

Chapter Thirteen

AGBO OLODE: THE HISTORY AND PHENOMINOLOGY OF A RELIGIOUS FESTIVAL AND FERTILITY DEITY OF OGIDI - IJUMU IN KOGI STATE

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Executive Summary

This chapter discusses the Agbo festival among the people of Ogidi-Ijumu within the context of egungun, and the phenomenology of this festival which is a fertility deity as the hub and identity of the traditional religion of the people. It is a discussion of the history of the religion of a people through the descriptive approach.

Keywords: Agbo Olode, Fertility Deity, Ogidi-Ijumu, Kogi State, Egungun, Religious Festival

Introduction

Belief in the numinous, life in the hereafter, the continuous relationship between the living and the dead especially through Egungun, and the celebration of annual festivals is very central to Yoruba traditional religion. While Egungun is the visible feature of the dead visiting the living, the festivals serve as the means of perpetuation of memories, the reenactment, and revitalisation of significant events and personalities of heroic status and places. It is on this note that this chapter discusses the

Agbo festival among the people of Ogidi-Ijumu within the context of egungun, and the phenomenology of this festival which is a fertility deity as the hub and identity of the traditional religion of the people. It is a discussion of the history of the religion of a people through the descriptive approach.

The Concept of Egungun among the Yoruba

The name “Egungun” means masquerade. These are ‘masked men who represent the spirits of the living dead, or who are seen as the reincarnated spirits costumed as masquerades.’¹ Egungun are believed to be ancestors.

Traditionally among the Yoruba generally, and the Okun Yoruba in particular, there are variety of ways for the living to keep in touch with the dead (ancestors). The Okun-Yoruba of Kogi State to which Ogidi Ijumu is a component believe that the deceased can be seen in dreams, or trances, and that they impact information or explanations, or give instructions, on any matter when the family is in a serious predicament. They can also send messages through other persons or through certain cults.²

S. O. Babayemi, a Yoruba drummer and scholar, explains that the spirits of ancestors, who “ensure the well-being, prosperity, and productivity of the whole community” can be “invoked” collectively and individually in time of need. The place of call is usually either on the graves of the ancestors (Ojuorori), the family shrine (Ile’fun), or the community grove (Igbale). They can also visit physically in the form of the Egungun.³ The impression is that the deceased is making a temporary re-appearance on earth in the form of a masked individual. Thus, “it is absolutely essential that not a single particle of the human form should be visible; for, if this is broken, the man wearing the dress must die (presumably as an impostor), and every woman present must likewise die.”⁴

While these policies have changed since British colonization, there is still great respect for the mysterious Egungun. Only authorized persons can come close. Generally, the costumes of Egungun consist of varied colours, horns, cowries, shells, and skulls of animals, skins of wild animals, feathers of mysterious birds, among other things.⁵ Among the Okun Yoruba, the costumes of the Egungun vary greatly from locality to locality and even from town to town. Some Egungun cover themselves with dry banana leaves and palm fronds like the Agbo of Ogidi and Ekirin Ade of Ijumu L.G.A, while others are concealed under an elaborate costume of the cloth like the Uro, Obebeyewu, Ogbin, e.t.c, celebrated all over Okunland. The masks they wear may be carved with woods like the Epa of Iya-Gbedde-Ijumu, some are made of other magical and medicinal elements such as black soap, and the red tail of a parrot (ikoede) may be attached to the costume or composed of objects such as antlers, skulls, feathers, e.t.c. Some are covered with clothes instead of masks. This is often combined with a long train of fabric that trails behind the Egungun, the longer and elaborate the train, the wealthier the family. To complete the illusion, the Egungun must also disguise his voice, which is often disguised in a low fumble or high falsetto, or a piping, treble voice.⁶

There are numerous Yoruba myths that explain the origin of these masked spirits. One of such myths says that when a man dies, he joins his ancestors to become an Egungun. Since his body is covered from head to toe for burial, the Egungun comes back to earth completely covered. Another myth tells the story of a king who was not properly buried when he died. His three sons had no money for a proper burial. The first son saw his father's corpse and fled. The second dressed the corpse up only to leave it behind. The third, after trying to sell the body in the market

(for medicine), finally abandoned it in the bush.⁷ Many years later when the eldest son had become king, his wife could not have any children. They consulted a diviner and came to the same conclusion that he was being punished for not burying his father. To add to his trouble, his wife was raped by a gorilla, and she ran away pregnant and ashamed. She gave birth to a child that had both human and money parts and abandoned him in the bush. She eventually returned and told the king the story. He went to consult a diviner who revealed that the child did not die in the bush and that it would grow up to be Amuludun (Literally 'one who brings sweetness to the community'). Then, the diviner advised the king to return to the place of his father's unfinished burial and perform the proper rites.⁸ These are but few of the many stories that explain the origin of the Egungun.⁹

Each Egungun may represent a particular person in a family lineage, or a broader concept of the ancestors. When contacted at a family shrine, the Egungun who appears is generally thought to represent the ancestor who is being summoned. Some Egungun always appear as young children (Egun Olomo). Though Egungun are known to emerge at any time of the day or night, they are always certain to be present at the annual Egungun festival. These festivals last seven, fourteen, seventeen or twenty-one days and their date is set by a diviner. During the festival, it is believed that the spirits of the Egungun come down from the heavens (as Araorun – visitor from heaven) to fellowship with their relatives on earth.

