

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Yoruba ritual: a case of transformation occasioned by ethno-nationalism

Morufu Bukola Omigbule

Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria  
Email: [omigbulem@oauife.edu.ng](mailto:omigbulem@oauife.edu.ng)

## Abstract

A Yoruba ritual – the Oodua ritual festival in Ile-Ife – has been sustained over a long period, but has been adjusted under the pressure of modernity. Its relevance as a cultural practice is being asserted in multiple ways in today's Nigeria. Ethno-nationalism is a key factor in the ritual in contemporary Ile-Ife in the sense that the Olokun Festival Foundation (OFF) is the agency through which the ethno-nationalism of the Oodua People's Congress (OPC) is inscribed on the ritual. Although it professes to be a culture-promoting affiliate of the OPC, the OFF's involvement in the ritual facilitates the presence of the OPC – a popular Yoruba ethno-nationalist movement – and thereby results in significant modifications to the ritual. Hence, the ritual has become an embodiment of new significations through which understandings of the contemporary face of Yoruba ethno-nationalism in Nigeria can be expanded. In sum, a combination of symbolic anthropological and sociological approaches reveal that the ritual in its modified form is culturally restrictive and socially integrative.

## Résumé

Le festival rituel yoruba Oodua d'Ile-Ife existe depuis longtemps, mais il a été adapté sous la pression de la modernité. Sa pertinence en tant que pratique culturelle s'affirme aujourd'hui de multiples façons au Nigéria. L'ethnonationalisme est un facteur clé du rituel dans l'Ile-Ife contemporain dans le sens où l'OFF (Olokun Festival Foundation) est l'organisme par lequel l'ethnonationalisme de l'OPC (Oodua People's Congress) s'inscrit dans le rituel. Bien que l'OFF se déclare être un organisme affilié à l'OPC chargé de promouvoir la culture, son implication dans le rituel facilite la présence de l'OPC, mouvement ethnonationaliste yoruba populaire, et donc modifie le rituel de manière significative. Ainsi, le rituel est devenu l'incarnation de nouvelles significations permettant d'élargir la compréhension du visage contemporain de l'ethnonationalisme yoruba au Nigéria. En résumé, une combinaison d'approches anthropologiques et sociologiques symboliques révèle que le rituel dans sa forme modifiée est culturellement restrictif et socialement intégratif.

## Resumo

Um ritual iorubá – o festival ritual de Oodua em Ile-Ife – tem sido mantido durante um longo período, mas tem sido ajustado sob a pressão da modernidade. A sua relevância como prática

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cultural está a ser afirmada de múltiplas formas na Nigéria de hoje. O etno-nacionalismo é um fator-chave do ritual na Ile-Ife contemporânea, na medida em que a Olokun Festival Foundation (OFF) é a agência através da qual o etno-nacionalismo do Oodua People's Congress (OPC) é inscrito no ritual. Apesar de professar ser uma afiliada do OPC que promove a cultura, o envolvimento da OFF no ritual facilita a presença do OPC – um movimento etno-nacionalista popular iorubá – e, por conseguinte, resulta em modificações significativas do ritual. Assim, o ritual tornou-se uma encarnação de novos significados através dos quais se pode expandir a compreensão da face contemporânea do etno-nacionalismo iorubá na Nigéria. Em suma, uma combinação de abordagens antropológicas e sociológicas simbólicas revela que o ritual, na sua forma modificada, é culturalmente restritivo e socialmente integrador.

## Introduction

Rituals have attracted many thinkers from across such disciplines as sociology and anthropology whose thoughts have served as platforms for their literary evaluation.<sup>1</sup> The enormous insight provided through the ways in which they have used the concept of ritual to analyse social realities and experiences continues to shape thoughts on ritual as a cultural category and as an artistic form (Turner 1977; Goffman 1967; Douglas 1970; Cohen 1974; Sewell 1992; Hays 1994; Giddens 1984; Lukes 1975). Yoruba rituals belong in the oral literary classification. As Diala (2014: 23) affirms, and as scholars such as Margret T. Drewal revealed in an earlier period, Yoruba rituals are oral African poetic performative models with the power to endure and mutate. This power constitutes a central preoccupation of Drewal (1992: xv), leading to her contention that Yoruba rituals possess 'transformational capacity' and are both 'repetition and revision' (*ibid.*: xv, 5). Against this background, it is relevant to identify significant changes in the Oodua ritual of the Ife people of Nigeria and to read ethno-nationalism into its changed processes. The qualities of being poetic, performative, transformable and transformative continue to define Yoruba rituals as a cultural and artistic form.

