

Humanistic Visions in Ekiti Cultural Festivals: An exploration of Olua festival in Osi-Ekiti community

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Abstract

Cultural Festivals all over the world are recognized as identity signatures of the people to which the festivals belong. As an intangible aspect of the people's cultural heritage, cultural festivals depict the norms, belief systems, myths, legends, and traditions of the people. As such, to grasp a people's worldview and humanistic visions, a study of such people's cultural festivals is imperative. The Olua cultural festival of the Osi-Ekiti community in Ido-Osi Local government area of Ekiti State provides rich repertory of the cultural heritage of Ekiti people, and their humanistic visions in particular. This study explored the humanistic visions of the Ekiti people through the prism of the primordial Olua cultural festivals of Osi-Ekiti people. The study was achieved through a combination of interviews and participant-observation research tools of qualitative method. Findings included comments by devotees and participants that Olua festival promotes unity, progress and cohesion among the people and their neighbours, provides spiritual harmony between the living and the dead thereby guaranteeing healing, breakthrough, spiritual protection and fulfillment for the adherents. A promotion and preservation of Olua festival and its likes across the state through grants by corporate bodies and government's support are recommended to promote unity, progress and development in the state.

Keywords: Humanity, Festivals, Culture, Ethnography, Visions.

Background to Study

Cultural festivals across the globe are traditional activities that are identity signatures and reservoir of the cultural heritage of the people who organize, perform and participate in such activities. Participants in cultural festivals need not necessarily be custodians of the culture that birthed the festival but organizers and performers are usually the owners and exhibitors of the cultural heritage that the festival portray, promote and preserve.

Culture as the totality of a people's way of life embodies the people's perceptions about humanity. Humanity, in its primary definition according to the Oxford Learners dictionary, is the quality of being kind to people and animals by making sure that they do not suffer more than is necessary. We deepen our understanding of humanity further by seeing it in the light of the quality of being humane. To be human is actually to be

imperfect or vulnerable and needing help. It also connotes having empathy, affection or sympathy for fellow beings. Humanity is that concept that binds all humans together as one entity needing one another in virtually all ways, for survival.

Festivals are communal products that are rooted in a people's culture. As such, festivals portray those qualities that make the people human, aspects of their culture that exhibit humanity and thus preach as well as promote humanistic Visions. By finding out those aspects of an African people's culture that preach and promote humanity through their cultural festivals we are able to establish that there are aspects of African cultures that embody humanity. We equally would be able to dispel some erroneous notions allegedly held by religious fanatics and racists brainwashed by imperialist sentiments that African cultures are replete with savage practices that are inhuman.

Nature, Concept and Origin of African Festivals

As an intangible aspect of a people's culture, cultural festivals feature ways of life, mainly primordial ways of life that are unique to a people who own the festival. This is because festivals originated from the cultural practices of man. It is basically a cultural manifestation of a people.

This explains why anyone can grasp the worldview of a people through their cultural festivals. As an offshoot or culmination of several earliest efforts by man to control, understand and manage his universe, cultural festival has its source from the rituals which the earliest man attached to several of his major activities which were created to control, manage and understand his universe. Several literatures have linked communal festivals to the origin of drama or theatre. This is as a result of the fact that festivals have theatrical as well as dramatic elements.

Writing on '*Alarinjo: The Traditional Yoruba Traveling Theatre*', Joel Adedeji establishes that festivals have dramatic or theatrical elements. He noted that Nigerian traditional theatre, particularly the Alarinjo theatre, had its roots from the cultic rituals/festivals of the Egungun (masquerade) cult which developed later into widespread communal festivals, thus he said: "*The Alarinjo Theatre first emerged from dramatic roots of the Egungun (masquerade) as ancestor worship during the reign of Alaafin Ogbolu who acceded to the throne at Oyo Ighoho about 1590 as a court entertainment*". (221).

Corroborating Adedeji's historic recount, Yemi Ogunbiyi cited MJC Echeruo's argument on the Relativist School of thought which holds that cultural festivals and rituals have dramatic elements. He said:

“Echeruo argues that until the ritual content of Igbo festival (for example, Mbom-Ama and Odo festivals) is forced “to yield its story”. The dramatic content of these festivals will remain subsumed in their “ritual purity”. Since ritual is a dead

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end, “what is needed is to ...expand ritual into life and give that life a secular base”(6).

