

**Ritual as Theatre:  
An Analysis of Oduduwa Festival in Ikoru-Ekiti**

**Abiodun J. Macaulay**  
Elizade University

---

---



Courtesy: <https://yemitom.wordpress.com/tag/olokun/>

**Abstract**

Oduduwa festival is one of the festivals mostly cherished among the Yoruba people right from the onset. As an unforgettable hero in Yoruba history Oduduwa, after his death was deified and worshipped by the people with cult following. This paper specifically focuses on the Oduduwa festival celebration in Ikoru-Ekiti, a Yoruba town in the south west region of Nigeria. The research examines the history, origin and the mode of worship of Oduduwa deity while isolating the ritual performances and theatricalities in the festival celebration. The paper concludes that while ritual acts and ceremonies are fading away in most African communities ,

festival like the Oduduwa should be encouraged and supported because of its significant socio-cultural contributions to the Ikoru-Ekiti community.

**Keywords:** *Theatre, Ritual performance, Oduduwa festival, Yoruba, Ikoru-Ekiti.*

## **Introduction**

The heart of culture according to Samovar et al (2009:26) involves “Language, religion, values, traditions and costumes. Culture shapes and moulds our behavior, values and even ideas. It is the fundamentals of human existence. The word culture can be easily substituted for the word history. In a real sense, both are conduits that carry the essential messages considered important by a culture. History reminds us of our past, our traditions, norms and culture. Part of what history reminds us of is our festivals and rituals which are the main focus of this paper.

Ritual practice is not a new thing in societies all over the world. Ritual is a common practice in most religions and consists of symbolic actions that represent sacred meanings. Ritual recalls past events, preserves and transmits the foundations of a society. Participants in the ritual become identified with the sacred past, thus perpetuating traditions as they re-establish the principles by which the group lives and functions. Each of these rituals has a particular relevance within the society that practices it. Through rituals people can “recall and re-affirm important beliefs... feel spiritually connected to their religion [and] develop... a sense of identity by increasing social bonds with those who share their views, and sense that their life has meaning and structure”. Larry et al (2005:66)

Rituals or ceremonial acts apart from being religious also relieve social tensions and reinforce a group’s collective bonds. More than this it provides a means of marking many important events and lessening the social disruption and individual suffering or woes such as death. Therefore, ritual is defined variously as prescribed formal behavior having reference to beliefs in invisible being or powers regarded as the first and final of all events. Edmund Leach as cited by Awuawuer (2010:35) viewed ritual as “Stereotyped behavior which is potent in itself in terms of the cultural conventions of the actors, though not in a rational technical sense”. In essence ritual is a prescribed action that has to do with the presence of divine intervention and its

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 15:8 August 2015

Abiodun J. Macaulay, B.A. (Hons.), M.A.

Ritual as Theatre: An Analysis of Oduduwa Festival in Ikoru-Ekiti

practice differs from one society to another where it performs significant functions in the life and customs of the people.

### **Ritual and Its Socio-Religious Functions**

In African society, rituals serve many purposes majority of which bothers on socio-cultural and religious needs of the people. According to Doki (2006:70) some rituals are observed through “performing symbolic actions and manipulating symbolic object so as to promote and increase fertility of men, crops and animals, wild and domestic, to cure illness, to avert plague, to turn boys to men and girls to women, and to make chiefs out of commoners”. Ray in line with Doki as documented by Awuawuer (2010:36) asserted that “Rituals are performed to cure illness, increase fertility, defeat enemies, change people’s social status, remove impurities and reveal future”. Thus, rituals are ways of communication between man and the cosmic environment; they play an integral role in lives of individual members of the society. These rituals are harnessed sometimes to appease and placate the gods or to set the society right.

It is evident that through ritual people are able establish a line of communication to the supernatural in order to seek guidance or assume control on forces beyond their understanding, Thus, the basis of ritual is to invoke the ancestral spirits to communicate and parley with the living. These ancestors are regarded as perfect in ensuring a smooth welfare of their living kinsmen and families. They are believed to be near God and as such, intercede between the supreme God and the living. Mbiti (1975:83) summarizes the ancestral roles thus “They return to their families from time to time, and share meals with them however symbolically, they know and have interest in what is going on in their family. They are guardians of family affairs, traditions, ethics and activities. Offence in these matters is ultimately offence against the ancestors who in that capacity act as invisible police of the family and communities”.

### **Of Rituals and Traditional Festivals**

Ritual practice as a significant aspect of most traditional festivals in Africa have assumed an acceptance used more often to mark a particular time of the day, month, and year, stage in life or commencement of a new event or vocation. This temporal characteristic of ritual is often

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 15:8 August 2015

Abiodun J. Macaulay, B.A. (Hons.), M.A.

Ritual as Theatre: An Analysis of Oduduwa Festival in Ikoru-Ekiti

called “sacred time” to be performed in a designated location called “sacred space”. Just like dramatic performance, time and place are essential features of ritual action, and both mark a specific orientation or setting for ritual. The shape, spatial orientation, and location of the ritual setting are essential features of the semantics of ritual action. Time and space, whether a plot of ground or a magnificent temple are ritually created and become in turn the context for other rituals.

Ritual festivals not only created sacred times that define the calendar and occur throughout the year, intersecting with ordinary time, they also establish the designated places that localize the sacred in the midst of ordinary space. Sometimes, these are places of natural beauty or imposing power such as mountains, caves or rivers. They may be sites that commemorate great religious events of the past. Sometimes, they are places where miraculous spiritual appearances are believed to have occurred. Sometimes the act of building a sacred place occur each time the rite is performed and is thus part of the ritual itself. The use of space reveals a great deal about a religious world view. It is popularization of these rituals that has placed their mundane aspects higher than esoteric, not really from the point of view of the ritual priests but in terms of the mass turn-outs of participants and spectators. This popularization has also been responsible for most rituals becoming entertainment today while others at various stages of imbibing the entertainment culture.

