1. ***OBEDU* FESTIVAL: FOREGROUNDING CULTURAL CONTINUITY, IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION IN YORÙBÁ CELEBRATORY ART Adewale Christopher Oyewo & Charles Alex Patrick**

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Abstract

Festivals as an art form are a significant component of people's cultural trajectory. Among the Yorùbá, they recreate age-old 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 existing work on Yorùbá festivals focuses on festivals in big cities such as Osun-Osogbo (Osogbo), Eyo (Lagos), and Olojo (Ile-Ife), it is imperative to research festivals in 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 kind, defies modern influences, and its centrality to socio-cultural and environmental protection remains unbroken. Symbolic Interactionism serves as the theoretical framework, and it is ethnographic in design. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews (with the king of Oba-Ile, three high chiefs, and ten other festival participants) and participant observation. The collected data were analysed using content analysis. The festival is crucial to the continuity, identity, and environmental protection in the Yorùbá cultural setting. The paper concludes that Indigenous performance needs reevaluation, as it continues to influence identity construction and social change despite modernity.

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

Introduction

Among most 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) describes it as "a transformative play that stimulates a dynamic relationship" (p.77). In Africa, festivals embody mythopoetic rituals that affirm people's stability, protect the environment, and foster social rejuvenation. As such, they are woven around "diverse beings and physical phenomena" (Beier, 1959). In intellectual discourse, festivals are constructed and viewed as traditions that constitute part of the people's worldview and are integral to their theatrical traditions (Adedeji, 1968; Finnegan, 1970; Ogunba, 1965; Soyinka, 1976). Thus, some African festival scholars argue that, because of its artistic impact, the festival reveals the ritual origin of drama in Africa.

However, long before African scholars submitted the festival mentioned above, the great philosopher Aristotle declared that tragedy, a genre of drama, grew out of the dithyramb, a song in worship of Dionysus (Macgowan & Melnitz, 1955). The worship embedded in the festivals is believed to be significant to the people's continuity. Hence, the festival signifies an epistemic site that connects people to their roots. It also

manifests their sociability and continuity. Therefore, it is a phenomenon that continues to attract scholarly attention to date. As deific folklore, Yorùbá festivals are periodically re-enacted with the belief that they connect the frontiers of the living and the dead. Many African and Africanist scholars have studied cultural festivals among the Yorùbá, including Beier, Ogunba, Adedeji, Drewal M.T., Drewal H.J., Pemberton, Babayemi, Barber, and Rea, among others. Nevertheless, this work aligns with 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 people's lives, expressing their belief that it can protect the environment and ensure continuity despite the new lifestyles and knowledge brought by 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, this paper takes as a guide the often-cited work on the ritual festival by the late Ogunba, regarded as the father of African drama festival and oral literature.

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, festivals among Africans are broad, all-encompassing carnivals that permeate Africans' life cycle. In it, different professionals, experts, and creative minds come together, bringing their ingenuity to the collective for criticism, pleasure, pedagogy, catharsis, and collective growth. Thus, the festival is a comprehensive celebration that encompasses diverse social and political activities that stimulate social reconstruction among Africans (Oyewo, 2019, p. 22). As a mass celebration, it brings together people with diverse ideologies, beliefs, and practices, even today. 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 relates to the experience of people when their lives take on full meaning together. Africa is largely an agrarian continent; hence, festivals often take place during or at the end of the rainy season. This is a unique and memorable time in the lives of African people. It is a time of great harvest, celebration, and collaboration.

The festival season among Africans, especially the Yorùbá, is marked by flourishing economic activities, especially the harvest of various farm produce. The harvests are taken to market for trade, and the money realised is used to purchase 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 the circulation of money possible for all.

Another important aspect of 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 the Yorùbá,

festive periods are known for the composition and performance of songs, praise poems, and various banter that assess the quality/unscrupulousness of past/present leaders in a bid to eulogize or denigrate 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 who 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 a double-edged 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 community's reigning ruler as a whole. Often, the ruler's name is not mentioned in the song, but then the whole community surely knows who the sarcasm addresses. The cited performance models therefore illustrate the likely banter 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).
Festival season is also a time of connection with Olodumare (Supreme Being), the deities, and the ancestors for guidance, prosperity, and 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 belief in 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 some other rare creatures are also accepted as imbued with extraterrestrial powers (Oladipo, 2022, p. 25). One example is *Obedu*, the focus of this paper. Consequently, Fadipe (1893-1944) argues that these so-called rare beings were known for strange accomplishments while alive, and the Yorùbá people believe that such beings must be placated for individuals or communities to prosper and live harmoniously. The community is compelled to seek their guidance and protection. Therefore, primordial divinities/rare beings are often referenced in stories of the creation of different Yorùbá groups and communities, a theme 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 another 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 still is. With this gesture, the community hopes to continue enjoying goodwill and protection from the creatures. Therefore, the festival expresses Yorùbá gratitude. Virtues which endorse appreciation are articulated in this saying: *yin ni yin ni keni se imi* (one good turn deserves another).