With the views of Ogunbiyi above, it could be established that festivals have dramatic elements of role play, costuming, spectacle and setting among others. Rituals were actually precedents to festivals and also became part of the festivals. Festivals are cultural celebrations of the primordial and memorable traditions, norms, and values of a people. They are seasonal as they serve to preserve certain cultural practices, promote such practices and also celebrate them.

Rituals were enacted by earliest men to manage and control some elemental and regular occurrences or features of nature, which are the raining seasons, animals behaving in their own peculiar and instinctive manners, dry season, as well as times of bountiful harvests after activities of farming. The earliest man reasoned that some elemental forces must have been behind these natural occurrences and features and since they wanted these things to continue as they were enjoying them, they began enacting rituals meant to appease those forces they believed or perceived were responsible for those occurrences. In the process, they imitate natural gestures and movements of features of nature and creatures such as animals, movement of the waters among others. This, the earliest men’s imitation of nature developed into rituals of appeasement and other rites of passage. These culminated into elaborate activities of festivals which are till today being deployed to mark specific or special seasonal or natural occurrences or phenomenon.

Corroborating the views being expressed about the nature and definition of festivals, the American Heritage Dictionary in 2009 defined festivals as: “...*occasions for feasting or celebration, especially a day or time of religious significance that recurs at regular intervals or an often regularly recurring program of cultural performance, exhibition or competitions*. In the same stream of thought, Grace Lawrence-Hart writing on Festivals: Catalyst for Peace in Nigeria, opines that:

“Festivals whether religious, cultural or secular play a very essential role in any local community, because it helps to develop the pride and identity of a people. Festivals provide an opportunity for the local communities to develop and share their culture, it showcases values and beliefs held by the individuals in a local community and provide opportunity for members of the local community to exchange experiences and information.”(1)

Lawrence-Hart’s views about festivals further stressed the functional nature of cultural activity as capable of strengthening communal cohesion and promoting acculturation which are part of factors that promote and preserve humanity. Another school of thought conceives of festivals as religious obligations. In this light, festivals are understood as religious ceremonies necessitated by tradition.

Origin of Oluwa festival in Osi-Ekiti

To the custodians of the Oluwa festival in Osi-Ekiti, the festival is as old as the beginning of their existence. Every elderly people interviewed in the town would reveal that their fore fathers of several generations past had celebrated Oluwa and handed its orature, traditions and precepts among others to the next generation. No one could say categorically that the festival started at a particular year. They simply tell the Researcher that: ‘*Our forefathers handed the festival over to us.*’

Oluwa is a short form of what in Yoruba tongue is called *Oluwa*, which in English translation means our Lord. Thus, in the dialect of the people of Ekiti, particularly in such communities as Osi-Ekiti, Igbole, and Iropora Ekiti all in Ido-Osi Local Government Area (LGA) of the state, and Awo in Ifelodun/Irepodun LGA, Oluwa simply means *one who is our Lord*. Oluwa, according to the natives of these communities is synonymous with the Almighty. It is a short coinage of ‘*Oluwa*’, which translates to ‘*the Almighty*’ in Yoruba tongue. Such communities have Oluwa festival being celebrated from February to September of every year.

Writing on the festival, Wole Balogun in a newspaper report, said:

“The people who are the custodians of Oluwa festival seemed to equate the deity to some Supreme Being or a capable representative of the Supreme Being or the Almighty and as such they respect and honour the deity as if it were God Almighty or His able representative who visits them on yearly basis.

At such occasion of the festival, which is either February or September of each year depending on a date preferred by any of community where the festival is being celebrated, the people of the town and their well wishers or friends as well as neighbours from far and near gather in high expectation and spirit to see how the deity would appear, perform its ritual dance, pronounce spiritual blessings and then disappear before their eyes into the nether world according to belief of the people.”