Bakary (1972:14) sums up that “In Africa, theatrical performances are regulated by the seasonal calendar and the days appointed for the festivals. The performance can sometimes translate itself into action; it is closely inter-woven with rituals”. Ritual in its action thus, can be observed as verbal as well as non-verbal communication. Hans as cited by Awuawuer (2010:39-40) on the paralinguistic aspect of ritual holds that “A complete analysis of ritual would also include its relation to art and the specific objects used in ritual dress. All of these components are found in ritual contexts, and all of them are non-verbal in structure and meaning. When particular ritual object, dances, gestures, music and dress are included in the study of ritual behavior far exceed any one description or explanation of ritual man”

In analyzing ritual as a module of religion, one could see ritual as a symbolic expression of religious convictions that are usually performed at traditionally prescribed times. Such activities as prayers, recitations, sacrifices, exorcism, dancing, feasting and feast often play an important part in religious rituals. To this end Traore (1970:113) maintains that “Religiosity is an essential aspect of life in Africa”. Therefore, the learning of rituals is a resume of life, and that ritual becomes a theatrical ceremony and myth takes dramatic form, actors become characters through disguise: they feel that they are other people, the festival easily turns into a dramatic production”

Thus, ritual is a form of communication in its own right involving performance and symbolic bodily actions, displayed in a tangible, visible way. These actions have power to focus experience and thus function to intensify the sense of the sacred. Ritual can be as simple as bowing one’s head or praying before a meal, chanting s certain phrase, or removing footwear before entering a particular place. At the other extreme, they can involve intricate ceremonies performed by teams of priests and lasting for a long period. Rituals reveal the sacred through specific, symbolic actions and objects including processions (stage picture), special clothing (costume), special sound (language) – for example, chanting – or silences, masks, and symbolic objects (props). Some religions use rituals to create effect, while others assign them a lesser role, and where ritual is central, there is usually priesthood (the protagonist). This affirms that ritual performance in Africa is a justification to the worshipper’s potency in their faith in the religion, which also projects a sense of common front that assures believers in their personal safety.

### **Ritual as Important Aspect of Theatre**

In general, theatre is an activity in which an actor takes a role other than himself and through mime, speech, songs and dance movements conveys or communicates a message to an audience. In essence, indigenous African theatre is rooted in the day-to-day part activities of the African man. It is part and parcel of the whole conception of existence, and it is essentially a communal activity. These qualities differ considerably from western forms of theatre where the proscenium arch, exclusive set, lighting and the individual ownership of theatrical productions, constitute the dominant characteristics of theatre.

African traditional theatre, because of its dynamic nature, and the fact that it is a product of a living culture, is able to evolve some few performances even in the post-colonial time. Such performances, for their form and function are synonymous to the pre-colonial theatre and are still regarded as traditional. Hence, traditional performances may have some given stages of the whole process as sacred rituals performances and ritual festival performances. And it is possible to have sacred ritual performances outside the festival period because the sacred part is a unit of itself. In his own classification Doki (2006:9-10) states that “Ritual performances embrace all the rites connected with a ceremony, there is rite of baptism, and others are rite of communion and burial rites. Ritual in other words is the way a religious activity is carried out. It also implies ceremonial observances in one sense. This is because we have ceremonial events that have become remarkable with special calendar days of the year, especially among traditional Africans. New Yam festival, for example, is a ceremony carried out with intensive activities such as dances, music and feasting as mark of jubilation over the arrival of the new yam from the land of the gods”.

In another perspective, African traditional theatre according to Awuarwuer (2010:28) can be classified into seven general categories: “(1) Simple enactment (2) ritual and ritualized enactment, (3) story-telling (4) spirit-cult enactments (5) masquerade and masquerade enactments (6) ceremonial performances (7) comedies”. Clark in the same vein summarizes Kirk’s classification into two “The sacred and the secular, and even the sacred is sub-categorized into ancestral or myth plays and the other which are masquerades or plays by age groups and cults”. Ogunbiyi has by expansion identified three types of traditional African theatre practice; “The sacred ritual performances, the ritual festival performances and deritualizing performances”. The focus of this performance is religious. To Dotun (2003:8) “In the deritualized performances, the ritual and cultic functions are absent or relegated to the very remote background. In the ritual festival performances, however, both the religio-cultic and aesthetic functions have equal emphasis. The performance of sacred ritual is also usually restricted to secluded places with only initiates as audience. The remaining three categories are performed in the open audience.

The contrast in both classifications is a matter of semantics and defense. The sacred and the ritual (Clark and Doki respectively) are those which are ritualistic, as the people seek to get protection and be purged of spiritual afflictions. Hence, only initiates are allowed as partakers, while the secular and festival aspect take care of the socio-political system of the people, reaffirming their socio-political aspirations cum – entertainment by communication their feelings which take care of their needs. It is important to note that sacred/ritual and secular/festival performances form the main parts of African traditional theatre. Hence, the same traditional festival may have some given stages of the whole process as sacred ritual performances and others as ritual festival performances, according to Dotun (2003: 7).

All societies in Africa organize festivals that are emblematic of both sacred and secular performances. These festivals have a great potency of adaptability to the emerging trends in the theatre practice where most Nigerian theatre practitioners draw their sources. This makes the Nigerian dramatist a self-made man who found himself in the environment in which he was born - the ritual ceremony, the ritual priest and communal life. For example “Ogunde drew his inspiration and urge from the Egungun festival as exemplified by his identification with the conventional theatre practice of the Alarinjo theatre” (Adedeji 1981:224) and by convention, the efficacies notwithstanding, the ritual or the festival is theatre in itself, even if removed within the cultural context in which it exists. Therefore, two types of places for performances can be postulated for the indigenous theatre performances. They are the secluded or private and the open or public places of performance. Again, two kinds of audience that also exist in relation to the kinds of performance places are the restricted or private and public or general audience. The private audience is made up of the initiates while non-initiates and initiates constitute the public or the general audience.

