

1. *OBEDU* FESTIVAL: FOREGROUNDING CULTURAL CONTINUITY, IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION IN YORÙBÁ CELEBRATORY ART

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Abstract

Festivals as an art form are a significant component of people's cultural trajectory. Among Yorùbá, it recreates age-long traits of the people, recognising and transmitting knowledge about a past that impacts the present and foregrounds the future. Commemorative arts subsist in all world cultures, articulating the people's socio-historical imaginaries alongside their biological forms of identity. Although there are existing works on Yorùbá festivals then they focus on festivals of the big cities such as *Osun-Osogbo* (Osogbo), *Eyo* (Lagos), and *Olojo* (Ile-Ife). However, it is imperative to research the festivals of the smaller villages and communities because of their rich history and tradition. Therefore, the paper examines the *Obedu* festival of the Oba-Ile people of Osun State, Nigeria. The festival, like many of its type, proves to defy modern influences, and its centrality to socio-cultural as well as environmental protection is unbroken. Symbolic Interactionism serves as the theoretical framework, and it is ethnographic in design. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews (comprising the king of Oba-Ile, three high chiefs, and ten other participants at the festival) and participant observation. The data collected was analysed using content analysis. The festival is crucial to the continuity, identity, and environmental protection in the Yorùbá cultural setting. The paper concludes that there is a need to reevaluate Indigenous performance as they continue to influence identity construction and social change despite modernity.

Keywords: *Obedu* festival, Oba-Ile, identity construction, cultural continuity, environmental protection

Introduction

Among Africans, a cultural festival is a ceremony suffused with spectacle, glamour, and diverse mimetics. It encompasses a wide range of art genres, including music, dance, dramatic skits, and poetry. Boscolo (2009) described it as "a transformative play that stimulates a dynamic relationship" (p.77). In Africa, festivals manifest mythopoetic rituals that articulate people's stability, environmental protection and social rejuvenation. As such, they are woven around "diverse beings and physical phenomena" (Beier, 1959). In intellectual discourses, festivals are constructed and viewed as a tradition that constitutes part of the worldview of the people and an integral part of their theatrical traditions (Ogunba, 1965; Adedeji, 1968; Finnegan, 1970; Soyinka, (1976). Thus, some African festival scholars ascertain that, by the consequence of its artistic impact, the festival reveals the ritual origin of drama in Africa.

However, long before the submissions of the African scholars on the festival mentioned above, the great philosopher, Aristotle, had declared that tragedy, a genre of drama, grew out of the dithyramb,

which is a song in the worship of Dionysus (Macgowan and Melnitz, 1955). The worship embedded in the festivals is believed to be significant to the continuity of the people. Hence, the festival signifies an epistemic site that connects people to their roots. Not only that, but it also manifests their sociability and continuity. Therefore, it is a phenomenon that continues to attract scholarly attention to date. As deific folklore, festival among the Yorùbá is periodically re-enacted with the persuasion that it connects the frontiers of the living and that of the dead. Certainly, studies on cultural festivals among Yorùbá have been undertaken by many African and Africanist scholars such as Beier, Ogunba, Adedeji, Drewal M.T., Drewal H.J., Pemberton, Babayemi, Barber, and Rea, to mention but a few. Nevertheless, this work toes the line of Barber's (1991) declaration that researching specifics is necessary. Therefore, the paper examines the *Obedu* festival of the Oba-Ile people of Osun State, Nigeria. It seeks to delineate how the festival makes meaning in the life of the people, expressing their belief in the festival as capable of environmental protection and determination of continuity despite a new lifestyle and knowledge as a result of modernity. Moreover, it adds to the existing materials that foreground ritual as the origin of theatre tradition in Africa. Nonetheless, to articulate the importance of this study, the often-cited work on the ritual festival by the one regarded as the father of African drama festival and oral literature, the late Ogunba, is taken as a guide in this paper.

