**ODUN AJE**

**BACKGROUND**

Festivals are an essential aspect of Yorùbá culture. For worshipers of deities like *Oranmiyan* and other Yorùbá pantheon gods known collectively as the *òrìsà*, festivals serve as a connector of the social world of the Yorùbá to the unseen world. The Yoruba pantheon consists of hundreds of gods, worshiped for an immense variety of purposes, each representative of some natural or spiritual element or human emotion. Some gods existed before the creation of the earth and others are heroes or heroines from the past that became gods after their deaths. Other gods are natural objects in their environment such as mountains, hills and rivers that have influenced people’s lives and cultural history. Important to the Yoruba religion are storytelling and the journey of life, and these are connected to many sacred rituals.

These gods are honored, reverenced and worshiped particularly during festivals which often begin with the retelling of a Yorùbá myth. A good example is the Oranmiyan festival which explores Oyo history in order to explain its foundation and the ultimate destiny of Oyo Empire. These includes maintaining a relationship between an individual and the past history of his or her lineage; Learning and teaching of incantations, traditional dances, songs, and ontology; and establishing continuity in the cultural tradition of Oyo town.

Many traditional festivals are celebrated in Yoruba towns and villages, they are celebrated in different ways and specified period of the year. A quick classification of these festivals into three categories further establishes the nature of traditional worship and festivals to Yorubas. First are festivals used to celebrate agricultural products such as the New Yam festival. Another festival is celebrated in memory of some powerful and historical figures in a particular community, who had achieved and fought for that community and made history. Festivals are thereby organized annually to celebrate them. Examples of such festivals include Ogun festival, Shango festival, Oranmiyan festival, etc. The third category falls under historical festivals which are organized in remembrance of a particular incident that happened in a community be it good or bad. Thus, rituals are carried out to honor those who have passed on to the world of the ancestors and provide a space where people may explore the profound and experience phenomena.

Ondo town is situated one hundred and fifty-five kilometers southeast of Ibadan Nigeria and forty-five kilometers from Ile-Ife the cradle of Yoruba race. Ondo is located in the tropical rain forest belt of Nigeria with a population of about three hundred thousand inhabitants. They are mostly farmers and traders who derive their wealth from exploration of natural resources such as timber, cocoa, kola nut and palm oil. Yoruba history and oral tradition traced the origin of the Ondos from Oduduwa, the acclaimed founder of Ile-Ife. It is believed that many years ago one of Oduduwa’s wives bore him twins: male and female. The custom then demanded the killing of the twins. In order to save the twins’ lives and himself from embarrassment, Oduduwa had to send them away from the town. When consulted, Ifa oracle predicted that if sent away; the twins and those that accompany them will eventually settle at a place where they would find yam stakes (Idi-edo) now referred to as Ode Ondo.

Ondo kingdom, which shares boundary with modern Akure metropolis in Ondo State and Obokun areas of Ilesha in neighboring Osun State forms its boundary in the north and in the south with Ilaje/Eseodo Local Government Areas, terminating at Owena River in the Ifedore Local Government Area in the West, stretching farther to River Ooni.

The system of government in Ondo Kingdom is rather unique. The focus is centralized on the election of a divine kingship with a king status, which is a hereditary one, rotating among five ruling houses (genealogies) namely Arilekolasi, Jisomosun, Aroworayi, Jilo and Fidipote, with an authority partly derived through the legendary fore-parent, Oba Pupupu, who migrated from Oyo and in the other part, from Oduduwa, the descent of the Yoruba race who derived (his) from ‘Olodumare’, the supreme being.

The next grade of chiefs are the ‘Ekule’ who number seven and lower in rank than the Eghae, carrying out ministerial functions of the kingdom such as treasury, information, attorney-general and justice, education and other special duties as assigned by the Eghae which they are responsible to. They are in this order; Odofin, Arogbo, Logbosere, Odofindi, Sagwe, Sara and Olotu-Omoba. After these seven are the lowest chieftaincy titled citizens of the kingdom called Elegbe. Their principal duty is law, order and general security of the land from both internal and external warlords. They of course constitute the armed forces. All these activities are well co-ordinated from the center headed by the Eghae and led by the Osemawe. In other words, the kingdom operates one of quasi-federal systems that provide for an effective governance process like Senegal and South Africa respectively.

The ‘Alaworo’ priest chiefs are the next group of leaders in Ondo. These are largely heads of local, pre-Oduduwa groups who are now in a position of ‘ritual superiority’ over the newcomers. They consist of Oloja Oke-Idoko, Ekiri of Ifore, Sora and Akunara, the last two being the Oramfe priests. All these titles are hereditary and candidates are elected from the family concerned.

