

THE LORE OF RELIGIOUS FESTIVALS AMONG THE YORUBA AND ITS SOCIAL RELEVANCE

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Abstract

Religious practices, ceremonies and festivals are part of folk heritage. They are essential materials in culture that circulate traditionally among members of any group in different versions. Festivals are occasion of public manifestation of joy or the celebration of a historical occurrence such as the role of Olumo rock in the victory of the Egbas. Culture and information about a particular community are often being transmitted through the songs, music and other activities that go with the festivals. The traditional festivals today are to a large extent seen by some as idol worship because of the deities associated with the festivals while some elites see the festivals as occasions that promote vices such as stealing, fighting, immorality, casting spell (by trying newly discovered charms/juju) on people. Hence many educated (Christians and Muslims) would not participate in these festivals. The festivals however are still very relevant as they provide a rallying point for people in a particular society, create cultural awareness and avenue of getting a practical experience of the people's customs, their way of life and their belief systems. The paper is, thus, an attempt to bring to fore the social significance of religious festivals.

(Key Words: Religious Practices, Ceremonies, Folk Heritage, Festivals, Culture).

INTRODUCTION

The Yoruba traditional society is a corporate and religious society. Ogunbile (1998: 125) identifies two major forms of identity in Nigeria-religious identity and ethnic identity. To be human therefore, is to belong to the whole community and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of that community (Mbiti 1970:80). Festivals, according to Famuyiwa (1992) are periodic recurring days or seasons of gaiety or merry-making set aside by a community or clan, for the observance of sacred celebrations, religious solemnities or musical and traditional performance of special significance. It is an occasion of public manifestation of joy or the celebration of a

historical occurrence or a religious celebration during which sacrifices are offered to the different gods having power over rain, sunshine, marriage and good harvest. In most Yoruba festivals, religious activities play a very prominent role and a participant in a festival identifies himself with the sacred time through ritualistic-re-enactment of the events that inform man about his identity (Famuyiwa 1992:83). Participation in the ceremonies of local traditional deities acknowledged in such a community becomes a strong means of identity formation and produces a collective spiritual consciousness (Ogungbile 1998: 129). To detach oneself from the religion of one's community is to be severed from one's root and kinships.

Religion is the focal point of Yoruba culture as pointed out by Idowu (1970), "the keynote of their life is their religion. In all things they are religious, religion forms the foundation and the all governing principle of life for them". Religious festivals usually serve as a package containing many aspects of the Yoruba culture, such as their beliefs, family life, dress, language, music and dance. The religious ethics, myths and ideas are clearly expressed through the songs the adherents sing during the festivals. Oyetade (2003) asserts that Yoruba religious festivals have welfare objectives, during a festival the divinity is appeased to in order that the adherents and the entire community may enjoy another year of safety, plenty and happiness. Every member of the society is therefore expected to show support for the occasion by joining the crowd or by partaking of the rituals. The annual Yoruba religions festivals, such as Ifa festival in Abeokuta, Sango festival in Oyo, Ogun festival in Ondo and Ijesa land, Agemo festival in Ijebu land, gelede festival in Yewa land, Oro festival, Egungun festival and so on among various groups in Yoruba land, are very important events. They are occasions for re-union of the people with their gods and for renewal of religious and social values.

Festival periods are liminal periods when people come together as a group, renew their relationships and strengthen their cohesion. They are sort of sacred times when people are free from the social constraints of normal life in an intense form of social communion and solidarity. In fact, Mbiti (1991:143) contends that without festivals and rituals, African life would be dull, "rituals and festivals are religions ways of implementing the values and beliefs of society".

Among the Yoruba, festivals may accompany birth, initiation, marriages and funerals. There are also harvest festivals, coronation festivals and so on, but the major religious festivals are those done in honor of some gods as mark of loyalty and to solicit blessings from the deity. Some of these major traditional festivals shall be examined.

Some people see this period as an opportunity to test their newly discovered charms (juju). Being an occasion of public manifestation of joy, as people move about in the festive mood it becomes easy for those with such evil intention to take offence at little insignificant errors made by others and cast a spell on them (an opportunity to test the potency of their charms). Many of the civilized/educated elites see these festivals as sheer idol worship totally ignoring the cultural transmission and preservation of tradition involved in it. For instance, the belief that Ogun has the machet to clear the path and open the gate for wealth, health and prosperity and that if he is neglected he can cause ghastly accidents and bloody battles, places Ogun to some extent side by side with God Almighty who alone (in the beliefs of Christians and Muslims) has the power to give health, wealth and prosperity.