Literature Review

In "Studying Traditional African Literature," Ogunba (1971) observes that "the festival is conceived as the most important cultural institution in traditional Africa. It is the institution that accommodates and utilises virtually all the major arts of a typical African community – the arts of carving, masking, costuming, and many others" (p.46). In other words, festival among Africans is a broad and all-encompassing carnival that overwhelms Africans' life circle. In it, different professionals, experts, and creative minds come together, bringing their ingenuity to the presence of all for criticism, pleasure, pedagogy, catharsis, and collective growth. This, thus, makes the festival a comprehensive celebration that manifests different social and political activities that stimulate social reconstruction among Africans (Oyewo, 2019, p.22). As a mass celebration, it brings together diverse people of different ideologies, beliefs, and practices, even in this modern time. Importantly, among the Yorùbá, it signifies a time of economic prosperity, political evaluation, environmental protection and religious devotion to some primordial beings. Thus, it is known to stimulate what Turner (1969) calls "communitas" in a very laudatory manner (p.78). Among Africans, the festival has to do with the experience of the people when their lives take on a full meaning together. Africa is mostly an agrarian economy; hence, festivals often take place during or sometimes at the end of the rainy season. This is a unique and memorable time in African people's lives. It is a time of great harvest, celebration, and collaboration.

The time of the festival among Africans, especially the Yorùbá, designates different flourishing economic activities, especially the harvest of different farm produce. The harvests are taken to market for trade, and the money realised is used for the purchase of other goods and services. In this way, money moves from hand to hand, and society continues to thrive. The findings of cultural researchers have shown that the times of festivals such as Osun, *Obanta*, *Eyo*, *Egúngún*, and *Arugungu* fish festival, to mention but a few, are times of opulence whereby many business owners, such as food vendors, hospitality providers, water suppliers, and other essential human needs suppliers, prosper (Babawale, 2018). It is also stated that during this period, "economic activities of host communities and that of neighbouring communities flourish" (Babawale, 2018, p.18). Thus, festivals make possible the circulation of money for the use of one and all.

Another very important thing that happens during this period is the evaluation of leadership quality. Thus, Adekoya (2014) avers that "festival is comparable to what accountants do at the end of a financial year, that is, reconciliation of all account books, to know whether or not profit and development have been made in diverse sectors of an economy". Adekoya (2014) continues, "a king or queen whose reign is marked by peace, plenty and progress have songs of praise composed for

him/her, while a ruler whose period on the throne is patent by corruption, disease, pestilence, poverty, war, and may be obliquely lampooned and mocked in songs of abuse or could even be asked to abdicate the throne" (p.195). Among Yorùbá, festive periods are known for the composition and performance of songs, praise poems, and different banterers that evaluate the quality/unscrupulous time of past/present leaders in a bid to eulogise/denigrate the leadership. A good example of such a song is as follows:

Laye Olugbon Modaborun Meje

Laye Aresa modaborun mefa

Laye Aremu emi ra lacii, moraran, mo ra sanyan baba aso

Afole lole pe 'leyi odun, beeni afole

Eni keni bee ogboko baba e lo

During the time of Olugbon (the past ruler), I bought seven wrappers

During the time of Aresa (also a past ruler), I bought six wrappers

At the time of Aremu (current ruler), I bought Lace, Velvet, and Sanyan, the king of fabrics

It is only the lazy one that will condemn this community, yes, a lazy person

Let such a person leave this community and go to his father's farm. (Translation is ours)

In a different scenario, a group of performers will hold some broomsticks and sing as follows:

Eni kalaseju o lo, eki sasara bagbo

Tell the wicked one to abdicate, sweep him out of this vicinity. (Paraphrase is ours)

The first song serves as two ways of the acerbic sword. On one hand, it references the good times of a past leader. The reign of the king in the chant (*Aremu*) is equated to that of the past rulers whose time was prosperous, as a matter of appreciation/acceptance. However, the second part of the same song derides the attitude of a lazy person in the community. *Ole* (a lazy person) is someone who does not work hard enough to be able to accomplish something worthwhile or be able to provide for himself. Laziness is condemnable among Yorùbá. However, the second model (song) castigates the reigning ruler of the community in totality. Often, the ruler's name is not mentioned in the song, but then the whole community surely knows who the sarcasm addresses. The cited models of performances, therefore, illustrate likely banterers and songs that permeate the atmosphere at most Yorùbá indigenous festivals. It should be noted, however, that during festivals, there is immunity, such that artists are well protected against unleashing wrath on the performers should their artistic productions directly or indirectly deride anyone (Kings or any highly placed person/persons).

