

Purification, Militarism, and Youth Identity in the Obòkun Ritual Festival

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Abstract

Yorùbá festival scholarship has extensively documented deity-centred celebrations while neglecting ancestor-hero festivals that dramatise foundational martial narratives. The Obòkun Festival in Ìbòkun, Nigeria, commemorates a warrior-founder who combined healing and conquest, yet existing literature lacks a critical analysis of how such festivals construct youth identity through ritual performance. This study addresses this gap by examining the festival's triadic structure of purification, militarism and youth identity, arguing that these three elements operate dialectically rather than sequentially to produce gendered subjectivities and ensure intergenerational continuity. Employing ethnographic methodology grounded in participant observation, ritual analysis, and interpretive thick description, the study applies performance theory-specifically, restored behaviour, efficacy versus entertainment, and performance environment-as its analytical framework. Findings reveal that purification establishes the sacred architecture for martial memory; militarism provides the narrative core of ancestral heroism; and hierarchical youth incorporation ensures transmission through observation, apprenticeship and performance. The significance lies in recovering an understudied festival genre, demonstrating youth identity as performative achievement rather than demographic category, and offering an ethnographic case study of indigenous festival adaptation to modern pressures.

Keywords: Obòkun Festival, Yorùbá culture, performance theory, ritual purification, youth identity

Introduction

Festivals in Yorùbáland constitute complex ritual landscapes where history, spirituality and social order are continually re-enacted and reinforced. However, scholarship has disproportionately focused on deity-centred celebrations-the Šàngó festivals of kingship and lightning, the Èṣù rituals of crossroads and communication, the Ọṣun festivals of fertility and riverine reverence (Drewal, 1992; Apter, 1992; Barber, 2000). This emphasis has created a significant lacuna: the systematic neglect of ancestor hero festivals that dramatise foundational martial narratives and, more critically, the role such festivals play in constructing youth identity.

The Obòkun Festival in Ìbòkun, Ọṣun State, Nigeria, exemplifies this neglected genre. Rooted in the epic of Ajíbógun (later Obòkun), who fetched seawater to cure his father, Odùduwà, of blindness and subsequently conquered territory through martial prowess, the festival annually re-enacts a founding narrative that combines healing and warfare (Personal communication, 2024).

While existing ethnographic accounts describe the festival's origins and ritual sequences-from preparatory divination to the grand finale-they fail to address a fundamental question: how does this festival actively produce the gendered, age-graded subjectivities required for community continuity?

The problem is both empirical and theoretical. Empirically, we lack a detailed analysis of how purification rituals, martial performances and youth participation interrelate within a single festival system. Theoretically, festival scholarship has rarely engaged performance theory's capacity to explain how ritual transforms participants through 'restored behaviour'- the rehearsed, repeated and transmitted actions that Schechner (2003, p. 36) identifies as the core mechanism of ritual efficacy. This article addresses both deficits.

Existing scholarship on Yorùbá festivals falls into three overlapping traditions. The first ethnographic documentation provides valuable descriptions of ritual sequences, participant roles and material culture (Drewal & Drewal, 1983; Fadipe, 1970). This tradition establishes that festivals constitute 'performance environments'- landscapes inscribed with meanings activated through embodied action (Schechner, 2003, p. 124). However, documentation alone cannot explain how festivals produce identity. The second tradition, symbolic and structural analysis, interprets Yorùbá rituals as expressions of cosmological principles (Peek, 1991; Abimbola, 1976). Drawing on recent appropriations of Turner's (1969) concept of ritual as social drama, these studies illuminate how festivals resolve crises, negotiate liminality and reaffirm community values. However, Turner's framework, while foundational, emphasises structure and anti-structure without fully accounting for the repetitive, choreographed nature of performance that Schechner (2003) terms 'restored behaviour'. The third tradition, performance-centred analysis, has applied Schechner's theories to African rituals with productive results (Conquergood, 2013; Kuoppala, 2021). Schechner's (2003, p. 130) distinction between 'efficacy' and 'entertainment'-where efficacy rituals transform participants while entertainment performances merely please audiences-provides a crucial analytical tool.