Others do not see any reason to identify with gods (like sango and ogun) who could be so destructive and merciless when irritated. Moreso, it is believed that when the spirits of these gods (mounts) come upon their worshippers (during the festivals) they could also be as violent and destructive as the gods. For instance, the “Elegun Sango” the person “invaded” or possessed by the spirit of sango usually loses consciousness and does things which he would not have been capable of doing under normal circumstances such as passing sharp-edged knife through his tongue. He becomes wild and uncontrollable in some cases.

However, some of the gods being venerated during these festivals forbid stealing, lying and oppression. Most of them stood for justice and uprightness. If these worshippers could also shun these vices and uphold the virtues of justice and righteousness. There will be some sanctity in the society (Awolalu 1979:112).

SOME MAJOR RELIGIOUS RESTIVALS

The worship of Ifa is found in almost all the towns and villages in Yoruba land. The Yoruba belief, as recorded by Wande Abimbola is that, Ifa in the company of other major deities came to earth from heaven and they first landed at Ife which the Yoruba people believed to be the cradle of mankind. The gods were sent by Olodumare from heaven to Ife mainly to establish order on earth. And Ifa played a leading role in this divine ordering because of his wisdom (Abimbola 1976: 4).

The great wisdom which Ifa possesses gives him a high position among the other gods. Ifa is the mouthpiece of the Yoruba traditional religion and as such, he serves to popularize the other Yoruba gods and helps to immortalize them. Because of his great wisdom, knowledge and understanding, “Ifa coordinates the work of all other gods in the Yoruba pantheon, because he serves as a middle-man or the go-between of other gods and the people, and between the people and their ancestors” (Sobola 1988:6).

Ifa is a famous divination god among the Yoruba and it is very rare for the Yoruba to attempt anything without consulting Ifa oracle. They consult him for guidance and advice in all their endeavours because of his wisdom and knowledge of the past, present and future.

The annual Ifa festival is a period when people normally show their gratitude to Ifa for all they have received from him. Apart from the sole festival which every Ifa priest is to celebrate yearly, there is the annual collective festival which is an occasion of rejoicing and thanksgiving. A time when people come out in their best and give of their best to Ifa, a time of communion between the divinity and his worshippers and a time for special renewal of covenants (Idowu 1970 :109).

In some towns in Egba land, 16th to 20th August of every year has been fixed by Ifa priests and worshippers for the annual Ifa festival. This is so because in the area, Ifa

festival also marks the arrival of the new yam (Sobola, 1988:19). Before the festival, all Ifa priests would meet in the Ifa grove to consult Ifa as to the materials he would want them to use for sacrifices during the festival. The worshippers, in some cases would buy the same type of clothes for themselves and their wives purposely for this festival. The common features of the festivals are:

- a. Iwe Ifa (washing the emblems of Ifa- beads, bracelets, palm-kernels, cowries, cowtails etc)
- b. The annual sacrifice to Ifa, and
- c. Cutting of the new yam with eating, drinking and merriments. Special songs, chants, and drums accompany each step or stage of the sacrifice and rituals. Prayers are said and sacrifices offered to ward – off premature deaths and for blessing and protection in the coming year.

Ifa festival usually brings the people of the town from other places together, traders record higher sales as people buy food items, and materials for sacrifices- goats, rams, doves etc for the festival, spiritual problems receive solutions, as bad luck is changed to good luck through rituals. If the town is faced with external problems, Ifa will tell them what to do to solve their problems, hence it contributes to political stability. The period of Ifa festival is used to cleanse the land of bad luck and it is believed that there is usually improvement in the activities of the town after the celebration of Ifa festival.

It provides opportunity for musician to develop and demonstrate their talents, as they perform during these festivals; they become popular and make more money. There is always a high demand for local beads, fly-whisk and other artifacts that people use during the festivals. This has created employment for many people who would have been jobless.

OGUN FESTIVAL

The annual Ogun festival among the Yoruba, usually takes place in the dry season, when there is good hunting. Ogun is the god of iron and consequently the god of hunters, hence fresh bush meat is required for this festival. The annual festival of Ogun

takes place during the month of August in many part of Yorubaland like Ondo, Ado-Ekiti and Owo. This is significant considering the fact that in the Yoruba calendar; August is known as the month of Ogun. But there are other towns like Ilesa which celebrate theirs between December and January every year. This festival is celebrated annually to appease Ogun to ward – off imminent accidents both on the roads and in the farms or bush during hunting. Like other Yoruba divinities, Ogun is an intermediary between God and man, hence they call upon him for blessings, protection and supports.