A festival season is also a time of connection with *Olodumare* (Supreme Being), the deities, and the ancestors for guidance, prosperity and the protection of their environment. The Yorùbá hermeneutics centres on *Olodumare*, who is regarded as the source of human existence (Idowu, 1962). For the Yorùbá, *Olodumare* is regarded as the one to whom supplication is made for guidance and resolution of pressing human problems (Oladipo, 2002). Besides *Olodumare*, there is also the belief in the existence of primordial divinities such as *Obatala*, *Ogun*, *Sango*, *Oya*, *Otin*, *Osun*, and *Esu*, to mention but a few (Oladipo, 2022, p.22). It does not stop there, for there is also the acceptance of some other rare creatures imbued with extra-terrestrial powers (Oladipo, 2022, p.25). An example of such a creature is *Obedu*, which is our focus in this paper. Consequently, Fadipe (1893-1944) argues that these so-called rare beings were known for strange accomplishments while alive, and it is the belief of the Yorùbá people that such beings must be placated for individuals or communities to prosper and live harmoniously. The community is compelled to come to terms with them for guidance and protection. Therefore, it is often the primordial divinities/rare beings that are referenced in the story of the creation of different Yorùbá groups and communities, which is manifested in festivals (Omigbule, 2018).

In the oral tradition of the Yorùbá people, it is told that these beings have helped the community to overcome hazardous conditions at one time or the other in their history. And, in recognition of this, propitiation is offered periodically to appease them in thankfulness. This is in the form of a festival. So, for Yorùbá, the festival is a time of gratitude and a time to pay tribute to the benign creatures whose benevolence has been enjoyed, and is still being enjoyed. By this gesture, it is trusted that the community continues to enjoy goodwill and protection from the creatures. Therefore, the festival is an indulgence of the Yorùbá. Virtues which endorse appreciation articulated in this saying: *yin ni yin ni keni se imi* (one good turn deserves another).

Essentially, what this paper discusses and analyses is the meaning, form, and function in the story of the creation of the Oba-Ile people, which is reenacted in the annual *Obedu* festival that is still observed despite modernity.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research design with emphasis on ethnographic methods, suited for interrogating the lived experiences, oral traditions, and ritual practices embedded in the *Obedu* Festival of the Oba-Ile community in Osun State, Nigeria. The ethnographic approach is appropriate because festivals, by their very nature, are socio-spiritual performances that combine ritual, spectacle, and symbolic enactments, which can best be understood through participant immersion, interpretive analysis, and collection of community-based narratives. Thus, the data for the paper is derived through the research instrument of participant observation, oral interviews, focus group discussions, and documentation and archival sources.

Data for this study were collected through participant observation at several celebrations of the *Obedu* Festival from 2021 to 2025. This method enhanced a thorough grasp of the artistic and ritual dimensions of the festival, including the music, dances, dramatic skits, drumming, masquerade performances, and communal camaraderie. Therefore, observing the *Obedu* festival at close range made it possible to interpret the performative and symbolic gestures within the cultural and religious context of the community. Moreover, in-depth oral interviews were conducted with selected custodians of tradition, including the King of Oba-Ile, the chiefs – the Oloba-Ile in council, the chief-priest of *Obedu*, the *Arugba* (the carrier), and members of the royal court who serve as knowledge bearers of the *Obedu* myth and its ritual enactment. Structured and unstructured questions were deployed to elicit insights into the meanings, histories, and values of the festival. Oral narratives, as Finnegan (1970) emphasises, are invaluable for preserving indigenous epistemologies that may not exist in written form.

In addition, group discussions were utilised among youths, artisans, business owners, and men and women participants to evaluate contemporary views on the festival. This method helped to capture generational shifts in the understanding, attitudes towards cultural continuity, and perceptions of social identity mediated by the festival. Finally, Secondary sources of data, such as published works, historical records, and archival materials, were consulted to provide a scholarly background for interpreting the symbolic significance of the festival. Works of scholars such as Ogunba (1965), Adedeji (1968), Turner (1969), Barber (1991), Drewal & Drewal (1990), and Abimbola (2005) were particularly important in situating the *Obedu* Festival within broader Yorùbá festival traditions.

The choice of ethnography is justified by the fact that festivals embody both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. They exist not only as visual spectacles but also as lived experiences, which entails study conducted through close interaction with the community. Moreover, because *Obedu* Festival thrives primarily in oral tradition form, participant observation and oral interviews remain the most reliable tools for accessing its meanings and functions. In sum, this methodology provides a comprehensive framework for engaging with the *Obedu* Festival as a performative art form, a ritual

practice, and a socio-cultural act that bonds people, making meaning together. It foregrounds the voices of the community while situating their experiences within scholarly discourse on Yorùbá celebratory arts and cultural continuity.