Oluwa festival according to the monarch of Osi-Ekiti, Oba Agunbiade Ladiran, had existed as early as the existence of the town and in fact the existence of man himself. Speaking about the origin of Oluwa festival in an interview he granted the Researcher during the 2018 edition of the festival in the town, Oba Agunbiade said:

“In every society in Yoruba land, there are inherited traditional cultures that have myths which constitute the festivals of such society. These myths are the sacred and secret aspects of the cultures and any attempt to take these myths, its secrecy, and potency will be resisted by our people. The sacredness of the festival lies in the inherited myth”

Here the monarch is conveying the message that most African societies prefer to protect their myths inherent in their cultures by not disclosing the nitty gritty of its origin or source and or explain why certain rituals are performed during the festivals. They do this in order to preserve its sanctity or sacredness and retain such rituals' spiritual potency as they believe that there is some kind of spiritual rejuvenation or healing so to say in the rituals. This further lends to the aspects of humanistic visions inherent in these festivals as would be explored in later chapters in this study.

Speaking further about the origin of Olua festival in Usi-Ekiti, the monarch, Balogun reports the monarch as saying:

“Olua festival is our cultural festival. The God Almighty created the heaven and earth. This is our belief. Olua is my people’s translation of Oluwa, meaning our God, the Almighty. So, the festival of Olua is the festival of God almighty.”

The monarch further revealed that the Olua cultural festival was brought from Ile-ife in Osun State, a town believed to be the cradle of the Yoruba race. This explains why several towns in Ekiti who have primordial relationship with the festival, celebrate it seasonally.

According to Balogun, Oba Agunbiade connects the origin of Osi-Ekiti with Olua festival when he said:

“Our history began from Ife, at the time of the dispersal of the sons of Oduduwa, the Olusi was one of the sons, he took off from Ife via a town called Osisoko, near Ife; he settled a bit there before coming to Ekiti, Isondu is another town near Otu here in Ekiti where Olusi settled for a while before eventually coming down here to settle with his people as first settlers of this land. We brought Olua festival from life, it is as old as our existence...”

Performance of the Olua Festival

Olua festival as witnessed in Osi-Ekiti is celebrated amidst pomp and pageantry. It involves virtually all the people of the town with the youths taking very active roles. Such roles include fetching traditional materials for the celebration and these materials include palm fronds, firewood, canes, and cleaning the community by cutting grasses, sweeping compounds, streets etc. While some of the materials fetched are used to decorate some relevant buildings that have been dedicated for the festivals, other materials are used for rituals during the festival. The materials used for decorations include palm fronds and such buildings as shrine for the deity, palace of the monarch and some other shrines spread across the town are decorated with these materials. The other materials such as the canes are used for purposes such as caning exercises or competitions among the able bodied men who are mostly youths and to make bonfires at strategic points in the town.

There are quite a number of rituals for several purposes during the festivals; such rituals also involve singing, dancing, and chanting to invoke the presence of the deity being celebrated among others.

Balogun in his report in Daily Sun newspapers, gives a vivid description of the festival, thus: ‘

...A few hours after the people of the town had sang songs praising the deity Olua, and carried burning sticks across the town, they gathered at the shrine of Olua, a secluded place located almost in front of the monarch’s palace. They were expecting some strange creatures, who eventually appeared like dwarfs dressed in palm fronds. The little creatures danced for several hours around the shrine which was also decorated with many palm fronds. As they danced and make some strange noises with guttural voices, hundreds of the participants present began to offer prayers for themselves and their relations, asking the Olua to bless them, give them jobs, children, wealth, breakthrough, victory over enemies and what have you.

Many of the people sang praise songs of the Olua in local dialect and showcased some very unique cultural performances in dance, music and mime that can only be said to be typical of their tradition.

This dramatic scenario played out for hours until when daylight morphed into a darkening evening and the duo of the strange palm fronds clothed creatures danced into some groove, far off into the bush and disappeared into the thin air!

A stranger, and more shocking occurrence took place just before the creatures disappeared, they grew unusually tall like some huge tree and then off they went and the religious people raised their voices in high octave to the deity of Olua.

With this kind of exit, the people of the town believed the gods have visited for the last time in the year and would return same time in the coming year.”

