that the philosophical problem of evil does not exist in traditional Yoruba thought (FAYEMI 2012). This claim, however, does not indicate the negation of evil, for Fayemi explains that evilness in Yoruba belief is more about the complement of goodness in a binary rather than a dualistic structure (FAYEMI 2012). Apart from Fayemi, John A. I. Bewaji argues that Olodumare’s possession of superlative attributes “does not lead to the type of impasse or contradiction that arises within the theistic Christian religion” (1998, 1).

The essential explanation given by Bewaji is that even though Olodumare has many superlative attributes, it is misleading to present Olodumare as a Christian God. Moreover, dismissing the problem of evil is supported by rectifying the misunderstanding of Esu as Satan or the Devil.

Notably, the discourse about Yoruba gods has been overwhelmingly influenced by Western colonization. Significantly, the Africanist discussion about Olodumare and the problem of evil advocates a call for the decolonization of Olodumare and Esu. To conceptually decolonize these gods, Igboin points to a fundamental issue at stake. He suggests that, on the one hand, there should be appropriate translations for God and the Devil in the Yoruba language; on the other, scholars should develop adequate translations for Olodumre and Esu (IGBOIN 2014). Both Yoruba and Western translations

must be faithful to Christian and Yoruba theologies. Admittedly, Igboin incisively points to the fundamental issue inherent in the debates of Olodumare's godhood, namely, the proper translations of both the Christian concept of God and the African gods. In addition, Igboin points out that the translation of the Christian God as Olodumare misrepresents the latter. Indeed, translating the word God is of the essence when comparing concepts of god(s). Expectedly, apart from influencing disputes about God and Olodumare, the same issue, translating the word God, has ignited similar discussions in other parts of the world. Additionally, local populations may entertain thoughts about how their gods relate to the Christian God.

God and the Chinese Gods

How to translate God into Chinese constitutes the core of dispute in the course of Christian proselytization in China. The Chinese religions have exerted great influence on the translation of God. Known as the first documentation of Christianity entering China, the Nestorian Stele, entitled *Daqin jingjiao liuxing zhongguo bei* (*Stele to the Propagation in China of the Luminous Religion of Daqin*), reveals the propagation of the Eastern Church in China during the Tang dynasty. The heading of the stele includes the Christian cross and Buddhist and Daoist motifs, such as the lotus flower and clouds. This demonstrates that Buddhist and Daoist concepts were integrated for the Nestorian propagation in Tang China. The *Jingjiao documents*, a collection of Chinese texts connected with the Church of the East in China, show that Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian terminologies appear to be frequently used for expounding the core doctrines of Syriac Christianity (MALEK 2021; TANG and WINKLER 2016).

However, it was the Jesuit reintroduction of Christianity to China in the 16th-century Ming dynasty that created the most vigorous disputes over the adoption of Chinese religious terms for translating the concept of God. Adopting the Buddhist path during their initial arrival in China, Jesuit missionaries soon realized that it was Confucianism that constituted the dominant stream among the Chinese elite. Switching their proselytizing strategy, Jesuit priests went on to criticize Buddhism and deploy Confucian concepts for explaining Catholicism to Confucian scholars. Matteo Ricci is a well-known representative of this trend. Following Michele Ruggieri (1543 - 1607), Ricci adopted *Tianzhu* (the Lord of Heaven) as the translation for *Deus*. The two Jesuit priests, however, were not aware that *Tianzhu* refers to *Śakra* in Chinese translations of Buddhist scriptures. *Śakra*, or the full title, should be *Śakro devānām indraḥ*. *Śakra* was originally a Hindu god and assimilated into Buddhism as a protector of the Buddhist dharma.

According to Buddhist cosmology, *Śakra* is the ruler of the Trāyastriṃśa Heaven, which is the highest of all heavens. It should be noted that, as a god, *Śakra* is long-lived but mortal, for in Buddhism god(s) exist in

the realm of the gods, namely one of the six realms of rebirth, or *saṃsāra*. In this regard, *Tianzhu*, as a Chinese translation for *Śakra*, is not compatible with the Christian concept of God. In Buddhism, the gods are not regarded as the creator. Thus, *Śakra* is not equivalent to Olodumare, for the Yoruba attributes to the latter as the creator or owner of heaven and earth. Additionally, Olodumare exercises power over his creation. Buddhist gods, however, are subject to the law of causality. Therefore, they have no absolute power over the creature realm. In Chinese Buddhism, *Śakra* is also known as *Dishitian*. *Śakra* is sometimes identified with the Daoist god, the Jade Sovereign (*Yuhuang*), as their birthdays are commonly ascribed to fall in the first lunar month of the Chinese calendar.