Theoretical Framework

This study is situated within a theoretical framework that connects oral tradition, communal symbols, and the mechanisms of social development. In this respect, the sociological theory of Phenomenology – Symbolic Interactionism serves as the primary analytical principle of the study. Symbolic Interactionism illustrates the enduring human loyalty to shared symbols entrenched in a society and deployed for social, economic, political, and religious development. The theory was pioneered by George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) and was later expanded by his student Herbert Blumer (1900-1987). The position of Symbolic Interactionism theorists is that the stability and continuity of a society depend on the norms, values, and symbols that are entrenched and shared among its members. Symbols within a culture highlight the process in which events, people, and other environmental features take meaning in themselves (Stryker, 1987).

From this theory's perspective, symbols function as interpretive signs through which communities articulate meaning, cohesion, and continuity. Essentially, Symbolic Interactionism emphasises the connection between people and the unifying symbols that link them with their traditions. Within this framework, what is embedded in the myths of creation of the community stands as emblematic accounts that highlight a people's socio-historical values, which engender growth and stability. Myths and rituals "provide social solidarity, enhance the integration of the society by providing a formalised statement of its ultimate value-attitudes, afford a means for the transmission of much of the culture with loss of content – thus protecting cultural continuity and stabilising the society" (Okpewho, 1983, p.48). In other words, the drama embedded in festivals transmits cultural values that not only preserve identity but also alleviate continuity. Drawing from the positions of the theorists of Symbolic Interactionism, festival, therefore, becomes not merely a commemorative event but an emblematic demonstration that renews the people's identity, reconstructs social bonds, and situates the community within the evolution of socio-cultural continuity.

Undoubtedly, the *Obedu* Festival of the Oba-Ile people becomes intelligible through this theoretical lens. The endurance of the *Obedu* festival can be attributed to the symbolic meanings embedded in the festival, which reinforce communal participation, restructure social order, and reaffirm continuity. This observation, therefore, resonates with the claim that "folklore genres such as myths, proverbs, riddles, praise poetry, and music constitute the aesthetic culture of a people, thereby facilitating social change and adaptation (Herskovits, 1965, p.121). Yorùbá hermeneutic, articulated in ritual and festival dramas, accommodates legends and stories that sustain communal values, philosophies, and communal aspirations and survival.

Conceptualising Obedu Oba

Obedu, a combination of both *oro* (spirit) and human, was said to have lived in a thick forest before Oduwole (the progenitor of the Oba-Ile people) encountered him in one of his hunting expeditions. *Oduwole* was believed to be a direct descendant of Oduduwa, the progenitor of the Yorùbá people. *Obedu* was said to be a desirable being with an abundance of wits and mystical powers. In his book titled *Oba-Ile Town in History*, Abimbola (2005) claims that "*Obedu* was neither a human being nor a spirit; however, he goes with the appellation *Olowu Oro Ife*" (p.23). He further described *Obedu* as one "who bore a fearful face that no one dared take a second look at" (p.25). *Obedu* is also reputed to be a very powerful creature whose wisdom is incomparable to any creature of that time. Although very ugly, a hunter in Yorùbá oral tradition would do anything to befriend such a creature. Having said this, what follows is how *Obedu* became what is being worshipped in Oba-Ile.

Obedu: A Festival in Oba-Ile

In one of Oduyale's trips to the forest for games, it was told that after missing his target for three consecutive days, he pledged not to go home without a game. On the fourth day, he saw a deer and, getting set to shoot, "bang", a loud noise, and the animal took off. This development frustrated Oduyale, and he decided to engage whatever was responsible for the ill-fated incident. Sighting a strange creature (*Obedu*), Oduyale engaged the creature in a serious brawl without a second thought. As articulated in the account, after a long fight that produced no winner, in the long run, they eventually agreed to be friends. Thereafter, they both became so inseparable that at the end of Oduyale's hunting expedition, *Obedu* accompanied him home.