Balogun’s description gives a vivid picture of the rituals involved in Olua festival in Usi Ekiti as witnessed by the researcher through his participant-observation research technique. As several interviews with some of the participants and custodian of the festival revealed, each of the process and phases narrated in the festival has got its own significance and objectives. We therefore discovered that the humanistic visions inherent in the festival are exhibited in these rituals, dramatic elements and other features of the festival as revealed in the comments made by the participants to explain them.

Theoretical Framework

Ethnography is the theoretical framework that has been adopted for this study. This is mainly because the subject of research is culture based. Cultural festivals are products of peoples’ cultures and as such an enquiry into them would be best carried out among

the custodians of such cultures which are the people or communities. according to Williams Julius and Wilson Anmol Chaddha in their paper, The Role of Theory in Ethnography Research, ethnography is aimed mainly towards examining human behaviour in their natural environment.

Humanistic Visions in Oluwa Festival of Usi-Ekiti

As a cultural product of a people, festivals capture the humanity of a people that owes it. Defining humanity could be an attempt to indulge in a discourse of the relativity of the concept, that is, posing such questions as what makes us humane and or human, what guarantees our collective well-being?, as well as what cultural practices, norms, among others guarantee the collective survival of the human race?. Where religion as a cultural practice of our society would rather segregate and discriminate, humanity embraces all mankind irrespective of differences in faith, class, race or status. This is why eminent personalities who have risen above religion in identifying with mankind, prefer to be identified as humanist rather than identifying themselves as a devotee of one religious faith or the other. Such eminent personalities as our noble Laureate Wole Soyinka come to mind in this respect.

The Oluwa festival embodies, preserves and espouses several concepts of humanity which, for the purpose of this study, shall be identified as love, healing, fulfillment, unity, communion, fellowship, and compassion among others. The aforementioned virtues/values/human traits are germane to human existence and are promoted in all cultures and religions.

The central aim of *Oluwa* festival is first of all the welfare and well being of the people of Osi-Ekiti. This means that the people, according to their history, enacted the festival in order to commune with the spiritual beings, or ancestors of the land, believed to possess powers that would bring fortunes, fulfillment and other positive things of life to them. This belief is reflected in the comments given by several indigenes of the town interviewed to explain their involvement in the celebration of the cultural activity.

For instance, the monarch of the town reveals in his comments that Oluwa as a deity in Osi-Ekiti community represents or acts as a representative of the Almighty God. He said Oluwa, which literarily in English means *our god*, represents the all powerful Supreme being, who can provide all that the people need. Thus, the people of the town and their neighbours in surrounding towns, evolved this festival to venerate the *Oluwa* so as to have as their reward, good things of life which include, protection of lives and property, fortunes, healing and other blessings of life.

In the same vein, other devoted worshippers or participants in Oluwa festival express the conviction that their participation in the yearly festival bring good fortunes to them. Hear one of them:

“Olua festival is the most important festival in this town. It is such a wonderful festival because many people come from all over the world. The Olua itself is like god, he is even god because if you come to him and ask for anything, he gives you, breakthrough, children

“If you need children, and you come to the god and he tells you a date you would give birth, it will happen exactly as he has said. Also, if the Olua says that you will have a job at a particular date, that day it will happen.

“The Olua festival has been celebrated since this town was founded. Oluwa can bring the freedom to those who are bound by life’s problems and challenges. This festival is our own Christmas and New Year celebration, it is a time all Osi indigenes come home to celebrate but they don’t even come home during the new year or the Christmas. I want to urge our people to support our culture and not allow it to perish. I have bought cow and many drinks for people to celebrate this festival and I do this every year.”

A need to promote, preserve and commercialize their cultural heritage have also been identified as reasons for the annual festival of Olua, according to a participant at the Olua festival in the town, Chief Akin Ojo:

“My role is to celebrate and promote our culture. We love our traditions and we don’t want our culture to die. Our culture is our identity and when we preserve it our race will not go into extinction. Our future will be preserved.

“We are here to celebrate our culture. We know that since the creation of the world wherever prayers are being offered, they are also answered. Our duty is to go to everywhere our culture is being celebrated and celebrate our own gods.

