

Socio-Economic Implication of Ajabuere Rites in Owoland

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Abstract

The world as a whole is dynamic, society and people cannot remain static, changes occur from time to time. For the ancient philosopher Heraclitus, change is the only constant variable in the entire world. Thus he proposed that “you cannot step twice into the same river, for fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you” (Copleston, 1962). In accord with the above assertion, great changes have taken place in the world, especially in Africa, which have affected the African people socially, morally, politically, spiritually and educationally. For instance, the incursion of Christianity on the shores of Nigeria has forced some changes in our societies and people, such that some cultural practices have been thrown away because they were wrongly perceived as fetish, barbaric and uncivilised (Awolalu & Dopamu, 1979). These changes notwithstanding, some of our traditional practices have subsisted; they were able to surmount the threat posed by these foreign religions and practices, one of such practice is the *Ajabuere* dance which precedes burial ceremony in the ancient town of Owo. The Owo people, like other Yoruba people believe that death does not annihilate, that there is life after death, the *Ajabuere* dance is therefore perceived as an instrument that lure one into the bliss of after-life.

Key words: Ajabuere; Rites; Owoland; Socio-economic; After-life

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INTRODUCTION

At one time or the other each and every one of the living organism, must die. The death that will kill one, one does not know; and our attitude to this phenomenon is quite different. While some perceive death as an inevitable debt that must be paid by everyone and they await its coming with calm, others abhor the very thought of death and the fact that they will cease to exist one day. This sentiment was expressed by the philosopher Miguel De Unamuno in the *Tragic Sense of Life*, when he says “I do not want to die—no; I neither want to die nor do I want to die; I want to live forever and ever” (Graham, 1993, p. 15).

This sentiment is shared by the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy in his work *A confession*, he says

Today or tomorrow sickness and death will come to those I love or to me; nothing will remain but stench and worms. Sooner or later my affairs whatever they may be, will be forgotten, and shall not exist. Then why go on making any effort? (Graham, 1993, p.15)

This pessimistic view is, however, not shared by the Yoruba people of Owoland, who celebrate the death of the elderly with fun fare, through the rite called *Ajabuere*. According to Adelowo (1992), Rites are a means of bringing into the limelight the religious experience of a group of people. Rites, thus, constitute some kind of religious expression. They are a means of concretising one’s belief system. They are a means of expressing one’s experience of the supernatural world and the supernatural beings. In short and simple terms, they are acts of forms of worship or communion and communication between one and one’s objects of worship. This work focuses on the socio-economic impact of *Ajabuere rites* on the people of Owo. Towards this end the paper is arranged as follows, Section 1 is the introduction above; Section 2 is an overview of the town, Owo, in the traditional society. Section 3 discusses the *Ajabuere* dance in Owoland, Section 4 focuses socio-economic implication

of the rite, and the last Section is the conclusion and recommendation. This work relies on written and archival documents and oral testimonies and participation.

1. THE OWO TRADITIONAL SOCIETY

Owo, the headquarters of Owo local government is forty-eight kilometres east of Akure, the Ondo State capital and four hundred kilometres northeast of Lagos, the former Nigeria federal capital territory. The town spreads over an area of about twelve square kilometres. The vast majority of the people of Owo kingdom are of Yoruba descent. Owo signifies respect or honour. The people lay claim to Ile-Ife, the first home of the Yoruba as their cradle of origin, but they have strongly marked Benin influence in their cultural practices that many scholars have been tempted to say that the whole area must have been subject to Benin civilisation. Owo town was founded by the first *Olowo Oba Ojugbelu Arere (Alias Onialagaye)* and the 12 *Ighare Iloros* who are the Prime Traditional Council of Owo. The name of Owo was derived from *Omo* Owo the first *Olowo* who was one of the sons of *Olofin Oduduwa* of Ife. Hence, the *Iloros* are called "*Araufe*" and *Onufe*". (Literally meaning the person from Ife) (Ashara, 2010; Babalola, 1992).