Geographical location of Ogidi

Ogidi is one of the ancient towns in North east Yorubaland¹⁰ and it is a major town in the present Ijumu Local Government Area of Kogi State. The town lies on latitude 5° North of the Equator and longitude 7° East of the Greenwich Meridian. It shares boundary with Kabba to the Northeast, Iyara to the North-west,

Ogale to the South-east and Ayere to the Southwest. Judging from the 1963 census, the population of Ogidi was put at 15,000. Ogidi is about four kilometers in length and one kilometer in breadth. It is about twelve kilometers from Kabba the headquarters of Kabba-Bunu Local Government Area of Kogi State. A road cuts across the town formerly regarded as “*Titi Ijoba or titi Awolowo*”, as an express way but is now a trunk C road and in bad condition. There are other roads which link Ogidi town with other places like Iyara, Ogale and Gbeleko. They are especially used on market days.¹¹

Furthermore, Ogidi is the valley town enclosed by high hills and mountains with occasional breaks in North-south and South-east, which serve as entrance and exit for the town. The rocks are granite which are useful for building of houses and road constructions.¹² The town has important river, Ohe/Ose, which takes its source from Bunu and flows through the town into the Atlantic Ocean. Another important River is Opaku, while the rivulets include Ojawiri, Apami Oso, and Apami Agbo. The town has an evenly distributed rainfall throughout the year, and this stretches from April to October and dry season is experienced from November until March. The climate is thus favourable and hence the large production of both food and cash crops.¹³

The Origin of Egungun in Ogidi-Ijumu

Traditional religion called Oro has always been the central religion of the people of Ogidi, although now it is waning with the advent of Christianity and Islam. Oro is expressed through the worship of the gods, especially, the gods of the mountains which are called Eborá. Hence, almost every year round, there are various festivals celebrated in the worship of these gods. The various gods are held in high esteem and of great reverence.

These gods are believed to serve as intermediary between the people and the Supreme Being who cannot be approached directly. The origin of these traditional worship is unknown but can be historically traced back to their founders who were believed to have come from the cradle of the Yoruba, which is Ile-Ife.¹⁴

Ogidi as a people and town is made up of various clans with her own Eboradeity to which they are devoted. Some of these are Olu-Iwo in Ilaere, Omo-Olunka in Okoro, Ayi in Ile-Oko, Agira in Igah; and Agbo festival which is the most popular, and for the whole town. The real worship of the clan deities is opened only to adult males of the society, while the women folk are kept off from participation. Some aspects of the festivals are opened, especially that of Agbo. In the parlance of oro, there are six different types of Oro or Egungun in Ogidi-Ijumu most of which have gone into extinction. The Egungun of Ogidi include Uro Odun, Itoga, the clothed masquerade that comes out and stays on the mountain, dances with only one leg, on the mountain that is heavily rubbed with ori (shea butter), and it is with the one leg that it descends and ascends the mountain while dancing; there is the oro Amuluwo (the one that comes out from the cave and agbo masquerades). In Ogidi, outside agbo festival, there are many masquerades that feature during burial ceremonies of great men, chiefs and powerful traditional worshippers. The following are mentioned here among others: Uro, Obebeyewu, Egungboro, Ogbin. Egun Oloye or Egun Aminu, which was imported by Aminu in the sixties to entertain children and as a means of sustenance.¹⁵

The Origin of Agbo Festival in Ogidi

This festival started long ago at Igbo-Eko, one of the 28 settlements that make up Ogidi, by a seemingly insane man, called Agbo, probably a shortened form of Agboola, who came

from Alu (Yagba land) to Ogidi, and was a great diviner. He was regarded as an insane man by the villagers. This was because he had no job, but rather danced round the town in dry banana leaves and palm fronds or Iko leaves, with whips in his hands, the predecessor of agbo masquerade, whilst going round in people's houses to collect whatever they could afford for him. He usually did this once every year. He would sing melodious and inspiring songs for about seven days and nights. This he continued for years but the villagers were indifferent to him and attached no significance to his activities.

There came a time when the village head was a sad man with lots of domestic problems. He had no child even after taking the sixth wife. He then consulted Ifa oracle to find the reasons and solutions to his misfortune. The divination gave him a rather shocking revelation when he was told of the man who used to come yearly and behave like a mad man; this "mad man", the diviner said, was a spirit and he and his household needed to join this man while he danced round the town to enable him (the village head) bear children.

The village head did this with faith and before the following festival, three of his wives conceived. This pleased him so much that he sent messages round the village ordering all his subjects to join the next festival. The following festival was full of pomp and pageantry as everybody danced round with Agbo. Just as the case of the king, many barren women were blessed with children. Hence, the worship spread throughout the 28 settlements, and was perpetuated and is still in practice today. This is done in remembrance of Agbo, who could be regarded as "god of children, prosperity and increase in farm output".¹⁶ Furthermore, the Agbo festival started at Igbo Eko. This makes the Agbo singers regard 'Eko' as the oldest of the settlements in

Ogidi.¹⁷ Through the seniority Eko is strongly disputed by the majority of the people of Ogidi.

The Identity Function of Agbo Festival in Ogidi

The Agbo festival is held annually by the people of Ogidi/Ijumu. This is not to say that the festival is exclusive to the people of Ogidi. According to M. O. Andi, "there is an Agbo festival in Agbowa among the Ijebus. The festival here differs in all aspects when compared to the one in Ogidi. The people make use of different kinds of costumes, songs, dance, rituals and they have a different kind of audience."¹⁸ While the Agbo in Ijebu is costumed with clothes, that of Ogidi is costumed with Banana leaves and Iko leaves blade. It has been noted that "the Agbo festival that has similar characteristics with that of the Ogidi people are those at IyahGbedde and Egbeda-Egga, both from Ijumu land". However, the type of Agbo festival in Iyah-Gbedde is an age-long tradition. This is because such a festival has ceased to exist. At Egbeda-Egga, there is a festival similar to Agbo in Ogidi, but there are marked differences in the two. The people of Egbeda-Egga have similar songs to those in Ogidi, but they normally accompany their songs with beating of bells. This is not the case in Ogidi, where there is no beating of bells to accompany songs. It is also worth noting that the Agbo festival of Egbeda-Egga no longer exists."¹⁹ One can therefore add that the Agbo festival is very central to the people of Ogidi within Ijumu Local Government Area of Kogi State.