In Africa when sacred ritual performance is enacted in an open place, it is usually done in the dead of the night when people are sleeping. A curfew may also be declared to prevent members of the public audience who are not initiates from seeing such performances. The sacred aspect of African performances takes into consideration the sanctity of the culture of the people and therefore lay emphasis on spectacle rather than dramatic sketches. The open secular or profane performance is usually located in the market place, community square, frontage of the

palace, houses of an important member of the community etc. for the consumption of the public; both initiates and non-initiates. Among the Yoruba according to Ogunba (1978 :54) such special locations are regarded as “Ibi ti ile ti loju” (where eyes of the earth are). The secular aspects of the traditional performances did away with the religious and concentrated on the creation of popular theatre. And the most common arrangement in a traditional place of performance is circular arena where the audience surrounds the performers who are in the centre.

To maintain order during performance some members of the audience may caution others to keep silent. Ogunba goes further (62 – 66) “There are two ways of delineating performance area and thereby maintaining order. First are the physical devices such as the use of strong rope to restrain the audience from moving near the performers, as is done in Olua festival and the use of whips, as is practiced in many Nigerian masquerade traditions. ... The second is the use of metaphysical means such as sprinkling of magical liquid or corrosive objects which spectators dare not stop to avoid been harmed.” Moreover, rules or more properly taboos are also set and put in place. A common example is that the costume of the masquerade or another performer may not be touched.

### **Oduduwa Festival: Origin and Historical Background**

Tradition and history has it that Oduduwa lived and died at Ile-Ife. After his death he was made a deity, as it is the belief of Yoruba people to worship the spirit of the dead, believing that prayers offered at the grave of deceased ancestors are potent to procure temporary blessings. So also the spirit of Oduduwa was worshipped by his children and people of the town in order to offer prayers to him according to their request because Oduduwa was regarded as the “God-sent” and the father of the entire Yoruba race. (This brought about the saying *Yoruba omo Oodua*), i.e., Yoruba the children of Oduduwa, and it was believed that his spirit lives forever to intercede for his people. This is why all succeeding Yoruba kings on their accession and before coronation are expected to send to perform acts of worship at the grave of Oduduwa and to receive the benediction of the priest.

After the death of Oduduwa, and as the population continued to increase, people started migrating to other places to settle, hence the first set of people to migrate were the children of

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 15:8 August 2015

Abiodun J. Macaulay, B.A. (Hons.), M.A.

Ritual as Theatre: An Analysis of Oduduwa Festival in Ikoru-Ekiti

Oduduwa, (The seven princes and princess) that Okanbi his eldest son left behind, and from them sprang the various ethnic groups in Yorubaland. His first-born was said to be a princess who became the mother of Olowu, also the second child who became the mother of Alaketu. Thus we have: the Olowu of Owu, the Alaketu of Ketu ,the Oba of Benin ,the Orangun of Ila the Onisabe of Isabe, the Olupopo of Popo and the Oranmiyan of Oyo.

These princes and princess not only became the founder and the first king of their towns, they also became first crowned heads (The kings who wore the original crowns) in Yorubaland, and of all the princes, Oranmiyan was the youngest, but eventually became the richest and most renowned of them all. This was how the children and the grand children of Oduduwa began to spread out to find other Yoruba towns and cities that we have in Yorubaland today. Thus, we also have the ethnic groups such as the Egba, Ijebu, Ekiti, Ijesa, Ondo, etc. that all trace their origin from Oduduwa and the city of Ile-Ife.

As people spread out, they took along with them their religion which was mainly paganism at that time. i.e., the act of worshipping idols (gods and goddess) which they term “Orisa” even though Yoruba believe in Olodumare (The maker of heaven and earth) they find him too exalted to concern Himself directly with men and their affairs, so they admit the existence of many gods and goddess, as intermediaries (the orisas). Hence the worshipping of Egungun (the spirit of the dead/ancestors) Orisala/Obatala (to whom they ascribed creative powers), Ori (head – god of fate), Ogun (god of iron), Esu (author of all evil) and including Oduduwa (the deified ancestor, who is also recognized as the goddess of the earth). Apart from occasional sacrifices to these idols they also celebrate annual festivals in honour of them. That is the time of merriment, a special time in the year to appease to the gods, to offer sacrifices, to give thanks or show appreciations for the help rendered them in the past year and for his continual guidance.

Thus, Oduduwa deity among other dieties spread from Ile-ife to every other parts of Yorubaland especially Oyo Alaafin and Ado-Odo in Egbado. The people of Idofin who are kith and kin of the Egbado people brought along Oduduwa deity to Igbo-Ora. Similarly, the people of Ilero, and Oyo North also got the idea of Oduduwa from Oyo township. Apart from the places

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 15:8 August 2015

Abiodun J. Macaulay, B.A. (Hons.), M.A.

Ritual as Theatre: An Analysis of Oduduwa Festival in Ikoru-Ekiti

mentioned above the worship of Oduduwa deity also spread out to some towns in Ekitiland such as Ijero, otun, Ilokuno, Iloro, Ekanmeje and Ikoru-Ekiti (which is the focus of this work). It is also important to note that the names given to the festival of Oduduwa deity differ from place to place. For instance: in Ile-Ife, it is referred to as Olojo festival, in Iloro-Ekiti, it is called Iyangede festival, it is referred to as Olua festival in Ilkunro-Ekiti and Ogboye festival in Otun-Ekiti, but in Ikoru-Ekiti, it is called Oduduwa festival.

