

Aesthetic Functions of Ogun Festival in Ijesha-Isu Ekiti, Ekiti State

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the aesthetic functions of the Ogun festival to the people of Ekiti State and how these functions have helped in the psychological and sociological well-being of the people of Ijesha-Isu Ekiti, Ekiti State. With the coming of Christianity and Islamic religions, the thrust of traditional religion dwindles day by day with recourse to Western civilization, which has aided the absence of traditional religious festivals. Notwithstanding the scarcity of traditional religious practices in Nigeria, the Ekiti people have held on to the Ogun festival beliefs and artistic aesthetics. The Ogun festival in Ekiti State has shown that the people still consider the worship of Ogun paramount to their existence and survival and can therefore not do without it.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Ijesha-Isu Ekiti, Ogun festival

Introduction

In any assessment of human values, the influence of religion cannot be ignored because, through the ages, religion has dominated the thoughts and lives of many people in different parts of the world. Alamu surmises that some African religion embraces all aspects of life (263). Supporting this claim, Dopamu attests that African religion plays a significant role in the lives of Africans. According to him: “Africans do not know how to live without religion. They celebrate life religiously and never embark on anything without religion” (1). Alamu further observes that Africans are incurably religious; hence they bring in the understanding of God and his vicegerents in the theocratic rule of the universe (264).

Though religion poses a great influence in traditional African festival, there is the place of aesthetics and social function which make a festival performance a form of dramatic enactment. Africans start from religion and their lives terminate at the point of religion. Religion is, therefore, the keynote and keystone of the African people's culture. In a similar vein, Stephen Kekeghe and Deborah Arhagba examine the socio-historical, religious and literary significance of festival performances, with a close investigation of two festivals enacted annually by the Urhobo people of Western Delta— Akwovworho festival of Ujevwu and the Ovwuwwe festival of Orua-Ivie in Abraka kingdom, in Udu and Ethiope East Local Government Areas of Delta State (305). It has been discovered that one of the ways the religiosity of the African people is established through festivals and rituals. Festival, as a socio-cultural phenomenon, is connected with various deities like Osun, Ifa, Sango, Obatala, among others, to preserve their heroic deeds and attributes and venerate them (Olajubu, 1982). Festivals in Yorubaland represent auspicious occasions when people celebrate religious, social, political and cultural events. Indeed, in Ijesa-Isu, the Ogun festival is celebrated annually to commemorate Ogun— the Yoruba god of war and heroism. He is the patron of the guild of hunters, warriors, road users and all those who work with iron equipment. Ogun holds a pride of place among farmers and hunters in Yorubaland (Adeleye 4)).

In Yoruba mythology, Ogun is referred to as "Oshin Imole" – the leader of the deities because he led the other deities to earth. He is frequently referred to as "Olulana" and given this superior position among deities. He eats first during sacrifices, especially in blood offerings, since the knife or cutlass is iron (Faluyi, 2017). Thus, Ogun remains the leader and pathfinder of other deities, which include but are not limited to Osun, Oya, Ifa, Obatala, Osanyin, Sango, Yemoja, as he is acclaimed to have cleared the path, being a warrior and a blacksmith, and led the deities to earth. In affirming this and reiterating the heroic deeds of Ogun, Ofeimun (2003) states:

whether from the standpoint of a creation myth in which Ogun is the path-maker who cleared the way from the gods to humankind, the entrepreneur who produced the fire of civilization to lift humanity from barbarism or the war-monger who protects the weak but could also devour them in sheer gore-mongering Ogun had become a twentieth Century deity who superintended not only over iron foundries that gave rise to modern civilization but other scientific pursuits, beyond metallurgy, in electricity, electronics and related feats.