Apart from adopting the concept of *Tianzhu* without being aware of its Buddhist connotations, Matteo Ricci found that many ideas in the Sishu Wujing (*Four Books and Five Classics*) were compatible with the core beliefs of Catholicism. He advocated a view that the truth of a monotheistic god was presented in the ancient Chinese texts. In his *Tianzhu shiyi* (The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven), Ricci argues that the ancient Chinese concept of *Shangdi* corresponds to the concept of God. He claims that

“The Lord of Heaven who I believe is what the ancient classics call *Shangdi*”

(MEYNARD, 2014, 100)

For Ricci, ancient Confucianism is compatible with Catholicism. Ricci’s contemporary, Nicolò Longobardo, however, refuted his approach. Longobardo contended that ancient Chinese philosophy opposes theism or the personal God, and thus it is impossible to find equivalence between *Shangdi* and *Deus* (STANDAERT 2001). Longobardo’s view is not without a reasonable base. In the theology of the classical texts, *Shangdi* refers to the Highest Deity, the Heavenly Ruler. This is equivalent to other Chinese terms such as *Tian* (Heaven), *Tiandi*, or *Shangtian*. Unlike the Christian God, who is regarded as the personal God, *Shangdi* is conceived as more impersonal. *Shangdi* tends to be perceived as heaven itself rather than the creator of heaven.

Longobardo opposed abandoning strictly Christian interpretations of God so as to accommodate Chinese culture. The Rites Controversy reflects the disagreements between Longobardo and Ricci with regard to whether *Deus* can be translated as *Shangdi* or not (STANDAERT 2001). The Vatican’s response to the Rites Controversy seemed to approve a compromise in translating *Deus* as *Tianzhu*. Overall, the Chinese translation for the Buddhist god *Śakra* and the ancient concept of *Shangdi* have had a decisive influence on the translation of *Deus*. Up until today, Chinese Catholics and Protestants respectively refer to God as *Tianzhu* and *Shangdi*, both of which are used for their respective translations of the Bible.²

² The concept of *shen* is also used by Chinese Protestants, and refers to the general concept of god in Chinese religions.

In addition to the discussion about God, *Tianzhu*, and *Shangdi*, the comparison between God and other gods in Buddhism and Daoism also ignited debate. For example, the Jesuit priest Giulio Aleni opposed any possible relation of identity between God and *Brahmā*. Recorded in the *Kouduo richao* (*Diary Transcriptions of the Father's Teaching*) dating to the late Ming period, a Chinese audience Lai Shizhang asked Aleni:

God is the master of heaven, earth and the myriad of creature. According to Buddhism, the Heavenly King *Maha-Brahmā* has the authority to rule over the three thousand worlds. I was wondering whether he is the same as God or not?
(SCHACHTER 2015, 146)

Aleni refuted such relation of identity:

“No! No! God is the supreme, incomparable, authentic Lord, and he is in charge of heaven, earth, and the myriad of creatures.”
(SCHACHTER 2015, 146)

According to Aleni, *Brahmā* is not omniscient, and thus absolutely incomparable to God:

“The Heavenly King *Maha-Brahmā*, about whom Buddhism talks, stands at the side of Sakyamunī in order to receive his teachings; how is it possible that he would be the authentic Lord of heaven and earth?”
(SCHACHTER 2015, 146)

Understandably, Lai Shizhang would not equate Buddha to God, for Buddha is recognized as an enlightened human being. Lai Shizhang's question reflects that for a Chinese commoner, a god who is attributed to the ruler of heaven would tend to be equated with the Christian God. However, although *Brahmā* is a god (*deva*) of the heavenly realm of rebirth, *Brahmā*, together with Śakra, is considered a protector of Buddhism. In Buddhist literature, both *Brahmā* and Śakra are frequently portrayed as consulting Buddha about moral matters. This is reminiscent of the scenario in which Olodumare consults Ifá on matters like knowledge and wisdom. Additionally, Olodumare does not have an absolute rule over other divinities but works with them in the administration of the universe.