The account further says that it was the stupendous powers in *Obedu's* possession that prompted Oduyale to request *Obedu* to stay with him. *Obedu* wholeheartedly agreed to stay with Oduyale, and from that day onward, he provided all the spiritual power and philosophical wits that Oduyale used throughout his lifetime. Further in the account, it was recorded that by the time Oduyale returned from his long expedition, his father had passed on, and his siblings had shared all the inheritance among themselves, thinking that Oduyale was dead. The uncharitable act of his siblings enraged Oduyale, who later took the matter to *Obedu* for counsel. *Obedu* advised that Oduyale should leave Ile-Ife for a new settlement, a piece of advice which Oduyale took with philosophical equanimity. Oduyale knew that adhering to this was the only way to stay clear of future clashes with his relatives. Moreover, it was the only way for him to have his kingdom. Thus, he and his household left Ile-Ife in the middle of the night to avoid his kindred's suspicion. *Obedu* gave him a magical wand and promised to be with him wherever he went. So, armed with four items (a beaded crown, *opaga* (an iron swagger stick), *oduro* (tick erectile iron), and *juju* (a magical bangle), Oduyale, together with his household, left for the land of the unknown.

The journey was reported to be aided by magical powers. In no time, Oduyale and his household landed in a forest, which in this modern day is found in the northwest area of Yorùbá land, the present-day Osun State. The account recorded that Oduyale and his family's arrival was heralded by a loud noise: *Oobale! Oobale!* (He has landed, he has landed). This information was corroborated by Chief Adeoye (*Elemo* of Oba-Ile), who said further that *Obale*, with time, transformed into Oba-Ile, the name by which the community is called today.

As gathered from oral sources, there was peace and tranquillity in the community until the people started complaining about the dreadful look of *Obedu*. Below is an account of what happened next, as narrated by *Eesa of Oba-Ile* (the second in command to the king of Oba-Ile):

Oduyale's household, together with some people in the community, complained to the King (Oduyale) that *Obedu* scared them and threatened to kill them on their way to their farms. Some even said he kidnapped their children. The uncharitable story spread quickly, and it saddened the king. Although within himself, he knew that his people were just mendacious about *Obedu*. Yet, the King persuaded *Obedu* to look for a comfortable place on the outskirts of the town to settle. *Obedu* obliged and moved out of the town to a forest designated as *Igbo-Obedu* today. While moving out, he promised Oduyale that he would continue to look after him and his community despite the treacherous attitude of his people.

Despite the people's attitude, *Obedu* promised Oduyale that he would not allow Oba-Ile to be overrun by any town in the time of war. Oduyale believed his friend, but his people did not. So, one day, the people raised a false alarm of invasion, shouting: *Obedu ooo, ogun ti gbe gbogbo ilu lotan ooo.* (*Obedu ooo! War has ravaged the whole town.* On hearing this, *Obedu* came out in full force, calling on the shrubs and weeds to stand up and defend his town. As he did so, shrubs, weeds, and trees obliged him, turning to armed men and killing everyone they came across, even the innocent ones who were

going to their farms and personal businesses. And in a short time, the town was overwhelmed.

When the sacrilegious act got to the King's hearing, he was enraged. He ran out of the palace to the scene and was rolling on the floor begging and pleading with *Obedu*, saying that the drum of war was a false alarm. This deceitfulness angered *Obedu*, and he banished all Oba-Ile indigenes from sighting him, especially those from the royal families. He also instructed the King that he should lead his people in fanfare and spectacle yearly to appease him; that failure would be disastrous. Since no one wanted the repeat the gory incident, *Obedu* became a festival that is celebrated with pageantry in the history of Oba-Ile town. The grove where *Obedu* resides has become a sacred place today. (Dr Abimbola, personal communication, October 14, 2018)

Chief Abimbola concludes that from that day on, the Oba-Ile people celebrate the *Obedu* festival in October of every year. Although nobody could ascertain why the placation comes up in October, successive kings, be they Christian or Muslim, appease *Obedu* in the company of a large town people and visitors yearly. The present Oloba (king of Oba-Ile) declares:

The tie between *Obedu* as a festival and the Oba-Ile community is extraordinary. No matter the complexity brought about by modernity, the festival must take place. The only exception is during social or natural tragedies such as war or national emergencies. Even at such a period, it will still hold but at a very low key. All Yorùbá towns and communities have a cultural festival that serves as a medium of metaphysical communication between them and their forefathers. No king, no matter his educational or religious background, can discount the popular festival in his town or domain. Once you accept to ascend the throne of your ancestors, you have accepted the traditions of the town wholly. Therefore, the king must take full participation irrespective of religious affiliation. (Personal communication, October 13, 2018)

The Structure of the *Obedu* Festival

The festival usually lasts two days; it commences on a Saturday and ends with a laud spectacle on Sunday. Surely, the *Obedu* festival attracts people from far and near. It is a festival that cuts across boundaries (religious, educational, and cultural affinity), for there is a large turnout of people. The opening ceremony takes place in the town hall. The hall is a small space and it cannot accommodate a large number of people. Thus, a multitude of people usually follows the event from the King's courtyard. The first day is tagged *Iboade* (appeasing the progenitors), represented in the crowns and other royal items used by the previous kings of Oba-Ile.