The Ondo people are also blessed with rich culture of various brands like festival celebrations, ritual marriages, rites performance as mentioned already, drumming and dancing, arts and crafts like blacksmithing, clothes ‘dyeing called ‘*Aso Adire’*, dressing, funerals, tribal marks, cultism, ancestral worships and traditional sacrifices, all of which are incorporated in their African Traditional Religion. Odun Aje in Ondo kingdom is literally referred to as a festival of the goddess of wealth and fertility. The festival is one of the over 44 traditional festivals annually celebrated with pomp and pageantry in Ondo. The festival is dedicated to Aje, the Yoruba goddess of wealth and fertility, it is another very special and impressive female angle to the Ondo traditions.

In the institutional structure and government process of Ondo, the women are also highly formidable and influential with their own structure appearing like their male counterparts’, playing prominent roles like the installation of a new *Osemawe* by the *‘Lobun’* the head of the market and kingmaker. History confirms that no one else installs a king in Ondo kingdom than ‘*Lobun’* and after this installation, she goes to her own tent and would never see *Osemawe* again until she dies vis-à-vis. If a *Lobun* also dies, the king she installs must die on the throne before a new *Lobun* is installed, lest, if not installed, no new *Osemawe* would be installed. This is the tradition and would continue to be. Lobun is regarded as a woman king, who replaces female Osemawe like Pupupu the progenitor. The market is an important place in the institutional structure of Ondo as it is of economic and social significance in the day to day administration and commerce of the kingdom. It is controlled by the women under the authority of *Lobun* who is also the priestess Aje (god of wealth and prosperity). Till today, there is no economic life-wire of the kingdom and the Ondo state people in general that is not fascinated and strongly upheld by women, even, in modern day

**LITERRAURE REVIEW**

Traditional festivals constitute the life wire of the socio-religious practices among the Awori of Lagos state (Ajetunmobi and Ishola, 1998). Both authors observed that the Awori in general are fully involved in varieties of traditional religious festivals which portray them as a society which values its cultural heritage.

Like other Yoruba sub group, different kinds of festivals pervade their cultural institutions among which is the Odun Aje festival of Ondo people. It is an epitome of a society which values its cultural heritage. The festival is an acceptable general behaviour guarded by the norms and beliefs of its members. It is a festival of music and dance and is also used as period to pray for peace and prosperity in the communities.

Many scholars have discussed the celebrations of traditional festivals in Nigeria. Among them are Ogunba (1978), Agordoh (1994), Okafor (1994), Hornby (1995), and Omibiyi (2005) to mention a few. Based on various studies on festivals, several definitions have emerged. Ogunba (1975) defines festivals as the great artistic institution in traditional Africa. It is the season or period when people reinforce their belief in the worship of gods, the divinities and the deities. Hornby (1995) defines festival as a day or period of religious or other celebration. Omibiyi (2005) viewed festival as a periodic celebration in acknowledgement of blessings already received, and means of requesting for more blessings, protection and guidance from the creator through lesser gods and ancestors. Omojola (2006) observed among the various traditional communities in Nigeria that as a periodic celebration, festivals provide occasional forum for the people to pray for peace and prosperity, to offer sacrifices to the gods, to make atonement for the sins of the past as well to celebrate common ancestry.

From the above definitions, it can be deduced that festivals are periodic celebrations, illustrating among other things, historical event and appeasing of various gods for protection against enemies and evil forces.

**METHODLOGY**

The first methodology adopted for this work is oral discussions among Yoruba speakers which is about the masquerade in Ibadan. This is considered as a practical and better means of collecting data as it is assumed that such propositions would be more valid and reliable as they form the basis for the day-to-day conversations among those who use the Yoruba language. The data is therefore gathered from the exchanges among the Yoruba speakers, and are based on egungun i.e. masquerade in Yoruba culture. Content analysis will also be used to carry out this work; in addition, this work will make use of historic analysis. The works of modern and ancient writers will be accessed. Furthermore works of contemporary news articles will be used. Documents will also be gotten from the internet.

**PERSONALITIES**

Odun Aje festival in Ondo city is an annual festival usually performed by the Opojis, that is the female Chiefs, the festival is usually held on the eve of Odun Moko, a special festival usually performed around November by the Udoko community, where women are barred from public glare.

The festival in Ondo kingdom is usually referred to as the goddess that controls women's success in business, and extends their wealth, Aje, is normally regularly propitiated by Ondo women, especially the market Chiefs and the Opojis.

The special annual festival and the worship is however vested in the Opojis, who perform the rites on their own and on behalf of womanhood, and the entire people in the kingdom.

According to a former Commissioner for Education in Ondo State and the Mayegun of Ondo city, Chief Mrs. Olufunke Iluyemi, Aje is worshiped annually in the city, so that fortune will continue to smile on all women and the townsfolk in general. She explained that each Opoji in the city is expected to have her own Aje, which is a kind of movable shrine, dedicated to the Yoruba goddess of affluence and fertility.

The shrine consists of the Aje itself which is placed in a big clean and white bowl, usually of brass and in the bowl are placed several items symbolic of wealth, enhanced social status and fertility.