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

Methodology

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

Data for this study were collected through participant observation at several Obedu Festival celebrations from 2021 to 2025. This method fostered a thorough grasp of the festival's artistic and ritual dimensions, including music, dances, dramatic skits, drumming, masquerade performances, and communal camaraderie. Therefore, observing the *Obedu* festival up close made it possible to interpret the performative and symbolic gestures within the community's cultural and religious context. 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. Both structured and unstructured questions were used to elicit insights into the festival's meanings, history, and values. 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 with youths, artisans, business owners, and male and female participants to evaluate contemporary views on the festival. This method helped capture generational shifts in understanding, attitudes towards cultural continuity, and perceptions of social identity, as 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 festival's symbolic significance. Works of scholars such as Ogunba (1965), Adedeji (1968), Turner (1969), Barber (1991), Drewal and Drewal (1990), and Abimbola (2005) were particularly important in situating the *Obedu* Festival within broader Yorùbá festival traditions.

The choice of ethnography is justified because 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 *the Obedu Festival thrives primarily as an oral tradition*, 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 binds people together in making meaning. It foregrounds community voices 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 study's primary analytical principle. Symbolic Interactionism illustrates enduring human loyalty to shared symbols entrenched in society and deployed for social, economic, political, and religious development. George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) pioneered the theory, and his student, Herbert Blumer (1900-1987), later expanded it. Symbolic Interactionist theorists argue that a society's stability and continuity depend on the norms, values, and symbols entrenched and shared among its members. Symbols within a culture highlight how events, people, and other environmental features take on meaning (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 community's creation myths serves as an emblematic account that highlights 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 formalized 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 ensure continuity. Drawing on the positions of Symbolic Interactionist theorists, the 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 hermeneutics, articulated in ritual and festival dramas, accommodates legends and stories that sustain communal values, philosophies, 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 wit 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 describes 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 the 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, as he got set to shoot, "bang," a loud noise rang out, 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 the account states, after a long fight with no clear winner, 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 the stupendous powers in Obedu's possession prompted Oduyale to ask *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 divided the inheritance among themselves, believing Oduyale was dead. His siblings' uncharitable act enraged Oduyale, who later took the matter to *Obedu* for counsel. *Obedu* advised Oduyale to leave Ile-Ife for a new settlement, and Oduyale took the advice with philosophical equanimity. Oduyale knew this was the only way to avoid 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 that, in the modern day, lies in the northwest of Yorùbá land, in 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 further said that Obale eventually became Oba-Ile, the name by which the community is known today.

As gathered from oral sources, there was peace and tranquillity in the community until the people began to complain about the dreadful appearance 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 he knew in his heart that his people were 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 now known as Igbo-Obedu. While moving out, he promised Oduyale that he would continue to look after him and his community despite his people's treacherous attitude.

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, 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 to lead his people in a yearly fanfare and spectacle to

appease him; failure would be disastrous. Since no one wanted to 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 is now a sacred place (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 each year. Although nobody can ascertain why the placation takes place in October, successive kings, be they Christian or Muslim, appease Obedu in the company of a large number of townspeople and visitors each year. The present Oloba (king of Oba-Ile) declares:
The connection 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 in such a period, it will still hold, but on a very low key. All Yorùbá towns and communities have a cultural festival that serves as a medium for metaphysical communication with their forefathers. No king, no matter his educational or religious background, can discount the popular festival in his town or domain. Once you accept the throne of your ancestors, you have wholly accepted the town's traditions. Therefore, the king must participate fully, 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 lavish 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 affinities), with a large turnout. The opening ceremony takes place in the town hall. The hall is small and cannot accommodate many people. Thus, many people usually follow 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 rituals to appease 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

Iboade is an invocation and 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 move around due to the large crowd.



