



AN EXPLORATION OF INDIGENOUS PERFORMANCES IN ÒWÒ KINGDOM,
ONDO STATE, NIGERIA

By

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Abstract

Òwò Kingdom in Ondo State, Nigeria is regarded as a hub of indigenous culture, considering the number of festivals and other indigenous performances that are commemorated periodically in the community. Some of these are used to address sociological issues and aid the organisation and general equilibrium of the society. Extant studies have been carried out extensively on diverse aspects of indigenous festivals and performances of the Yoruba ethnic group of Southwest, Nigeria. However, many of these studies are selective and the indigenous festivals and performances of Òwò Kingdom are yet to receive adequate scholarly attention, thereby creating knowledge gap in African performance studies. Employing the Qualitative research design and espousing Ethnography, Interview (key informant and in-depth), as well as Non-participant Observation methods, the study identified some Òwò festivals and indigenous performances with a view to examining their performances and identifying the categories of people that perform in them. Additionally, some videos were recorded, photographs were taken and Data were analysed. The study found Àjọ, Ùlabì, Ugbáàtẹ and Ùpèlì to be popular performances in Òwò Kingdom. Furthermore, six categories of performers were found; Olówò (King), Priests, High chiefs, Ayóyos, Òpàtẹ-Ògún and Participant-audiences. The study concluded that the performances were purposive and distinctive; therefore, academic focus should be directed at them.

Keywords: *Indigenous festivals and performances, Yoruba ethnic group, Òwò Kingdom, performers*

Introduction

A society's customs and values are often identifiable through the summation of their sociological and ideological sensibilities. Roy (2005: xi) observes that "Since the beginning of time, and despite the advent of modernity as the reduction of the latter to the linear progress of secular history, the life of most human societies has unfolded within the sacred cycle of a strict succession of festive observances." These include myths, legends and religion. Fuller (2001: 9) maintains that, "to many people in the world, their religion is part of their ethnic identity", a notion which seems accurate, considering the numerous festivals that are commemorated across the globe, many of which have their roots in religion, and oftentimes, in their social and geographical milieus.

Describing festival, Kuutma (1981:1) avers that it is "a cultural performance which is scheduled, temporally and spatially bounded, programmed, characterized by co-ordinated public occasions and heightened occasions of aesthetic expression". Festivals vary in form, mode and content from one society to another. The point, however, is that festival commemorate important and unforgettable experiences in the life of a people. It is celebrated periodically and at no other time than the times allotted in the community's calendar. This period is regarded by Roy (2005: xii) as "privileged moments" in the recollection, reenactment, or anticipation of—and always participation in— "timeless" moments that stand out amid the flow of time.

On the African continent, indigenous festivals are important aspects of sociology and many aspects of their culture and lifestyle auspiciously predisposes them to it, therefore, the number of festivals that abound among them is multifarious and multi-dimensional. Diakhate (2001:18) observes that "Africa is prodigiously rich in rituals of all kinds. Some are in lighter vein and give rise to comic expression but the great majority have their origins in religious expressions and magic". The sacred, religious in mode, and conceived as a channel to worship deities, believed to possess supernatural powers, thereby serving as intermediaries between Man and the Supreme Being. Through rituals, deities are honoured, placated, channelled and celebrated. It is against this background that Cohen (2002:213) believes that "...rituals may re-enact defining moments of a culture's presumed history – such as the birth, death, or resurrection of a divine being –which can serve to unite adherents in a shared passion of sacred events and to educate and evangelize the general public as well".

Among the Yoruba people of SouthWest Nigeria, festivals are fundamental to culture. Osuntokun (2013:12) observes that “The culture of the Yoruba particularly its cuisine, history politics, art, music, religion, leisure, literature (both written and oral) cosmology, worldview and etiquette are shared by all the people speaking various dialects of the Yoruba language”.

Statement of the Problem

The study of indigenous performances is not new to cultural anthropologists and theatre scholars across the globe like (Falassi 1987; Roy, 2005; Kuutma, 1998). Likewise, on the African continent, it has received attention in the fields of theatre, religion, anthropology, history and tourism, among others; (Diakhate & Eyoh, 2001; Ododo, Oduro-Awisi, 2016; Ayesu *et al.*, 2020) from diverse perspectives. Furthermore, Adedeji (1968, 1972; 1978); Ogunba (1978); Poynor (1980, 2017); Lawuyi (1988); Opere (2014); Agbabiaka et al. (2017); Akinyemi (2018); Agboola (2022); Mejabi (2019); Umejei (2021) and Afolabi (2023) have also written extensively on diverse aspects of indigenous festivals in the Southwest, Nigeria. These include performances like Ojude-Oba, Osun-Osogbo, Olojo, Okebadan, Eyo and other popular Yoruba Festivals. However, these studies have been selective and studies on indigenous performances in Òwò Kingdom are scant. Although, Akinwunmi (2005); Olugbadehan (2006); and Mahmud (2018) have carried out studies on Òwò Kingdom, however, their indigenous performances are not extensively discussed, nor are the performers identified. This creates a gap in literature on African theatre and performance studies.