The items include Aso-Oke, the Ondo traditional cloth, owo eyo, (cowrie money) Iyun (red beads) awo (China plates) irunkere, (horse tail) and decorative mirrors as well as gold ornaments to mention a few. The items which are artistically and daintily arranged in the white bowl and topped with horse tail is a symbol of prestige, status, ease and affluence. It could also be topped with white doll, which also symbolises western civilisation in which Ondos are noted for.

**CELEBRATION**

The Aje in Ondo kingdom is the Opoji's symbol of position and elevation in the society, it reflects her position as a woman of substance and respectability without which attributes she could not have been made a chief. Other women around her or her own relations may also have cause to propitiate the Aje on their own behalf for success in their individual business in life's endeavours.

At the beginning of the Obitun ceremony celebrated for puberty initiation performed by the Ondos for girls prior to marriage, the girls involved will have the Aje near them or that of their relation who is an Opoji worshipped on their behalf.

The usual materials for the Aje rites are kolanut and cold water (*Ugba Omi Titu*) in local parlance, elo (marched yam without palm oil) among others.

Apart from this private worship of the Aje, which is usually around November, precisely on the eve of Odunmoko, a special outing for each Opoji with her Aje. This is called Odun Aje, a unique outing for the women Chiefs to perform publicly the worship of their Aje to seek fortune and favour, not only on themselves, but also on the entire kingdom, including the Oba, Chiefs and all his subjects.

The Aje ceremony in Ondo kingdom also involves the Udoko priest Chiefs whose duty it is to perform the rites on the Aje to seek for success and prosperity in the entire kingdom.

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Preceding the day of the celebration, elaborate preparations are made by the Opoji for a festival splashed in honour of her Aje. Relatives are informed and items for feasting are got ready. On the morning of the day, the Opoji dresses up and prepares her Aje for the evening outing. The Aje will be displayed and placed in the front of the house of the Opoji chief, while spectators view it for their admiration.

In the evening of the celebration, the Aje will be placed on the head of a young virgin, for the efficacy of the prayers and rites, the Aje carrier (votary maid) must be pure. The girl herself would be beautifully attired with choice traditional wears and beads, covering her body from the thighs to her chest.

She wears the Yata and other trappings of traditional affluence, very important that the Aje carrier is expensively attired, because both she and Aje are on display, as a reflection of the status and social success of the Opoji concerned.

With the Aje carried by the young virgin, the Opoji dances to the appointed assembly at a spot in Okedoko street in Ondo, accompanied in a joyous procession by her children, neighbours as well as other relations and well wishers, mainly women. Naira of different denominations would be pasted on the body of the young girl.

When all the female Chiefs might have assembled, each Aje is placed on a stand in front of the Opoji. The female Chiefs then hold a mock marketing session to symbolize the importance of economic activities in Ondo kingdom and the key role of women in the commercial life of the society.

As the ceremony proceed, in a highly delightful manner, the Opoji pays homage to Lobun, who is the leader of the women Chiefs in the city, this exercise would go round in a hierarchical order, very similar to what the male Chiefs do during Ugha, a traditional meeting spot within the Palace of the Osemawe.

The whole ceremony is perform in a square called Enuowa, a spot near the Old Town Hall, behind the palace of Osemawe. The ceremony is a special forum for women. It is the high point of Ondo tradition, it is a most enthralling sight full of gaiety and colour.

During the celebration, the very depth of Ondo culture is reflected in the women’s dressing, singing, ceremonial dancing, traditional prayers and exchange of ceremonial greetings to mention a few. However, the main thrust of the ceremony is for prayers to be said for communal peace, success in business and continued prosperity for the entire kingdom in general, and the Opojis in particular.

This celebration involved the Opojis in Ondo and the Chiefs from Udoko led by the Sasere who would arrive later in the evening to partake in the elaborate celebration, the Chiefs from Udoko community would offer prayers foe each of the Opojis, praying for their success in trade, prosperity and long life.

The Udoko Chiefs would also offer prayers for fertility among Ondo women and the safety, happiness and well-being of all children born into the community, during this prayers each Aje is touched with the priests, while “ase” meaning Amen would rent the air.

After the rite the Udoko chief would depart, amidst drumming and dancing, while the Opojis would also leave the venue in hierarchical order, in company of their drummers, this aspect of the celebration is always a delight to watch as everybody present at the venue would be happy to be part of the annual celebration.

The accompanied friends and relatives would be cleared on their returns to the Opojis house, while the Aje is returned to its special place on a conspicuous stand in the house to await another year’s outing.

However, if the Opoji herself is unable to accompany her Aje to the venue of the celebration as a result of illness, old age and demise, her children and other relations will perform the outing on her behalf.

In the alternative, she may display the Aje in front of her house, where she herself will sit, well dressed in a festive mood, while all her relatives would dance to the admiration of spectators, the virgin girl who has the honour of carrying the Aje is showered with cash gifts and valuable items. The virgin girl would also be given a hen and kolanuts to worship her guardian spirit and pray that she too may grows up to be a woman of substance in the society. When the virgin girl grows too big to carry the Aje or gets married, another carrier has to replace her.

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