During Ogun festival the worshippers offer numerous gifts of food and drinks and there is the payment of vows to Ogun. Ifa Oracle is consulted to determine the festival date in accordance with Ogun’s wishes. Mbiti (1970:79) reveals that, “prior to the events, the Ogun priests (Oluode) and the officiating family heads prepare themselves morally and physically, so that they may be acceptable servants of Ogun. They must abstain from cursing, fighting, sexual intercourse and eating certain foods”. Throughout the night preceding the festival, Ogun’s special praise chants (Ijala/Agege) are sung in honour of the divinity, particularly to attract his attention and appease him to shower his blessing upon the followers.

On the day of the festival, libation in form of water/palmwine is poured at Ogun shrine and the materials for sacrifice are brought before Ogun snails, palm-oil, pigeons and dogs. They begin by offering kola-nuts to Ogun. This signifies a renewal of bond between Ogun and his worshippers. Other sacrificial materials like the snails, pigeons and palm oil are also significant (they stand for softness, smoothness and calmness) they are meant to calm Ogun’s anger and wrath. The dog as well symbolically corresponds to Ogun’s dualistic, destructive/protective nature (it combines in itself both the wilderness and ferocity of its natural state and the friendliness and protectiveness of its domestic state). Therefore, it is uniquely appropriate and a most suitable medium for establishing and controlling intimate contact with him (Mbiti 1970: 80).

After the sacrifices have been offered, the participants share the consecrated flesh of the dog and share the ‘bush-meat offering while singing Ogun’s praises. The essence

of this sharing is that through the sacrificial rite, the worshippers should partake of the consecrated animal so that its protective good qualities would be acquired and evil influences expelled.

Abe (1986:19) noted that it is not only the worshippers that benefit from the sacrifice, the deity also needs to be sustained in order to be effective, he needs sustenance as men, though in spiritual or mystical manner while the deity does not consume the food in its simplest form like men, he might be delighted in the savour of the essence of the sacrifice and be satisfied. The sacrifice in some instances, is not just for appreciation but for the elimination of sin, especially sins committed against the deity, and those committed against neighbours, and for restoration of the good favour of the offended. In this way, they reinforce Ogun's relationship with them and renew the bonds of unity among themselves.

SANGO

Sango is a very important deity among the Yoruba, he is the divinity that executes God's anger through lightening. He is known for taking hardened criminals' lives without any human intervention (Abioje 2000:33). Sango is regarded as the god of thunder and lightening. Nine days are usually used for the annual celebration of Sango festival in Oyo. This festival normally comes up between August and September to commemorate the new yam. Ifa consulted, as in other cases for the sacrificial materials for the year's celebration.

During the festival, the sacrificial object is killed and its blood is sprinkled on the shrine of Sango. Then the worshippers offer prayers asking Sango for guidance, protection, children, good health etc. Dancing, eating and jubilation then follow as Sango's praise-singers and dancers would be singing and chanting Sango's praises. These songs contain the life history of Sango, his supernatural powers, and his expectations from his followers. The drum that normally accompanies Sango's praises is 'Bata' and people make new vows to the god while some who vowed the previous year would fulfill their vows. One of the significance of this festival is that it is a period when people ask

for his people. The importance of rain to the existence of man health-wise and economically cannot be over-emphasized.

SOCIAL VALUES OF RELIGIOUS FESTIVALS

The festivals help in propagating and promoting Yoruba cultural values, advertising Yoruba cultural heritage for appreciation and preservation. The realization of the values in these festivals has led the church today, both indigenous and orthodox, through the process of contextualisation, to engraft the harvest festival/celebration into their annual programme. The Christians recognizes the socio-economic values in festivals and in a bid to replace the traditional religious festival which have been dedicated to one god or the other, have found an alternative in the annual harvest celebrations in the church. In this case, people still come from near and far to offer thanksgiving to God, eat, drink, jubilate and praise God in a sweet communion. It is a yearly re-union with the same purpose as the traditional religious festivals. People have opportunity of paying and making vows; prayers are offered for God's favour, mercy, protection, and blessings, and people find solutions to their long standing problems.