Fig. 6.1. Agbo olode in sitting position

The Celebration of Agbo Festival in Ogidi

Agbo festival is the most symbolic of all the festivals in the lives of the indigenes of Ogidi community. The Agbo festival used to be in stages and part of it used to be wrapped in secrecy since Agbo is an egungun, and is seen as coming from another planet. The secrecy is in the details of the religious observance and rituals associated with Agbo festival, since that is the exclusive preserve of the Agbo worshippers. As the worshippers are diminishing as a result of Christianity and Islam, some of the religious observances are thrown out of the festival.

The secret aspects of the festival which are carefully guarded in secrecy by the Oloros (traditionalists) and can be related to researches include the following stages. The first stage is as follows:

- i. **Ifa dida** - divination
- ii. **Igbin fifun** - discovering of snail at the market square
- iii. **Ato wiwo** - gazing at Ato
- iv. **Oja rire** – sacrifice and the gathering of food items from the market.

The second stage is the one which affects everyone in the society, which can be called the main stages of the festival and still remain as:

- i. Ogba outing
- ii. Agbo in town
- iii. Egun Oru
- iv. Ighere moonlight masquerade²⁰

The ecological significance or spirituality of the costume of Agbo Olode: Agbo Olode is dressed on the body with heavy layers of dry banana leaves, overlaid with fresh Iko leave blades, while the masking of the masquerader is done with the use of broom stick.

Among the Yoruba generally Banana tree signifies fertility, continuity and prosperity. The Yoruba potent saying that says: Ara Kogbudo nimi, Ara Kogbudo nimi, emi kogbudo rinira, Iran Ogede kii sun kun atije, ara kogbudo nimio, meaning life must be easy with me, Banana does not find it difficult to shoot out a scion, so I must be fertile. This conveys and justifies the costume of Agbo as a fertility god. More so, this costume is easily gotten in the locality, with Ogidi being located in the forest region of Ijumu land.

The Iko blade leaves is a plant that spring up in the swampy areas when the raining season is gradually winding up in the late September into October. It lives in its greenish luster throughout the dry season while other plants have withered. Its presence as

part of the costume of Agbo portrays freshness, beauty, wellbeing and prosperity. The bunch of broom is purely for the concealment of the masquerader and for visibility. Brooms are common things in forested environment where there are so many palm trees.

The Agbo Festival: period, preparation and celebration Period:

Oro is the traditional relationship of the people with the numinous, and Agbo is very central to it. The head of the religious system of the people is Aworo (chief priest), an office held in perpetuity by the Ilounkon lineage. While Oro is celebrated by the whole community, it is handled principally by Ilounkon and Itaji lineages in conjunction with Olori Uro (head of Uro cult/masquerade). While Ilounkon holds the office of Aworo, Itaji is regarded as Oya Oluwo (Oluwo's wife). According to the chief priest of Ogidi, Oro begins when Itaji goes to inform Ilounkon that Oluwo deity says Oro should commence. It is after this that, Aworo, Itaji emissary and Olori uro (head of uro) will consult Ifa about Oro for that year. This consultation takes place at the house of Olori Uro. Having decided the date for the commencement of oro, Aworo will send Atorin (very long whip) to the three quarters of Otun, Ohi and Ona, informing them that Oro will commence.

Oral sources state that "the entire period of Oro is seen as sacred such that brawling and asaults are strictly forbidden during the festival. Crying is banned when eborā (the deity) comes out at night. Defaulters are heavily sanctioned and they must pay '1 pence, 2 shillings', to the chief priest. While those who assault Sasu or Ape during oro are fined '2 pences, 2 shillings' and a black goat, payable to the chief priest".

Agbo festival is always carefully planned, performed and directed by the principal officers of Oloro, who are the aworo,

olori uro and members (the worshippers). It spans over a fairly long period of time of about three months, starting from September, which is the preparatory period, and ending in November. The period witnesses many traditional activities and different masquerades beautifully and heavily dressed in fresh iko leaves blade and dry banana leaves. The very many Agbo Olodes (masquerades) give the town a general atmosphere of beauty and excitement.

Preparation: Preparation for oro has several steps

Ifa dida – Consultation of Ifa divination: Every year before the festival, the worshippers led by the aworo (chief priest) will go and consult Ifa Oracle in order to ask for the feasibility, and success of that year's festival. Also, the divination is done to determine the future relevance of the festival. The divination exercise takes place thrice in the house of the orori uro. Since the oba is a member of uro cult, he also will be duly informed, or even be a part of the exercise. If the oba is not an initiate of uro cult (a thing that was not possible in the pre-Christian era), he will still be informed. The first two divination exercises are not done to the hearing of the public. The third one, which is the final, is for the generality of the people. However, their attendance is not needed in the house of Olori uro where previous consultation exercise is performed.