### ***Ikoru-Ekiti: The Town, the People and Oduduwa***

Ikoru-Ekiti, according to history, was founded by three men and a dog. These men were hunters from afar who settled permanently on the land while people from the neighbouring towns and villages came to join them. As people came from near and far to settle in Ikoru, their various gods were not left out. In other words, they came with their gods and goddesses. It was said that sometimes a god or goddess might visit them to help them during wars and thereby stay with them permanently. Such was the case with the River goddess called “Olobe” that is worshipped up till today by Ikoru people. Other deities that are worshipped include: Obatala/Orisa-nla, Egungun, Orisa oko (the goddess of the land), Sango (god of thunder), Ogun (god of iron), Osun, (goddess of the river) etc, including Oduduwa, which is our focus.

According to Omoboye Macaulay who was the “Eye lori” of Oduduwa meaning the mother of Oduduwa and who hailed from the Oduduwa custodian family, her father’s elder brother, Arapate, brought Oduduwa deity to Ikoru from Ile-ife a long time ago. After the death of the first set of people that brought the deity, people no longer involved themselves in promoting Oduduwa festival in the town. Though there was no continuity in the festival yet people that had benefited from the festival one time or the other and those that still believed in the deity come to offer sacrifices from time to time at the shrine of the deity.

This was the situation of things with Oduduwa festival in the town until the time of Chief Owanikin Ayo when the spirit of the deity descended on him about fifty years ago when he was still a school boy. Chief Owanikin Ayo (now the chief priest of Oduduwa deity in the town) had then continued with Oduduwa festival in Ikoru-Ekiti every year and up till now there has been no set-back. Oduduwa festival has now become one of the most cherished festivals in the town, and

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 15:8 August 2015

Abiodun J. Macaulay, B.A. (Hons.), M.A.

Ritual as Theatre: An Analysis of Oduduwa Festival in Ikoru-Ekiti

in fact, it has gone beyond the town to other neighbouring towns and villages even now people come from every nook and corner of the country to witness and worship at the Oduduwa shrine during the annual festival in Ikoro-Ekiti.

### **Oduduwa Festival: Performance of Rituals**

The festival is usually opened with a ritual early in the morning in front of the Chief Priest's house, before moving to the family house. During the rituals, the "Yeye Okin" would use salt to make a circle on the ground (though initially common ashes were used but today, it is salt that is used). Inside this salt-circled, they would put a special kolanut called "oju merin" (four lobes). After this, they would pour water on the kolanut. This is when all the devotees would come around to offer prayers to the deity. They would thank him for the past blessings and tell him whatever they want him to do for them in the next season. Below is an example of what they say:

"A tun de l'odun – in o (We are here again this year)  
A dupe oore tesi o (We thank you for last year's help)  
O mo tu e ro tia lodun-in o (Come and be with us again this year)  
Koo pe se eo, koo pese omo (Provide us with money and children)  
Keero kan-an e baa sodun (the visitors that are celebrating with us)  
Kan-an pada dele layo ..." (Let them get home in peace)

After they might have finished saying whatever they want the deity to do for them, the "Yeye-Okin" would then take the kola and break it into four and cast them on the ground to see whether the deity has accepted their request. Definitely, if two of the lobes should face downwards and the remaining two face upwards, then their prayers have been accepted, then they can proceed but if the lobes place otherwise, which signifies a rejection of the offer by the deity, they continue casting the kolanut until they find out why the deity is rejecting the kolanut and they would perform the necessary sacrifices. If the lobes should place alright then they would shout for joy and say: "*Obi yan, Obi mo yan o*" (The deity has accepted the kola). That is, the prayer or request has been accepted and answered .

## **The Performance**

The celebration and performance of Oduduwa festival is for a duration of seven days while the activities that takes place daily is highlighted as follows:

### ***Day One***

The first day of this festival is called the “Itepe day”. This is the day the chief Priest would move from his own personal house to the family house where the alter room for the deity is. The festival takes place there from the first to the last day of the festival. On the eve of this “Itepe day” there would be merriment in the house of the chief Priest whereby the devotees and the whole household would not sleep throughout the night. Some women would engage themselves in the frying of “akara” (baked beans) throughout the night while some would be busy packing the luggage that would be taken along to the family house the following morning. Usually, the luggage would be for the chief priest, and it will contain everything needed for the seven days that the festival would last. The frying of “akara” on the other hand will be in two sessions. The first is for the people who are present, while the second section is the special one meant to be carried along the following morning. It is called “akara itepe”. While frying this second set, there must be no talking, from the beginning to the end of the frying, but both frying sections take place between 7.00pm in the evening and 4.00am in the following morning. After this, the “akara itepe” would be packed in a big calabash and wrapped with a white cloth by Yeye Okin. It is ready for the “Arunpe” who would then carry the “akara itepe” during the procession to the deity’s palace. Even when everything is ready, they would still not set out until the early morning ritual is performed. Immediately after the ritual, before six O’clock in the morning, they are set to go. The “Arunpe” would lead the procession, followed by people carrying the luggage. The chief Priest of the deity then follows with the other devotees, singing and dancing in front of the drummers.

The Chief Priest’s mode of dressing at this time is simple as he appears in a simple native dress called “buba and soro” with a cap and shoes on his feet and also a strip of white cloth hung on his shoulders. He would hold a staff of office called “Orere” which he uses to bless people and mark his way. The procession would last about two to three hours before reaching the deity’s palace which is still within the town. As they come, the devotees would be chorusing at intervals:

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 15:8 August 2015

Abiodun J. Macaulay, B.A. (Hons.), M.A.