The Oodua ritual, as a prominent act of ancestral worship in Ile-Ife, is seized upon by the Oodua People's Congress (OPC) through its subsidiary, the Olokun Festival Foundation (OFF), to serve as a medium through which the past is brought into negotiating the present for the Yoruba of Nigeria. The ritual is an act of ancestral veneration, which is very common among the Yoruba of Nigeria and beyond and for whom Ile-Ife is a place of origin. More specifically, it is a major part of the spiritual life of the ancient city of Ile-Ife – a city reputed to be one of the major religious centres of the world (Olupona 2011). Noticeable changes in the ritual in contemporary times, due to the annual involvement of the OPC, reaffirm the established notion that Yoruba rituals are attuned to social circumstances in remarkable ways (Drewal 1992).

<sup>1</sup> This is a product of field-based research conducted over a period of twelve years – 2013–24 – on the Oodua or Oduduwa ritual in Ile-Ife. The ritual was repeatedly observed using participant observation for nine of the twelve years, sometimes partly for confirmatory purposes and as time and resources permitted. Photographs and video recording were used in data gathering. Transcription and translation were involved in the analysis of the data. In-person interviews were conducted with the Obadio (at the Oduduwa temple) and Chief Gani Adams (at his Omole residence in Lagos) as well as with selected members of the ritual congregation. A virtual interview was also jointly conducted by me and Insa Nolte with Chief Gani Adams on 5 October 2023.

Through such adjustments, they assume new or additional responsibilities and consequently are opened up to new meanings, often inclusive in essence. For instance, their pristine concern with the immediate spaces of habitation of the Yoruba might be expanded to cover remote spaces such as those in the diaspora, where the Yoruba exist in large numbers today. The Oodua ritual is thus seen as a prominent and historically important cultural act for the Ife people, and one that has adjusted to certain social imperatives. This reaffirms the notion that Yoruba rituals transform, regenerate and carry meanings that reflect their subscription to modernity in ways that bring about a mutual exchange of values across a wide spectrum of interests and social categorizations. That rituals regenerate or transform is also a sign that, as an art form, they are malleable and can serve emergent interests and purposes. Since change in any art form or artistic tradition reflects significant socio-political realities in the society that produces that particular art form, ethno-nationalism can be identified as a noticeable and significant social force that has influences that extend beyond the artistic to the cultural, political, demographic, ideological and institutional sectors of the larger society – Nigeria. It is within this larger society that Ile-Ife exists as the site of the Oodua ritual and as a growing modern city. In this article, the discourse of the ritual will be situated within the wider discourse of Yoruba ethno-nationalism, and, through that, the more encompassing subject of multi-ethnic Nigeria will be broached.

Previously, in the pre-independence era, there was a nationalist context to understanding Yoruba cultural forms as malleable and thus deployable to serve the political interests of the Yoruba. Although I do not have any written records relating to the specific deployment of any Yoruba ritual to further or advance Yoruba interests at the time when Nigerian nationalism was being cross-ethnically articulated in pre-independence Nigeria as part of the decolonization process, it could logically be inferred that Yoruba rituals may have played a role, regardless of the level of political significance they may have subsequently garnered. A conjecture such as this can be reinforced from a myth/ritual perspective – a perspective with which Yoruba ‘indigenous hermeneutics’<sup>2</sup> aligns, since, hermeneutically, Yoruba myth and ritual have a symbiotic relationship. An inference can be made here. While Yoruba rituals may not have been deployed overtly, the Yoruba origin myth was heavily appropriated, which might suggest that rituals were deployed alongside their corresponding myths within the context of the ethnically framed national politics of the time.

In this regard, the myth of Oodua is particularly relevant. Oodua – also known as Oduduwa – is said to have sired legendary figures who eventually founded the principal kingdoms of the Yoruba, which in turn gave rise to other Yoruba kingdoms, cities and communities. Oodua might have been injected into articulations of Yoruba ethnicity as a way of raising the political consciousness of the Yoruba of south-western Nigeria. This could have aligned with the inter-ethnic alliances being built with the aim of attaining political independence for the culturally and historically diverse peoples of pre-independence Nigeria. An important record of this remarkable aligning of ethnic interests exists in S. O. Arifalo’s work (2001: xv).