An Ifa priest, who is the chief diviner, uses four pieces of kola nuts as divination objects. In this exercise, the Ifa priest loses his individuality as an ordinary man in the society. The Ifa priest assumes a super human personality. He starts the divination exercise by singing the praise names of Ifa. Then, he holds the kolanuts in his hands for those present to touch. This, in some way, registers their support and acceptance of whatever he tells them as a statement from the gods. One needs to add at this juncture, that, audience participation is minimal. Divination is

held by Aworo, Olori uro, and a male representative of Itaji lineage. No external audience is allowed to watch or listen to the proceedings of the divination exercise. The Ifa then makes salutation to the gods:

*Oluwa mi, o sewa
Ododunkar'orogbo
Ododunkar'awusa
Ododun ka r'omo obi lori ate
Ododunkas'oro baba gha
Onibagbehi todun ni, e ni soju'un
Un sa yin re.
My lord, you are mighty
It is every year we see bitter kola
It is every year we see walnut
It is every year we see little kolanut in the stall
It is every year we celebrate the 'oro' festival of our
forefathers Whosoever says he does not want to witness
this year's own, Let the 'oro' come in his absence.*

This salutary song comes before the priest reveals what the gods have in store for the people. The people present give a general approval to his words when they all respond with a chorus of "Aaasee" meaning 'may it be so'. In some cases, the priest will recommend some sacrifices which are performed as early as possible to avert disaster.

As the divination ends, the festival mood of the Agbo festival begins, as the decision of when the Agbo masquerades will be out is made. When Ogidi people were still living according to their settlements or Apole, before coming together in their present site, there were agbo of Iketu, Igaja, Ilebu Ebeni, etc. but with the coming together into one place, after the last consultation of Ifa, agbo masquerades belonging to Ilebu quarters were determined to be eleven days, hence, that of Iga

quarters became fifteen days; Ilaere quarters, seventeen days, and Okoro quarter eighteen days. These arrangements have revealed that each quarter in Ogidi has its own Agbo. However, all masquerades in these quarters are similar in appearance. With the acceptance of Agbo as an annual festival of the whole of Ogidi, it must be noted that, the coming out of Agbo first from Ilebu, then Iga, Agbo Elegboro, and finally from Ilaere not only shows the unity in purpose of the town, but also, the opportunity of rendering assistance, cooperation among the settlements in successful Agbo outing, and also a symmetric arrangement for a full participation of all, in this festival.

Igbin fifun – finding snail in the market

square: After the consultation of ifa, the next ritual procedure is “igbin fifun” (the finding of a snail within the central market arena), which occurs few days after the final divination. This takes place in the market during the dry season, when snails hibernate. The event is very spiritual as orolo adherents will gather at the central market searching for the mysterious snail. The snail is always found in the bushes around the market. It seems that the snail is usually kept within the central market arena by one of the orolo. This exercise comes up nine days after the divination exercise mentioned earlier. When the snail is finally found, which is inevitable, there is jubilation and the singing of some agbo songs. The finding of the snail is very symbolic as it indicates the success of the forthcoming oro festival. However, the snail is very significant. It is an object which moves very slowly. The movement of this object can easily be traced as a result of the watery path created by it while it moves from one place to the other. It is on this basis that the snail is found.

Oja rire – collection of food stuff from the market:

Another important ritual exercise after the divination and finding of the snail, is “oja rire”. This is the collection of five

percent of whatever food produce is brought to the market for sale. Oja rire actually involves the making of sacrifices to the deities for a peaceful agbo festival. Oja rire is done three times in the central market with an interval of four days. The products which are gotten from the market include pieces of yam, pepper, kolanuts and other food items. Significantly, these products are kept together to be used as part of the cooking items for the festival. Moreover, some parts of these products are distributed to the oloro members who are too old to partake in that year's performance of the festival.

Ato dida - the descent of ato: In addition to the above ritual is the descent of ato, some masked masquerades on Okedu hill, which will be performed before dawn to the gaze of all from a distant hill. Ato belongs to ona Gogongo people. Ato are semi-agbo in outlook. The numbers of ato is often taken to be a pointer to how numerous the agbo will be in the town for that year. Ato descend on a hill called Okedu, while the people watch from another hill called Okuta ara. This early morning event leads to ogba outing; that is the instrument used for gathering the materials for the costume of agbo.

The second stage / the main stages of Agbo Festival

Ogba outing: From the ato performance on the mountain, called oroke edu, immediately follows the shout of nonintelligible shouts of ogba, which are forbidden to be seen by women and children. A lot of those who participated in seeing ato for few minutes will have to take to their heels in haste to get back home in order not to see ogba. As from that day, through the agency of ogba, or aromale, there commences the preparing of the secret gathering of dry banana leaves and fresh Iko leaves blade which are the costumes of Agbo. Women generally and children are forbidden from seeing who or how and when the materials for

the costume of agbo are being gathered and carried to the Igbale, or Igboka. As a result, women cannot go to the farm frequently during this time, since the materials are gotten from the farms and swampy areas in faraway locations from town. This lasts for seven days.

Agbo in town: This is always done with a lot of festive moods in each quarter. At the beginning of agbo rituals, the adherents first give respect to superior powers by singing the song “ajola moju ere lapami” at four designated sites: aala, aofin, agbede and aalo.

Solo: MojubaMojuba o

All: Ajolamojuba ere lapami

Solo: omo Ela o

All: Ajolamojuba ere lapami

Solo: Emei iburu elere mo jeji o

All : Ajola mojuba ere lapami

Solo: sugbon onikan gbenigbanse o

All: Ajola mojuba erelapami

Solo: oraba iyawo oliyawoloru

All: Ajolamojuba ere lapami

Solo: Oko yin Oba mo o

All: Ajolamojuba ere lapami

Solo: Ohi ile ko sue je ounnri dada o All: Ajolamojuba ere lapami

Solo: Okunetigbo be ria?