Ritual as Theatre: An Analysis of Oduduwa Festival in Ikoro-Ekiti

“Oo di o”

They also chant to praise the deity as follows:

“Olori Alade (Head of all kings)

Ajiwajiwa ileke (With dangling beads)

Oloja an mokuku na (The owner of the market operates at night)

Kan-an mo rihoho ayaba (So that the nakedness of the queen is concealed)

On getting to the house, it is the “Arunpe” that would first enter, but this normally takes some time because the spirit must have descended on her, making it difficult for her to walk faster. As soon as she enters, others would follow. Then, the chief Priest would come out later to dance in his white costumes and enter the house again. This thus, marks the end of the ceremony for the first day. The “akara itepe” is later shared among the devotees and people present.

### *Day Two*

The major ceremony on the second day is the fetching of water for the Oduduwa deity and the other deities. Before proceeding to the stream at the outskirt of the town, “Yeye Okin” would wrap the three pots that are going to be used in fetching the water with white sheets. There are two iron pots and one clay pot, which are just small and light pots. The three pot-carriers must also get themselves prepared in their white outfit. The first pot carrier is called “Oloru baba”.

The second carrier is called “Oloru Osun” and the third carrier is called “Oloru Agbe”.

The procession to the stream led by the “Oloodo” would begin at about three to four O’clock in the evening. Some devotees would also carry plenty of pap and “Ekuru” while others would just follow them. At the stream, the “Oloodo” would perform the ritual. She first collect her staff of office in one place, then collects the sacrificial items, two kolanuts (olojumerin), a hen, a pap and “Ekuru” which she offers to the deity at the stream. Apart from this, any of the three pot-carriers or any of the devotees that had pledged a hen for sacrifice would also bring their pledges which are also offered. Then, there would be the casting of the kolanuts. After the ritual, the remaining pap and “Ekuru” are shared among the women and children of the

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 15:8 August 2015

Abiodun J. Macaulay, B.A. (Hons.), M.A.

Ritual as Theatre: An Analysis of Oduduwa Festival in Ikoru-Ekiti

household and the other devotees of other deities that are present and they would eat and make merry.

After eating, the “Oloodo” would then peg a white cloth at the entrance of the stream; she then unwraps the pots and fetches the water inside. At that juncture, they are ready to come back home. Before they enter the town, the traditional native bell carrier called “olomo” would run to inform the chief Priest of the deity who now comes out in white outfit with a crown on his head to meet them. Then, there would be singing and dancing towards the house. On getting home, the water carriers enter the house while the chief Priest led by Obalufon and Orisaala dance to the Orisaala’s shrine which is not far from the Oduduwa’s palace. He then dances round the shrine three times before coming home. This is because of the age-long connection between Oduduwa and Orisanla.

### ***Day Three***

The third day is mainly for the celebration of the fetching of the deity’s water, which they celebrate to show that the body is cool, and that it is well with the devotees, and there is dancing and merriment. Some people believed that there are two hundred and one deities in the Yorubaland, and that on this day, all the two hundred and one deities must be present to celebrate with Oduduwa. Therefore, during the celebration, there would be two hundred and one songs to be song, each for each of the two hundred and one deities. As they change songs, so also the drum beat changes, and as they sing, all the devotees of the other deities such as Ogun, Sango, Oya, Obatala, Osun, Orisa oko, Esu, Egungun, etc much rise to dance to the tune of their particular song.

Similarly, when Oduduwa’s song is being sung, the chief Priest of the deity also comes out to dance. One of the songs for Oduduwa for this occasion goes thus.

Solo: Ulu Ulu Ufe Yesii gbodo wi kaa mo joo(Who say we shouldn’t dance to the drums of Ife)

ALL: Yoyo Lufe, Ufe yoyo (Multitudes in Ife)

SOLO: Ejio loni o (Olojo is dancing today)

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 15:8 August 2015

Abiodun J. Macaulay, B.A. (Hons.), M.A.

Ritual as Theatre: An Analysis of Oduduwa Festival in Ikoru-Ekiti

ALL: Yoyo lufe, ufe yoyo (Multitudes of Ife)

SOLO: Ogun i komo ula (War doesn't affect Ila's citizen)

ALL: Obara etura, e jogun peyinde...." ( Obara etura, disease, go back)

### ***Day Four***

The major ceremony for the fourth day is for the Priest of Oduduwa deity to go to the Oba's palace to pray for the king and his entire populace. On this fourth day, he would go to the king, sit on the throne together with him, crown on their heads and also come out to dance together in front of the palace to offer all the necessary rituals and prayers before leaving the palace with the people of the town singing and dancing.

### ***Days Five and Six***

The fifth and sixth days have been set apart for thanksgiving and receiving sacrifices from the people. This is because at the festival every year, people come from every nook and cranny of the country and even abroad to seek the face of the deity for one help or the other. These include sick people looking for healing or good health, barren women seeking for children, workers looking for promotion etc with a vow that should the deity grant their request they should come and show their appreciation in the following festival period. On these two days, such people must come to fulfill their promise. The chief Priest of the deity would sit in the inner chamber of the house and people would be coming with their different types of sacrificial items to show their appreciation. The chief Priest would collect the items brought and bless them. Those that have not received answers to their petitions would also come to know the reason for it. It is important that the reason must be traced to know what they should do to overcome their problems. In short, these two days are meant for thanksgiving for those that have received solutions to their problems, problem solving for those bringing theirs for the first time and redeeming of pledges by people concerned. These sacrifices are offered to Oduduwa deity.

### ***Day Seven***

The seventh day is the last day of the festival when all activities would be brought to an end. It is the greatest day of all other days. It is the happiest day for all the devotees and the most colourful day throughout the town of Ikoru-Ekiti. Devotees of the other deities such as Obatala,

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 15:8 August 2015

Abiodun J. Macaulay, B.A. (Hons.), M.A.