What remains absent is an integrated analysis of how purification, militarism and youth identity co-constitute each other within an ancestor hero festival. The Obòkun Festival provides an ideal case because its triadic structure-purification rituals that establish sacred space, militaristic performances that re-enact conquest, and hierarchical youth incorporation that ensures transmission-exhibits what Schechner (2003, p. 245) identifies as the autopoietic

(self-reproducing) character of efficacious ritual systems. This article offers a dramaturgical analysis that moves beyond description to critical interpretation, arguing that the three domains form an autopoietic system: purification enables militarism by creating the sacred container for violent re-enactments; militarism shapes youth identity by providing a vocabulary of courage and collective defence; youth identity perpetuates purification through intergenerational transmission of ritual protocols.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative ethnographic research design grounded in performance studies and cultural anthropology, facilitating immersion in the ritual culture of the Ìbòkun people to investigate the dramatic aesthetics, purification rites, militaristic performances and youth identity construction within the Obòkun Festival. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling, focusing on three principal figures who hold custodial, symbolic and performative authority: the Balórò (senior ritual custodian and chief priest), the Babòkun (the king, embodying Obòkun's authority during homage rituals), and Àyàntúndé (the master drummer who apprenticed from age seven and leads the talking drum ensemble). Additional ritual specialists, Olóríòrò (the Olórí ọ̀dọ̀), one of the nine virgins, and other chiefs were observed, and their public statements were documented through participant observation. Data collection employed multiple instruments: participant observation during festival ceremonies captured embodied practices, spatial dynamics and communal interactions through detailed field notes; unstructured interviews with the three principal participants were conducted in Ìjẹ̀sà and Yorùbá, then transcribed and translated into English, providing insider perspectives on ritual symbolism, dramatic aesthetics, martial chants and historical continuity; archival documentation included ethnographic records and photographs of ritual materials (ancestral sword, earthen pots, white costumes and Obòkun's statue), examined as performative texts; and oral texts were collected in the form of myths, storytelling, praise poetry, chants (such as 'Gidigbo gidigbo') and songs, transcribed, translated and subjected to literary analysis focusing on symbolism, metaphor, rhythm, repetition, call and response, and enactment. Data analysis proceeded through three stages: coding transcripts, observations and archival evidence into domains of purification, militarism and youth identity; mapping these codes onto Schechner's performance categories (restored behaviour, efficacy/entertainment, performance environment); and interpretive synthesis identifying dialectical interrelationships among the three domains. Validity was ensured through triangulation

of methods and member checking with the three principal participants. Ethical considerations followed standard anthropological practice: the festival is public and documented with community consent; informed consent was obtained from interviewed participants with assurance of anonymity; the analysis respects ritual secrecy regarding specific sacred formulas while analysing publicly observable performances; and participants' voices have been represented accurately without disclosing restricted knowledge.

Historical origin and dramatic plot

The Obòkun Festival's narrative core derives from the epic of Ajíbógún, the youngest son of Odùduwà, the mythical progenitor of the Ijeshas. When Odùduwà became blind, Ajíbógún journeyed to the coast, fetched seawater and restored his father's sight. In gratitude, Odùduwà offered him any reward. Ajíbógún requested a sword, which he used to conquer territory, found the settlement that became Ìbòkun and acquired the name Obòkun (Personal communication, 2024). This origin combines two heroic modalities: healer (through seawater) and warrior (through conquest). The festival annually re-enacts this duality over two days. The festival's dramatic structure unfolds in three stages, aligning with recent applications of Turner's (1969) social drama model. The Preparatory Day ritually prepares the community for the two-day festival and re-enactment. The Procession to Igbó Èkùn represents the remedial phase: participants journey to the Forest of Èkùn, a former battlefield, re-enacting Obòkun's martial conquests. The Grand Finale (Ìgbajì) achieves reintegration: the king's blessing, the cane wrestling contest and communal celebration re-establish social order for another year.

Spatial narrative as a performance environment

The festival transforms Ìbòkun's physical landscape into what Schechner (2003, p. 124) terms a 'performance environment'-a space inscribed with meanings activated through embodied action. Three sites carry particular significance. Igbó Èkùn (Forest of the Leopard), the former battlefield, receives sacrifices to Ògún and marks the site of ancestral combat. Òkè-Èsè, where Obòkun first settled, represents the warrior founder's strategic foothold. Ìtaji, where the homage ritual occurs, re-enacts the submission of conquered peoples through the presentation of weapons. The procession routes connect these sites into a narrative geography. Participants walk paths that literally trace Obòkun's movements, performing what Schechner (2003, p. 124) calls 'differential space'—space that is simultaneously physical (actual locations) and symbolic (ancestral territory

claimed through conquest). When youth walk these routes carrying ritual objects, they inscribe embodied memory onto the landscape, learning through their feet what words alone cannot transmit (Mingon & Sutton, 2021).

