



EGUNGUN FESTIVAL AND ITS THEATRICAL ELEMENTS IN ILO-IJESHA AS KEY TO CULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY IN OSUN STATE.

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Abstract

The Yoruba traditions stand out in Nigeria as the most respected culture. Much work has been carried out on tradition at festivals. Still, sufficient attention has not been given to the Egungun Festival in the Amusigbo area in Ile-Ijesha of Osun State. This study explores the cultural value and significance of the Egungun festival as a major event in Ilo-Ijesha, which has sustained the community's cultural heritage and helped foster a strong bond among the people. This Study relies on fieldwork to authenticate the relevance of the festival to the sustainability of cultural values, through oral interviews with some of the worshippers. It is also based on a sociological approach, which deals with the culture of the Ilo-Ijesha community. Findings reveal that this festival not only strengthens the bond among the people, but it also indicates that Ilo-Ijesha people did not allow modernization and foreign religion to eradicate the cultural values and identities of the land, because it is being observed every year and their children at home and those in diaspora come home to celebrate the festival. The observation method was adopted as the primary source, while existing and relevant literature books were used as a secondary source. This study concludes that the Egungun festival in Ilo-Ijesha stands out as a key or major festival in Ilo-Ijesha and its environment, with the theatrical elements it has helped to sustain the cultural heritage and honour of the land. This study recommends that adequate and proper attention should be given to the festival by the government in order to give it wider publicity so that even tourists from other countries can make the place a viable tourist centre and the event something to look forward to.

Keyword: Egungun, Festival, Cultural Sustainability, Yoruba land

Introduction

Ilo-ijesha is a single community by administrative definition, but it is composed of several communities. Until 1921, it was six separate settlements: Ilo, Ijesha, Ibokun, Ilowa, Iponda, Ajibode, and Ajowa. Ilo-ijesha is located in the Northern part of Osun state and is one of the major towns in Obokun local government area. Each of the settlements is to varying degrees autonomous with its own political organization. Ajaraibolu (The King) is at the center. These are the people who salute themselves mutually with the short acronym AO. They share so many other traits, such as dialects, age grade system, and traditional festivals, like most Yoruba towns. Ilo-Ijesha has various settlements that come from various sources in search of safety against external attacks and with prospects in coming together to form a larger town. This was particularly so in the 19th century, when inter-tribal war and slavery distorted their peace and settlements. It was what led the settlements of Iro-Adin,



Isewa, Obalufon, Olofin, Owaani, and Amusigbo to have a meeting ground at Oke-Ojain in the 19th century, and to consolidate later into the town Ilo-Ijesha early in the 20th century. The six communities were known to have existed in the various settlements before this time. The colonial administrators encouraged various settlements around Ilo-Ijesha, like several towns of western Nigeria, to come together and form a new unit. The new town created from this merger was called Ilo-Ijesha, retaining the name of the old metropolis after the merger; all the communities retain their individual identities to date.

Conceptual Framework

Many studies on festivals have concentrated on Oyo-speaking areas of Yoruba land, while Egungun festivals in Ilo-Ijesha have not been delved into. This study penetrates the Egungun festival of the Ilo-Ijeshato to bring out the theatrical elements that make the festival unique and that have made the cultural sustainability of the event possible. The Theatrical elements make the event outstanding and make the audience see it from a different perspective psychologically on their emotions, motivate aesthetics and get the audience to witness the trajectory of a person or community other than their own.

Theatrical in its real sense stands for having qualities of suggesting a stage play or of an action performance that is deliberately or exaggeratedly dramatic or emotional. Hence, elements of the Egungun festival are the clothes (most red, believed to have spiritual powers to revive the dead). The costumes are made of many kinds of fabrics, both logically woven and bought and also metal, beads, leather, bones and potent empowering material are visible elements used. The appearance of the Egungun Masquerade is accompanied by activities such as dancing, singing, drumming, celebration and loud chores that sink into the atmosphere to paint the day colourful.

