



Women in Imolè Festival in Àkókó Area of Oñdó State, South West, Nigeria

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Abstract

Much work had been carried out on the role of women in Yorùbá traditional festivals. However, sufficient attention had not been given to female-dominated festivals especially in Àkókó area of Oñdó State, South-West, Nigeria. This study examines the role and place of women in the society as depicted in Imolè festival (a female-dominated festival) in the identified geographical location. The theoretical framework is based on traditionalist approach and womanist theory. Traditionalist approach deals with the culture of the society while womanism focuses on women and their rights in the society. Our findings show that women play a very significant and relevant role in the religious life of their people as ritual specialists, food providers, entertainers and peace-loving people. The paper concludes that women are not evil objects; they are created for good and harmony of human life. It is therefore suggested that women should see the traditional image of the women as depicted in Imolè festival as a challenge to womanhood, and in particular the Nigerian women. Women should maintain the few good attributes of uprightness and vivacity and should use woman diplomacy productively.

Key words: Imolè Festival; Yèyémolè; Women; Cult; Female-dominated festivals

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INTRODUCTION

There are various divinity-related traditional festivals in Yorùbáland most of which are celebrated on yearly basis. All the festivals can be grouped according to the sex of the initiates; there are festivals celebrated by men (male-dominated festivals), festivals celebrated by both men and women (male-female-dominated festivals) and festivals celebrated by women (female-dominated festivals). Although, much work had been carried out on the various festivals, yet, there are no sufficient works on female-dominated festivals especially in Àkókó area of Oñdó State, South-West, Nigeria. The importance of women in the society cannot be over-emphasized. This work therefore, investigates Imolè festival (one of the female-dominated festivals) in Àkókó area of Oñdó State, South-West, Nigeria to establish the place and role of women therein.

Many researchers have investigated into the place and role of women in female-dominated festivals in Yorùbáland. Mbiti, J. S. (1988, pp.69-82) asserts that women play significant roles in religious activities of African society. Mbiti believes that one of the areas where this role is prominent is in offering prayers for their families in particular and their communities in general. He further explains that in many areas they act as women priest (priestesses). Ilésanmí, T. M. (1989, pp.80-89) depicts that women are prominent in cult, singing, chanting, drumming, and taking part in cult of *Egbé-Èwe* in the olden days. Àyántáyò, E. F. (2006, p.115) explains that *Èwe-Sùkú*, an ancient socio-religious practice among the Ìgbómìnà Òşun, controls social misbehaviour like sexual immorality, indecent dressing, and parental irresponsibility. Ìdòwú-Òshó (2008, p.217) establishes that women, known as the *Jàluwà*, headed by the *Ambasu* play a prominent role in the success of *Orò* cult. Dangel (2008) reveals that *Obitun*, a bridal dance in Oñdó town

is supposed to be performed for every maiden in the town before she gets married. The people in this community believe that if the ceremony is not performed for any particular girl, she might end up being childless.

From the fore-going, it is depicted that there are female-dominated festivals in Yorùbáland and that women play important roles in the festivals. It is however observed that there had been no sufficient work on Yorùbá female-dominated festivals especially in Àkókó area of Oñdó State, South-West, Nigeria to the best of our knowledge. This work therefore, investigates Imolè festival being one of the female-dominated traditional festivals in the identified geographical location in order to display the role and place of women therein.

1. IMOLÈ DIVINITIES

Imolè or Irúnmolè divinities are set of divinities coming down from heaven to deliver Olódùmarè's message (Àràbà, 1978, p.5). Imolè or Irúnmolè are spirits that are no more than personification of natural forces and phenomenon. They are associated with hills, mountains, rivers, rocks, caves, trees, brooks, lakes or thick forests. Although they are not confined to the physical objects in which they reside since they have unlimited mobility and can move anywhere. The divinities are intermediaries between God and man, and they are ready at hand. God is frequently worshipped through them and they receive day-to-day sacrifices. They have temples, shrines, priests, priestesses and devotees. People, therefore, regard them as the convenient channels through which they can reverence the exaltedness of the Almighty.

There is annual festival in connection with each divinity or ancestor (Ògúnbà, 1978, p.3). Awólálú, J. O. and Dopámú, P. A. (1979, p.149) explain that such annual festival is primarily:

To thank the divinity connected with the festival for its past blessing and protection, to ask for his blessings on the worshippers' trade and other activities and to propitiate him that all may be well with them throughout the year.

A period is separated once a year for such festival. This paper concerns itself with Imolè having rivers as their emblems because they are the ones regarded as female divinities and their worshippers are mainly women. The festivals associated with them will henceforth be called female-dominated festivals.