Aim and Objectives

The study aims to fill knowledge gap by examining some of the indigenous performances in Òwò Kingdom with a view to:

1. Examining the performances and their significances
2. Determining the categories of participants in the performances

Methodology

The study area for this research was Òwò Kingdom in Ondo State, which was selected for its rich history, performance traditions. The study employed the “Potpourri approach” (Staller and Chen, 2022: 81) which invigorated the study of a phenomenon like indigenous festival. Consequently, the instruments used for data collection from the participants in this study were non-participant

observation, ethnography and interviews, which enriched the work. Moreover, in combining a range of methods, a more effective instrumentation in data collection which further enhanced the understanding of research findings by the researcher is higher.

This study favoured the non-participant observation method because of the peculiarities of the festival, as well as the criteria for participation festival under study. For ethnography, the researcher conducted field work (Òwò Kingdom) over a period of 22 weeks, between March and August, 2020. The period was utilised by the researcher to familiarise with the cultural sites of Òwò Kingdom, as well as the sociology of the community. For the non-participant observation design, the researcher attended the performances of the 2021 Igogo Festival during which she made video recordings and took photographs of diverse performances in the festival.

Finally, interview method was also adopted. The interviewees were divided into key informant and in-depth interviews that included structured and unstructured questions, since the roles and responsibilities of participants in the festivals were mostly different. Key informant interviews were conducted with 20 purposively selected participants who were some of the custodians of the two festivals. These included the Ọlówò of Òwò, 10 high chiefs (mostly aboriginal chiefs from *Ìlórò* quarter who are considered the key custodians of Òwò culture), a priest, six *Ùkòjú-Ọlówòs* (spiritual sisters of Ọlówò) and two *Olórisàs* (traditional worshippers). On the other hand, in-depth interview was conducted with 20 randomly selected participants that included four scholars of Òwò culture, four culture enthusiasts/researchers, two cloth-weavers, one brass-caster, five indigenes and four participant-audiences in the two festivals.

The significance of the methodologies espoused in the study were the fact that they enabled the researcher to understand many aspects of Òwò culture, especially their sociology and dialect, which enriched the work and aided the comprehension, pronunciation and translation of some technical words rendered in Òwò dialect. Data were content-analysed.

Research ethics were conformed to, in relation to informing the participants about the purpose of the interviews and their consent were obtained before they engaged in the study. Having done this, they were requested to willingly supply information and by so doing, they were informed on how the data collected would be utilised, as well as the latent benefits the outcome of the research to

knowledge would be to indigenous performances and festival in Òwò Kingdom, if the proposed recommendations are implemented.

Scope of the study

The study was delimited to the precursor performances of Igogo Festival in Òwò Kingdom, Ondo State, Nigeria, namely: Àjọ, Ùlabì and *Ugbààtẹ* and *Ùpẹlì*, as performed in 2021, though references are made to previous editions. The paper concentrated on the sequence of performances, as well determined the categories of performers.

Literature Review

Festivals: Meanings and Concepts

Festival is a not an uncommon event in diverse parts of the world. It is performed in varied modes and forms. They are celebratory in nature and are shared events among people that are rooted in common origin and ancestry, and together find a need and validation in coming together to enjoy happy moments.

In many parts of Africa, festivals are elemental to people's culture and have been the bane of their existence and survival for centuries. They are commonly used to indicate celebrations that are marked by distinctive observances, usually performed at standard intervals, which are characterized by remarkable performances. Festival is derived from the Latin word *festum*, which means public joy, merriment, revelry. (Falassi, 1987). Falassi (1987: 1) describes it as:

...an event, a social phenomenon, encountered in virtually all human cultures. The colorful variety and dramatic intensity of its dynamic choreographic and aesthetic aspects, the signs of deep meaning underlying them, its historical roots and the involvement of the natives have always attracted the attention of casual visitors, have consumed travelers and men of letters alike.

Stoeltje (1992: 41) argues further that festival is a “cultural performance which is scheduled, temporally and spatially bounded, programmed, characterised by coordinated public occasions and heightened occasions of aesthetic expression.” It is a platform of social reinvigoration, discovery

of association, and rejuvenation, while facilitating dynamisms of spectacle and encouragement of group identity and promotion of public revelry.

Festivals are cultural signifiers, capturing world views, ideologies, arts, science and technology, religions and organisational structure of the societies they represent (Darah, 2014; Orji, 2019). It is characterised by public ecstasy and revelry in celebration of particular gods (Falassi, 1987; Downs *et al.* 2013). Cole (1975), cited by Gbadegbe and Mensah (2013: 35), observes that:

Festivals are manifestations of the practices and beliefs of a people. They are promoters of culture and builders of one's identity. Festivals perform many functions in the society. They serve as a means of commemorating and remembering important events in the history of a people. In the process, they perform other functions, both intended and unintended. As they involve re-creation of the past, they provide occasions for transmission of traditional cultures and values from one generation to the other.

Stoeltje (1992) emphasizes that festivals are community-oriented and occur only at the periods allotted to them in a community's calendar and cannot be observed individually. In summary, (Roy, 2005: xxi) views festival as:

a way for humans to "come home" to an original state outside the immediate demands of daily life –be it only to secure optimal conditions for their satisfaction –festivals also normally represent a certain release from customary practical strictures. This suspension of "normal" time is what makes them stand out as the archetypical manifestation of that "play element in culture".