It is also imperative to embark on the conceptual framework of culture. Culture has it has been observed to be a universal phenomenon which transverse societies, the world over. This explains why there is no universal definition of the term. The 1988 cultural Policy for Nigeria defines Culture as the totality of the ways of life evolved by a people in their attempt to meet the challenges in their environment, which gives order and meaning to their social, political, economic, aesthetics and religious norms and modes of organization, thus distinguishing them from their neighbors (Cultural Policy for Nigeria 1988)

Edward B. Tylor also in Omohan (2014) a representative of Cultural evolutionism, claimed that culture is related to universal human capacity in his primitive Culture', he says, it is a complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society (Omohan 2014: 121-140). Kluchkon and Kelly in Oluwadare submit that culture is all those historically created designs for living, explicit, implicit, rational, and non-rational, which exist at any given time as potential guides for the behaviour of men (Oluwadare 2004:15). Lutan in Oluwadare also defines culture as the sub-total of knowledge, attitudes and habitual behavioral Patterns shared and transmitted by members of a particular Society. The main thrust of the above argument on culture is that it evolves as a result of man's ability to think and to make things work within his environment. There is also the need to take a cursory look at a festival, the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary defines a festival as a series of performances of music, plays, films, or movies, usually organized in the same place once in a year. It is also a public event connected with activities and ideas. Duruaku defines cultural festival as that group activity which springs from the people; for culture is commonly sourced from the people and it is original to them; learned from forebears and transmitted; accumulating and accumulated. It may become



modified with time, but it does not lose its base wellspring of the people, the common experience that binds them closely. (Duruaku 2011).

Yerima Posits that the festival involved the past of the different Nigerian communities. It is usually an accumulation of shared experiences or practices that have had a significant impact on the lives, and the very colourful activities such as dances, parade of masquerades, regattas, dubar displays, wrestling matches and other Cultural displays. He also pointed out that festivals are a series of performances of music, plays, films, movies, etc usually organized in the same place once a year, a day, or a period of the year when people stop working to celebrate a special event, often a religious one.

It is important to note that the Yoruba culture had its traditional take off with Egungun culture, whose functional objective is divided into different parts: ancestral protection, theatrical performance, promoting family or societal cultural aesthetic and as a medium of Cultural preservation. The colourful exhibit and fancy dress of an Egungun in Yoruba land was born out of its core genesis of cultural flamboyancy that best describes the beauty of culture, tradition and heritage. Its bold and fearful outlook creates a persona of god/ancestors on earth. However, no matter how conical and fun looking Egungun is, one needs to understand the powerful spiritual, cultural relevance and strength they possess, thus making the supernatural being in their own right.

In Yoruba land, this state of relevance earns them the appellation. “Ara Orunkinkin” meaning “Members of the celestial order”. Women do not dare to go around or stand in front of the Egungun, but their chants and songs are essential to the melodramatic success of the festival. Also, there is technically an Egungun for every age grade association and cultural professional in Yoruba land. Egungun, such as “Geeede,” which is a flamboyant and fashionable masquerade celebrant, the very core of African womanhood, advocates for female gender equality and protects the rights of women, although men commonly wear the headdress.

History of Egungun

Egungun is a cultural festival used to strengthen the bond of brotherhood within a family or nation, among the living and between the dead and the dead. It is a season of love expressed through colorful outings, music, dance and general merrymaking; it is also a period of interment, atonement of sins and the glorification or remembrance of ancestors. It is again an instrument of peace, social cohesion and enforcement of law and order. However, research has shown that the history of Egungun can be traced to Alaafin Sango's dynasty of the Old Oyo Kingdom. On ascending the throne as Alaafin of Oyo, Sango requested that the remains of his dead father, Oranmiyan, who was long buried in Ile-Ife, be brought for a re-interment at Oyo. The news from Ile-Ife that Oranmiyan has metamorphosed into a stone staff which cannot be released did not debar Sango's desire to communicate with the spiritual world through his father. He therefore prepared a re-incarnated spirit costumed as a masquerade and consequently called him 'Baba,' meaning father. This, therefore, spread like wildfire to all the nooks and crannies of Yoruba land in Nigeria and beyond.

Egungun Festival in Ilo-Ijesha

In Ilo-ijeisha, Egungun are the material representatives of ancestral spirits, but at the same time, Egungun are human beings who put on specially created costumes called "Ago or Eku", endowed with the spiritual power of the ancestors they represent. Those clothes cover the human form completely so that no part of the wearer is visible. The individual wearing Egungun dress (ago) does not become an ancestor, but the ancestors make use of the living essence of these carriers to return to the world. Egungun is the designated spirit of the deceased, making a temporary reappearance on the earth (Yerima 2012: 195). The living have an obligation to summon the ancestral spirits from time to time to enable them to taste the pleasure of the world, to relive their past adventures, to inspect the



community to ensure that things are as they left them and to see that they are still feared and respected. As well as representing the ancestors, however, the appearance.