The town was made up of four quarters namely: *Iloro, Igboroko, Ehinogbe* and *Isaipen*; headed by *Akowa, Ojumu, Osere,* and *Ajana* respectively. During the reign of *Olowo Adedipe Elewuokun* a fifth quarter- *Ijebu* was created in Owo. *Ojomo* title was brought from the *Iloros* being one of the 12 *Ighares* which migrated with *Olowo* from Ife. Owo was able to maintain virtual independence from the neighbouring kingdom of Benin, but was occasionally required to give tribute. The transmission of courtly culture flowed in both directions between the Benin and the Owo kingdoms. The skill of Owo's ivory carvers was also appreciated at the Court of Benin (Ashara, 2010; Babalola, 1992).

The people lay emphasis on hard work, while laziness is discouraged. Though they are a religious people, they believe that a person could be devout and at the same time face his occupation with all seriousness. A man must work, try his best and then rely on the supernatural for blessings. A person who propitiated the divinities without working hard was doomed as a popular saying show:

Use ohun ogungun use

Work is the medicine for poverty

Ene Yuse be se whoever is poor

Dumaborisa let him not worship the divinities

Oran nee kuku kan toosa

nothing concerns the divinities

Ko ke boorisa he may worship the divinities

Dubobatala maa he may worship Obatala

O di je suse oje

it is not until he does a profitable job

Dun jeun that he would eat.

The kingdom of Owo occupied a large area. The people inhabit nine major towns of: Owo, Idasen, Iyere, Usuada, Emure-ile, Uso Amurin, Upenmen and Upele. The people of these towns and villages speak the same dialect except for the people of Uso, who as a result of their proximity to Akure, speaks the dialect of the Akure people. The Owo people are predominantly farmers who plant yam, cassava, cocoyam, maize, beans and vegetables for local consumption. Cash crops such as cocoa, kola and cotton are also grown (Babalola, 1992).

2. THE AJABUERE

The *ajabuere* (*ajabue* for short) originated in Owoland prior to the import of western civilisation into Africa. The dance is performed as part of the funeral rite for the dead. In Owo-land, everybody believe in the after-life, and they also have the knowledge that the after-life could be in heaven (*orun rere*) or hell (*orun buburu*), but everyone seeks to enter into heaven, and there are certain rites to usher one into heaven one of such rites is *ajabuere*. *Ajabuere* is done in honour of a deceased by his/her children and relatives. In the past, young children were the ones who dance the *ajabue*, because it is believed that children are sinless and they therefore reinforce the holiness of heaven.

Before the invention of local chemicals for the preservation of the dead and hospital mortuaries, when a person dies, (an elderly person who died a good or natural death) the person is usually buried on the day he died. The relatives and children will make a coffin inlaid with one of the Owo traditional clothes such as "*Asigbho, Sheghoshen, Olori-meji, Ainose, Ugbero, kehojo,* and *Iketa* the deceased is placed in the coffin and they (relatives and children) carry him /her and dance round the community in company of drumming and a great fun fare, after which the deceased is brought back into the compound for burial and the guests and drummers are thereafter entertained.

In the present day however, the *ajabuere* dance is performed at the convenience of the relative and children of the deceased, it is not mandatory that this rite dance be performed on the day the person dies, but it is mandatory for the rite to be performed before a person is laid to mother earth, for it is believed that the dead person cannot be said to have been buried properly without this rite; therefore, some people may keep their dead in the mortuary for months before burying the person, what is important is that it is performed. Also, in the contemporary period it is common for the relatives of the deceased to perform the dance with a special cloth, some use *aso-oke*, some print vests on which the picture of the deceased is inscribed, but the commonest attire for the occasion is *Ankara*, a material made from cotton.

3. TABOOS GOVERNING THE RITUAL

Mutual co-existence exemplifies in individual and collective well-being is required in every society, because the action of an individual is both capable of affecting the person who committed the act, and other members of the society. Therefore, the *ajabuere* ritual dance in Owoland like most rites in the Yoruba society is guided with some dos and don'ts. The taboo attached to the *ajabuere* is that it must not be performed on an *ikoko* market day. The market is one of the major markets in Owo, it is observed every five days. *Ikoko* market use to be one of the markets situated at the outskirts of the town in order to serve as monitoring spots in case an attack is being launched against the town by neighbouring towns or villages. A. O. Olatunde (personal communication, March 11, 2011), Olufawoye (personal communication, March 16, 2011), J. G Adesida (personal communication, September 10 2012); A. O. Abiodun (personal communication, June 20, September 30, 2013). The market got its name from the fact that the major item sold in the market was pottery of different kinds, but almost all items are sold in the market now. The reason adduced for the taboo is that the sound of the drums beaten by the people and the merry making could distract the watchmen who are in the market. However, according to another interviewee, Mrs. A. O Abiodun, *ajabuere* is not danced on the *ikoko* market day because the market used to be a ritual market.