Wande Abimbola explains that Ogun had a covenant with God to advance humanity with his technological creativity and moral conduct. Ogun is creative, proficient in all professions, and competent in all works without a master. He had a covenant with God to obey the Ten Commandments, which he wanted his followers to obey equally. He detests fornication and all forms of immorality, including cheating, falsehood, stealing, and mudslinging, among other vices, to serve as normative codes for professional hunters (4). Besides from these creative attributes of Ogun, he is also known to exhibit rage and destructiveness of the warrior whose strength and violence must not turn against the community. Ogun, during his lifetime, was a skilled and renowned warrior, craftsman, hunter, blacksmith and medicine man who had a passion for war and was always ready for war. He was more than skilled and renowned at war; he was an enthusiastic warlord who delighted in war (Adeleye 3). Odu Ogunda Meji, an Ifa verse, buttressed Ogun's tenacity and preparedness for war. It states that:

Ile nimoti jade wa
Ona mi nimo n to
A dia fun Ogun Ejemu Oluwonron
Adigirigiri re bi ija.

Ogun was deified after his demise, and he is presently being worshipped in the Yoruba nation and beyond, as far as Cuba and Brazil (Tinuoye, 2010). The importance of Ogun and the role he played among the citizens of Ijesa-isu caused the people to immortalize and worship him to date. The benefits of celebrating Ogun, the god of iron, include, but are not limited to, promotion of peace, protection from accidents, bountiful harvest, wealth and prosperity, safety and security, among others.

Ijesha-Isu Ekiti: Historical Development

Ijesha-Isu Ekiti is one of the important towns in the Ikole Local Government Area of Ekiti State. She is bounded in the North by Ikole-Ekiti, in the West by Ire-Ekiti, in the South-West by Igbemo-Ekiti and Ilu-Omoba, and in the South-East Ode-Ekiti. Ijesha-Isu Ekiti is a typical Yoruba town made up of several communities. People have even described her as a mini "United Nations". Like any other Yoruba town, Ijesha-Isu Ekiti is an ancient concentric town with a market square at the town centre. (Forde 28).

The available oral narrations reveal in no absolute term that Ijesha-Isu Ekiti took its roots from Ile-Ife; its

first set of settlers being descendants of Oduduwa, the historical father of all Yorubas. (Ojo 15). Some people on war expeditions settled at the present Ilasa site during the inter-tribal wars. Subsequently, other warriors settled in Ikose, Ilojo and Ilasa areas. Later, a renowned warrior from Ilasa called Oloro, also on a war expedition, arrived at the Ilasa site. The head of Ilasa people accommodated him. Having demonstrated his capacity for warfare, and political organization, he became the military leader of the people.

As the inter-tribal wars raged on, the arrival of some strange invaders led to the temporary dispersal of the settlers and the abandonment of the yams on the farm. However, inspired by their spirit of group supremacy and cultural nationalism, they returned to their original site and met their abandoned yams flourishing due to the fertile land. Thus the production of yams became the main occupation of the people. They supplied tubers of yam to other settlers who nicknamed them "isu", derived from their area of expertise in yam production, hence the name "Ijesha-Isu". (Oguntuyi 40). Ijesha-Isu, throughout the ages, remained the breadbasket of her neighbouring community particularly, during times of famine. (Fashan 14).

Ogun festival in Ijesha-Isu Ekiti, Ekiti State

The Ogun festival in Ijesha-Isu Ekiti is the same as the Ogun festival in other parts of Yorubaland. There could be differences in the mode of worship, which varies from town to town. Ogun festival in Ijesha-Isu Ekiti marks the beginning of a new year in Ijesha-Isu Ekiti. All the children of the land, both far and near, are expected to be present at this celebration; if not, they are regarded as strangers even among their peers. Pa. J.O. Ogunsakin (an informant) mentioned that Ogun festivals are held during the harvest of the new yam festivals. The blacksmiths, drivers, farmers, and people who use iron pieces of equipment must worship Ogun at this period and make sacrificial rites to him. The shrine of Ogun is always in the town, and it can also be built in some houses. In some towns, seven dogs are killed at the shrine of Ogun. The dogs are macheted at the neck and severed with a single machete stroke. After the sacrifice of the dogs, the people at the shrine dance around the shrine in jubilation.

The Ogun festival in Ijesha-Isu Ekiti is carried out within seven days, especially in August, when harvesting new yams. During the seven days, different activities are done to celebrate that day.