(The Aworo (the *Obedu* priest), dressed in a brown outfit, performs the rituals of appeasing the

ancestors. Photograph taken by the authors on 3 October 2018.



(The traditional royal emblems — such as the crown and ceremonial staffs, some of which date back centuries — were placed before the king, and the ritual was performed by the *Aworo*. The photographs were taken by the authors on 3 October 2018.)





(The Oba-Ile-in-Council in attendance, participating in the *Iboade* rituals, photographs taken by the authors on 3 October 2018)



(The representatives of the youths, pictures taken by the authors, 03/10/2018)



(The Oloba of Oba-Ile pouring libations after the ancestors have been appeased. Photograph taken on 3 October 2018.

Iboade

What happened during the *Iboade* is an invocation and an appeal to the *oniles* (ancestors) and Olodumare for guidance, prosperity, and continuity. Thus, *Iboade* is a prayer to the ancestors, especially to the *Obedu*, believed to be the protector of the community. Earlier on, each of the royal houses (four in all) came up with two bottles of Aromatic Schnapps (Gin), three bunches of *Obiabata* (three-face Kolanut), *Adun*, *Akara* (bean cake), and *Orogbo* (bitter kola). With all these items, the *Akesin* (the chief priest) invokes the spirits of the ancestors, beseeching them to pray for the king, then for the Oloba in council (chiefs), and then for the entire community. Each time the chief priest prays with an item, the people chorus *asee* (amen). After the prayers, there is lavish entertainment. Eminent people and guests seated in the hall are entertained and treated to sumptuous meals. Also, participants outside the hall (in the courtyard) scrambled for food because they could not go around due to the large number of people in attendance.



(Some ajopidan (performers) taken after the *Iboade* appeasement of the ancestors by the authors 14/10/2018)

After eating, everyone in the hall moves to the *Ojude-Oba* (The Palace facade). This is where different performances, skits, and mockeries are presented by different performers. The king, the chiefs, and the public who are there to enjoy themselves take this time to interact and recollect past happenings. A great level of bonding takes place among the people during this period. The king, who is a retired professor and a Christian by faith, is not left out of this merriment and celebration. When asked about his stake in the Yorùbá festival concerning modern beliefs and tastes (religion and education), the king was quick to respond that tradition and modernity should not clash at all. According to him, "tolerance is what is needed. Each should endure one another because there is a great history behind the two." He continues: "Every royal blood with the mind to ascend the prodigious throne of an Oba must blend both tradition and modernity". Essentially, the king believes that taking part in cultural performances/festivals of this nature does not make someone illiterate or primitive.

On the third day, which is the grand finale, some rituals are performed indoors. Later on, there is a journey to the *Igbo-Obedu* (the *Obedu's* groove) in the early hours of Sunday morning. In the course of preparation for the journey, some maidens, led by the *Arugba Obedu* (the carrier), are sighted with loads on their heads, singing and dancing. While this is going on, the public starts gathering. The general belief during the *Obedu* festival is that prayers, wishes, and desires are granted speedily. And this period is the best time for making supplications to *Olodumare*. Therefore, participants at the festival take advantage of this moment to pray for success in their undertakings, for children, for work, for longevity, for good health, and prosperity. A large number of people are, therefore, seen praying and saying their wishes and heart's desires towards the loads carried by the *Arugba* and her maidens.

Customarily, the large covered calabash carried by the *Arugba* and the maidens denotes two things: first, it indicates the imitation of the placatory items taken to *Obedu* during the ancient days, purposefully for compassion and forgiveness to be shown to the people for their treacherous act. Secondly, it signifies the conveyance of all misfortunes, hostility, and ill luck to *Obedu* to dispose of on behalf of the community.



(The first photograph shows the *Arugba Obedu* dressed in white apparel with a red cloth draped from the neck down the left side, accompanied by other carriers. The second photograph depicts the *Agboopa Obedu* (the *Obedu* staff bearer), clothed in red, leading the people on the journey of conciliation. Both photographs were taken by the authors on 15 October 2018.)