Several hundreds of festivals are performed yearly in different societies and at different intervals giving people copious opportunities to experience and take part in them. In primordial times, indigenous festivals were anticipated to honour, appreciate and openly acknowledge the benevolence of gods and deities in anticipation of their cooperation. Roy (2005: xii) observes that:

Every traditional festival is at once “a popular festivity and a mystic ceremony” and belongs, as such, at some level at least, among the only true festivals that religious festivals are, unlike secular, social festivals, since no contingent caprice attaches them to some day or other that is not specially meant for them, that has nothing essentially festive about it.

Festivals and rituals

Downs et al. (2013: 238) posit that theatre is an offshoot of religion, myth and ritual: “the word *ritual* comes from the Latin *ritualis*, a ceremonial act connected with human life and all that sustains it. Many thousands of years ago, people used rituals to understand and deal with their environment”. In the view of Cohen (2003: 213), communal cultural rituals could concern seasons; they may also provide social witness and cultural authentication of people’s life passages. Some may also re-enact defining moments in the prehistory of a culture that could unite adherents and propagate such culture.

These include birth, death, or resurrection of a divine being. Some rituals may also target specific needs of a community, such as adequate rainfall, bountiful harvest, victory in battle, successful hunt, favour from gods/goddesses and end to sickness (Downs et al., 2013). Turner (1969: 19) notes the “unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *communitas*, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders”.

On the African continent, Diakhate (2001: 18) observes that “Africa is a continent that is prodigiously rich in different kinds of rituals. Most indigenous festivals entail rituals, which are sacred religious modes conceived as a channel to worship deities. A central component of the African thought system is animism, which places humanity at the centre. In the African universe, God requires people to be fully realized. The people give God meaning through their sacrifices, cultural manifestations and incantation Diakhate (2001). These activities are ritualistic; through them, deities are appeased, honoured, placated, channelled and venerated.

As noted further by Diakhate (2001: 19), ritual ceremonies are conducted by celebrants who must establish contact between supernatural and custodians. Through them, there is imitation of supernatural phenomena and an effort to make the celebrants one with such forces. Festivals are celebrated in Africa for many reasons.

Again, festivals often engage rituals aimed at invocation of deities to grace the festivity and commune with their devotees. Rappaport (1992: 249) conceptualises ritual as “the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not encoded by the performers.” Rituals are tied to the emotional well-being of individuals and groups. Essentially, it is “a ceremonial act performed for religious or cultural reasons, either to summon the gods and influence nature (as with rain dances or healing ceremonies) or to dignify an important social, political, or mythic event” (Cohen, 2003: 213).

Rituals are an important component of culture and are performed to honour deities and ancestors to stress group identities and perpetuate culture. It plays important roles in many aspects of human life, such as religion (baptism, communion, birth and funerary rites), graduation ceremony, and legal and government institutions (Downs et al., 2013).

Badeji (2024) observes that: Rituals are not synonymous with African festivals only. They have existed in many parts of the world from antiquated times and were observed in different aspects of life, from birth, the coming of age, marriage ceremonies and funeral obsequies. Rituals are performed through traditional ceremonies, as well as the doctrines of imported religions. The difference is that many of these in the traditional African tradition, they are used to re-enact the principle of renaissance of the universe...”

Classification of festivals

Seasonal/agricultural/harvest festival: This category of festival is resolute to the change in seasons, owing to the environmental effects and weather on planting and harvesting of crops. As such, numerous modern festivals that began from primeval rural performances are celebrated across the world (Badeji, 2024). Ogwezzi-Ndisika and Faustino (2017) argue that many festivals are connected to farming and rural development. Many of them signal times for the planting and

harvesting of crops. This kind of festival is widespread in Yorubaland, and often celebrates harvest of crops, especially, yam.

Veneration of Natural Resources: Among Africans, the belief in the superiority of physical phenomena, like mountains, bodies of water, the sun, the moon, vegetation and hills, among others have been observed to occasion various forms of indigenous performances. These natural resources are believed to have nurtured people in particular societies at some point, as well as having been liable for their continued existence. These kinds of festivals originated from antediluvian epochs and are still integral to a people's history and foundation, especially in African societies.

These kinds of festivals honour spiritual entities that are believed to reside in such natural spaces. An instance is the Fetu Afahye Festival among the Oogua people of Ghana (Walls, 2011; Assanful and Boakye, 2020) held annually in September around the lagoon, in appreciation of the deities of the community for their perceived intervention in the plague that devastated their community centuries prior.

Also, this kind of indigenous festivals may be used to oppose the malevolent forces of nature that sometimes militate in opposition to man's total well-being. These include flood, drought, other forms of natural disasters and diseases. For instance, among the ancient Chinese, the Wu Shaman tribe perform agricultural rituals (Winkelman, 2023) through rain-making. In time of drought performers danced within rings of fire until they sweated profusely and the droplet of sweats on their bodies made rain to fall for agriculture and relief. (Chiminya, 2015). A similar rain invocation ritual festival, Mukwerera is also practiced among the Shona people of Zimbabwe.

Ancestor Veneration: This relates predominantly to Africa where festivals relating to the return of ancestors from the land of the dead in the form of masquerades, believed to connect with the living are performed, periodically. This category of festival is replete among Africans in different forms (Olupona, 2014). Poynor (2017: 9) explicates that "In discussing the importance of ancestor veneration in Africa, Igor Kopytoff pointed out that "the African emphasis is clearly not on how the dead live but on the way they affect the living."