Chromatic staging and visual semiotics



Plate 1: Balórò, Obòkun's chief priest (with feathered cap), the chiefs and the youth during the procession with Obòkun's statue (Photo by author, 2024)

The festival's colour code establishes a visual hierarchy distinguishing sacred from profane and ritual specialist from general celebrant. White attire dominates among ritual leaders: the Balórò, Babòkun (king) and the nine virgins all wear white. This chromatic choice signifies purity, spirituality and connection to Ọbàtálá, the orisha associated with white cloth and moral authority. By contrast, general celebrants wear vibrantly coloured Aṣọ Òkè, the patterned Yorùbá festive cloth. This visual staging creates what Schechner (2003, p. 78) terms a 'feedback loop' between performers and spectators: white figures moving through colourfully dressed crowds visually announce the sacred within the profane. The effect is dramaturgical-it trains spectators to read ritual significance through colour, establishing an embodied semiotic system that youth internalise through annual repetition.

Purification: Establishing Sacred Architecture

The most visible purification performance features nine virgins dressed in white wrappers, carrying earthen pots (òrù) filled with sacred concoctions. Their procession moves with controlled, deliberate movement-slow, synchronised steps, bodies held with poise and dignity-as they sprinkle purifying water at the king's palace and other sacred sites (Personal communication, 2024). Their virginity is not a personal attribute but a ritual requirement, as one virgin stated: 'When I carry the pot, I am not myself. I am carrying Obòkun's power through the town' (Personal communication, 2024). This statement exemplifies Schechner's (2003, p. 36) concept of 'restored behaviour': the young woman is not performing her everyday identity but a twice-behaved role-the virgin as ritual agent-that she inhabits only during festival time. The selection of nine virgins carries numerical significance. In Yorùbá cosmology, nine is associated with Èṣù's òtúrá méjì sign and with the nine-night cycles of funeral rituals (Drewal, 1992). Their liminal status-neither children nor fully adult women-makes them appropriate agents for boundary-crossing purification work.

Purification as an enabling condition

Crucially, purification is not an isolated ritual domain but the enabling condition for militarism. Ram sacrifice, weapon handling and combat mime all require purified contexts; otherwise, they risk attracting negative forces. The nine virgins' sprinkling creates a sacred architecture within which martial performances can occur without spiritual danger (Turner, 1969). Purification, therefore, establishes the container; militarism provides the content. This hierarchical relationship reflects the Yorùbá cosmological principle that ritual purity must precede any engagement with violent or chthonic forces (Abimbola, 1976).

Militarism: Dramatising Martial Memory



Plate 2: The youths engage in flogging games as an expression of militarism (Photo by author, 2024)

Cane wrestling as restored combat

The festival's most explicit militaristic performance occurs during the afternoon cane wrestling game. Young men, armed with ritually anointed sticks prepared by the Lóríòrò, engage in a physical contest of endurance, flogging one another while chanting a paradoxical combat song:

Gídìgbò gídìgbò, uré ni, ujà ni, uré ni, ujà ni

(Let's fight seriously, it is a game, it is a fight, it is a game, it is a fight)

Kó bá dùjà, ke dùjà

(If it turns to a fight, let it turn to a fight)

This chant exemplifies Schechner's (2003) concept of restored behaviour. The youth are not actually fighting to injure but performing 'fighting as ritual', where the paradox of 'game' and 'fight' dramatises the tension between play and real confrontation. The call-and-response structure creates *communitas* (Krause, 2020) among participants, transforming individual endurance into a collective display of martial solidarity. The winner remains alone on the field, re-enacting Obòkun's martial prowess. This solitary victory pose establishes hierarchy among youth while dramatising the community's ultimate reliance on male protection. As one chief observed, the ritual tests not only physical strength but also pain tolerance-enduring the flogger's sting

demonstrates a warrior's essential quality: remaining functional despite injury (Personal communication, 2024).

Battlefield cartography and spatial militarism

The festival's procession routes map martial history onto the physical landscape. The journey to Igbó Èkùn re-enacts the warrior founder's territorial expansion, with each step performing a claim to the land. This spatial narrative transforms walking into a martial act-participants literally retrace conquest routes, embodying the ancestors' movement through contested space (Schechner, 2003). For youth, this mapping serves a clear pedagogical function. Young men who walk these routes learn that territory was claimed through violence and must be defended through readiness. The landscape becomes a mnemonic device: every significant location activates stories of combat, sacrifice and ancestral protection. Over years of participation, youth internalise this martial geography without explicit instruction, learning through their bodies what maps could never convey (Mingon & Sutton, 2021).

