

Woman's Self-Perception in Selected Female-dominated Traditional Festival Songs in Oñdó North Senatorial District of Oñdó State

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Abstract

The role of women in society has been greatly underestimated in the last few decades, but now it is highly recognised by people. In the traditional setting, women were seen as wives who were intended to cook, clean and take care of the kids. Soon enough, people realise that women should have a bigger role than what other people thought women should have. This work, therefore, investigates the woman's perception of herself in the poetry relating to female-dominated festivals in Oñdó North Senatorial District of Oñdó State, Nigeria. The theoretical framework is the womanist theory. Womanism focuses on women and their rights in society. The findings show that the traditional societal perception of a barren woman and a woman having her first pregnancy as stillbirth is responsible for the woman's zealous attitude towards children, child-bearing and child-caring. Women criticise pre-marital pregnancy. The paper finds out that the woman is encouraged to give herself to hard-work by engaging in petty trading to complement her household income in female-dominated traditional festival songs. The womanist theory reveals that woman's perception of barren woman and woman having her first pregnancy as stillbirth originated from societal perception of such group of women. In the light of these findings, the women should reject the debasing

constraints imposed on her by culture. The paper therefore agitates for a change in woman's perception of barren woman and woman having her first pregnancy as stillbirth. In addition, women should maintain the good attribute of complementarities.

Keywords: Traditional festivals, feminism, first pregnancy, stillbirth.

Introduction

African societies generally have various festivals traditionally celebrated by the people. Traditional festival refers to periodically recurring days and seasons set aside by a community for rest from labour and more or less hallowed by religious solemnities. Ògúnbà (1978:4) defines traditional festival as

An indigenous cultural institution, a form of art nurtured on the African soil over the centuries and which has, therefore, developed distinctive features and whose techniques are sometimes totally different from the borrowed form now practiced by many of our contemporary artists.

Sometimes, it may be to hallow and show appreciation to the forefathers that have performed great things while on earth. It may be to remember the day(s) the people of that community were struck with certain calamities. Such days were brought to remembrance so that their offspring learn about the incidence

and try to avoid what brought about such occurrence. They are periods for singing and dancing, dramatising, eating and drinking (merry-making). Such periods always fall into either harvesting or planting seasons. The festivals may be once a year, bi-annual or biennial, triennial and the like. However, there are certain ceremonies that come up any time the need arises. These ceremonies are to show appreciation for what God has done in the lives of the people concerned. For instance, the people of certain communities in Yorùbá land rejoice, drum, make merry, dance round the town whenever their children are successfully delivered of their first children.

Researchers have developed more interest in the study of indigenous festivals since Adédèjì (1966) and Ògúnbà (1967) completed an extensive research on them. It is observed that many of their studies centered on the problems facing the African culture and what could be done to revive it (Awólàlú and Dòpámú, 1979:279-285). In addition, there are no sufficient studies on indigenous festivals, especially in Oṅdó North Senatorial District of Oṅdó State. This is the gap this work tends to fill. Although both man and woman participate in Yoruba traditional festivals, this work focuses on the woman in traditional festivals in the identified geographical location in order to examine what the woman perceives about herself.



Female-Dominated Traditional Festivals

There are various festivals in Yorùbá land, most of which are celebrated on yearly basis. All the festivals could be grouped into three: male-dominated, female-male-dominated and female-dominated festivals. Male-dominated festivals are festivals celebrated by men such as Egúngún festival all over Yorùbá land and Olúa festival in Òsi Èkìtì; female-male-dominated festivals are festivals celebrated by both men and women such as Ògún festival in Yorùbá land and Orósùn festival in Ìdànrè, while female-dominated festivals are the festivals celebrated by women ranging from infants to those of menopausal age such as Obitun festival in Oṅdó and Èwe-Sùkú festival in Ìgbómìnà (Arówóşęgbé, 2013:297). There are many existing studies on Yorùbá traditional festivals, but there are no sufficient works on female-dominated festivals in Yorùbá land. It is observed that the chants and the songs relating to these female-dominated traditional festivals speak out the minds of the women. This work, therefore, investigates the poetry relating to female-dominated traditional festivals in Oṅdó North Senatorial District of Oṅdo State, Nigeria, in order to examine the woman's perception of herself in the society as depicted in female-dominated-festivals.