However, the overall quintessence of masquerade festival seems to be similar across parts of Africa. Many masquerading festivals which are in two modes are employed to tackle diverse socio-cultural issues. The first is the sacred (core religious mode) strictly contained and assigned roles and responsibilities by the *Egungun* cult or the community. The second is the festive mode, which involves the entire community. It often comes with merriment, feasting and social interactions. For instance, among the Chewa in Zambia, a masquerade called *Nyau* is used to transport the newly dead out of the living to the spiritual abode of the dead (Olupona, 2014).

Rite of Passage: Another widespread category of festival among Africans is rite of passage (Harvey, 2004). Such festival is commonly performed in Calabar and other South-South axis in Nigeria. Similarly, Òviá-Òsèsè maiden Festival among the Ògòrì people of Kogi State, as well as Àrígiyán Festival in Ìkàrẹ̀-Àkókó Ondo State are other examples. These kinds of festival are also found in diverse parts of East Africa and South Africa. They entail a maturity rite for young boys and girls to adulthood. Ulwaluko Festival among the Xhosa people of South Africa requires the circumcision and seclusion of teenage boys, who must show the bravery and resilience required of real men in their society

Progenitor Festival: Also, festivals that commemorate the progenitors of their communities are performed in diverse communities in Africa. These usually show the appreciation and continued allegiance of indigenes to the founders or the original settlers of their communities. This is believed to initiate the continued protection of their ancestors over them. Furthermore, the gesture will prompt their benevolence. Substantiating this, Oduro-Awisi (2013) cited by Ayesu (2016: 7) observes that “festivals are traditional gatherings that seek to celebrate historic occurrences or ancestors for their protection and guidance.”

Functions of Festivals

Festivals help communities embrace aspects of their culture and religion, (often superstitious) which is viewed by scholars like Carpenter et al. (1950) as a backward and unscientific method of evaluating progress. Therefore, festivals serve important roles of re-enacting a society’s past and its overall traditional thought system. It focuses on some important features of the community and its culture is frequently tagged with religion, culture, occupation and season. This enables the mechanisms that help to foster and promote a sense of being and heritage.

Besides, festivals, especially religious ones, furnish communities with the belief and assurance of spiritual protection and symmetry. When festivals are not commemorated, communities often feel disconnected from the gods and may be enveloped in the fear of impending calamities and unpalatable consequences. As such, custodians of culture often ensure their regular celebrations to promote inner peace and psychological equilibrium.

Significant to festivals is their propensity in breaking the monotony of a community's life and ethics by enabling people to engage in some activities and behaviours that may otherwise be prohibited. Stoeltje (1992: 261) submits that the mood of festivals is often aroused with elements like music, songs, dance, chants/utterances, masking/ masquerading, make-up and costumes customarily distinguished by a community.

Additionally, they are celebrated to observe seasonal changes and the good they bring. For instance, in some African societies harvest season are conceptualised to thank the gods and request more bountiful harvest in the next season. Ogbenika (2020: 292) further argues that:

The myth of eternal return according to Eliade's thesis is developed along the line in the beginning; there were supernatural beings that created the world and all that lives in it –cosmogony and anthroponomy.

The veneration of mythological entities (gods and goddesses) became mandatory due to the accepted indebtedness to them. Similarly, ancestral spirits are honoured due to their perceived roles in the link between a people's existence and the influence of the unseen hands in the affairs of men. Man has both physical and spiritual sides. The physical side relies largely on the manipulation of the spiritual for its essence.

As a social channel for cultural expression and interface, festivals serve as a significant platform for promoting ethics and orientating younger generations on the quintessence of such standards. Owusu-Frempong (2005: 730) observes that African festivals are a medium of "cultural education and intergenerational communication and play an important role in the preservation of our cultural heritage, transmitting knowledge and our experiences as a people to future generations".

Festivals can be a veritable platform of informal cultural education and training for indigenes, community members and visitors. This kind of cultural instruction and orientation is frequently achievable through involvement, scrutiny and assimilation. Nyamawero (2021: 38) provides an example of the annual Paari-gbiele festival in Ghana.

Finally, a unique feature of festivals is the atmosphere provides the avenue for group interaction during which community members can communicate as performers and audience. These kinds of interaction focus on the concerns of the community and project their collective experiences (Kuutma, 1998).

Carnavalesque Theory

Describing the concept of carnivalesque, Bakhtin (1984: 314) opines that “carnavalesque” is an aspect of the medieval celebration known as “carnival or festival”, which dates back to the eighteenth century when the participants were given the opportunity of “licensed misrule”. They could mock and defame the acknowledged authorities of the Church and State without prosecution.