All: Eyeeooo

The English interpretation is as follows:

Solo: I give regard to great ones

All: As the weaker snake gives to the strong

Solo: No matter how bad, a farmer must reap the fruit of his labour (this is a proverb).

All: As the weaker snake gives to the strong

Solo: But somebody vowed to deny this proverb from coming to pass

All: As the weaker snake gives to the strong

Solo: He sneaked into another man's wife in the night when he was caught

All: As the weaker snake gives to the strong

Solo: He sneaked into another man's wife in the night when he was caught

All: As the weaker snake gives to the strong

Solo: He said it was darkness of the night that obstructed his vision, so He couldn't know she was another man's wife.

All: As the weaker snake gives to the strong

Solo: Have you ever heard this kind of excuse before?

All: No ooo

The outing of agbo is a sequence following the gathering of materials through Ogba for seven days. After the 7th day, each quarter will celebrate their festival with an interval of three days in between. Before the outing of agbo, there will be the elaborate singing and dancing by everyone in the particular quarter whose turn it is for their agbo to emerge. The singing will be led by a lead singer, and chorused by others; there will be the dancing round the quarters, to finally end at the king's palace, from where the king and everyone will be led to the Ala village square to await the arrival of the agbos from yonder land or heaven. The joy, pomp and excitement are normally expressed because the masquerades which represents agbo and the men in each quarter will be singing and dancing with a lot of sticks and rods with which they beat one another, intruders, miscreants, and careless fellows. The actual outing of agbo starts segmentally according to the town's quarters, beginning with agbo Ilebu, agbo Iga, agbo Elegboro, and finally agbo Ilaere. Agbo outing in Ilaere is in this order: agbo Odomogun, and agbo Ilowe, and finally agbo Okoro.

There are occasional variants of agbo such as agbo omode (that is, agbo for children called Olumusin), and agbo olodimeje. Agbo olodimeje must not be seen three times by a reigning monarch.

Songs are very essential aspects in agbo festival. They provide humour and correct the social ills within the society. Above all, they serve as prayer in some particular contexts to appease the god of the agbo festival. The agbo song consists of solo and chorus. Some agbo songs are sung for particular situation and in particular contexts. We have particular songs for the obas/ololus while they are being accompanied to the ala by the participants, which is "Idu komo re ijo". It is at this ala (arena) that the masquerades will meet the oba/ololu for his address. As the whole congregation moves with the oba from his palace to the ala stage, a song accompanies the movements:

Solo: Eduro e gborokan o (2x)

Ologidi modamorun bit'ileke Idu

k'omo re re'jo om'a gini

All: Idu k'omo re re'jo

Solo: Listen everybody and hear something (2x)

Ologidi impresses me like ornament.

The mighty takes his children to the public

All: The mighty takes his children to the public

Agbo lasts in the town for seven days, at the end of which it goes back to the yonder, having mingled with the people, blessed supplicants, flogged miscreants, added glamour to the town, and signaled another year in the life of the people. Throughout the period of celebration, there must not be the beating of drums or gong. Although, churches have broken the rules. The night of the withdrawal of agbo from the quarters are always dreaded night, as only the brave men, and initiates can stand the scene, the screaming, the yelling of the withdrawing masquerades to yonder. As the last batch of agbo has emerged, that is agbo

Okoro, the song that is sang is “abo eboras Esu amoyo” (we have sacrificed to Esu and we are free). Three months after agbo festival, imole and ofosi will take possession of the cultic members. Oral sources state that initiation into these cults has ceased in the community as the last set of ofosi was in the time of Alaere Amujabi, who ruled from 1941-1950.

The descent of the clan deities as Egun Oru - the dreaded night - masquerades.

Another follow-up event after the agbo festival is the celebration of three principal eboras (deities of the community) namely oluwo, ayi and agira known as egun oru. They descend from the mountain during the night. The elderly initiates prepare akara egun (mashed beans), molded in leaves and cooked in extra-large sizes which are taken in advance to the igbale of the egun oru, as a welcome stable by devotees to the egungun. One night, Oluwo at Ona, Agira at Otun and Ayi at Ohi, all descend simultaneously, to visit every nook and cranny of their quarters for solicited and unsolicited divinatory role. In each quarter, they usually come to give warning to culprits who might be responsible for any evil deed in the town. Their warning and orders must not be violated, anyone who tries to violate their orders has himself/herself to blame. They are never seen by women or non-initiates and young boys are excluded from seeing them. So, when their voice is heard, women and children hide immediately and all lanterns are put off.

The coming of eboras/egun Oru is always heralded by the blowing of Akutu (ram horn), to invoke them and send signals for non-initiates and devotees to stay indoor, be silent, and ensure total absence of movement. The eboras move freely without any interference. The eboras/egun orus play important divinatory role in the life of the community. They warn miscreants and

individuals who have erred be it a chief or the King. They invoke peace on the community. They also make forecasts and can tell whether individuals will be alive to see the next season. More so, childless women or anybody with any type of affliction can send gifts to ask for favours and seek solutions to their problems. Oluwo, Agira and Ayi spend nine nights and during this time, there will be no market until they have left.²¹

Ighere - moonlight masquerade

Three months after the festival, there will be another follow up which will be performed by young boys. In the evening, they will be dressed in palm fronds used to mask themselves. They are forbidden from going to where there is light. They sing and dance and this usually marks the end of the festival until the following year. They are known to be unruly, thus, their outing has been banned.