Critical Appraisal of Yorùbá Oral Literature

Oral literary scholars are fond of investigating issues concerning women in oral literature. Many critics such as Oyèşakin (1982, 1985); Ògúnşínà (1984, 1997); Ilésanmi (1987), Olútóyè (1991); Sheba (1999); and Adébòwálé (2000); examine the woman in Yorùbá oral literature. Oyèşakin (1982, 1985) examines women's beauty, their spiritual power and all bad characters exercised by them. Ògúnşínà (1984) argues that the societal perception of women in Ìjálá is negative. Ilésanmí (1987:82) avers that women are on the forefront in Yorùbá oral literature; they do sing and drum. Olútóyè (1991: 23-34) states that women play prominent roles in Yorùbá oral literature; yet, literature depicts women as an untrustworthy, treacherous, adulterous and arrogant. Sheba (1999: 31-41) asserts that women play prominent roles in all the traditional festivals, yet she condemns the thought of certain people in the society that believe that women themselves should be sanctified because they have been accused of certain devilish acts. According to a belief in the society, woman's menstruation could spoil medicine and the power exercised in festivals. Sheba explains further that all women are regarded as witches in male-dominated festivals; hence, women are not allowed to move near masquerades nor touch their garments while dancing round the town during their festival; this is because the masquerades could be made powerless. Adébòwálé (2000:13-27) asserts that

in Èkún-Ìyàwó which is a female-dominated poetry, a bride's perception of herself is not different from the traditional society-perception of woman which regards woman as being quarrelsome, loquacious and abusive.

Though the previous studies add to our knowledge of Yoruba society-perception of woman, there are few or no works, to the best of our knowledge, on female-dominated Yorùbá traditional festivals. Most of the festivals examined are male-dominated festivals where the voice of women could not be heard. This work therefore focuses on female-dominated festivals in Oṅdó North Senatorial District of Oṅdó State in order to examine what the woman has to say concerning herself. The festivals include: *Odún Túnlá* in Ogbàgì, *Odún Òyò* in towns like Ikún, Ìṣùà, Ìkákùmò, Ìdógún, Ìdó-Àní and Ìfira, *Odún Ùròkòde* in Ùgbè Àfò, *Odún Lọli* in Àjowá, *Odún Agédì* in Òkèàgbè, *Odún Ìgbéyàwó* in Ìkákùmò, *Odún Òtẹ̀ẹ̀bù* in Àkùnù.

Theoretical Framework

The womanist theory suggests that there are constraints that prevent African women from realising their potentials fully and debarring them from acquiring their rights; they therefore yearn for a society in which they can assert their innate resourcefulness by rejecting the fetters of tradition and any aspects of socialisation that puts them at a disadvantage.

However, they seek to convince men that they can be productive in the home and outside the home by their resilience and dynamic drive in economic areas (Kóláwólé, 1997:30-31). Womanist theory is based on the culture and custom of the people. As Kóláwólé (1997:196) rightly says, womanism does not deny the natural biological God-given traits and characteristics, but rejects the manipulation of such traits to hold women down. Womanism wants meaningful union between black women and black men and black children, and will see to it that men begin to change from their sexist stand. Kóláwólé (1997:31-32) ascertains that “African woman cherishes her role as a home maker as well as her status as a mother or potential mother. She does not necessarily see these roles as liabilities”.

Before this time, Selden (1985:130) states that “Women themselves, not sympathetic men, are in the best position to assess the true existential possibilities of womanhood”.

Hence, gynocritics is used to analyse woman's perception of herself in this work. This approach enables women to express their opinions publicly while their voices are heard the more.

Women's biography, their occupation, the type of literature they are involved in, the structure and their style of writing are examined in gynocritic approach to the study of women (Sheba 1999:57). Adébáyò (1999:7-8) rightly says that women of all social groups must know who they are, where

they are now, where they are going and where they could be. What women experiences are in all spheres of life must be unearthed, and change must be effected for the overall progress of mankind. In sum, womanism is the totality of feminine self-expression, self-retrieval and self-assertion in positive cultural ways.