Both characters, the *Arugba* and the *Agboopa* (the *Obedu*'s staff bearer), lead the journey of pacification. The two characters are not from any of the royal families, according to our informant, and this is because it is forbidden that any Oba-Ile indigene should see the *Obedu*, who is believed to resurface yearly during the festival, especially at the shrine located in the groove. Given this, all other journey makers, including the king and his entourage, stop at the spot believed to be where the king met *Obedu* in the ancient days. However, while at the groove, it is believed that more rituals are carried out by the *Agboopa*. When the *Agboopa* is done with all the bits and pieces of the purification performances, the return journey to the city commences.

On the return journey, the king wears a special crown made of beads. The crown is believed to be an ancient one, brought from Ile-Ife, the source of all Yorùbá people. With this bearded crown, the king invokes the spirit of his forefathers to make his reign a prosperous one. He prays for the barren to be pregnant before the next *Obedu* festival, and for pregnant women to give birth without any

complications. He also prays for peace to reign supreme in Oba-Ile and its environs; he prays for good health, and finally for prosperity for all and sundry. The essence of these prayers is the banishment of misfortune in his domain.



(The king, his *olori*, and the chiefs engaged in a final prayer session for peace and tranquillity within the community and its environs. The photograph was taken by the authors on 15 October 2018.)

The Festival as a Transmitter of Message

The *Obedu* festival, like other Yorùbá festivals, is similar to what Rappaport (1999) called “transmitters of messages” (p.29). By this, we mean that it is a clear demonstration and reminder of the past and is meant to inform the present for continuity. The *Obedu* festival illustrates the ordeal of an eponymous hero. This hero (*Obedu*) is regarded and treated as a god today in Oba-Ile. For the people of Oba-Ile, it is *Obedu* who oversees their welfare from the chthonic realm. In the Yorùbá cosmic apprehension, there is great regard for the continuity of life. Hence, the dead are believed to cross over to the realm of the unborn through reincarnation as they join the living (Awolalu, 1970). This is why the Yorùbá has such names as *Iyabode*, *Babatunde*, *Yejide*, and *Babajide*, to mention but a few. For the Yorùbá, there is always a replacement (easy passage) of people, especially when the dead are well venerated. Hence, the veneration of *Obedu* yearly is to foster continuity.

The Festival as an Aesthetic Tradition

The *Obedu* festival is a very rich artistic tradition. Like other Yorùbá ritual performances (*Egúngún*), it is informed by the Yorùbá worldview, which is formulated on the principle of complementarities in which the three realms of existence (the dead, the living, and the unborn), separated by what Ibitokun (1995) called a “transitional gulf”, become whole (p.22). For the Yorùbá, in such festivals, the living is the go-between the other two realms (the dead and the unborn). Hence, the saying: *bi o seniyan, imole kosi* (without human beings, there is no god).

Human beings thus remain at the centre of all things that connect nature. In support of this assertion, Adekoya (2014) echoes Ogunba’s declaration that “reenacting the myth of the land in festivals is a way of bringing the supernatural to the level of nature and making the unfathomable comprehensible to the folk” (p.199). Also, Soyinka in *Myth Literature and the African World* (1976) sees man as the harmoniser of all forces “physical, social, and psychic” (p.2) that challenge his environment. Thus, the

cosmic apprehension of the myth that connects the other two realms is directed by the living. This is what takes place in the *Obedu* festival, a festival that is dedicated to the worship and celebration of an ancestor and that is concerned with purification while supporting enduring socio-historical imaginaries alongside Yorùbá identity construction. Yorùbá always emphasises an *Omoluabi* (virtuous) attitude at all times (Awolalu, 1979 and Adeoye, 1979); for the Yorùbá, an *Omoluabi* must be decent in character, s/he must not be deceitful. Thus, the saying: *iwa loba awure* (character predates success). Certainly, the Oba-Ile people of the prehistoric time, as shown in their myth of creation, were not *Omoluabi*; rather, they were treacherous, hence the calamity that befalls them.