Appraisal of agbo festival in Ogidi

It is obvious that Ogidi people celebrate this festival yearly in remembrance of agbo who is seen as the god of fertility and peace. All surrounding villages and towns do come and watch the ceremony, especially the first seven days of the festival which is marked with merriments and festivity. M. O. Andi in his research paper has said,

It is common belief among Africans that each social system has its own culture. Throughout Yoruba land, for example, each town or village gives some attention to the celebration of one traditional festival or the other. For example, Oshogbo in Oyo State is associated with the Osun goddess and her annual Osun festival. Ire and Ondo towns recall the celebration of Ogun festival which is believed to be the god of creativity and the god of Iron²²

The agbo festival in Ogidi-Ijumu has social, religious, economic and political importance. In the realm of religion, the festival serves as a means through which the *oloros* (traditional worshippers) appease their gods. The people, at this time, pray for peace in the town and for prosperity. Prayers are also said for a peaceful reign for the *oba*. It is very important to mention that the agbo festival has a lot of taboos and rules which must be taken note of. Disobedience to these guiding rules and taboos can bring down the wrath of the gods. The people of the town try to obey these rules because they believe that “African gods do not forgive their offenders. You offend, the punishment is immediate”.²³

It is considered an offence to the deities for anybody to die during the festival, because it is considered a festival of fecundity. If such happens, people must avoid wailing as it is regarded as a disruption of peace during the festival as a result of this, the deceased cannot be buried until after the festival. During the festival, there should be no crying, no beating of drums and no singing for the deceased. Peace and harmony are further enhanced through the belief that it is a taboo for anybody to fight during the festival. Physical combat between adults are totally forbidden. In case of disobedience, the offenders are brought to book and they end up paying some amount of money and a big-she goat each to appease the gods.

Socially, the agbo festival provides entertainment and fun. Agbo masquerades do a lot of dancing while the agbo chanters sing and dance. The songs contain humour which provide entertainment. In addition, the songs have the purpose of correcting some social ills within the society. If anybody commits any serious offence like stealing, witchcraft and adultery, the songs are directed at such deviants. The singers also perform interpretative function and suggest ways of change. They make

known the sufferings of other individuals and families resulting from the misdeeds and wickedness of the deviants. The songs are equally entertaining. They are rendered in a way that everybody laughs and rejoices, especially when the evil doers are exposed. Despite the informal nature of the songs, the deviant and evil doers never miss the castigating message. This brings us to a unique function of the songs during the agbo festival. They serve as a form of social control in the community. Evil doers and their families are shamed publicly; the effects of the public revelations are actually long lasting. Many times, they never repeat such offences. Also, every other member of the society makes a conscious effort to behave well, especially when the period of the festival is getting near.

The economic importance of the festival cannot be overstressed in the sense that during the festival there is a lot of out-put in farm products which the people regard as a blessing from Oluwo deity. Also, due to increase in the town's population, there is an increase in the sales of food stuffs and other consumable items during the festival.

The festival equally ensures the transmission of culture, which serves as means of cultural education. The singers reflect the society, they give regards to dead kings, hunters and philanthropists in Ogidi and appeal for the emulation of such people. Some indigenes are also anxious to preserve such vital information, by supplying tape recordings to record and store these songs. Often times, the singers help to do the recording. In some instances, however, interested people are allowed to go about with the singing group and do the recording themselves after the necessary clearance. Whichever way it is recorded, the information is stored to be played and replayed, within the family or group, in the town and other villages around. In this

way, other people are being educated about the culture and tradition of the Ogidi community.

Politically, the festival places the Oba as the head of all, because the Oloro has to work with the Oba in carrying out the rituals. Also, the Oba and his chiefs have to be present at the stage when each quarter is bringing out their agbo masquerades. He will address the participants and ask them not to beat strangers and the school children. Obviously, the position of the Oba is enhanced during oro festival.

The festival promotes community spirit in the town. All Ogidi children look at one another as brother and sister because they are celebrating a common festival. Also, the discipline and orderliness which the gods call for during the festival are obeyed by the people. It is on this basis that agbo festival is always celebrated in an atmosphere of friendliness and peace among the people of Ogidi. The taboos are meant to avoid tragedy and the songs are directed at correcting societal ills, even while they entertain the people. The festival generally regulates peace and harmony in the community.

The agbo festival despite its immense positive impact has some shortfalls:

Negative economic impact: The fact that women and children are restricted from going to the farm and market and barred from undertaking any economic activity during the festival must be addressed. Indeed, all markets are closed while the festival lasts.

Negative social impact such as restriction of movement of people which run counter to their fundamental human rights: There is the restriction of boys, girls and women from attending church services and Islamic activities. While the festival lasts, no

social gathering is permitted, for such attempt will be hindered by the masquerade through the employment of his whip to flog people. There is also the hindrance of children from being able to go to school. Though, most of these practices have been relaxed as a result of the pressure by the Christian community in Ogidi and the effects of modernization.

The people of Ijumu have more than 365 festivals which they celebrate every year. These festivals are in honour of various gods such as Owa, Epa, Gberaka, Omoelepo, Oluwo, Agbo, Ina-Oko and others. Each of these require different intricate ways of worship and they are revered by the people who worship them as sacred.