Since womanism is woman-centered and Yoruba female-dominated traditional festivals are also woman-related, it is hoped that the theory would go a long way to examine oral poetry relating to female-dominated traditional festivals in Oñdó North Senatorial District of Oñdó State in order to determine the woman's perception of herself.

Woman's Self-Perception in Female-dominated Traditional Festivals

Woman as Mother

In female-dominated traditional festivals, the woman regards herself as being fortunate to be called a mother however small her child may be. This is depicted in a song rendered by a woman singer in *Túnlá* festival at Ògbàgì thus:

Ògbàgì Dialect	Gloss
Şi wélé, Şiwèlè	I rejoice, I rejoice
Mo bí kékeré	I have a small child
Ma şiye ọmọ	I am a mother

This woman's thought is in conformity with the womanist's thought that regards woman as someone that cherishes her status as a mother. She does not mind the age of the child; the act of having the child makes her a proud mother and not the age of the child.

Women believe that a woman can have a child at any time during her life-time. Although child-bearing is important to African woman, she believes that the birth can come up any time before the menopausal age. A Yorùbá adage says: 'Àtètèbí kò bí tẹni', meaning that she that first gave birth to a child has not given birth to a child meant for another woman. Therefore, a woman's concern is to have a child on earth regardless of the time she has it. This is depicted in *Eré Ọ̀yọ̀* that comes up in towns like Ìkákùmò, Ikún, Ìṣùà, Ìfira, Ìdógún and Ìdó-Àní. A woman singer in *Eré Ọ̀yọ̀* in Ikún renders a song thus:

Ikún Dialect	Gloss
Olóbí àkókó o	Someone that first gave birth to a child
Olóbí ùgbèyìn	Someone that is delayed to have a child
Ọmọ mà nú gbèyìn	Child-bearing has nothing to do with time
Ma bí tẹmi o èè.	I will have mine

Women believe that the time when one gives birth to a child is not as important as to having a child. It depicts that if a lady is delayed in having a child, people, especially her husband's relations, will regard her as *akọ ìbẹ̀pẹ̀* (male pawpaw) that does not produce fruits, and they will rain all sorts of insulting remarks on her and her mother. They may even ask their son to marry another wife (Adéoyè 1979:240). If eventually the lady gets a child, she becomes happy and her mother renders a variant of the above song to indicate that those that have given birth to children have not given birth to a child that is supposed to be born by her daughter. One only needs to be patient.

In *Túnlá* festival, women believe that taking care of children is of paramount importance to the woman. Women believe that every woman would be duly rewarded for her labour on her child (Adéjùmò, 2002:53). Based on this fact, a woman singer rendered a song advising her fellow women to take care of their children thus:

Ògbàgì Dialect	Gloss
In mo sare o ẹ̀gbé mi	Continue to struggle, my fellow women
In mo sare o	Continue to struggle
In mo sare aṣọ méjì gèlè méjì	Try to get two wrappers and two head ties

Ọmọ ni mo boni jaṣọ

Children cover one's
nakedness more than
clothe

Tẹnígbọlá o

Tẹnígbọlá (human name)

It is revealed in the above song that women prefer the care of children to purchasing clothes because of their belief that children will provide for their needs in their old age.

The Woman and Premature First Pregnancy

In *Ùrókòde* festival at *Ùgbẹ̀ Àfò*, women regard woman with her first pregnancy as stillbirth as an unfortunate woman. The people of this community believe that the first born baby that cries at birth makes the woman a proud mother. Therefore, whoever loses her first baby is not qualified to be regarded as a mother. Whenever such woman talks in public, people hiss at her; such woman is not qualified to show up in any gathering that relates to *ayò ọmọ* (first-born related festival); instead, she remains indoor and weeps all the time while the celebration goes on. Women believe that the punishment does not exonerate the mother of the 'unfortunate woman' and even her relations. It is upon this thought that a lead-singer who gave birth to her first child successfully renders a song to satirise a fellow woman thus:

Àfò Dialect

Gloss

Lílé: Dúùdu o, dúùdu o.