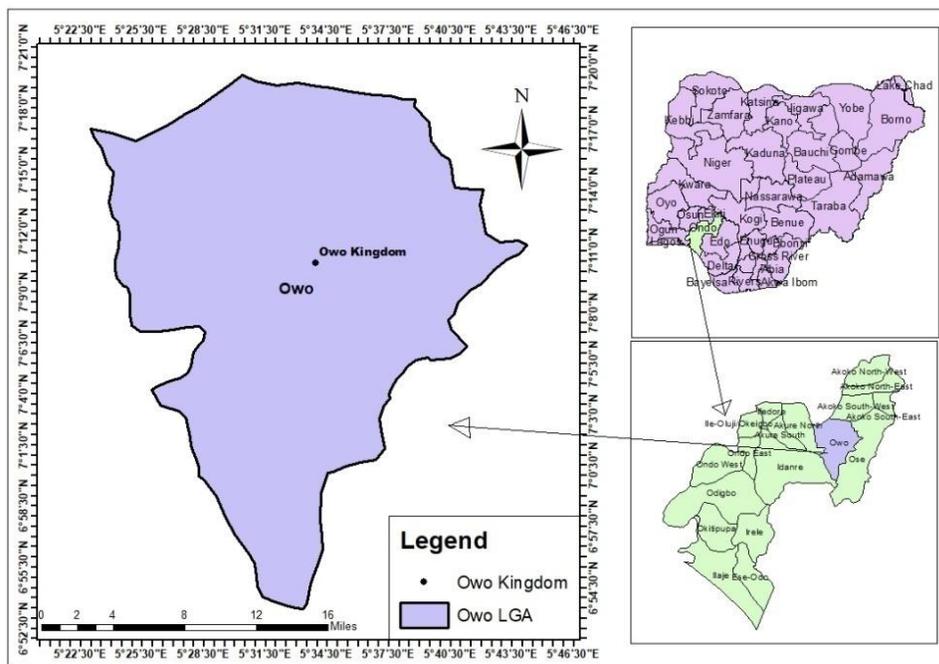
This window, otherwise known as “freedom of expression”, was designed to coincide with an atmosphere of festivity, merrymaking, costuming and dance. This window provided the right and enabling avenue to thrive, but was time bound, during which performers could express themselves freely. Outside this period, it became unacceptable. DeShields (2015: 2) points out that “Unrestricted celebration of carnival season permits a reversal of the typical social, political and religious standards. In order to relieve tension that could cause a revolt among the lower classes, the hierarchical structure of medieval European society was temporarily dismantled.”

Bakhtin (1984: 108) argues that carnivals (which is synonymous with festivals) allows the latent side of the human nature to reveal themselves, breaking down barriers and allowing the sacred to be mixed with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid. During festivals, most protocols are downplayed, allowing participants the same floor to express themselves, with fewer consequences for poor decorum and comportment. This is in synchrony with the “licensed misrule” where carnival participants had the liberty to express their bottled-up emotions as they wished. This was due to a meltdown of social-political rules and social divides (Bakhtin, 1984, Platter, 2006, DeShields, 2015). Carnavalesque is relevant to this

performances as it affords a licence for liberty that festivals and indigenous performances can afford.

General Overview of Òwò Kingdom in Ondo State

Among the prominent towns that are noted for the commemoration of indigenous festivals in Yorubaland is Òwò Kingdom in Ondo State, Nigeria.



The study area: Òwò Kingdom, Ondo State

Source: Department of Geography, Faculty of the Social Sciences, University of Ibadan

It is situated at the crossroads between Akure, Kabba, Benin City and Siluko (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2009). Olugbadehan (2006) refers to it as “a frontier Yoruba Kingdom”. Òwò sits at a distance of 48 km east of Akure and 400 km north of Lagos, with a land area of about 636 km² (*Facts and Figures about Òwò Local Government*, 1993: 1) and it is positioned at latitude 7.1962 and longitude 5.58681 and is located in the northern hemisphere of Africa (Geodatos, 2021). Analogous to various Yoruba tribes, Òwò (traditionally pronounced Òghò) people have their parlance of the Yoruba language and have a long history of association with Ile Ife and Benin Kingdom. Poynor (1987: 56) points out that

Owo today is a middle-sized, traditional city that was once the capital of an ancient city-state on the eastern edge of Yorubaland. Although it is by no means mainstream Yoruba, the Owos do today consider themselves as part of that ethnic group. They speak a Yoruba language. They claim that their ruler, the Olowo, is descended from Odudua, the divine founder of the Yoruba holy city of Ife, from which came, too, their ritual chiefs, the Iloro Ighares. These declarations of linkage are backed by archaeological evidence.

Additionally, informants corroborated by (Oloidi, 2004) assert that Owo and Benin were the sons of Oduduwa, whose original home was Ile Ife, and the shrine of Ọ̀wò sits next to Benin's in Ile Ife. Poynor (1976: 40) observes that "Its position on the far eastern edge of Yorubaland makes it transitional between Yoruba-speaking peoples to the west and Edo-speaking peoples to the east. Archaeological excavations support Owo's claim of origin from Ife, the sacred Yoruba city, if we accept similarity of art styles as valid".

It is therefore a home to rich cultural traditions, from their kingship and chieftaincy traditions, to diverse ceremonies and festivals, the latter, which are calendrically commemorated and strictly adhered. These take place at different periods, regardless of the threats of modernity. Many facets of their sociology are commemorated publicly. These include birth, rite of passage, marriage and burial rites (*àjàbùé*). These are largely guided by principles conserved in centuries old traditions, though some have been slightly modified by modernity. It is significant to state that some of their festivals overlap, thereby acting as precursor to others. These festivals include Ọ̀labì (ripening of kolanuts) *Ugbáàtẹ* (performance of the bush-meat sellers and other traditional items; *ẹran-ìgbé* and *léku-léja*) Ọ̀gúnró (new yam festival), Àjọ (performances of the age-grades). Their two major festivals are Igogo (gong festival/festival of love) and Èró (retirement festival). These festivals are some of the most ethnically preserved in Yoruba land.