First day: Idagba Day

The first day of the Ogun festival is called Idagba day. Very early in the morning, the worshippers of Ogun go to the shrine to worship him. To worship Ogun, they take sacrifice materials- dog, schnapps, kola nut. At the shrine, the dog is beheaded in a single stroke, and the blood is poured on the shrine of Ogun. A bottle of schnapps is used to pray at the shrine for the people and the town's advancement. After this, the worshippers go home, waiting for the king to announce the commencement of the festival. Idagba is a drum built in the sand that the king must beat to announce the beginning of the festival. Idagba is a mandatory rite that the king must do. (Late Baba Edemo 2010).

The King (Oba Gabriel Oso Adeniyi Ojukutu II) climbs the heap of sand and beats the drum. After him, two elders beat the drum also, thus announcing the commencement of the festival. After this, everybody goes home to cook and eat, visit friends, and prepare for the festival's second day. This first day signifies unity and the commencement of the Egungun festival.



Picture 1: *The King beating the Idagba drum to announce the commencement of the Ogun festival.*

Second day: Isagun Day

The second day is for the Masquerades. Masquerades from different streets come out to grace the Ogun festival. Egungun or masquerades is an ancestral cult showing the beliefs of the Yoruba in life after death, which is fundamental to the Yoruba cosmological interpretation of the human life cycle. Hence, he is called 'Ara Orun'. (Idowu 29).

The Egungun cult consists of masked figures that represent the dead. The clothing of the Egungun gives one the impression that he is from the Spirit World. He is robed from head to foot in various colourful dresses, and he sees through a net covering his face. The whole body must be concealed. This drives home the fact that the cult is shrouded in secrecy. Women are not allowed to know the secrets of the Egungun. Still, there is a strong personality called 'Iya Agan', a female who is let into the cult's secret, whose function is to supervise the dressing of the Masquerades.



Picture 2: *The Egungun and his escorts on Isagun day.*

The Egungun appears in the daytime singly or in small companies. Usually, an escort called 'Atokun' accompanies the Egungun. The young Egungun carries a whip and drives people away, but the older Egungun may wear a wooden mask, feared for his magical powers. The youthful exuberance of the younger Masquerades is seen in them chasing people who do not run on sighting them. Both the young and older Masquerades are dressed in colourful attires and well masked. The younger Masquerades are slightly shorter than the older Masquerades, reflecting the age gap between the two masquerades. He does not go out frequently like the young Egungun, and when he does, he usually has many people accompanying him. Drummers may also accompany him. Some older Egunguns usually become excited at the sound of the talking drum, and they are only controlled from being too wild by their escorts.

A vigil precedes the coming of the Egungun, and the vigil is called 'Igbagbon Egungun'. (Late Baba Ejemo 2012). The whole night is spent in the 'Igbo-Igbale' (The groove), and people invoke the blessings and the aid of the departed ancestors. The blood of sacrificed animals is poured on the shrines of the ancestors used in purificatory and expiatory rites to wash away defilements and restore the spiritual life of individuals and, by extension, the community. On the morning of the festival, the people go on to the central Egungun shrines, and from there, the actual festival begins. This is called 'Ojo-Ikunle Egungun' (The starting day of Egungun). A person who does not participate in this opening ceremony cannot parade his Egungun that year. From this central shrine, the Egungun moves around the other shrines. (Pa Ogunsakin 2013).

Third-Day: Onikoyo Day

Onikoyo is a day set aside for wrestling. The wrestling is done in the mud. Young wrestlers from different quarters come to wrestle. Due to the mud, the wrestling is slippery, thus causing a lot of struggle and inconvenience for both wrestlers. Not only do males participate in this contest, but females also participate in the competition. The loser's face is rubbed in the mud, making the person look ugly and horrible to show the victory of the other party.

The audiences surrounding the ring cheer up the contestants, making them more willing to fight, no matter how tired they may be.

Fourth Day: Ajagbo Day

People of different age groups participate at Ajagbo day. They usually dance around the town, rendering songs to expose whoever had committed or perpetrated one atrocity or the other during the year. For instance, somebody caught cheating on their partner will have themselves to blame during Ajagbo, when the people start singing abusive songs to show their displeasure at the act(s) of such a person.