Ritual as Theatre: An Analysis of Oduduwa Festival in Ikoru-Ekiti

Ogun, Obalufon, etc., come to worship their own deities, and to pay homage to Oduduwa since he is regarded as the father of all the other gods, and more so, that they believe the deity himself who is being referred to as “Baba” must come from Ife this day to see his people and to address them. Towards the evening, all Oduduwa Priests from near and far together with the devotees will dance round the town, praying for and blessing the people. Gifts of money, salt, kolanut etc will also be given by the people to the chief Priest. Rituals are also made round the four corners of the town this day as they dance round. Before the end of this dance, the Oduduwa chief Priest would dance at the Obatala’s shrine where the deity through him would address the people.

The words of prophecy come out to the devotees and the entire populace of the town. He warns the wicked and disobedient people seriously, informing them that if they persist in the bad acts, the end-result may be unbearable for them. From there, they would dance back home with the deity’s prophesy on their minds throughout. The Oduduwa chief Priest redresses seven times in different outfits with different crowns to dance before he finally enters the house only to come the following year again but the devotees continue with dancing and merriment till day break. The water fetched on the second day and regarded as sacred water is also shared among the devotees to be used for healing, protection etc. The chief Priest then leaves the deity’s palace for his own house the following evening till next festival.

### **The Theatrical Elements in Oduduwa Festival**

Spectacles such as costumes, dance and music contribute immensely to the colour and beauty of the festival as in every other traditional African ceremony. As already realized or mentioned from the account of the origin of Oduduwa, he was rich in culture when he came to settle in Ile-Ife. Thus, all the superior cultures he brought which made him dominate the people culturally and socially are still being exhibited today during the Oduduwa festival. As the first king of the entire Yoruba race, his way and manner of dressing, the use of beads, different types of crowns, the horse tail called “irukere” and all other things he brought to Ile-Ife are still being enacted by the Oduduwa chief Priest during the festival in his remembrance.

Originally, the major out-fit being used by the Oduduwa Chief Priest and other devotees are white railment called “Ala”. The chief Priest who is the centre of the ceremony would tie

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 15:8 August 2015

Abiodun J. Macaulay, B.A. (Hons.), M.A.

Ritual as Theatre: An Analysis of Oduduwa Festival in Ikoro-Ekiti

around his chest the “Ala,” use traditional white powder called “Efun” to make marks round his face and every other part of the body that is exposed, and put on plenty of beads round his necks, wrists and ankles with crown on his head. On the last day of the ceremony or celebration, he must appear seven times with seven different multi-coloured attires and seven different crowns on his head while dancing.

Apart from the Chief Priest of the deity who is at the centre of the festival, other devotees too have their own costumes which make them more attractive at the festival. The women, for instance, wear wrapper that covers their chests and beads on their necks. They do not put on their “buba” and head-tie called “gele”. Instead, they plait their hairs in the same style, called “suku” throughout the period of the festival. For the procession to the stream, they put on white wrapper but on arrival from the stream, they change to their attractive and colourful wrappers to dance, such as “Aso oke”, lace and other beautiful materials. Similarly, the male devotees put on colourful dresses except the chief Priest of other deities that may tie white wrapper or any other colourful wrapper like the Oduduwa chief Priest. From the first day of the celebration till the last day, this is how the chief Priest and the devotees would be changing from one beautiful attire to another which makes the festival colourful and interesting.



Courtesy: <http://www.oduduwa-ned.com/yaruba.html>

Apart from the dress, there are other materials that are used that add colour and beauty to the festival. Among these other materials are:

***Irukere:*** This is made up of horse-tail. It may be white or black in colour, and it may be either short or long. It is believed that irukere belongs to Oduduwa originally, so it is used by Oduduwa chief Priest mainly during dancing periods, throughout the festival.

***Orere:*** This is an iron staff which is believed to be the staff of office. This is carried by the chief Priest during processions. They use it to bless people by dramatically touching the ground with it and giving it to the person they want to bless and who will also receive it with two hands while touching their chests with it three times without talking.

***Omo:*** This is a traditional native bell made of iron. It is carried by men who tie them by their sides, and run around with them, as they run, the bells will rattle and jingle. This is to announce to the people that Oduduwa festival is in progress. During procession, the carrier of

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 15:8 August 2015

Abiodun J. Macaulay, B.A. (Hons.), M.A.

Ritual as Theatre: An Analysis of Oduduwa Festival in Ikoru-Ekiti

this “Omo” would run ahead to announce the coming of Oduduwa. When people see him, they become immediately aware of the filing order. Similarly, when the devotees are coming back from the stream during the festival, it is these people that come to inform the chief Priest with their bells before he goes out to meet them.

***Eko-ooode:*** This is a type of feather from a type of bird called “Oode” (Parrot) or “Odide” in some places. It is red in colour. Not all the officers are allowed to use it, only those who have met all the requirements (that is, performing the necessary rituals) are allowed to use it for decorations at the festival.

***Efun and osun:*** These are traditional native powder mainly used by the Oduduwa chief Priest and other officers. “Efun” is white while “Osun” is red in colour. “Efun” is used to mark the body during processions but “Osun” is used to paint hands and feet. These make them to look more attractive throughout the festival period.

### **The Music**

Among the Yoruba race and Africa in general “ the concept of music is all – encompassing a sort of total art and what is referred to in the theatrical parlance as ‘total theatre’ made up of different spectacular acts...[like] the movement, the rhythm and the vocals” (Adedeji 2010:50). The Oduduwa festival being an original Yoruba cultural practice exploits the use of music to the fullest through drumming, singing, chanting and dancing.