Imolè festival comes up once a year and is celebrated the same way in towns like Òkà, Ìkàré, Arigidi, Àfin, Ìrùn, Òbà, Òkèàgbè, Àkùngbà, Ùgbè, all in Àkókó area of Oñdó State, South-West of Nigeria. Generally, the festival is called Imolè festival but each of the aforementioned towns has a particular name for its own Imolè. For instance, we have *Umalè Adònàmásùn* at Òkà, *Umalè Aládé* at Àfin, *Èrìsà Iyè* at Arigidi, *Umalè Àtìbà* at Àkùngbà, *Umalè*

Oríyeríye at Ìrùn, *Umalè Abu (Òkè-léyìn-Ùgbè)* at Ùgbè. Imolè festival in all the towns mentioned above would be examined in order to establish the place and role of women in Yorùbá society as depicted in Imolè festival.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical foundation of this article is based on traditionalist criticism and womanist theories. Traditionalist criticism deals with the culture of the people. Ògúnjímí, B. (1989, p.78) believes that some proponents of this theory are of the opinion that culture is either static or dynamic. As far as we are concerned, culture is neither static nor totally dynamic, it changes gradually, for instance, there may be certain areas of Yorùbá culture that are no longer relevant to the contemporary society, such areas could be modernized for instance, under Yorùbá traditional marriage, parents no longer choose husbands for their daughters as they used to do. Also, there could be good aspects of the same culture that needs to be retained like teenagers keeping virginity till marriage. What we are saying is that culture may not change totally but it can be modernized. There is nothing bad if modernization is introduced into any Yorùbá customs that could make her look barbaric and outdated to the outside world. The society should move with time.

Since Imolè festival constitutes part of Yorùbá culture and traditionalist criticism deals with the culture of the Yorùbá people, it is assumed that the theory will be useful in analyzing the place and role of women in Imolè festival.

The womanist theory is the totality of feminine self-expression, self-retrieval and self-assertion in positive cultural ways (Kóláwolé, 1997, p.24). Offen, K. (1988, p.133) states that feminism started in the year 1848 in America in Seneca Falls. African feminism was coined from it under the name 'womanism'. Womanism is based on life and custom of the African society. It sees both male and female as co-workers to find solutions to any societal problems. It is a way of fishing out women's right and accords them the due rights. Womanism does not deny the biological God-given traits and characteristics, but rejects the manipulation of such traits to hold women down (Kóláwolé, 1997, p.196). Adébòwálé, O. (2005, p.34) urges women:

not to accept the constraints imposed on them by culture, and encourages them to fight for their rights in a way that will make meaningful progress and advancement possible for them.

One of the ways to do this is to investigate what women do in the society. Since womanism is concerned with women affairs, and Imolè festival is being celebrated by women; we are of the opinion that womanism will broaden our knowledge of the place and the role of women in Imolè festival.

3. THE ROLE AND PLACE OF WOMEN IN IMOLÈ FESTIVAL

Imolè festival depicts woman as spiritual head. Investigation shows that in Imolè festival, woman is the *Yèyémolè*. *Yèyémolè* is the spiritual head. Her place in any Imolè festival is very important; she performs rituals, for instance, it is learnt that *Yèyémolè* of Ìkàrè performs rituals at Imolè shrine situated at Òsèlè market at Ìkàrè before the commencement of Imolè festival, *Yèyémolè* Umalè Aládé worships other initiate's *Ori*¹ (the inner head) before the commencement of Imolè festival at Àfin. At the shrine, it is also observed that *Yèyémolè* performs the ritual after *àwòrò* (the male priest) has killed either ram or pig for the rituals; for instance, at

Òkà Dialect

Iye wa òrìsà-gbòòdùn
 Odón o nú wa katse
 Ohun a í tse íí o
 Má to hon wá o
 Má tógun kó wa o
 Àwon okùnrin wa íí gòògun
 Tún wan kéré kárùn wa o
 Odón ká jo, obì tie tse o
 O mà tú wa gbádon o
 Hón ma wa gbádòn o
 Ajùre wa tse o
 Tó o rò wa orùn o
 Àwon ukú dii-dii-di, a tà fè o
 A májùre yíí wá toro
 Uhun wàn íí san-an
 Hún oma wa, oko wa àtara wa
 Tó o rò èèkun ùlú wa orùn o