<sup>2</sup> The term ‘indigenous hermeneutics’ is used by J. K. Olupona. Adding ‘Yoruba’ as a qualifier indicates its culturally specific use in respect of the Yoruba, whose culture is being discussed (Olupona 2011: 1).

What we refer to here as Nigerian nationalism has never been a political phenomenon in which the interests of the various ethnic constituents have aligned either naturally or consistently. Rather, it was a development that arose from the consciousness of being colonized and from the felt need for self-rule among the various peoples, broadly ethnically categorized as the Yoruba, Hausa-Fulani and Igbo. It would therefore appear that, since 1945, when this expression of Yoruba ethnic consciousness emerged as a counterpoint to the hitherto dominant Nigerian nationalism, Yoruba ethnic consciousness and expression have continued to gather momentum as they undulate and meander alongside those of other groups within the relatively unstable political atmosphere of the country. From the formation of Egbe Omo Oduduwa – a cultural organization that gave expression to Yoruba identity in pre-independence Nigeria – in 1945 in London, through the devolution of the group into a political party, the Action Group, in 1951 preparatory to Nigerian independence in 1960 and the subsequent formation of the Unity Party of Nigeria in 1978 out of the Action Group, to the founding of Yoruba-dominated political parties of the Third Republic such as Alliance for Democracy in 1998 and Action Congress of Nigeria in 2006, there has been a considerable increase in Yoruba ethnic political consciousness across generations (Ukeje and Adebaniwi 2008). The history of this sustained group consciousness, however, combined with the militant activism of an ethno-nationalist group named Oodua People's Congress in 1994, following the controversial annulment of the presidential election of 1993. While the popularity and political relevance of the OPC seem to have waned, a group strongly associated with it, the Olokun Festival Foundation, has been championing the cause of sustaining this group consciousness and imprinting its identity on how the consciousness is not just sustained but heightened in contemporary times. Overall, Yoruba ethnic nationalism has obviously been lucky, especially in terms of how it is being perpetuated through the activities and commitment of a legally recognized organization – the OFF – which professes to be apolitical but is dedicated to Yoruba cultural renaissance.

The OPC was founded in the midst of the outcry over the election. Indeed, it was an ethnically constituted force established in response to the perceived ethnically fuelled injustice at the root of the turmoil caused by the annulment. The perception of wider political marginalization of the Yoruba in Nigeria exacerbated the situation.<sup>3</sup> Since then, it has continued to exist and to act in a representative capacity vis-à-vis the political interests and general welfare of the Yoruba ethnic group in the country.

This self-imposed role as an ethnic representative has made the OPC's history one of travails, but not without considerable recognition and socio-political relevance. It has been visible in social and political conversations and negotiations in the country in line with its avowed ideology as an ethno-nationalist group. Nevertheless, an account of its existence from its beginning until now cannot be complete without its 'violent antecedent' (Nolte 2008: 106). Sensitive to the socio-political marginalization that often forced the government to understand and tolerate ethno-nationalist excesses and to the need to balance this with a consistent desire to represent the Yoruba and their interests, despite the heavy toll this has had on the group and its leadership in human, material, intellectual and psychological terms, the OPC has had

<sup>3</sup> This is clearly stated and elaborated in Adams (2003: 96–100). The level to which the Yoruba should be seen as undeserving of this injustice is more emphatically indicated in Fasehun (2002).