Ajagbo day is a day of fun and laughter. People laugh at the songs and give money to the singers. Unfortunately, the offenders must give the singers either money or food for their efforts, not minding how embarrassed they feel. One of the songs recorded during the Ajagbo occasion goes thus:

<i>Okunrin pupa kan wa</i>	<i>(There is a fair-complexioned man)</i>
<i>Ti o ni o ya su le</i>	<i>(That has a wife at home)</i>
<i>Oya re dara lo mo</i>	<i>(The wife is a beautiful creature)</i>
<i>Sugbon Okunrin yin ni ojukokoro</i>	<i>(But the husband is jealous)</i>
<i>Oya o lo ya lo mi ba lo po</i>	<i>(It is someone else's wife that he is sleeping with)</i>
<i>Ti oko ti o mi fi ade le kiri</i>	<i>(The husband caught them and began to chase him with a</i>

Ole, Ode, Okunrin ti o dara ti o ni itelorun (Thief, fool, a handsome man but is not contented).

The intriguing thing about the story is that the names of the culprits are not mentioned, but the villagers know who the offender in the song is.

Fifth Day: Alaogba-O Day

Alaogba-O is a name given to a particular occasion carried out by one of the quarters in Ijesha-Isu Ekiti, Ekiti State. Igbede sons and daughters carry out this function. This activity is done to remember their ancestors.

The females go from one house to the other, singing the praises of their ancestors. This activity is done only by Igbede sons and daughters, and no other person must join them. During this activity, a particular masquerade called 'Ele' produced by each quarter, Egbiran, Ikere, and Egbeodo, comes out. This Masquerade goes to the market with his counterparts, but they must not meet with one another on the way or else there will be a display of magical powers resulting in loss of lives and accidents. (Mama Omoyajowo 2011).



Picture 3: *The Ele on his way to the market on Alaogba O Day.*

They are provided with akara at the market square, which they will pick using their mouth. The masquerade hands must not touch the bean cakes, and it is taboo for the bean cakes to fall. Each Masquerade takes their bean cake and goes back to their quarters to dance and entertain the people.

At night, 'Agboakamomo', another masquerade, joins the other masquerades to entertain the people. This Masquerade comes out only at night.

Sixth Day: Ipaja Day

New yam is not taken to the market until the eighteenth day. The people wait until the Alase (a chieftaincy title conferred on one of the Ilase sons) does the necessary rituals before the yams can be taken to the market. During this occasion, the Alase bears the spiritual responsibility of a priest.

Ipaja is all about bringing new yam into the market. Early in the morning, the Alase and some elders will go into the shrine to perform rituals. After that, they go straight to the market, where the women will be waiting with their yams. The Alase goes to each woman, picks a yam tuber, and gives it to one of the comrades following him. After this, he blesses them and orders the selling of yam in the market. (Chief Olufolabi 2014).



Picture 4: *lase sons and daughters during their ritual worship on Ipaja day.*

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Throughout that day, one can hear the sound of mortar and pestles, announcing the preparation of pounded yam to celebrate the Ipaja (breaking of the new yam).

Seventh Day: Final Day

This is the final day of the Ogun festival. In the morning, the community goes to the palace to listen to the king's speech. He encourages and appreciates the people who participated in the festival. After the speech, everyone goes home to prepare for the masquerades' entertainment.

As earlier mentioned, the masquerades are the spirits of the dead ancestors, so the spirit must return to the spirit world. Each masquerade 'dies', going back to the spirit world, waiting for another year before he comes back to commune with men. (Late Baba Egbemo 2010). Even after the death of these masquerades, the euphoria of the festival still lingers on.

Aesthetic functions of Ogun Festival in Ijesha-Isu Ekiti, Ekiti State

It is obvious to note at this juncture that the Ogun festival is a traditional festival that has come to stay in Ijesha-Isu Ekiti. No matter what influence Christianity and Islamic religions have on its performance, the festival is still be performed every year. This is because of its aesthetic function and not just its traditional belief or indigenous background. Therefore, it is pertinent to discuss and evaluate some of these functions and how it impacts the psychological and social welfare of the people of Ijesha-Isu Ekiti. According to Maurice de Wulf, aesthetic

The study of the philosophy of the beautiful in nature, art, and literature. It has a philosophical dimension... The aesthetic study of literature concentrates its attention on the sense of the beautiful, rather than moral, social, or practical considerations... (154)

Aesthetics may be defined broadly as the study of beauty and, to a lesser extent, its opposite, the ugly. With this definition, it is evident that the Ogun festival in Ijesha-Isu Ekiti performs many aesthetic functions.