In the light of civilization and modernization these religious festivals still persist in most Yoruba cities and towns but now they are embedded in the modern day jamborees under different titles, such as 'Iwoye Day', 'Lisabi Day', 'Yewa day', 'Obanta Day', 'Osun Festival', 'Oyo day', etc. These festivals have persisted because of the much values embedded in them. The main purpose of religious festivals is to reassure the members of the traditional society of the presence of the gods in their midst and the concern of the gods for their welfare (Olabimtan 1984:9). The festivals are constant reminders of the attributes of every god, its role and function in the communal life of the people, and its place in the universe. It enhances effective communication among people, and between them and the gods, they are able to communicate with the gods through their sacrifices and prayers; in turn, translatable messages from the gods are received through the medium and the audience feels satisfied and happy that the gods have communicated with them.

Information about Yoruba beliefs in the gods, the myths about the gods, their activities among men and why the people reverence them so much are being transmitted to the members of the community and outsiders through these festivals. For instance, Olabimtan (1984:7) asserts that from the Sango Festival, one can learn much regarding Yoruba Belief about thunder and lightening, about bata music, about Sango's stool and special axe, his special dress and coiffure, about his chants and dance steps, about Yoruba kingpin and political system in the old Oyo kingdom and about the myths of Sango's supernatural power. "In this way the three modes of folklore, namely, verbal, partly verbal and non-verbal are well exhibited. Sango's chants and myth pertain to verbal folklore, bata music, Sango's dance and chants pertain to partly verbal folklore, his axe, stool and costume relate to non-verbal folklore .

In addition, these festivals help in promoting purity in the society. The abstinence from sexual intercourse, fighting and all uncleanness by the priests and worshippers during the period of the festivals gets them prepared to commune with the gods. The celebration of the festival also gives the quality of "sacredness" that separates "the religious from the secular".

Religious festivals help in strengthening societal bonds. During the celebration, there is reconciliation, and personal feuds are put aside. It reinforces the status quo in that the religious and social powers of Kings and priests are well demonstrated at such times. Moreover, talents in various field of human endeavors such as singing, dancing, carving, hunting, weaving etc are discovered during these festivals.

In most cases, there is usually an increase in population of the community at the time of the festivals. Consequently traders and transporters make more money as transportation fare goes up and there is greater demand for consumer goods.

It has been observed however that some of these traditional festivals are normally identified with specific communities or divinities as such, they are less meaningful when organized outside these contexts. The need to preserve the values they possess prompted

the establishment of the National Arts Council and similar organization in the States to organize Arts festivals which will cut across different ethnic groups. The principal objectives of such festivals include: ensuring the revival, resurgence, propagation and promotion of African cultural values and civilization; to bring to light the various contributions of African peoples to the universal currents of thought and arts; to promote better international and interracial understanding; to promote African artists, performers and writers and facilitate their world outlets, among others (Famuyiwa, 1992:86). This gives credence to the inherent socio-economic values in the traditional festivals.

CONCLUSION

It is lamentable that many intellectuals among the Yoruba today, having been brought up in the Western traditional practices, have virtually become complete strangers in their own religion and culture. This is manifested in the ignorance displayed by such people as regards the traditional religion and also in the way and manner by which they ridicule and despise those who participate or show interest in these things. Oduyoye (1986:7) observes that Christian theology can benefit from knowledge of African traditional statements concerning God, nature and human nature. She thinks that African Christians would benefit more from an in-depth study of the religious components of our oral traditions, myths and legends (which are embedded in the religious festivals) than studying Greek metaphysical philosophy. The fathers of the synod on Africa also admitted that Africa has a great wealth of cultures and values to be shared with other nations and they recommended that a dialogue with the guarantors of our cultural values and of our traditional religion (ATR) structured around the cultural heritage is strongly recommended in our local churches (AMECEA 1995:25). These views buttress the fact that the present generation of Africans in spite of the discoveries and benefits of technology and western education cannot dispense with the cultural heritage inherent in the traditional religious festivals. There is need to discover more of our philosophical ideas and moral heritage which emphasizes the sanctity of life and the solidarity of the community. The prospect of these festivals however lies in the fact that they are carriers of cultural values. They are means of ensuring the attainment of the ultimate values of the Yoruba which are happiness and longevity. Through these festivals, people seek the

intermediate values possession of materials wealth and children to make one happy, possession of good character and health to make one live long and be of useful service to one's community – these are then employed to achieve the ultimate values.

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