to redesign its strategies of ethnic representation. It therefore formed the OFF and identifies with the OFF's central mission of cultural promotion. This development is consistent with Chief Adams' contention that the best way to 'represent and *re-present* ... the Yoruba and their culture and interests in contemporary times' is to 'return to culture'. This consistency can also be read into how the development serves to demonstrate the suitability of Chief Adams and his cohort within the return-to-culture ethno-nationalist movement – a movement to which the founder of the OPC, the late Fredrick Fasehun, was opposed and over which the two men clashed fiercely. In this regard, Adebaniwi's drawing upon Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* is insightful in illustrating Adams' 'return to culture' as reconceptualizing his approach as a '*re-invention of culture*' (Adebaniwi 2005: 351–2). Through the OPC's involvement with the OFF, the OPC has been able to gain greater visibility for itself and revalidate its mission to champion the Yoruba ethnic cause in Nigeria. With its outstanding visibility in OFF's public appearances at Yoruba rituals, a palpable logical inference is that the OFF is a proxy for the OPC. The significance of such an inference inheres in the ritual act that the OPC and the OFF perform jointly as part of the Oodua ritual. (Many other prominent Yoruba rituals in which the OFF has shown an interest can be read as similar cases.) This article recognizes mutual connections and oppositions between notions of the Oodua ritual as a culturally restrictive yet socially inclusive act.

### Ritual and the OPC's cultural project

It should not be a surprise that the OFF, as an offshoot of the OPC, is committed to advancing the cause of Yoruba culture through the promotion of Yoruba rituals. A ritual, as Adebaniwi rightly remarks in relation to the operative schema of the OPC, 'constitutes a powerful weapon in the construction and deconstruction of the social order' (2005: 353). Prior to the OFF's professed apolitical interest in promoting Yoruba rituals, its parent body, the OPC, had appropriated the Yoruba ritual of oath taking to ensure group loyalty within its membership. This exclusive process of admittance to the OPC is a sort of rite of passage from the non-initiated to the initiated. The place and significance of the appropriated ritual in the OPC's ideological commitment, its self-sustenance, and the constitution and organization of its membership have been discussed by Adebaniwi. A noteworthy contention of his study is that rituals and violence are 'instances that locate the practices and narratives of the OPC members within the larger corpus of their [the OPC's] overarching goals, even where they are capable of representing practices with ambiguous or paradoxical meanings in the context of the group's representation of the Yoruba as modern, progressive and peaceful people' (Adebaniwi 2005: 353). What all of this means for the present discussion is that, while rituals may never have appeared to the OPC as an art form, the OPC recognizes the instrumental character of rituals as a cultural category, hence its exploitation of them. Therefore, the Yoruba rite of passage appropriated by the OPC for admitting members and securing their loyalty to the group (*ibid.*: 348, 352) was a precursor of the Yoruba rituals that the OFF strategically prioritizes in its agenda for promoting Yoruba culture in line with the OPC's broad ethnic project.

Although the OFF is a proxy of the OPC and hence can be drawn into the OPC's operative schema for the purpose of evaluation, two shifts in the way in which Yoruba

ritual traditions are exploited can be deciphered. One ritual is performed by the OPC exclusively to assure its integrity and the unwavering commitment of its members. Others, such as the Oodua ritual, are exploited for the advancement of what should be understood as the OPC's 'cultural project' (Adebanwi 2005: 362) and take place at the communal level. Consequently, it can be inferred that, while the appropriated rite of passage may not afford the OPC the mix of artistic experience and sanctity that usually characterizes the performance of a Yoruba ritual, the rituals are splendid artistic and solemn experiences. More significantly, the Yoruba rituals with which the OPC identifies enhance the OPC's public image given their power to attract large audiences and invoke influential cultural and historical experiences, moments and entities. In an interview of 22 October 2022 conducted by a *Vanguard*<sup>4</sup> correspondent with Chief Gani Adams, the OPC leader and the chief promoter of the OFF, on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the group, it was revealed that the OFF 'champion[s] the celebration of over 30 festivals across the South-west zone'. The interview was also an opportunity for Chief Adams to highlight two sections of the public from which the OFF drew its appeal: 'cultural enthusiasts and traditional rulers who are the custodians of Yoruba culture and tradition'. In a related report in the *Nigerian Tribune*, also dated 22 October 2022, Chief Adams recalled that the birth of the OFF coincided with a time when the Yoruba had lost touch with their 'culture and traditions'. This resonates with the key points made by Chief Adams in an interview conducted by Insa Nolte and myself.<sup>5</sup> When responding to an inquiry about the reason for adopting a Yoruba *orisa* as the symbol for the OPC and the OFF – Oodua for the OPC and Olokun for the OFF – Chief Adams explained that the Yoruba believe that it is necessary to apply the names of the progenitors of the Yoruba before embarking on an important task in order to achieve success. In sum, the process leading to the OFF's admittance into the framework of the Oodua ritual was one of struggle, negotiation and some sort of local and international victory; this echoes the overall fate of the OPC in over three decades of existence.<sup>6</sup> It was clear from the interview that Chief Adams was engaging in two forms of struggle: struggle against the state as the leader of the OPC and struggle against modernity as the leader of the OFF.