(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). Here, different performers present performances, skits, and mockeries. The king, the chiefs, and the public who are there to enjoy themselves take this time to interact and reminisce about past events. A strong sense of bonding develops 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 in light of modern beliefs and tastes (religion and education), the king quickly responded that tradition and modernity should not clash. 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. As this goes on, the public begins to gather. The general belief during the *Obedu* festival is that prayers, wishes, and desires are granted speedily. This period is the best time to make supplications to *Olodumare*. Therefore, participants take this moment to pray for success in their undertakings, for children, for work, for longevity, for good health, and for 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 signifies the imitation of the placatory items taken to Obedu in ancient times, offered 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. According to our informant, the two characters are not from any royal family because it is forbidden for any Oba-Ile indigene to see the *Obedu,* who is believed to resurface yearly during the festival, especially at the shrine located in the groove. Because of this, all other journey makers, including the king and his entourage, stop at the spot believed to be where the king met Obedu in ancient times. However, while at the groove, the Agboopa is believed to perform more rituals. When the *Agboopa* has finished all the bits and pieces of the purification rites, the return journey to the city begins.

On the return journey, the king wears a special crown made of beads. The crown is believed to be ancient, brought from Ile-Ife, the source of all the Yorùbá people. With this bearded crown, the king invokes the spirit of his forefathers to ensure a prosperous reign. 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 clearly demonstrates and reminds the community of the past, informs the present, and reinforces continuity. The *Obedu* festival illustrates the ordeal of an eponymous hero. This hero (*Obedu*) is regarded and treated as a god in Oba-Ile today. For the people of Oba-Ile, Obedu oversees their welfare from the chthonic realm. In the Yorùbá conception of the cosmos, 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, joining the living (Awolalu, 1970). This is why the Yorùbá have names such as Iyabode, Babatunde, Yejide, and Babajide, among others. For the Yorùbá, there is always a replacement (easy passage) of people, especially when the dead are well venerated. Hence, the yearly veneration of Obedu is meant 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 center 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, in Myth Literature and the African World (1976), Soyinka sees man as the harmonizer of all forces "physical, social, and psychic" (p.2) that challenge his environment. Thus, the living direct the cosmic

apprehension of the myth that connects the other two realms. This is what takes place in the *Obedu* festival, a festival dedicated to the worship and celebration of an ancestor, 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; 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 prehistoric times, as shown in their myth of creation, were not *Omoluabi;* rather, they were treacherous, which is why the calamity befalls them.

Didacticism in the Obedu Festival

Whenever the *Obedu* festival is reenacted, it is, on one hand, a reminder of the forefathers' misfortune. On the other hand, it constantly reminds people that the Omoluabi attitude is best. Hence, the festival is a deliberate performance to discourage people from embodying bad characters. The *Obedu* festival, with all the elements of total theatre (costumes, make-up, props, and various characters), thus presents a social drama of purification and reconciliation. Consequently, Ogunba's definition of the festival in Africa, as detailed 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 basis and source of 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 is abundant banter, elation, theatricality, and spirituality. Above all, the social differences among the diverse attendees 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 the Oba-Ile people, all respondents express the view that the Obedu festival signifies the constant remembrance of their connection with their ancestors, facilitating continuity and social development. This view was shared even by the educated. It thus clearly shows why the placation endures to this day. The presence of a large crowd, despite new beliefs and new ways of living, validates people's belief in tradition.

The researchers observed no fewer than 8 (eight) Obedu festivals, and the respondents' views continue to align 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 has borrowed from modernity to enrich itself. As with the introduction of customized T-shirts, a tradition taken from carnivals imported from Brazilian festive styles, this is well observable at all the Obedu festivals the essayists witnessed. With this kind of innovation, the festival becomes appealing to youth and even some

older adults. This keeps the tradition alive; it becomes an open jamboree without erasing its spiritual meaning.

Conclusion

The Yorùbá cosmology is the result of 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 pursued through collective supplication to Olodumare (the Supreme God), the deities, and the Oniles (progenitors) for self-actualization 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 that 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 ancestors' benevolence (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 relationship between supernaturalism and naturalism. This paper articulates the *Obedu* festival of the Oba-Ile community as a periodic reminder of their past, so that the same mistakes their ancestors committed will not be repeated. By keeping this constantly in their consciousness, they strengthen social continuity and ensure prosperity. This, therefore, ensures that the Yorùbá belief, enshrined in the cyclic structure of its universe, endures despite new lifestyles (education, religion, and new culture). Moreover, all Yorùbá sub-group have their eponymous hero who oversees their affairs from beyond. These heroes are often mollified, mindful of new culture and religious convictions.

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