Didacticism in Obedu Festival

Whenever the *Obedu* festival is reenacted, it is, on one hand, a reminder of the misfortune of the forefathers. And on the other hand, it is a constant reminder that the *Omoluabi* attitude is the best. Hence, the festival is a deliberate performance to discourage people from embedding bad characters. The *Obedu* festival, with all the elements of a total theatre (costumes, make-ups, props, and different characters), thus presents a social drama of purification and reconciliation. Consequently, Ogunba's definition of the festival in Africa, as details in the sacred and profane, dramatic, and ritualistic mimesis, applies to the *Obedu* festival of the Oba-Ile people. Ogunba (1978) puts this strongly as follows:

Contrary to popular understanding, the festival is not just a religious occasion... Besides, it is always difficult to determine what a religious occasion is in a traditional African context. Such strict categorisation into religious and secular or religious and political seems alien to the spirit and nature of the traditional African. With him, things that in other civilisations are regarded as merely secular are treated with a certain degree of awe and sacredness and things that would otherwise be regarded as sacred do accommodate 'surprising profanities'. Every traditional festival is indeed attached to a supernatural being or deified ancestors, and to that extent may be said to be religious as a base and inspiration. But in its realisation, a festival's religious origin or foundation is often and too easily superseded, the festival thereby becoming a veritable carnival, dance drama, or ritual drama that *communicates, teaches, and serves as catharsis* (p.5) (emphasis is ours)

During the *Obedu* festival, there are abundant banters, elation, theatricalities, and spirituality. Above all, the social differences among the diverse people in attendance are blurred. This, therefore, makes the religious and artistic value of a festival in Africa a pleasurable experience.

Discussion of Findings

In an attempt to identify the significance of the festival to Oba-Ile people, all the respondents express the view that the *Obedu* festival implies the constant remembrance of their connection with their ancestors to facilitate continuity and social development. This submission was agreed on even among the educated ones. It, thus, clearly shows the reason why the placation endures till today. The presence of a large crowd despite new beliefs and new styles of living validates the belief of the people in tradition.

Nothing less than 8 (eight) *Obedu* festivals had been observed by the researchers, and the views of the respondents continue to tally with the objectives of the performance. Above all, it is surprising that the modern style of civilisation and the proliferation of religious beliefs have not changed the tradition radically. Rather, the tradition had borrowed from modernity to make it richer. Like, the introduction of customised T-shirts, a tradition taken from carnivals, which was imported from the Brazilian styles of festivity, is well observable at all the *Obedu* festivals that the essayists witnessed. With this kind of innovation, the festival becomes appealing to the youth and even some elders. And this makes the tradition ongoing, by and by; it becomes an open jamboree without erasing the spiritual

implication.

Conclusion

The Yorùbá cosmology is a development from a long process of reflection and speculation on “the hard facts of life” (Opeloye, 1998). One of the hard facts of life is illustrated in this Yorùbá concept: *aye le* (life is mysterious). *Aye* (the world), from the perspective of an indigenous Yorùbá, is saturated with all sorts of complications. As a result, no one can claim to have the solution to the mysteries of life, but those “who know more than us, those who have left the realm of the living” (The Oloba of Oba-Ile, personal communication, October 15, 2018). In cognisance of the above, there is always recourse to primordial beings to resolve the encumbrances that suffuse the world of the living. Hence, for the indigenous Yorùbá, life processes are chased by collective supplication to *Olodumare* (the Supreme God), the deities, and the *Oniles* (progenitors) for self-actualisation and social development.

In the paper, we explored the oral tradition of Oba-Ile to identify the symbolic meaning and function of the festival drama, *Obedu*. In doing so, we understood that among the functions which ritual festivals among Yorùbá perform is recourse to higher beings to help in fighting the precariousness in man’s world. For the Yorùbá, whether or not the challenges are subdued, there is always an appreciation in the form of elaborate celebrations called festivals, enacted periodically. Hence, being alive to witness another *odun* (festival) is enough reason to be grateful for the benevolence of the ancestors (Oyewo, 2019). Moreover, Olorunyomi (2019) avers that the emphasis in African festival drama is on “moral, cultural identity and social development” (p.42). Essentially, the African festival captures the essence of the relationship between supernaturalism and naturalism.

This paper articulates the *Obedu* festival of the Oba-Ile community as a reminder of their past periodically, so that the same mistakes committed by their ancestors will not be repeated. By having this constantly in their consciousness, social continuity is strengthened and prosperity is assured. This, therefore, makes the Yorùbá belief, enshrined in the cyclic structure of its universe, enduring despite a new lifestyle (education, religion, and new culture). Moreover, all Yorùbá sub-group have their eponymous hero who oversees their affairs from beyond. These heroes are mollified often, mindless of the new culture and religious convictions.

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