Courtesy: <http://www.oduduwa-ned.com/gallery.html>

### ***The Drum Ensemble***

Both the drums and the drummers are essential at this festival. There are different types of drums with different types of drummers, beat and rhythm. This can be grouped into two different parts, that is, the traditional drums and the modern drums. Basically, the drums that are used mainly for this festival are: Ikarakara – it is also called “Gbedu” or “Iya ilu”. There is also “Gangan-un” which is also known as “Gangan”. Another one is “Agada Ode” and the last one is “Ipesi Awo” These drums are made of goat’s skin or antelope’s skin and there are professional drummers to handle them. Some of these professional drummers are invited from outside the town while some reside in the town permanently. In most cases, the drums are not to be danced to anyhow. There are specific dance steps to the rhythm without missing the beats, and when the beat changes, the dance steps must also change.

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 15:8 August 2015

Abiodun J. Macaulay, B.A. (Hons.), M.A.

Ritual as Theatre: An Analysis of Oduduwa Festival in Ikoro-Ekiti

The modern drums are the types of contemporary musical instruments that are used by the modern musician. Such as “Sekere”, “Dundun”, Jazz, piano and so on. These are used by different musicians that may either be invited or who may willingly come on their own to play for Oduduwa especially in the night for people’s enjoyment. In other words they are just meant to entertain people and there is no formality in the dance steps, hence their performance cannot be placed on the same level with the first group of drummers who are in the centre to co-ordinate the dance during ritual processes throughout the festival period. The drummers usually talk with the drums and communicate with the dancers for instance, if the drum says:

“Joruwa joruwa” – dance forward, dance forward

“Joreyin joreyin” – dance backward, dance backward. Then the dancers dance forward and backward as dictated by the drum-beat.

### ***The Songs***

This aspect also contributes greatly to this colourful occasion in the sense that it adds to the exciting moment and gives room for audience participation.

The songs at the festival can be classified into two:

- (1) The special songs
- (2) The general songs

The special songs are songs that are specifically meant for a particular event during the festival. In other words the special songs cannot be sung anywhere else except at the special occasion or during a particular procession that it is meant for. For examples:

Solo: *Olori Alade tomi oro i bo* (The crowned king is coming back from the festival’s stream)

Chorus: *Ugbe rire, ee gbe* (It will be accepted)

The above song is meant for the procession from the stream, where the water for the deities is fetched. This usually takes place on the second day of the festival, thus the song is used

to announce to the people that the worshippers have successfully come back from the stream and with the assurance that the deities will accept the rituals surrounding the fetching of the water. Thus, after this event, the song cannot just be sung again until the next festival when they will fetch the water again. It is not only at this occasion that special songs are sung. They are also at every ritual process and at the processions to and from a particular place such as the palace, the Orisanla's shrine and so on.

On the other hand, the general songs are songs that can be sung anytime and anywhere during the festival and no ritualistic meaning is attached to such songs. Both the devotees and the audience can sing these songs during the period of dancing and even after dancing. They are not meant for a specific set of people or a specific occasion. An example of the songs is:

*Solo:* Orisa nila leObamofin ni laye (The god possesses the land)

Orisa momo jemiYayo mona laye mi (Please do not let me misbehave in my life)

In general, the use of songs at this festival is very important, because of the impact it has on the festival as they perform specific functions to praise the deity, pray or at time form of warning to worshippers. They also offer avenue for audience participation making the festival more meaningful and more realistic.

### ***The Chants***

The chants serve as a stimulant to both the Oduduwa chief Priest who is representing the deity and all the other devotees. Chanting is normally done by women and they must utter or render it at every stage of the festival, at rituals, processions, dancing period and even during relaxation period. When chanting is done, it arouses their spirits and brings them closer to the deity and the deity closer to them. At times, when they are fully possessed by the spirit or whatever god they represent and they are acting beyond their control, they direct the chanting to the unseen spirit to relieve them and they will be relieved. For instance during the procession to the Oduduwa house on the "Itepe" day, at the last celebration, when the "Arunpe" who carries the "akara itepe" and leads the procession finds it difficult to raise her feet when she is about to

enter the house because of the Oduduwa spirit that is fully on her face. The women will start chanting:

“O Odi oo ,ofe, ofe, ofe ni e gbe o (Let the spiritual power of upliftness lift you up)  
Ogberi poju daaa” (Let the uninitiated look away)

Immediately, she will start to lift up her feet that has been glued to the ground one after the another. The chanters will continue repeating the chant until she finally enters. Such is the case with the praise chants when uttered by the chanters. The chanting makes the Oduduwa Priest happy and enables him to go deeper in the spiritual realm. Again, the praise chants enable the audiences to know much about the deity especially, when the story about him is told and when they talk about his power and his position among other deities and when they praise him concerning all the good deeds he has done.

### **The Significance of the Oduduwa Festival to Ikoru-Ekiti Town**

All the gods and goddesses in Yorubaland have their importance which makes the worshippers to feel their impact and thereby makes them devote their time and everything they have to serve or worship these gods or goddesses all the time. This is applicable, not only to the traditional worshippers alone but also to modern religious sects like Christian or Muslim whose adherent also believe and worship God because of His importance in their lives. In a similar vein, Oduduwa festival all over Yorubaland has its own impact. The importance of this festival in Ikoru can be looked at in two ways, first, on the worshippers or the devotees in particular and second, on the town in general. It is believed by the devotees that Oduduwa a deity can give answer to the prayer of a barren woman to have children. This has happened to many of them and they have extended it to the general world such that barren women from every nook and canny of the country would come during the festival to plead for children and when their prayer is answered, they become members of the devotees out of joy and believe such that they would bring the children to the annual festival, if possible for thanksgiving to show their appreciation at the shrine of Oduduwa.