### Context of the discourse

The discussion above reveals the socio-political circumstances that make the Oodua ritual a subject for literary anthropological and sociological discourse. Hence, the contention from an anthropological perspective that every ritual operates a system of symbols, despite opposing arguments from scholars such as Jarvie (1976), Lévi-Strauss (1964) and Turner (1977), provides a theoretical background against which the ritual is read. To begin with, what is a symbol? In answering this question, Geertz is our guide: 'any object, act, event, quality, or relation which serves as a vehicle for a

<sup>4</sup> *Vanguard* is a leading Nigerian newspaper.

<sup>5</sup> Insa Nolte is a professor at the University of Birmingham. She and I conducted a joint interview with the OPC leader as part of a proposed joint research project.

<sup>6</sup> Chief Gani Adams explained how the Oodua ritual had not been as popular before the OFF's involvement and talked about the long negotiation he had with the late monarch of Ife, Ooni Okunade Sijuwade, before his argument for a more elaborate Oodua ritual could be approved. The book by Ogbeidi on Gani Adams and the OPC presents a similar narrative (Ogbeidi 2005).

conception ... the conception is the symbol's meaning' (1973: 91). In another but related sense, it is described as 'a set of relationships between objects or events uniquely brought together as complexes or as concepts, having at once an intellectual, instrumental, and emotional significance' (Asad 1993: 117). To extract significance from the system of symbols through which the Oodua ritual operates – like every ancestral ritual of its kind – meanings are accessed by penetrating what in Turner's opinion (1977: 14) are 'the inner structures' of the ritual. As Traphagan (2012) contends, ancestral worship rituals can be 'innovative and inventive'. And since, as Feuchtwang (2010: 282) affirms, ritual is a code that serves the purpose of communication, diverse interests and entities can continue to exploit its communicative powers to their personal advantage. The OFF/OPC's involvement in the Oodua ritual is proof of this. Ritual discourse falls within the expansive but inclusive realm of the discourse of spirituality. Hence, the corollary holds true that ritual symbols, especially of the Yoruba, are largely religious symbols. Therefore, Asad's insightful description of religious symbols may seriously help in our reading of the ritual as a cultural text: 'Religious symbols ... cannot be understood independently of their historical relations with nonreligious symbols or of their articulations in and of social life, in which work and power are always crucial' (Asad 1993: 129, emphasis added).

As we place the whole of the argument in context, Paul's (1980: 287) view of culture as 'generative' should be counterbalanced – that culture consists of a 'deep layer and a surface layer' that obey the rules of transformation, with the consequence that the deep layer of culture can be converted into the surface layer, as is the case with the pristine process of the Oodua ritual and the OFF's relation to it. The elucidation provided by Ogundiran and Saunders on Yoruba ritual symbolism shows how this may be further understood. They contend that there can be contraction and expansion of Yoruba ritual symbolism as dictated by 'historical moments', while the ritual symbolism itself can shape and be shaped by 'the constitution of the society' (Ogundiran and Saunders 2014: 79). As this transformation is recognized and offered for symbolic interpretation, it would be productive to factor in the actual social conditions of the people, which, as Renne (2001: 76) observes, involve the 'changing cosmological belief' of the Yoruba. This might be helpful for an accurate examination of the circumstances that inform the whole cultural process of transformation. What is to be distilled here is a notion of culture as text, in line with Keesing's (1987) postulation: that is, the ritual as a cultural form is a textual category. Hence, our task is to go 'beyond interpreting cultural meanings', borrowing an insight from Keesing, by taking culture to mean a text, so as to allow for 'alternative readings' that shift attention away from the 'exotic' and profound reading of cultural metaphors. This, in Keesing's words, means situating our treatment of culture as text within 'a wider theory of society' and seeing 'cultural meaning to be more clearly connected to the real humans who live out their lives through them [i.e. cultural metaphors]' (*ibid.*: 161). The Oodua ritual is therefore interrogated against the background of its long-established procedures and in view of its now altered processes. This way of viewing the ritual takes a cue from Keesing by transcending ethnographic interpretations of the ritual to consider it as a text that is available for free interpretation. Hence, the present discussion of the symbolism of the ritual cuts across the three discursive platforms highlighted by Keesing for engaging with culture as text: history, economy



and politics (*ibid.*: 162). Undergirding this discussion are the contradictory notions of sacralizing and de-sacralizing the ritual; these are important issues overtly and covertly raised in J. D. Y. Peel's (1994: 163) review of Margaret Drewal (1992), Andrew Apter (1991) and J. K. Olupona (1991).