The two religions (Christianity and Islam) that have come to unseat the traditional religion are aliens to the culture of the people and they have recent origins. The spread of Islam was the handiwork of the freed captives that returned from the Nupe Kingdom and the subsequent proselytization of Muslim clerics. Although, Muslims were very few in number at the beginning, they were also able to gain some sort of support. Christianity, on the other hand, came as a result of "the intention of some individuals to search for conversion, the desire to acquire the Whiteman's status, the prevailing European influence at the time and their personal resilience in enduring persecutions, after accepting Christianity around the tail end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century"²⁴

The advent of Islam in Ogidi

The importance of Islam in Ogidi was made possible by returnees from Bida who had accepted the religion of their masters. Islam, however, predates the Bida raids in the area, as the Okun, like their Yoruba kith were already abreast of a religion called Imole for several centuries. However, Islam had

no foothold in the community until the coming of the Bida returnees. These few returnees had already embraced the religion which their overlords practiced. When they first came, they were allowed to practice the religion but were hated because of the ill-feeling the people had for the Nupes who made life difficult for them until they were relieved by Captain Wallace's forces. As time went on, many converts were won. Some of the early converts were Bonire, Yahaya, Mallam Kesirin Obajemu, and Ibrahim Adeniji. These converts mixed Islam with their traditional religion. When the converts were growing, the following people decided to employ an Arabic teacher to teach their children; Ikumapayi, Yusuf Ilugbemi (now Alhaji) and Giwa (also an Alhaji). One important cleric called Mallam Lasisi was employed. He came from Akunu in Akoko.

According to Asinde, "In 1956, the Muslim had grown in strength and so built an Arabic school between Ileteju quarters and the Anglican mission. The school was later moved to Ilaere quarters where it has since become a primary school. The school was taken over by the Government Schools Board in 1967. It thus became the third party school in Ogidi".²⁵ Although, the Muslim percentage in the community is relatively small, the healthy rivalry that developed between them had made them to be preeminent in the town. The town has at present one Jumat mosque and about three other mosques. The town can also boast of many who have gone to Mecca on Hajj. The first Imam, Alhaji Muhammed Adeniji and Mallam Bello the first Ladan were both natives of Ogidi. At present, Mallam Isa Ogungbamiwa from Okoro is the chief Imam.

The advent of Christianity in Ogidi

Data point to two sources of Christianity in Ogidi. First, the archival records at the St John Anglican office state that

Christianity was birthed in Ogidi when two converts from Oweland visited Ogidi. At about 1905, “two men named Olowolaiyemo and Abraham came from Gbeleko-Kabba to Okoro-Ogidi. They lived at Abudo compound where they preached. From there they went to Oke-Igbo, another compound to preach. This was how these two men preached the gospel in Okoro-Ogidi until six men accepted the gospel. They were Degan, Omojagbara, Arobani, Enimola, Alerinu and Jacob Olowolhinmmitowa”.²⁶

The second source states that some three years before this, in 1902 a man in Ejugbe called Bamigboye had accepted Jesus Christ. He was converted at Abeokuta area where he lived but was unable to practice the religion for fear of persecution. He later joined these men and then they brought A.B.D. pamphlets from the missionaries and started to read and write. These people met regularly at Ebuku where Agbo worshippers erected a hut for keeping all their materials for the festival. There, they learnt the Yoruba alphabets A.B.D. until they were driven from the hut by agbo worshippers. Later on, the people began to see light in the converts’ lives so they continued to join them. The following people later joined them: Jemirade, Meduwa, Aroniye, Gbangba, Olupeka and Abigael Olupeka. The converts were so enthusiastic that they went to surrounding villages whenever there was any stranger or missionary to learn the Bible. Bamigboye taught some of the converts to read the bible and worship. This was how people got converted and Christianity soon began to spread like wild fire in Ogidi.

The advent of Christianity was not as smooth as the early part of this chapter has portrayed. It was only through God’s power, that it was firmly rooted in the town. The agbo worshippers (after the coming of Christianity), who no longer had agile and active members to help them sing and dance, decided never to

allow the new religion to stay. The new converts were persecuted that they decided to run away from Ogidi. Some went to Kabba while others went to Aiyede Ekiti. It was at Kabba that a white missionary, Rev. J. J. Williams advised them to return so as not to allow the new religion to die. The converts were not able to comply with this advice because of their fear of the agbo worshippers. When another missionary, Rev. Betham, came to Kabba, he gave them a similar advice and they complied this time.

After they had settled down at home, more people were converted among members of the traditional religion. This triggered the annoyance of the agbo worshippers and they employed new persecution tactics. All sorts of means such as charms, cudgels, denial of marriage, flogging, etc. were used to fight the Christians. When this did not give the desired result, they changed to the use of clubs, arrows and cutlasses (This will be discussed later). The Christians at last got a breathing space and it inevitably led to the spread and strength of Christianity in Ogidi. Today, there are more than ten Christian denominations including the Anglican, Baptist, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Christ Apostolic, Jehovah witness and Aladura operating in Ogidi town.

The Impact of Christianity and Islam on agbo festival

It is evident from human history that human beings always resisted change. This is even a peculiarity of African tradition which is rigid and authoritarian. The introduction of Christianity and Islam into Ogidi, like any other town, was not without resistance. Even the early churches, as recorded in the Bible, were persecuted, but one thing worth noting is the fact that, persecutions against the Christian church in most cases always help it to be more firm and spread wider still.²⁷

Initially, the old traditional religionists of Ogidi (agbo worshippers) opposed the learning of “ABD”. Therefore, the new converts were driven out to Ebaku. The traditionalists also expected the young converts to join in the celebration of agbo festival. When it was time for the festival, the elders called on the young Christian converts to join them for the celebration but they refused. Consequently, it led to conflict and the *oloros* asked the Christians to quit the area where the Church was built (Ebaku) because the place was the centre of traditional worship. As young converts began to denounce some traditional practices, the traditional religionists also started to suppress the new religion. On Sundays for instance, the Christian converts would take permission to be exempted from farm activities so that they might go for worship. This request was usually turned down, just to make it impossible for them to get deeper into the new religion. According to an informant, one Sunday morning, the Christians were already in the church when the traditionalists went there to attack them openly with bows and arrows, but the leading men in the church restrained the Christians from fighting back. Another instance was on the eve of Christmas. The Christians went to destroy the *ebora*’s shrine at Okoro where the traditional religionists perform their rituals during the agbo festival. The *oloro* saw this as an abomination and decided to revenge by destroying the public bell which the missionaries gave to the Christians. This resulted in serious conflict and the people went to Kabba to report the case for investigation.²⁸ The elders demanded that the Christians should move out of the town. After much debate, the District Officer charged the traditional religionists three pounds (£3) which they had to pay.