“In this festival, many miracles happen, those without jobs get it, the barren give birth afterwards. In fact, the festival has assured us that there is nothing God cannot do. You can see hundreds of people in this town who want one thing or the other from the deity.

“Olua is God’s work and no one can claim to know its origin. It began with our origin as a people. We must be proud of our culture. It is being celebrated two times in a year. Olua is as old as our existence as a people. We must be proud of our culture and show off with it anywhere we find ourselves.”

Also, participants of the festival strongly believe that Olua festival draws them closer to the heavenly beings. Something in the similitude of fulfilling their religious or spiritual desires. They hold the belief strongly that Olua is a supreme being that deserves worship, veneration and adoration just like a Jesus Christ, Mohammed or other faith based spiritual figures are being celebrated or worshipped. so, the festival of Olua thus becomes, in the

reasoning and argument of the participations, a religious and cultural practices that give spiritual fulfillment.

The participants also comment that human values of their culture, such as good character, helping others, saving lives through divine healing and others, are imbibed in the celebration of Olua festival. For instance, they revealed that during the Olua festival, no one can fight his or her neighbour, no one can also curse or plan any evil towards another in the community because it is believed that such evil or curses will bounce back on the one planning it.

Another participant in Olua festival who is a native of Osi-Ekiti, Chief Femi Robinson, according to Report by Balogun in Daily Sun, spoke glowingly about the Olua festival in Osi Ekiti, saying:

“You know that before Christianity came, our forefathers have their own calendar with which they order their life. In this town, we have our festivals which mark our calendar for the year. There is the festival of masquerades with which we are celebrating the dawn of a new year. There is also the festival to adore our king and then this festival of Olua which is this. There are other festivals being observed in this town.

“This deity that has appeared to everyone in broad day light has been with us from time immemorial. The festival will last for a week and climax with he eating of a new yam on the last day. God has created the whole heaven and the earth and he gave each people their own Messiah. He gave Jesus to the Jews, Mohammad to the Arab and gave us this Olua as our own Messiah.

“My great grand father who died at about 126 years had told me that when he asked from his great grand father about the Olua festival, his great grand father told him that he met the festival the way it is being celebrated till today.

“Many of our children from across the world have come home to participate in this festival. My own son had come from the United Kingdom to be part of this. This is because they have all found out that whenever they come for the festival, they experience great achievement and breakthrough in their life.

Imagine, a man having to buy a big cow to show gratitude to the deity for making him to have breakthrough in his business and life.

Once the deity, instructs you to take a certain step to get something, if you do it, the results will be overwhelming

“Even a Reverend Father had come to witness this festival he told us that he was awed by the mammoth crowd who come seasonally to be part of this festival and wished to see what happens here. The Father said what he had observes is that everyone who came to seek the help if the deity have always been praying and that he was pleased with such development,”

Summary, Conclusion and Recommendation

In this study, we have established that there are humanistic visions in African cultural festivals, and that these festivals do not just exist for the mere purposes of communal entertainment or some fetish worships but that they equally, and more concretely, exist to cater for humanity.

As reflected in this study of the Olua cultural festival in Osi-Ekiti, cultural festivals in Africa have both spiritual and secular purposes for their existence. The spiritual purposes have been explored in this study and they x-tray the humanistic visions inherent in the celebration of the festival. Some of such visions include, as we have established, healing, good fortunes, fulfillment, unity, societal cleansing and promotion of values of love, tolerance and togetherness among others.

It is our hope that findings in this study will ignite the passion to support the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage of Africa by relevant stakeholders, particularly government. The support for the preservation and promotion of cultural festivals as rich as the Olua festival in Osi-Ekiti will go a long way in ensuring that peace, stability and order among other values germane for the survival of humanity, shall be achieved effortlessly in our various communities.

Against this background, we shall make recommendations as follow, that government at all levels should fund the organization, celebration and preparation of cultural festivals across the federation in order to ensure a continued promotion and preservation of these cultural practices; that the continued celebration of cultural festivals should be among the strategies to be deployed by government in ensuring peace, stability and order in our societies and finally, that government should partner willing corporate organizations to preserve and promote the seasonal celebration of cultural festivals to guarantee peace, unity, stability and development in our societies.

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