Youth Identity: Intergenerational Transmission

The festival's engagement with youth operates within a structured hierarchy that respects elder authority while cultivating youthful participation. The homage ritual at Ìtaji explicitly stages this hierarchy: Olórí àgbà (head of chiefs) pays homage first, followed by Olórí ọdọ (head of youth), and finally Olórí ọmọdé (leader of children). This sequence communicates that youth occupy an honoured but subordinate position, establishing a clear generational progression. Youth observe elders performing ritual roles, learning correct procedures through what Schechner (2003, p. 236) terms 'training as performance'. Over successive years, observation transforms into embodied competence. A young man who begins as a spectator becomes a drummer's apprentice, then a dancer, and eventually, if chosen, a chief who handles Obòkun's weapons.

Musical Apprenticeship and Embodied Learning



Plate 3: The youth displaying drumming skills as they walk to the palace to welcome the king and visitors (Photo by author, 2024)

Youth participation in musical performance is essential to transmission. The talking drums that produce utterances such as ‘Ọba ò, ọba l’áṣẹ’ (A king, yes, a king has authority) require years of training to master. Àyàntúndé, the master drummer, reported beginning his apprenticeship at age seven, learning rhythmic patterns through bodily practice before achieving festival-level virtuosity. Similarly, the complex choreography of processional movements—two steps forward and one step backwards, accompanied by swinging hands—demands youthful energy and coordination. Older participants can instruct but cannot physically demonstrate these demanding sequences. The festival therefore depends on youth for its kinetic density, creating reciprocal dependence: youth need elders’ knowledge, but elders need youth’s bodies (Schechner, 2003).

Oral transmission and genealogical songs

Oral transmission through song further consolidates youth identity. Songs such as:

Song Text (Ijesha dialect)

Translation

Ọmọ Obòkun

The offspring of Obòkun

Ọmọ Olúbòkun èrò wọtiriti

The offspring of Olúbòkun, the crowd walk en masse.

Song Text (Ijesha dialect)

Translation

Ọmọ eléní àtẹ́kẹ́

The offspring of the one who owns a permanent mat

Ọmọ eléní ẹwẹ́lẹ

The offspring of the one who owns a well-woven mat

encode genealogical claims. When youth sing these texts, they perform their own identity as descendants of the warrior hero, internalising ancestral connection through repetitive vocalisation. The call-and-response structure of festival chants ensures youth participation even when they do not yet know entire texts (Finnegan, 2012). The chant ‘A mò ha sorò ulé ria o’ (‘We come to do our household’s tradition’) functions as a meta-performance statement. Youth singing these words are not merely describing tradition but actively claiming it, asserting continuity through their vocal presence. This meta-statement transforms passive inheritance into active embodiment-tradition becomes something one does, not something one has (Barber, 2000).

The virgins as liminal youth figures

The nine virgins occupy a particularly significant position in understanding youth identity. As young women, they embody the community’s reproductive future. Their white attire visually distinguishes them from both colourful celebrants and adult ritual specialists, reflecting their liminal status. Unlike the young men, whose martial performance emphasises physical endurance and public display, the young women’s performance emphasises controlled movement, dignified bearing and spiritual efficacy. This gendered division of ritual labour reflects broader cultural expectations within Yorùbá communities (Fadipe, 1970) while simultaneously naturalising those expectations through sacred performance. Therefore, the festival does not merely reflect gender ideology but produces and legitimates it through ritual authority (Butler, 2023).

The Triadic Dialectic and Autopoietic System

Purification, militarism and youth identity do not operate in sequence but dialectically. Each domain enables, shapes and perpetuates the others in a recursive rather than a linear fashion. Purification enables militarism: ritual cleansing creates the sacred container within which violent re-enactments can occur without spiritual danger. Militarism shapes youth identity: martial performances provide a vocabulary of strength, courage and collective defence. Youth identity perpetuates purification: young drummers, virgins and dancers ensure that cleansing practices continue across generations. The hierarchical structure of homage-elders preceding youth, who in

turn precede children-ensures that each generation observes the protocols it will eventually inherit (Turner, 1969).