Solo: The unfortunate woman

- Ègbè: Éée àyà e. All: So she is
- Lílè: Iye mi mè sùlí kosùn. Solo: My mother is at home
rubbing *osùn* (cam
wood powder) on her
body
- Ègbè: Iye tẹ̀rẹ̀ mè sùlí sọ̀n pòrò. All: Your mother is at home
crying
- Lílè: Dúùdu o dúùdu o. Solo: The unfortunate woman
- Ègbè: Éée àyà e. All: So she is

Investigation reveals that *osùn* (cam wood powder) is always rubbed on a newborn first child, the mother, the grandmother and all interested relations to show their joy (though *osùn* powder is generally used to make the body smooth). The use of *osùn* here connotes the arrival of a new born baby. It is unfortunate for any woman to deliver her first pregnancy as stillbirth; neither the woman nor her mother could rub *osùn* powder on her body. The ‘unfortunate’ woman is forbidden to participate or to be an observer in any of the firstborn-related-festivals. In fact, her family will be sorrowful throughout the festive period. In our opinion, stillbirth should not be regarded as the fault of the woman concerned; neither should it be that of her mother. Nobody prays for a stillbirth. The fear that one should not have stillbirth because of the societal perception of such occurrence can even result to sickness that can lead to the occurrence of stillbirth that such

woman is trying to avoid. It is observed that women only support the thoughts of the society by regarding their fellow woman that has stillbirth as a woman with bad luck. Women should, therefore, ignore the notion that regards a fellow woman that delivers her first pregnancy as stillbirth as an unfortunate person.

The Woman and Virginity in traditional Festival Songs

Women believe that the woman should keep her virginity till marriage. They regard any lady that does not take part in a female-dominated festival celebrated in her community as someone that has lost her virginity. Investigation reveals that the belief of the people in this community is that virgins do not feel shy to participate in traditional festivals whether the festival is performed in the nude or not. Virginity is highly rated among the Yorùbá people. The loss of virginity before marriage brings shame to the lady and her family, especially the mother that is expected to have brought the girl up in the right way. The lady could be beaten up by the groom; she could be mocked by the young ones in her husband's family; half a keg of palm wine (diluted with water) and charcoal would be sent to her family the following day. Half a keg of palm wine and charcoal connote that the lady is irresponsible.

On the other hand, pounded yam with good stew, a full keg of palm wine, chalk and money (virginity money) would be

sent to the father of a lady that was not deflowered before marriage. There will be merry making in both families; the husband's family rejoices for marrying a responsible lady, while the wife's family rejoices for the glory brought to the family by their daughter (Adéoyè, C.L. 1979:233, Ládélé 1986:127-128). The only way by which a lady could show that she is a virgin in the community where female-dominated festivals take place is to take part in such festivals, failure to do this connotes that she has been deflowered, and this results into condemnation from maidens in towns like Ìyàni, Èrìtì, Imerì, Ògbàgì, Oyín, Ìkàrànmù, Ikún, Àfò, Ìdógún and others. It is believed that such a lady has failed to utilise her time judiciously as a virgin. This is revealed in one of the songs during *Loli* festival in Àjowá thus:

Àjowá Dialect	Gloss
Lilé: Arúgbà má lò.	Solo: She who fails to utilize her time
Ègbè: Ó kú ùyà.	All: She suffers a lot
Lilé: Awáyé máà lúgbà.	Solo: She comes to the earth with no time of her own
Ègbè: Ó kú ùyà.	All: She suffers a lot
Lilé: Olúgbà n lògbà rẹ̀.	Solo: Everybody makes use of her time
Ègbè: Èmi náà á lògbà tèmi.	All: I will make use of my time

Olóyun ajá here is a metaphoric noun phrase in which the pregnant woman is compared with a bitch that any male dog can mate with; one cannot point at any particular male dog as the father of the puppy. Investigations show that such a girl lacks stamina to carry the pregnancy because of her immaturity. She looks unattractive; she is referred to as someone that has swollen cheeks. Women believe that the lady will need more herbs than others that are matured to be able to deliver safely. It is because of a special care given to such a lady that brought about another satirical song in *òdún Ìgbéyàwó* in *Ìkákùmò* thus:

Èlégbè wa mà loyun o.	Our counterpart is pregnant
Kedere	It is obvious
Kòkò àgbo rẹ̀ pégbèje o.	She has one thousand, four hundred medicinal concoction pots
Kedere.	It is obvious

‘*Egbèje*’, one thousand, four hundred, in the song connotes many. We are of the opinion that even if a girl is matured enough to be pregnant, marriage should precede pregnancy.

The Woman and Entrepreneurship

Women want every woman to be hard-working. In *Túnlá* festival, a singer, advising her fellows to engage in petty trading to supplement their regular income, sings thus:

Pàróró o pàróró o.	Remove the shell of (<i>ègúsí</i>) melon
Òtúnla Òṣèlè.	Next tomorrow is <i>Òṣèlè</i> market day
Pàróró o.	Remove the shell of <i>ègúsí</i> melon

It is learnt that *Òṣèlè* market is one of the famous markets in *Ìkàré* (a town very close to *Ògbàgì* but bigger than *Ògbàgì*. *Ìkàré* is a commercial town). *Ògbàgì* community believes that any woman that can sell things at *Òṣèlè* market is a great merchant. The singer persuades her fellow women to buy melon at a cheaper rate at *Ògbàgì* market; remove the shell and resell it at a profitable rate at *Òṣèlè* market. This would enrich her purse, and she would be able to supplement the husband's income. Though the song refers to melon, investigations show that melon here connotes anything that a woman can trade in and bring her money. The singer's thought here is in accordance with a womanist thought that a woman should have a means of livelihood to augment her household income. It is observed that an average modern Yorùbá woman is both enterprising and highly industrious. She would want to have her own source of income that is independent of the husband's; she therefore engages in petty trading to supplement her regular income.

In *Òtẹ̀bú* festival at *Àkùnù*, poets perceive the woman as the husband's helper; she helps her husband concerning the

house budgets to sustain the family. This is depicted in one of the songs thus:

Yorùbá Language	Gloss
Bóyá n ó jọkọ lójú.	Whether I will be appreciated by my husband
Bóyá n o jọkọ lójú.	Whether I will be appreciated by my husband
A ba ràdirẹ o.	I would have bought <i>àdirẹ</i> (cloth dyed in patterns by the Yorùbás)
Boyá n o jọkọ lójú.	Whether I will be appreciated by my husband

In Yorùbá society, the husband is expected to take care of the wife by buying food and clothing materials for her. If a woman can now afford to buy cloth for herself as suggested by the singer, surely, such move will be appreciated by the husband. The female poet's thought here is in accordance with the womanist theory which believes that husband and wife's role should complement each other. What is deduced from the song is that in a family set up, the woman does what the communities where such festivals take place is expected of men. It is also observed that the song is rendered in standard Yorùbá language as against the local dialects which all Yorùbá traditional festivals are noted for. This gives the impression that the song

and the likes are composed in the modern time when modernity has been introduced to the festivals.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have examined the woman's self-perception in female-dominated festivals in Ondo North Senatorial District of Ondo State, Nigeria. Investigations show that women's perception of barren women and women having their first pregnancy as stillbirth are not different from that of the society where such festivals take place. Women show her joy whenever she bears a child, especially her firstborn. She regards herself as a mother. Women take care of her children in the hope that her children will take care of her when she is old. Women advise her mates to work hard to be able to supplement the household income. It is observed that many modern women are government workers or self-employed, and they support their husbands to cater for their family.

It is therefore proposed that the woman should maintain this good complementary attribute. Again, it is equally observed that the communities where these female-dominated traditional festivals take place still regard barren women and those that have their first pregnancies as stillbirth as an unfortunate set of people. Judging by this, therefore, it is recommended that women should change this perception of their fellows to reject the debasing constraints imposed on them by culture. Also new

songs that would reveal the good image of the modern women in the reality of the contemporary times in which they live should be composed.

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