Ogun festival is performed every year. Whatever happens during the year, there must be one to two weeks set aside for the festival. It is an irresistible celebration that draws the populace together to celebrate and display their fine arts at a specific time of the year. Although the Muslims and Christians are about 80% of the population, they still come together during the Ogun festival purely for its beauty. This togetherness of spirit is one beauty of the festival. All religious bodies in Ijesha-Isu Ekiti come together to share in the joy

of the festival, thereby erasing any sense of religious conflict amidst the town's populace. (Chief Olufolabi 2014).

The use of palm fronds as a festival costume is a beautifying factor. All the worshippers of Ogun must tie the palm fronds around their neck, chest, waist, arms etc. The palm fronds represented the dress of Ogun when he was on earth. Therefore, it is a distinctive feature of Ogun worshippers because it is realized that Ogun was always in palm fronds when he was on earth, using it for one thing or the other. (Idowu 29). It is also a classical symbol of fecundity and victory. It is unique, for it can be likened to the biblical Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem whereby everyone had a palm frond in their hand to welcome him. The palm frond, therefore, symbolizes heroic worship.

Another vital aesthetic function of the Ogun festival is the ritual involved. Every aspect of the ritual performed constitutes a part of the aesthetic function, e.g. the dog killed by cutting off its head just once, showing that Ogun was accurate and superb in hunting. Moreover, the same symbolizes how Ogun bounces to unleash his wrath on an evildoer or liar. (Idowu 29). Ironically, the idea of beheading the dog looks ugly and gory, but in the ugly ritual is the beauty of dramatic tension and suspense espoused.

The worship at the groove is another factor to consider. The materials for rituals like kola nut, palm oil, palm wine, snail, and dog extol the ritual culture of the Ekiti people. Material of ritual such as palm oil symbolizes peace, calmness and a means to appease the wrath of an angry divinity. Kolanut symbolizes divination; apart from divination, it is a sign of love and understanding. When split and shared by others, it constitutes a part of loyalty and communion. (Mama Omoyajowo 2011). The priest uses the kola nut to offer prayer and see what the incoming year has in stock for the town's people. It also serves as a unifying factor because the kola nut will be shared after the prayer at the groove. This shows that they have sealed an agreement that they will continue to live in harmony. Kola nut also sends away pending evil in the town, saying, "he who brings Kolanut brings life".

Another aesthetic function is the occasion of Ajagbo day during the festival. Songs rendered during this occasion is to warn, mock and expose people who have committed one atrocity or the other during the year. This occasion prevents people from doing things contrary to the norms and values of the land. It also signifies the just cause of Ogun and portrays him as a god of justice.

From the previous illustration of the activities of the role and impact of Ogun festival on the people of Ijesha-Isu Ekiti, it is, however, essential to note that the Ogun festival has brought Ijesha-Isu Ekiti people the recognition of their devotion to Ogun, despite the threat and challenges faced due to the foreign religions.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that specific aesthetic values are evident in the Ogun festival of Ijesha-Isu Ekiti. These aesthetics have made the Ogun festival in Ijesha-Isu Ekiti of great importance to the community. The paper demonstrates the beauty exemplified in the worship of the Ogun deity and how these are revealed in the seven-day activities carried out in Ijesha-Isu, Ekiti State. These activities are sacred and profane therefore depicting the interface between spiritual and non-spiritual worship in Ijesha-Isu. Furthermore, the paper shows that the festival has brought tourist attraction while reducing the religious conflict to the lowest ebb. The festival shows the beauty of the people's tradition and heritage and encourages the people to continue pursuing the worship of a divine god. Finally, the paper submits that the Ogun festival makes room for community growth and development despite the influence of western religions in Ijesha-Isu, Ekiti State.

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