The *lagholagho* and *ogagango* drums are usually beaten for the *ajabuere* dance, these drums are usually composed of chains and gongs and the drum is never beaten on *ikoko* market day. As the drum is being beaten, the children, relatives and well-wishers dance to the rhythm of the music and they spray money on the drummers; after this, the throng returns to the house of the deceased where they are entertained. The degree of entertainment of the guest is usually a function of the affluence of the relatives or survivors. The expenses are so heavy that the relatives sometimes have to resort to borrowing; people try to outshine others just to prove to the people that they are wealthy, and so they enter into debts which they are unable to defray for many years. Some people sell valuables for the purpose of performing this rite and the burial ceremony, which have severe consequences on the living relations, such as non-payment of their children/wards school fees.

4. THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPLICATION OF AJABUERE RITES

In Nigeria, the family is extremely important. The Nigerian families may not be the epitome of indestructible knit, but there is still that strong family bond which is mostly described by the saying that blood is thicker than water; and fuelled by strong societal traditional norms (Labeodan, 2002). The importance of the family in the

society is seen during the *ajabuere* dance, as the throng dances, they make a stop from time to time at homes of members of the deceased family, the family of orientation, that is, the parental family in which the deceased grew; and the family of procreation, the family the individual formed by marrying and having children. Wherever they make a stop, members of the deceased family offer the throng whatever item of entertainment that could be afforded, which the people accept with much joy.

The point here is that the rite serves as a point of unification of the families which the deceased was a part of, in the land, thereby encouraging communalism which is the hallmark of societal arrangement in the traditional Nigerian society. One can then understand the import of the phrase, (which some people at times use sarcastically) that burial ceremony is a festival in Owoland.

This burial rite also has outstanding economic impact, both on the Owo people, and on the general national economy. Celebration of *ajabuere* has contributed to the sustenance and improvement of the traditional weaving industry that produces the *aso-oke* that most families use for *aso-ebi*; and also it has helped in keeping the 'almost folded-up' Nigerian textile industry alive, because the Ankara material that people use for *ajabuere* dance is usually bought by so many people for it is inexpensive, colourful (Soyibo, 2013) and easy to wear in the Nigerian climate. The economic impact of this rite is also felt in the 'burgeoning catering industry'. Nationally now celebrants employ caterers to prepare food for parties, many of these caterers employ the services of the teeming unemployed youths as help in the 'kitchen' and as servers on the party grounds. This rite, like any other partying culture has helped to keep in business some of the manufacturing companies like the producers of warmers and coolers in which food and drinks are preserved. It has kept in business too, the traditional drummers and the different bands that play at parties; and even rental businesses, such as chairs and canopies (Soyibo, 2013).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Ajabuere rite is one of the cultural practices in Owo, Ondo State, Nigeria, which have withstood the incursion of colonial rule as well as of the foreign religions of Islam and Christianity, for most people who celebrate their dead in this present dispensation are adherents of either religion. Their feelings about the significance and importance of *ajabuere*, engendered in them by their earlier belief system do not appear to be altered by the new beliefs.

In the light of this, and the fact that it enhances social cooperation, as well as empowers the people of Owo economically like any other 'partying culture' we submit that the rite should be encouraged by all and sundry, but we equally extend a word of caution to those who

celebrate the dead at the expense of the living. It is general knowledge in the land that without *ajabuere*, one has not completed the burial of his/her aged dead; and as a result some people in order to celebrate it, incur debts that could handicap the smooth running of the family after the burial, such as having problems paying children school fees. Again, people should see the rite as one of the celebrations which accompanies the passage of life, and not as a forum for competition, as many people try to outshine others in the celebration of *ajabuere*.

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