Àjọ Festival

The origin of this festival is credited to Ọlówò *Ogèjà* (1385-1386) the 11th King of Ọwò. believed to have brought instituted many revolutionary changes like abolishing the *Elefene* title, established the *Sàşéré* and *Ọşùpòrú* titles and also began the conferment of many chieftaincy titles around 1386. According to City Track Magazine (2021:10), one of his major reforms was the establishment of the Àkóró-Pàsà, now Àrágba-Gbayé (Youth-leader), an honorary but non-hereditary title. He directed that all the youths in the Kingdom, (with the exclusion of women) be grouped into different segments, called ‘*Otu*’, assigned with roles and responsibilities in the kingdom. The grouping also enabled proper identification of status and hierarchy.

The creation of *Ọtu* provides the background for Àjọ Festival which all individuals (*Olótu*) in the various groups are obligated to perform. This festival is rotated among members of a given group every seventeen days, until the cycle is complete. This meeting (*Àjọ*) often shifts from the home of each group head to another during which a member of each cadres is expected to host members of his age group.

During this performance, members must be treated to a meal of pounded yam, bush meat and drinks. The feasting routine must be rotated until every member has discharged this responsibility, and the cycle begins again for 27years. This is corroborated by some informants that for each of these meetings, the host member must provide *ùdádó-uyán* (a mortar full of pounded yam) that must comprise at least, fifty wraps, two antelopes, two kegs of palm wine, two cartons of beer and twenty-six lobes of kolanuts. This feasting custom must be rotated among members until they graduate in a spectacular Èró (retirement) Festival 27 years later.

Using himself as paradigm, an aboriginal high chief disclosed that he joined the group at a young age, performed the annual Igogo rituals, during which he went to different shrines to appease the gods, as well as performed other rituals. Another informant stated that the age-grade process begins with the age-grade groups –*Káyá* (the carriers and junior cadre). Rituals are observed within these periods, while those that are found eligible will begin from the ‘carrier’ (*Káyá*) cadre.

During Àjọ Festival, an *Olótu* must provide a feast for his group members and also entertain the High-chiefs who would subsequently enunciate blessings on him on behalf of the Ọlówò. He must

afterwards dance within the palace grounds with his group members before taking the festivity into town where he could be joined by willing members of the community. On returning from dancing, he must present gifts to the *Ọlówò* at *Ùghà-Èdumà*. This is where the *Òtu* groups are received by the High-chiefs, including the *Àjànà* (the Chief priest of Igogo), the *Ogwa-Sanye* and other priests. After receiving royal blessings, the *Òtu* groups have to dance at the palace grounds (*Èhìn-Òde*) to continue with the festivities.

Ùlabì (*Èlà-obi*) Festival

An antecedent festival to Igogo, *Ọwò*'s main annual festival is *Ùlabì* (the ripening of kola nuts) an annual festival performed in the first week of June, preceding Igogo festival by 90 days. It commences with the plucking of the first ripe one thousand kola nuts in the kingdom. These must be immediately arranged in special calabashes for onward presentation to the *Ọlówò* by quarter heads at *Ùghà-Èdumà*.

On receiving the kolanuts, he would formally send invitation to all the High-chiefs in the kingdom for the commencement of the festival. He would thereafter open a calabash, place both hands on them and pronounce blessing on them, his chiefs, the entire *Ọwò* people and lastly, the royal family. One of the key rites of this festival is *ìbori-adé* (the propitiation) of the royal head with the kolanuts. This performance is often done with two handfuls of kolanuts, which the *Olowo* places his forehead on, at the same time offering prayers with them.



Some chiefs (including High priest *Àjànà*) carrying kolanuts to the *Ọlówò*

Source: Olowo of Owo (Posted on Facebook, June 13, 2023)

Olugbadehan (2006) corroborates that the kolanuts are used by Ọlọwọ for his *ibori* (the worship and propitiation of his head).

After this performance, the calabashes would be covered and presented to the highest ranking High-chiefs in each quarter. When the rites are completed, all the chiefs would be entertained with food, drinks and music, courtesy of the Ọlọwọ. Afterwards, he would announce officially, the commemoration of Ọgúnró Festival in 17 days. From the day Ụlabì is performed, headgear, drumming and shooting of guns or cannons are proscribed in Ọwọ Kingdom, while the schedule for the forthcoming performances will be prepared by the chief Priest, *Àjànà* and presented to the Ọlọwọ for approval. Among the Yoruba ethnic group of Nigeria, kolanut (*obi*) is a significant crop. The species that is mainly grown in the Southwestern part of Nigeria consists of between four and eight lobes. It is an item of ritual significance in many Yoruba societies.



The Ọlọwọ performing his *ibori* (worship/propitiation of his head) during Ụlabì Festival

Source: Olowo of Owo (Posted on Facebook, June 13, 2023)

Its name, *obi* from which *bi* has become the pun for ‘warding off’ is significant for rituals and indigenous performances, believed to invoke blessings and ward off evil; *obi ní nbi’kú, obi ní nb’arùn...* (kolanut wards off death, kolanut wards off diseases....).