It is also believed that Oduduwa deity can help to maintain good health and at the same time grant healing to the sick. The devotees also believe that the deity gives perfect protection to his own people and, it is therefore believed that after doing their best at the festival, the deity will hear them and protect them in their journeys throughout the year, beginning from that festival time when devotees have to travel to and fro, especially, devotees of the other deities from near and far who have come to celebrate with them. Also Oduduwa festival helps to foster unity among the traditional believers in general both in Ikoro-Ekiti and in its environs. This is because during the festival, the devotees of the other deities, such as Obatala, Sango, Oya, Ogun, Osun normally come around to celebrate with the devotees of Oduduwa, because of the unique position of Oduduwa among the deities. This allows them to interact freely during and after the festival. With the spirit of unity, the devotees are able to share with one another the problems facing them and also look for possible solutions among themselves.

In general, Oduduwa deity helps to bless the farm in order to yield good fruits during the year. It is believed that if the deities are annoyed with the town they may punish the town by not allowing the farm products to yield, thereby cause famine in the town for the year. This is one of the reasons why the chief Priest of the deity goes to the palace during the festival to offer intercessory prayers on behalf of the people of the town. Moreover, Oduduwa deity is believed to be able to resist any evil coming to the town that year, especially when the deity has fore-seen and prophesied what he has seen concerning the town, he then prescribes the sacrifice to be offered. If this is obeyed, the evil will be averted.

Like a human being, Oduduwa detests disobedience in all its ramifications. During this festival, he forewarns the evil doers (including the witches and wizards) about any evil plans they might have against the town in that year. If after necessary sacrifices they still persist at doing evil, then the result will be unbearable for them. Another significance of this festival is that it promotes culture. With Oduduwa festival, the Yoruba culture is brought closer to the people who will witness things physically especially for those that have never had the opportunity of knowing about culture or those who may have only heard about it from school. They would now see and appreciate the beauties or aesthetics in it. The festival also creates opportunity for family

re-union, misunderstanding and quarrels among devotees and inhabitants of the town. The festival period thus serves as a good occasion for settling such quarrels and misunderstandings.

### **Summary**

It is quite obvious that Oduduwa festival is not a ruse but a festival worthy of celebrating just like every other notable festival in other towns and countries. This is a festival that reminds the people of their past and promotes the heritage, norms and tradition of the Yoruba people as a whole. It is a festival that must not be allowed to go into extinction because if it does, then the culture is gone. Though we live in a modern and dynamic society at present where everything changes through civilization. Likewise people's attitude to traditional practices also undergoes changes, which can be observed from the Oduduwa festival as well. The impact of civilization is evident now in the mode of dressing and other significant aspects, For instance at the onset, the only outfit for the festival is white but nowadays, the old white uniform has given way to multi-coloured dresses. The use of the multi-coloured dress has added aesthetics and made the festival more colourful. The chief Priest uses most expensive of the modern clothing material such as Satin Lace, Organza, Jacquard, etc. The impact of civilization can also be felt in the area of worship during the festival. There are some sacrificial materials that are no longer in use today that have taken a new shape or another dimension. For instance, the major sacrificial animal at the festival used to be a special cow breed (Einla) but now, it is an ordinary cow that is being used.

Similarly, during the ritual, it used to be ashes that were being used in making a circle on the ground before adding any other sacrificial items. Today, salt has replaced ashes which have made the festival more acceptable to the people. Lastly, the influence of foreign religion like Islam or Christianity or traditional religion and especially festivals cannot be ignored. Traditional religion in Yorubaland has lost members terribly to the foreign religion because of strong evangelization by the foreign religion. By this the Oduduwa festival (cult) too is not left behind. To avert total extinction of this beautiful culture, the participants need to be encouraged in all ramifications, so that the festival can continue as to promote the cultural identity of the Ikoro-Ekiti people and the Yoruba race in general.

=====

## References

- Adedeji, Adewale.2010. “Yoruba Culture and Its Influence on the Development of Modern Popular Music in Nigeria” Unpublished PhD Thesis, The University of Sheffield, United Kingdom.
- Adedeji, Joel. A. 1981. “Alarinjo the Traditional Yoruba Travelling Theatre” in Yemi Ogunbiyi (ed). *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book*, Nigeria Magazine.
- Awuawuer, T.J. 2010. “Tiv Ritual Theatre Tradition: A Study of Ivom I Tiv and Ier Performances.” Unpublished M.A. Thesis. University of Ibadan.
- Bakary, T. 1972.*The Black African Theatre and Its Social Functions* (trans), Dapo Adelugba. (Ibadan University Press)
- Doki, A.G. 2006.*Traditional Theatre in Perspective; Signs and Signification in Igbe, Girinya and Kwagh-hir, Markurdi*: Aboki Publishers.
- Dotun, O. 2003. “An Introduction” in Ademola Dasylva (ed) *Dapo Adelugba on Theatre Practice in Nigeria*. Ibadan cultural Studies Group.
- Horn, A. 1981. “Ritual Drama and the Theatrical: The case of Bori Mediunship Spirit” in Yemi Ogunbiyi (ed). *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book*.1981. Nigeria Magazine.
- Mbiti, J.S.1975. *Introduction to African Religion*, London: Heinmann Educational Books Limited.
- Ogunba, O.1978. “Traditional African Festival Drama” in Oyin Ogunba and Abiola Irele(eds).*Theatre in Africa*, Ibadan University Press.
- Samovar, L.A (et al). 2009. *Communication between Cultures*. Wadsworth. U.S.A

## Oral interviews

Chief Owanikin Ayo

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 15:8 August 2015

Abiodun J. Macaulay, B.A. (Hons.), M.A.

Ritual as Theatre: An Analysis of Oduduwa Festival in Ikoro-Ekiti

Chief Omotola

Mrs. Omoboye Macaulay

Miss. Fadekemi Ayo

---

**Abiodun J. Macaulay**, B.A. (Hons), M.A.

Department of Performing and Film Arts

Elizade University

Ilara-Mokin

Ondo State

Nigeria

[deejammy00@yahoo.com](mailto:deejammy00@yahoo.com)