Efficacy over entertainment

From the perspective of Schechner's performance theory, the Obòkun Festival exemplifies 'efficacy' over 'entertainment' (Schechner, 2003, p. 130). Efficacy rituals transform participants; entertainment performances merely please audiences. The festival's efficacy operates on multiple levels: virgins become ritual agents rather than ordinary young women; youth become 'children of Obòkun' rather than demographic aggregates; the community becomes purified and protected. Participant transformation occurs through restored behaviour-annual repetition of choreographed actions that are 'twice behaved' (Schechner, 2003, p. 36). Moreover, spectators are not passive consumers but potential future participants. Children watching the homage ritual observe the hierarchy they will one day enter; young girls viewing the virgins imagine their own potential selection. The festival creates aspirational spectatorship, recruiting future generations (Schechner, 2003).

Autopoiesis and community reproduction

Together, purification, militarism and youth identity form an autopoietic system-self-reproducing through recursive performance. Purification creates conditions for militaristic performances that dramatise communal values. These performances attract and shape youth participants, who learn purification protocols through practice. Youth become adult practitioners who transmit technologies to the next generation (Rappaport, 1999). This autopoietic character explains the festival's endurance across centuries. The festival does not merely preserve tradition but actively regenerates it, a process Schechner (2003, p. 245) identifies as the core mechanism of ritual efficacy. The Yorùbá phrase 'A mò ha sorò ulé ria o' captures this autopoietic logic: tradition is active practice requiring annual renewal. The festival's adaptability-incorporating jùjú music alongside ancient chants, adjusting to urban migration patterns while maintaining core structures-demonstrates autopoietic resilience rather than frozen preservation (Barber, 2000).

Gendered subjectivities as mutual constitution

The festival's construction of gender operates through mutual constitution rather than separate spheres. Young men's martial masculinity and young women's sacralised purity are not independent productions but interdependent performances. The male performance of combat

would be spiritually dangerous without female purification work; the female performance of purity would lack political significance without male martial display to complement it. This mutual constitution reflects broader Yorùbá cosmology, where physical protection and spiritual preservation are dual pillars of societal stability (Abimbola, 1976). Neither suffices alone; both are necessary. The festival, therefore, produces youth identity as always already gendered, always already relational, and always already embedded in communal rather than individual frameworks. Youth emerge from festival participation not as autonomous individuals but as embodiments of ancestral mandates, carrying both Obòkun's sword and the purifying pot (Drewal, 1992).

Conclusion

This article has provided the first sustained dramaturgical analysis of the Obòkun ritual festival, demonstrating three interconnected findings. First, purification, militarism and youth identity operate dialectically within an autopoietic system: purification enables militarism by creating sacred architecture; militarism shapes youth identity by providing a vocabulary of courage and defence; youth identity perpetuates purification through intergenerational transmission. Second, using Schechner's performance theory, the analysis has shown how the festival achieves efficacy through restored behaviour, performance environment and the efficacy/entertainment distinction, operating as a self-reproducing system that recruits youth into ritual agency through hierarchical incorporation and embodied learning. Third, gendered subjectivities are mutually constituted: martial masculinity and sacralised purity perform complementary functions within a single ritual logic, reflecting Yorùbá cosmology, in which physical protection and spiritual preservation are equally necessary for communal survival.

This study contributes to African performance studies, Yorùbá festival scholarship and youth identity research in three ways. It recovers an understudied festival genre-ancestor hero festivals- and provides analytical categories for comparative analysis. It demonstrates that youth identity is not merely a demographic category but a performative achievement produced through ritual participation, challenging passive models of cultural transmission (Butler, 2023; Mingon & Sutton, 2021). Finally, it offers an ethnographic case study of how indigenous festivals maintain core structures while adapting to modern pressures, demonstrating adaptive resilience rather than frozen preservation (Schechner, 2003).

The festival endures not because it is frozen in time but because it performs time, reproducing the past in the present for the sake of the future. The blood of sacrificed rams, the white garments of

virgins, the combat chants of youth and the voices singing ‘Ọmọ Obòkun’ converge in a ritual theatre that is both timeless and timely. In Ìbòkun each year, the ancestors return, the community gathers, and the children learn who they are. The youth who receive the flogger’s sting, who carry the earthen pot, who drum the talking drum, who sing ‘A mò ha sorò ulé ria o’-they are not merely preserving tradition. They are becoming tradition, embodying in their young bodies the ancestral mandate that the community continues.

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