Persecution and Conversion of Chief Ayeni Olupeka

The persecution came to a climax at the conversion of one Olupeka, a prominent chief and one of the best singers, during the agbo festival. He was said to be a very bold and powerful man, and was therefore respected in the society. During one of the festivals, it was reported that Olupeka invited the Christians and promised to become a Christian on the condition that these Christians join them during that year's festival. This was not too much sacrifice on the part of the Christians. On behalf of a soul which Christ had died for, the Christians complied and participated in the festival. To his promise, Olupeka denounced traditional worship of agbo and became a Christian after the festival together with many of his associates. The traditional religionists were filled with rage realizing clearly that Christianity was a thorn in their flesh and so they embarked on further attacks against it. Islam, in the earliest time, had little or no conflict with the traditional religionists because some of the converts were practicing syncretism. Moreover, they were in the minority in comparison with the Christians. Islam became prominent because of the rivalry that developed between the Muslims and Christians.

In addition, it is obvious that the two alien religions had a great impact on the agbo festival up till today. The number of agbo adherents has decreased greatly, and some of the rituals involved are not esteemed as before the advent of Christianity and Islam. Also, education brought about some changes and modifications to the celebration of the festival. For instance, school children were given the privilege to get home from school before the festival activities begin. Also, as regards the rituals performed in the night by egun oru (night masquerades), students were allowed to be back from evening classes before the masquerades can come into the town.

Christianity has contributed much to the development of western education in Ogidi. It is responsible for two of the three primary schools in Ogidi: Saint John's Primary School and Saint Michael's Primary School. Many sons and daughters of Ogidi who are now members of Ogidi Development Union and Ogidi Development Association had their earlier primary education from these primary schools. It is of note that with regards to western education in Ogidi, Saint John's Primary School which was first built, started with a good number of converts being able to read and write in 1910²⁴, then the school was erected as a hut at the present Maternity site in Okoro quarters between 1930 and 1932 when it formally admitted pupils, before it moved to its present site in 1932. Then, in 1947, St Michaels Primary School started.

Besides the establishment of schools, the various Christian organizations, especially Roman Catholic Mission which got the support of the mother church in Rome have been responsible for the education of some important sons of Ogidi. Even before the establishment of schools, about seventeen years earlier, some early converts were capable of reading the Yoruba alphabet and the Yoruba bible, due to the influence of the missionary teachers.²⁹ Also, the preservation of the Yoruba language in writing stand as a credit to the Christian missionaries so that an individual can read the Bible in his or her vernacular not necessarily in English or Greek.

Christianity and the advent of Western Civilization in Ogidi

Christian missionaries advised the people, when they were still living independently of one another, to come together to a place (the present site of Ogidi) where they can have access to the road and be in touch with other parts of the country. It was the colonial administrators who were responsible for bringing them

together through force in 1917, in order to carry out effectively their colonial activities.

Above all, cognizance should be taken of the rate at which evil practices are reducing with the activities of some groups of Christians in Ogidi today. It is a common knowledge that in all towns and villages, there exist some wicked fellows who practice their wickedness with impunity. Sometimes, educated and able youths who could have been of great asset to the society mysteriously die in great numbers. At other times, infant mortality will rise in the community and sometimes, it is through disease, accidents and lots of problems that evil seems to be perpetuated in Ogidi community.

It should be noted that a good number of Ogidi people who were observant identified some of these evil practices. When such things happen, it would be exposed and the persons involved are forewarned. This is due to the prayers and services of some dedicated Christians in the town. These dedicated Christians now seem to be filling the gap, by doing the work which a branch of the traditional religion and worship was doing in the pre-contact days.

Conclusion

In the past, there has been much pressure on and a shift from the agbo festival to the Christianity and Islam. The present effort of the Nigerian Government at promoting our cultural heritages can be boosted through its agents, the State Government, Kogi State Council for Arts and Culture and Nigerian Television, amongst others, to give the festival a wide publicity. First, these centres for disseminating cultures should give some attention to the festival. This will help in generating some effective researches on the potentials of the festival and aid the

preservation of the festival from dying out or from being eclipsed by Western Civilization.

Second, agbo songs need to be preserved from its weakness, by being transformed from its oral nature to a written one. Since Ogidi language is a dialect of the Yoruba language, and not yet written down as a standard literary form of communication and writing, skilled fellows need to be engaged in order for the songs to be written down and therefore develop its literature for future reference.

Above all, the festival serves as a common core which binds the people together, no matter the divide that is presently witnessed in Ogidi. There is a demonstration of religious tolerance in the town during the festival. The wealth of the festival, and its socio-cultural importance beacons on all cultural revivalists and enthusiasts to make out time to watch the activities during the festival. This will contribute to scholarship and research which will further identify and understand the dramatic potentials of the festival. There is the possibility that this exercise will aid the identification of some similarities between this festival and other festivals in the country.

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