Lai Shizhang, however, still wondered whether the Jade Sovereign (*Yuhuang*), the chief deity of the Chinese Pantheon, and God, have any equivalence. Proffering three aspects of reasoning, Aleni refuted the identification of God with the Jade Sovereign: (1) The title, Jade Sovereign, was given by the emperor of the Song dynasty. It is incorrect to equate God to

a title coined by a man. (2) According to the *Scripture of the Jade Sovereign*, the Jade Sovereign was a human being who ascended to the status of the Thearch through self-cultivation, while God created human beings and therefore existed before creation. (3) The *Scripture of the Jade Sovereign* also states that the three gods known as the *Three Pure Ones* are above the Jade Sovereign in the Daoist Pantheon (SCHACHTER 2015). Thus, it is impossible that a god who could not be the King of Kings is equivalent to God. Aleni's argumentation is recorded in the *Kouduo richao* and is not the sole exemplar of comparison between God and the Chinese gods. In *Chongzheng bibian* (*Fundamental Debates Regarding the Veneration of Truth*), a Chinese convert He Shizhen, rejected either rendering God as any of the chief deities in Buddhism and Daoism or equating these deities to God. He says:

The Lord of heaven, earth, and all the creatures is completely different from those gods, buddhas, bodhisattvas³, the Jade Sovereign, Laojun⁴, and Pangu⁵. They were born from their parents after heaven and earth came into being, being nothing more than the people of old times. Before they were born, they could not create heaven, earth, and the myriad of living beings, and after dying they had no power over creation. (SCHACHTER 2015, 151)

Unlike Lai Shizhang, He Shizhen who converted to Christianity presented an exclusive view regarding the correlation between the Christian God and the Chinese gods. He Shizhen even seemed to regard the Christian God as more superior than the Chinese gods.

Further Comparative Remarks

The Chinese and Yoruba translations for God share one similarity. Both resort to local concepts of divinity. Strictly speaking, we may say that God is erroneously rendered as *Tianzhu* or *Shangdi* in Chinese. Similarly, as Igboin argues, God should not be rendered as Olodumare (IGBOIN 2014). The discussion about God and the local gods reflects Western scholars' different approaches to Chinese and African religions. While Western anthropologists and philosophers of religion have tended to express a derogatory attitude towards African religions, Catholic missionaries express a more divergent attitude towards Chinese religions.

Having immersed himself in Chinese languages, Confucian classics, and involvement with local elites, Ricci regarded ancient Confucianism as compatible with Catholicism. However, as Africanists criticize Western

³ Bodhisattvas refer to those who seek enlightenment not for their own liberation but for the sake of all beings.

⁴ Laojun, also known as Taishang Laojun or Daode Tianzun, is one of the Three Pure Ones, the highest divinities in Daoism.

⁵ Pangu is known as a creation figure who separated heaven and earth in Chinese mythology.

scholars for not being true to African religions, the Jesuit missionaries suffered from a similar flaw. Chinese Catholics today barely notice that the concept of *Tianzhu* involves Buddhist connotations. Furthermore, although Ricci rightly noticed the ancient Chinese veneration of *Shangdi* and *Tian*, he did not understand the concept of *Shangdi* the way ancient Chinese sages did. Nor did he intend to verify the differences between God and *Shangdi*. Rather, Ricci aimed at utilizing ancient Confucianism, the “skillful means,” in order to build up a common ground of dialogue with the Confucian literati and to gain their recognition of Catholicism (MEYNARD, 2014, 100). As discussed previously, representatives like Longobardo and Aleni, however, discarded Ricci’s approach and rejected any deities of the three traditions (Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism) as comparable, let alone equivalent, to God. They, therefore, dismissed any compromise of adopting Chinese religious terms for *Deus* (STANDAERT 2001). Nevertheless, many Chinese concepts such as *Tian*, *Shangdi*, and *Dao* have been deployed for explaining the concept of God. This constitutes one significant mark of the sinicization of Christianity.