Gloss

*Our mother*² *òrìsà gbòòdùn*
The festival ordered by you
Is what we are celebrating
May it not have adverse effect on us
May we not be taken into captivity
Our men that are away to the front
Let them return with slaves and property
We are in another year, this is your kola nut
Let it be well with us
Let it be well with our children
This is our hen
Let it be well with us
We reject untimely death
We bring this hen to ask for
All good things
For our children, husbands, and ourselves
Let it be well with every member of our community

The importance of the ritual is to ask Imolè for peaceful celebration of the festival and to ask for their needs. In Yorùbá society, rituals are performed to appreciate the divinity for his protection and provision of good things in their lives. They also ask for further protection and other needs (Adéoyè, 1985, p.79). It is observed that every member of the community enjoys the advantages of the prayer rendered by each *Yèyémolè*. In this way women are the mouth piece for the whole community where such festivals take place.

Imolè festival depicts women as seers. It is learnt that elderly women among the initiates in Imolè *Oriyeriye* festival at *Ìrùn* that gathered in *Upa*³ for seven days before the commencement of the festival relay messages concerning their lives, the social life of the members of

the shrine of Imolè *Àtìbà* at *Àkùngbá*, *Yèyémolè* offers the pig killed by *àwòrò*, white hen, eggs, snails, red oil and *tètè* leaves (spinach) as sacrifice to *Imolè Àtìbà*. It is learnt that such sacrifice is to appease *Imolè Àtìbà* to forgive every member of *Àkùngbá* community for the sin committed by their fore-fathers. Woman splits kola nut and pour libation to hear from Imolè. Thus women are seen as ritual specialists.

In addition, while performing rituals either at the beginning of the festival or at any other time during the period of the festival, *Yèyémolè* prays for the initiates, their husbands, children, warriors and the community at large as depicted in the prayer rendered by *Yèyémolè Umalè Adònámásùn* at *Òkà* as follows:

their community and their way of life from *Imolè* divinity to the community. The advantage of this prophecies is not for the initiates alone, it is also for the members of the community where such festival takes place; it is learnt that *Imolè* may direct the community to perform certain rituals to avert evil, *Imolè* may expose the evil doers in that town or tell the initiates what to do so that wicked ones could be exposed. *Imolè* can even invite an individual outside the initiates to tell him/her the cause(s) of his/her problem and proffer solution to such problem.

Imolè festival depicts women as a provider of food and drink. Investigation shows that *Yèyémolè* provides food and drink for all initiates, their drummers and the young boys that clear the surroundings of *Imolè* shrines throughout the period of *Imolè* festival in each of the

¹*Ori*: The Yorùbá believe that *Ori* (the inner head) is the symbol of predestination. Every man's *Ori* is regarded as his personal god who is expected to be more interested in his personal affairs than the other gods who are regarded as belonging to everybody. As a god, *Ori* is worshipped and propitiated by the Yorùbá.

²The initiates believe that *Imolè* divinity is female hence they refer to her as mother.

³*Upa*: The elderly women among the initiates remain under close door where they sing until they have ecstatic experiences and possession by the divinity. At this time, they speak the language that is understood by the initiates only. A possessed devotee relays messages from the divinity.

towns where *Imolè* festival takes place. For example, *Yèyémolè Ìkàré* provides food for thirty days, *Yèyémolè Òkà* for four market days (thirteen days), *Yèyémolè Arigidi* for eighteen days. Yorùbá culture expects man to provide food for the family (Ládélé, T. A. A. Mustapha, I. A., Awórindé, O., Oyèrindé, O. & Oládàpò, O. (1986, p.137). It is expected of every woman to prepare the food for the consumption of the members of the family (Adéjùmò, 2002, pp.31-32). Women provide food for both men and women during *Imolè* festival, women also prepare the food. The behaviour of women concerning food during *Imolè* festival belies the thought of some members of Yorùbá community that women are lazy. It also depicts that women do what Yorùbá culture expects of men only.

Imolè festival depicts women as healers. It is revealed that water fetched from *Imolè* shrine located in the bush once a day through out the period covered by the festival is given to barren women, pregnant women, sick infants and children. Barren women are able to produce children, sick infants and children recover from their illness, and pregnant women are delivered of healthy babies. In this way, women are depicted as healers. It is learnt that herbalists and native doctors charge exorbitant prices and collect materials from people for this type of work whereas the *Imolè* initiates collect nothing from the people. In addition, the water is used to ward off epidemic in the community, for instance, it is depicted that during *Umalè Aládé* festival at Ìrùn, the initiates sprinkle the

water from *Imolè* shrine over their land to ward off epidemic in the society.