The Character of the Egungun Ilo-ijesha varies. As representative of the ancestors, they exhibit the Characteristics of those they represent; some of them are known for their special concern with child care. Others are known for their strength and some are for the aesthetics of their dance and performance. This reflects in their Oriki, thus "Omoelegun ire, Ejeeroyule (child of the owner of a good masquerade that does not permit people to go home). Some Egungun represent specific ancestral individuals, while others represent collective ancestral power. Those who represent collective power seemed to have been summoned on specific occasions to deal with issues. Names of Ilo-ijesha Egungun Ilo-ijesha are Aloro, Okeripe, Iru erue, Alemosoko, Ujogbo and Iguleauin of Egungun in Ilo-ijesha were also a source of power and expression of it.

During the appearance of Egungun in Ilo-ijesha, the oriki of various ancestors were chanted to show that they are remembered, to please them and help them relive their past adventures. As the Egungun hear their "oriki," they will dance to demonstrate their pleasure. It is during this period that people of Ilo-ijesha approach them to strike a bargain with them, promising to do certain things if the Egungun will help them in the same way to achieve some objectives, like giving them children or to prevent the occurrence of a misfortune, like untimely death in the family that had been foreseen for them. Some also give out presents in cash to the Egungun.

Igwule Masquerade in Ilo-Ijesha

It is a festival which comes up between January and February every year. It was brought from another place into the Ilo-ijesha culture; it lasts for nine days. Ajedon, the chief priest, is the sole authority. As far as the festival is concerned, he does not need to consult anybody before announcing the day of the festival. On the last day of the Ujogbo festival, the chief priest will send a message to Afieeke and Ojebemi families to announce the day of the festival. Each family turn will go to Adoro's house with a keg of palm wine, with a leaf tied around the neck of the keg. The palm wine is called "Oyonesinsinko bale," meaning "the palm wine that was tapped overnight that flies have not touched". The two families will travel to the grove, where Ojebemi will wait, leaving Adoro and the two sons to perform the necessary rituals at the shrine; after the rituals, the priest will meet the two families, after which they will go to announce to the public that the Igwule festival will commence in nine days.

During the period of the festival, the celebrants are forbidden to go to the farm. The two masquerades are clad in palm leaves, white clothes and a net to cover their faces. On getting to the town, Adoro will remind and warn that nobody should beat drums, strike gongs, use abusive words, or fight throughout the period of the festival. On the legs of the masquerade, they tie ibere on their ankles, different types of feathers are arranged on their heads and they will hold long canes. They will pay homage to the ancestors at specific places and run around the town.

- Chanting: "huhuwiri hi hi
- Abimolemo o, aromoponpono
- Asonisumodun o, anenesare o
- Hu huwiri hi hi
- (People will multiply by year, as we do this year, we shall do next year and year to come)
- The woman will be chanting Oriki in praise of the masquerade, saying:
- Omoleisoro
- Yajijoodun o
- Eniyi login mo, run yi



- Olofin se
- Siluromimo o

(Owner of Esisoro (masquerades) comes and dances. Anyone who does not come to Ilo-ijesha cannot know what Ilo-ijesha is doing (the land that cannot be moved)

These will be done around the town with Adoro holding a goat called Ebu u pe (festival goat). This will be done repeatedly for nine days; those who made vows will pay their vows and elders will pay homage to their ancestors. When they get to the marketplace, everybody will depart for their houses, except Adoro, who will go to the grove that night to perform a sacrifice at the shrine. It is believed that if the sacrifice is not offered that night, the spirit of the ancestors will not leave that community.

Theatrical Elements in the Egungun Festival in Ilo-Ijesha.

The Egungun festival in Ilo-Ijesha has a lot of theatrical elements in it, which add beauty and glamour to the whole festival, some of which are:

- i. Scenery
- ii. Costume
- iii. Props
- iv. Sounds/ music
- v. Light
- vi. Dance
- vii. Drama

Scenery

The scenery in this festival was a stage set for the movement of the Egungun from the groove to the street. He dances from there to the marketplace, the scenery around the town and the groove gives a vibe that adds colour to the festival. This is theatrical in the sense that if it were to be the stage, all these would have been added through painting and the likes

Costume

The costume consisted of disparate fabrics that were locally woven, with metals, beads, leathers, bones, potent materials and masks. Actually, there are two major masquerades among the masquerades that came out during the festival, the Ela and Apomon. Ela is dressed in woven leaves, white clothes and a mask to cover his face. He uses common canwood to paint his legs while Apomon dresses in white clothes, a red cap and nets to cover his face; other dancers were completely covered with layers upon layers of clothes. One can also tell the age of the masquerade by the clothes he wears.