The Africanist comparison between Olodumare and the Christian concept of God present a different conceptualization of Olodumare’s godhood. Similarly, in terms of the correlation between Chinese gods and the Christian God, Chinese audiences came to hold a variety of views. An average Chinese may tend to identify the Buddhist gods, *Brahmā* and Śakra, as similar to the Christian God. He would have an open mind about incorporating a new foreign god into the Chinese Pantheon. This conjecture could be understood to some extent by the high level of inclusiveness entailed in Chinese polytheistic practice.

However, as exemplified by He Shizhen, a committed Chinese convert was more likely to hold an exclusive attitude towards other religions. Similarly, the Jesuit priest Longobardo, Aleni, the renowned Confucian officials, and converts like Xu Guangqi (1562-1633), and Yang Tingjun (1562-1627) regarded the Jade Sovereign as incomparable with God. As indicated in a document attributed to Xu Guangqi entitled *Pomi* [Destroying illusion], Xu relates Chinese religions to superstition (SCHACHTER 2015).

A third Chinese approach would be severe opposition to the Christian God and claiming the superiority of Chinese religiosity. In *Shengchao poxie ji* (Collection on Destroying the Evil on Behalf of the Holy Court), a Confucian literatus Huangzhen, who was also a Buddhist, severely criticized the spread of Christianity in late Ming China. Claiming Catholicism as “evil doctrines”, Huangzhen criticized the doctrine of God as violating neo-Confucian

cosmology (XIA 1996). As Huangzhen explains, God creates heaven and earth, human beings, and all things. He is omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent. And God puts the soul in humans called the spirit. According to Huang, Catholicism divides heaven and earth, the Lord, and human beings, claiming that they cannot be united. And heaven and earth cannot be regarded as the Lord. Huang argues, however, that according to neo-Confucianism, the spirit is the heaven, and the heaven is the mind; thus, heaven and earth, all beings, and my mind belong to one unity. In his argumentation, Huang incisively points to the essential difference between Catholic and neo-Confucian cosmology. This leads to a criticism of Ricci's adoption of Confucianism as the kind that *seems like but not*, because Ricci has refuted the neo-Confucian doctrine. In *Tianzhu shiyi*, Ricci criticizes the ancient Confucian truth, suggesting it to be distorted in neo-Confucian doctrines. Huangzhen and Ricci seemingly had quite a different understanding of Confucianism. Moreover, as a Buddhist practitioner, Huang undoubtedly did not favor Ricci's criticism of Buddhism. Ricci's critique of Buddhism constitutes one factor that caused Huang's hostile attitude towards Catholicism.

Conclusion

As Igboin suggested, two truths are essential and imperative in Yoruba's encounter with Christianity: one is to translate God as true to Christianity, the other is to translate Olodomare as true to the Yoruba. The above review of the Jesuit mission in late Ming China has some implications relevant to Igboin's thesis. The Chinese translation *Tianzhu* is originally referred to the Buddhist god, *Śakra*. In this regard, the Buddhist concept of *Tianzhu* cannot adequately denote the meaning of God. Similarly, the ancient Confucian concept of *Shangdi* entails different connotations from the Christian concept of God. In this sense, both translations of *Tianzhu* and *Shangdi de facto* suffer from similar errors to which Igboin alludes. Both translations are neither true to Christianity nor true to Chinese religions.

However, as a matter of fact, both translations have been preserved and do not cause controversy in common contemporary usage by scholars and Chinese Christians. With respect to the Yoruba translation for God, is it possible to avoid the tendency to adopt the Yoruba religious concept? In other words, can Western scholars and local people avoid the mental and cognitive process whereby the Christian God is conceived by relating Him to local gods? Transliterations are commonly seen in Chinese translations of Buddhist scriptures. Perhaps, scholars may consider using the Latin word *Deus* so as to precisely denote the Christian God. Scholars may also consider transliterating words such as *Deus*, *Olodumare*, *Esu* in their translations and academic works. Transliterations do not necessarily lead to the elimination of Christian influence on the understanding of Yoruba gods. Rather, they can avoid the

the confusion caused by referring to Olodumare as God. In other words, the transliterating term bears the assumption that it carries the indigenous belief system as a distinctive whole. These remarks, however, indicate possible directions for further exploration, not a final solution to the problem.

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