Imolè festival depicts women as spokespersons. Investigation shows that elderly women among the initiates (those that are involved in Òrírí⁴ cult) in the community where *Imolè* festival is being celebrated are called upon to offer sacrifices at *Imolè* shrine situated in the bush to appease *Imolè* whenever there are calamities in the society while the king or the community takes care of the financial aspect of the sacrifice. It is learnt that at such time, the request of the community is always granted. For instance, it is learnt that if the sacrifice is offered because of artificial drought that is believed to have been caused by evil people, or the wrath of God, the locality where the sacrifice is offered experiences a down-pour even before the elderly women get back home.

Imolè festival depicts women as entertainers. Investigations show that in towns like Àfin and Àkùngbá, women drum during *Imolè* festival. They use drums made of pots. It is learnt that most people come to witness the festival purposely to watch the women-drummers. In addition to drumming, women dance and they are the majority among the spectators. Different songs are rendered during *Imolè* festival. Apart from the fact that such songs are entertaining, they also add glamour to the festival. Most songs are to give reverence to a particular *Imolè* being worshipped in such community as depicted in the *Imolè* songs below:

Aoro gbobi pe
 O o rawa a da'male
 A mà seyí hún 'Malè
 Ú wa ráyè yóko
 Ú wa ráyè yómi
 À mà seyí hún 'Malè
 Ara Tóówo,
 Oyinbo ni 'Malè re o
 Ògbèrè maidan 'Molè
 Àwòrò ni í sorò
 Àwòrò ní í sorò
 Èè éé ògbòrògòdò *Imolè*
 Oní bá dan ó, ò mò be orí

The priest, accept cola nut and split it
We are not the one that create Imolè
We shall perform this for Imolè
To allow us to go to farm
To allow us to go to the brook
We shall perform this for Imolè (Umalè Adònàmasùn at Òkà)
Hello, Tóówò (name of a person)
Your Imolè is a white man (Òrìṣà-Iyè at Arigidi)
Non-initiate, never you tempt Imolè (Umalè Aládé at Àfin)
Àwòrò (the priest) is the one celebrating
Àwòrò (the priest) is the one celebrating (Umalè Abu at Ùgbè)
Mighty Imolè,
Behead whoever tempts you (Umalè Oriyeriye at Ìrùn)

Most of these songs express people's feelings of joy and thanksgiving. They convey the faith of the worshippers about their divinity, their assurance and hopes with reference to the hereafter. In most communities in Yorùbáland, men are noted for drumming.

In *Imolè* festival, women control *Imolè* cult. During the *Imolè* festival, elderly women ranging from 2-6 in numbers (depending on the number of female elders

allowed by culture in each of the localities where *Imolè* festival is being celebrated) take part in *Imolè* cult. The ceremony is performed in the nude. The women move from *Yèyémolè*'s house to the boundary between their town and the next town before throwing the cowries used during prayer session and *imù* (grass) used when fetching water away. Neither *Àwòrò* (male priest) nor any other initiate is allowed to see those going to *òrírí* (unseen).

⁴*Òrírí* indicates what is forbidden to see. It does not refer to a particular place. This is the last rite in *Imolè* festival and it marks the end of the festival in each locality where such festival takes place. At this time, the chiefs among the women including the *Yèyémolè* perform the sent-forth rite in the nude.

Apart from the fact that the rite ends *Imolè* festival in that locality, those things like cowries and *imù* (grass) that were thrown away by the elderly women connote the removal of death, loss and calamities from the society. In this way, *Imolè* cult debunks a Yoruba adage which says “Awo burúkú lobinrin lè se...” “*Women are capable of only vicious secrecy*” (Sheba, 2006, p.84) since *Imolè* cult is to remove calamities from the society where *Imolè* festival is being celebrated.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, it is established that women, in addition to having an intimate knowledge and experience of the spiritual world, play within the religious background, a very significant and relevant role in the religious life of their people as ritual specialists, prophetesses, provider of food and drink, healers, entertainers, and peace-loving people. Womanist theory employed reveals that the Yorùbá belief that ability to lead is not of women causes the employment of *Àwòrò* in *Imolè* festival since *Àwòrò* does not take part in *òrìrì* performance; the sent-forth ceremony of *Imolè* festival.

From the fore-going, it is depicted that, women are not evil objects; they are created for good and for the harmony of human life. It is therefore proposed that the traditional image of women as depicted in *Imolè* festival throws a challenge to womanhood, and in particular the Nigerian women to maintain their few good attributes of uprightness and vivacity and to use their diplomacy productively.

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