Props

One of the props in this festival is Canes (Atori). This Cane is used to beat people; sometimes, they use it to beat themselves. Ela holds sticks and canes (Atori) in his hands. This stick is what he will throw at anybody who looks at his face, and the person will shake to death. He also carries fire in his hand. Other masquerades, which are the four Esisoro masquerades, also hold a cane in their hands. After they have paid homage to their ancestors in the marketplace, they use their canes to sweep the ground. This symbolizes the sweeping away of diseases, death, calamities and any form of evil from the village.

Sound and Music

It is anything that the audience can hear, such as sound effects, music, noise, etc. This sound in egungun festival makes the festival more interesting. The sound is made whenever the egungun wants



to pay homage to their ancestors or when they want to sing the praise of the ancestors. Women also chant Oriki to praise the masquerades, and they sing songs to make the festival livelier.

Light

During the festival, whenever the egungun want to come out of the shrine, a local lantern is used to light fire around the groove, which means there will not be darkness in anybody's life throughout the year and beyond

Dance

It is a very interesting theatrical aspect of the event, though most of the dances are not choreographed, but it is synchronized with the songs and they do it with all joy in their heart. The masquerades dance from the groove to the town to the marketplace and the women sing and dance to the music, though they are not allowed to be very close to the masquerades.

Drama

Either rehearsed or not, every aspect of the festival is dramatic, the chant, the invocation of the spirit of the ancestors, the ritual is all done dramatically, counting beats with synchronized movements, which are also done in the theatre. This shows that what is done in real life is re-enacted on stage.

Theatrical elements help a lot during the Egungun festival in Ilo-Ijesha; it makes the festival complete, it shows the basic idea of a good festival, in fact, it gives the idea of how and what a festival should look like. And more so, it shows that there are similarities between what happens in festivals and what happens on stage in the theatre.

Significance of Egungun Festival in Ilo-Ijesha as Key to Cultural Sustainability

The Significance of the Egungun festival in ilo-ijesha has been tremendous in that It lies in relating yesterday to today and tomorrow by bringing the past into the present (ogundeji 2014:28). Yoruba people believes in the active existence of the spirit of the dead ancestors which was obvious in the Egungun festival in Ilo-ijesha, they pay homage in form of festival which stands as the magnetic force that draws them nearer to their gods through worship. Egungun are seen to be god's mouthpiece on earth. It was instituted first and foremost to honour their ancestors. This is a means of keeping their memory alive as spirit beings and making them participate in the affairs of the living.

This culture had been sustained over the years because they believe that Egungun is an ancestral spirit that the descendants harness spiritual power to purify and cleanse the town and its inhabitants of malevolent forces. They see them as the source of answers to all their problems. The role of Egungun in ilo---ijesha is very important, they use Egungun to serve the community in a large number of contexts, it serves as a judicial function and keep moral order in time past, this is because they believe that moral order helps them to work out and know among themselves, what is good and evil, right and wrong, truthful and false (Aremu 2012:286). Egungun festival functions more on a communal rather than an individual basis. It is celebrated by a group of family, relatives, or town, or by those engaged in a common belief, thus bringing people together as a group, strengthening their cultural values, unity and cohesion.

Civilization and religion have brought changes in worship and belief systems in modern society; yet ilo---ijesha people, to a large extent, did not allow modernization and foreign religion to eradicate their cultural values and identity. The festival is done every year, their children at home and in Diaspora do come home to celebrate the Egungun festival. The sustainability of the festival has fostered peace, unity and rapid development in the town. The festival also sweeps evil occurrences



away from the town; it serves as a means of honouring the dead, showcasing the place of their ancestors among them. It assures them of the protection of their ancestors on their land.

Conclusion

This research has revealed findings that despite the advent of modern religion is pitching its tent against the sustainability of our culture and traditions in Ilo-ijesha community has maintain a strong stand for sustainability of their cultural values and if the government and media houses can help in advocating on social media for a revival of our cultural values, ethics and traditions, there is hope that there will be improvement in preserving our cultures, festivals, and traditions

Recommendations

1. The songs and chants of the Egungun festival in Ilo-ijesha should be properly documented and preserved by the elders and researchers in the field of oral literature so that they will be passed to the forthcoming generations.
2. The government should get involved in supporting festivals.
3. Egungun festival should not be stripped from our societies, especially in Yoruba land.
4. Books on traditions and festivals should be supplied to the libraries in primary and secondary schools, and also, history should be properly and adequately taught in our tertiary institutions.

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