Beyond this, in ritual performances, a kolanut with odd number of lobes is believed to be bad omen. Additionally, in the Yoruba sociology, kolanuts used for divinity, when the lobes are separated and cast on the ground must lie to face up to signify acceptable sacrifice (*obi yàn*). If it goes otherwise, even with one or more lobes facing down, it is believed to be bad omen (*obi ò*

yàn). If this ritual is repeated thrice, and the same result is arrived at, the fear of impending doom often pervades the atmosphere.

Furthermore, many deities in the Yoruba cosmology are believed to possess appetite for kolanut. So they are often included in the objects of their worship. It is also not uncommon to sight them in shrines (*ojú'bo*). These illustrations might justify the devotion of a festival to kolanut in Òwò Kingdom, as well as its deployment for the worship and propitiation of Ọlówò's head.

***Ùpèlì*: an antecedent of Igogo Festival**

The performance of Igogo Festival begins with the first *Ùpèlì*, precisely twenty-one days before the festival. This is the traditional procession of *Ùghàrẹ-Ùlórò* (*Ìlórò* chiefs) to the Ọlówò's palace from *Ìlórò* quarter. Igogo Festival was instituted by Ọlówò *Rẹ̀rẹ̀gẹ̀jẹ̀n* when his mythical wife *Ọ̀rò̀nșẹ̀n* fled from the palace into a forest, after her taboos were contravened by her co-wives. *Ùpèlì* thus symbolises a re-enactment of distress call by Ọlówò *Rẹ̀rẹ̀gẹ̀jẹ̀n* on discovering that his wife, had left the palace. For these performance (which is repeated thrice), *Ìlórò* chiefs have to go in single file to the palace, pay obeisance and pray for Ọlówò, and officially announce the commencement of Igogo in 21 days.

The procession of the *Ùghàrẹ-Ùlórò* is sacred and it is forbidden for anyone to cross their path or interrupt the procession. Informants revealed that in the olden days, anyone who dared cross their path during procession was instantly beheaded, but nowadays, such a person would be heavily fined. As such, members of the community can only view them from a distance and shower them with prayers and words of encouragement.



The *Ùghàrẹ-Ùlórò* on procession 2021 Igogo Festival

Source: Researcher, 2021

The performance of the second *Ùpèlí* is a repetition of the first, but with five days interval between each one. The third and final *Ùpèlí* is often held four days after the second one but, this time, in the company of the *Ayóyos* (who act as the kingdom's police during the festival). This procession usually has the *Ùghàrẹ-Ìlórò* on a queue different from that of the *Ayóyos*. Their procession also begins at *Ìlórò* quarter through the town to the palace. Any stray animal that attempts to break into the procession will be instantly hacked down, while its owner will be heavily fined.



Ùghàrẹs paying homage to the *Ọlówò* at an *Ùpèlí* performance in *Ùghà-Èdumà*

Performance of *Ugbààtẹ*

On the first day of the festival, which is the ninetieth day after *Ùlabì*, *Ugbààtẹ* is often held.

Source: Olowo of Owo (Posted on Facebook, June 13, 2023)

This performance was observed to predominantly have market men and women whose merchandise is bush meat (*Ọlópàtẹ* or *Ọpàtẹ-Ògún*) as key participants, besides the *Ọlówò*, high chiefs and priests. Aderibigbe (2015: 12) substantiates that the *Ugbaate* often takes place at dusk, four days after *Ùyànnàń*, and "...all the women that are traditionally vested with the power of selling meat come to the oba's market carrying their trade baskets containing knives and pieces of iron implements of their trade." They are traditionally referred to as *Ọpàtẹ-Ògún* and, for this festival they must display their wares as a symbol of welcoming *Ọrònşẹń* to the festival.

The *Ọlówò*, after dancing through the market often stops at the stall of the *Ọpàtẹ-Ògún* to pay greet them, while they would shower him with prayers and perform with him. The sheep (*onùghò*) sacrificed to *Ọrònşẹń* is customarily presented by the *Ọlówò* to this group of people. This would thereafter be handed to the *Ayóyos* after tying a white cloth, woven by one of them, under ritualistic proscriptions across its belly. Informants reiterate that it is the *Ọpàtẹ-Ògún*'s responsibility to do

this at every Igogo Festival. Some informants, corroborated by (Aderibigbe, 2015: 12) aver that at in the olden days, rather than sheep, human were used for this performance, but that has long been abolished.

It is significant to mention that, as informants explained, after the cloth has been tied to the sheep's belly by the *Ọ̀pàtẹ̀-Ọ̀gún*, it is a forbidden that it has physical contact with any human again. To reinforce this, Aderibigbe (2015: 12) states that "A strip of white cloth prepared and woven by a woman on that very day is tied round the sheep's belly. The animal is led round the palace walls three times by the Ugbama who dance, singing repeatedly..." While this is going on, the *Ùghàrẹ̀-Ùlórò* would have organized a musical and dance extravaganza at *Èhin-ode*, participant-audience would also participate in amidst feasting and other traditional games.

At Ugbo-Ulaja, where the sheep is usually taken, it would be beheaded with a single blow of machete, while the severed head must be caught by the *Ègwi*, who would thereafter take it to another destination in the forest. In the olden days, this was considered a perilous trip, from which the bearer might never return. Additionally it is believed that if the severed head is not caught, the sacrifice of that year is unacceptable (*ebọ ò fín*), which is believed might bring disasters to the community.

Categories of performers in the performances

Ọ̀lọ̀wọ̀ (the King of Ọ̀wọ̀ Kingdom)

At the apex of Ọ̀wọ̀ kingdom is Ọ̀lọ̀wọ̀, the key custodian of the traditions of Ọ̀wọ̀ Kingdom.



A stall of the *Ọ̀pàtẹ̀-Ọ̀gún* in Ọ̀wọ̀ Kingdom on *Ùgbàtẹ̀* day

Source: Researcher, Sept. 2021

He is an absolute monarch and paramount ruler of Òwò Kingdom. In most of the performances, it was observed that he was the key performer.

In historical times, he was revered like a god and was accorded so much reverence that his word was law. In that era, it was a taboo to insult an Ọ́lówò; it was felony and liable to be punished by death. To reinforce the supremacy and invincibility of an Ọ́lówò, he is usually hyped with fearsome natural phenomena, like the mighty ocean (*òkun àrábàribi*), tiger (invincible *ẹ̀kòṅ*) and Mountain (*òkè*).

Since the position of the Ọ́lówò is so revered, Olugbadehan (2006: 202) points out that “A candidate for the throne of Olowo must fulfil some requirements and meet some qualifications”. An ordinary indigene knelt or lay prostrate to greet an Ọ́lówò, and bowed and touched the ground with their heads amidst effusive prayers. However, titled men knelt and with outstretched arms parallel to the ground and greeted him thus: The greeting must thereafter be quickly followed with a bow of the head to the ground in obeisance.

Olúwa mi lèjì...

Wa gbó, wa tó, Ááse...

Priests

The *Àjànà* is the quarter head of *Ìsáipèṅ* quarter in Òwò and he is the official chief Priest of Igogo. He also has the role of being the priest who prays for the Ọ́lówò. He belongs to the lineage of the priests that offered sacrifices on behalf of the Ọ́lówò, including the ones pertaining to Igogo. Other priests include *Ọ̀bàjò*, *Àdànígbò*, *Ogwa-Sanye* and so on.

Ùghàrẹ̀-Ùlórò (aboriginal high chiefs)

These were another category of participants in the festivals and performances. Historically, they are chiefs from the clan that migrated from Ile Ife with the first Ọ́lówò, Prince Ojùgbélú Arère. The *Ùghàrẹ̀-Ùlórò*, are referred to as the “most honoured chiefs” (*Èlẹ̀nupònnà*) because they are the original chiefs that first came from Ile Ife. So they were the first set of people that Ọ́lówò *Rẹ̀rẹ̀gejẹ̀n* sent for, as inferred from myth, when *Ọ̀ròṅṣẹ̀n*’s disappearance from the palace was noticed.

Ayóyos (Ugbàmas)

This is a very significant group in most of the performances. They are members of the three age-grade cadres in Òwò Kingdom. Before the advent of Igogo Festival, in which they are most prominent, they were known as *Osegbe-Mẹso* and consisted of youth and middle-aged men (*Ugbàma-Ìlórò*) from *Ìlórò* quarter. According to informants, they were the team of youths that *Ọlówò Rẹ̀rẹ̀gejẹ̀n* deployed to go in search of *Ọ̀rò̀nșẹ̀n* when she left the palace. It was through them that she sent her demands to the *Ọlówò*, as well as her final instructions for the institution of Igogo in her honour. *Ayóyo* is deduced from the phrase, *A-yé-ye...* (We are many...). They are also the group that perform *Àjọ* Festival

Ọ̀pà̀tẹ̀-Ọ̀gún

These are the market men and women whose merchandise is bush meat and items that are related to iron, They are usually referred to as *Ọ̀lọ̀pà̀tẹ̀* or *Ọ̀pà̀tẹ̀-Ọ̀gún* and they are headed by *Ọ̀kọ Ọ̀pà̀tẹ̀-Ọ̀gún* (husband of *Ọ̀gún* merchandisers) and *Ìyálóde Ọ̀pà̀tẹ̀-Ọ̀gún* (the matron of *Ọ̀gún* merchandisers). In the performance of *Ugbààte*, they are key participants, besides the *Ọlówò*, high chiefs and priests. Aderibigbe (2015: 12) substantiates that the Ugbaate often takes place at dusk, four days after *Ùyànnàn*, and “...all the women that are traditionally vested with the power of selling meat come to the oba's market carrying their trade baskets containing knives and pieces of iron implements of their trade.”

Participant-audiences

These include people that have no active roles in the festivals and performances, but are spectators that view them. These include indigenes, townspeople and tourists. Since many aspects of these festivals and performances are sacred, they are customarily barred from interfering or disrupting any aspect of the festival.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, indigenous performances that are purposive represent a matrix in Owo Kingdom. Irrespective of religion, age, class and cast, they are perceived as integral to their sociology and are believed to sustain the equilibrium of their community. The study therefore recommends that academic searchlight should be directed at other aspects of these performances in order to enrich the archives of indigenous African festivals and performances.

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