A complement to the view set out above from the perspective of sociology is the differentiation between 'the act' and 'the social act' (Ritzer 2011: 359): one relates to an individual while the other involves more than one individual. The concept of a 'significant symbol' explained in terms of 'gesture' is a borrowing from Ritzer: 'a kind of gesture ... only humans can make [which] arouse in the individual who is making them the same kind of response ... they are supposed to elicit from those to whom the gestures are addressed' (*ibid.*: 360–1). Of course, the process of many if not all Yoruba rituals is a series of significant physical and vocal gestures. Both the physical and the vocal gestures that constitute the Oodua ritual culminate in significant symbols; and all these symbols produce meanings that vary in terms of degree of intelligibility among ritual performers and the ritual audience as a whole.

The present structure of the ritual has been modified to reflect a major alteration in its traditional process: the OPC's ethnic/cultural project has been projected onto it through the OFF. Yet, it remains a ritual grounded in Yoruba cosmic understanding in a way that recalls and affirms Paul's postulation that humans are 'limitless, creative and self-transcending', in addition to having a 'protean power of symbolization' (1980: 286). The ritual's contemporary adjustment to ethnic demands recalls the assertion of Griaule and Dieterlen (1954: 83) that African cosmologies are refined 'ethno-philosophies'. Chief Adams' point about the need to invoke the ancestors of the Yoruba resonates with this generalization of African cosmologies. The OFF, a culture-preserving, culture-promoting offshoot of an ethnic militia, the OPC, has been involving itself in the ritual's processes since 2009.<sup>7</sup> This is a recent development that radicalizes the history of the Oodua ritual as a re-enactment of ancestral veneration that has undergone multiple generational transfers with no erasure of its immense artistic significance. The OFF's involvement has caused a remarkable structural alteration, with implications for the way in which the ritual communicates meaning through systematized symbols. By looking into the way the ritual has evolved over time (diachronic) and the way it has combined its old operative structure with a new structure from the OFF (synchronic), meanings are drawn from the verbal and what Turner (1977: 39) considers the 'nonverbal language' of the ritual. By recognizing the categories of the symbols – the traditional and the recent – and by exploring the ways in which the categories interact and speak to major influences on the ritual in recent times as well as the social and political implications of such influences, we can seek further meaning.

Engaging with the ritual in this way requires a primary focus on the 'semantics of the [ritual] symbols', to borrow yet another phrase from Turner (1977: 26) and to subscribe to Keesing's conception (1987: 161) that ritual embodies cultural reverberations. The OFF is then understood from its foundational connection and ideological alignment with the OPC – a body aptly described by Nolte (2008: 106), based on its antecedents, as 'a militant ethno-nationalist movement of the Yoruba

<sup>7</sup> The date of commencement of the OFF's participation in the ritual was provided in the interview granted to Insa Nolte and myself by Chief Gani Adams.



people of south-west of Nigeria' that seems to have outgrown its proclivity for violent ethno-nationalist agitation while still retaining its ideology of championing the cause of the Yoruba ethnic group in Nigeria. The additional significations arising from the OFF's changes and consequent extension of the ritual's processes are a subject that can be interpreted from the perspective of a political powerplay in which ethno-nationalism has agency in negotiations for equity and justice among ethnic groups in Nigeria. This approach therefore requires us to understand the shift in the pristine goals of the ritual, towards the kind of modernity-induced ends to which the ritual is being put by the OPC – a development that cuts across Yoruba rituals in general today. It is equally significant to understand the ways in which the ritual, to echo an idea of Apter (1991: 214), has maintained its centrality in the body politic of the people. Although the OFF buys into the annual Oodua ritual in line with its proclaimed objective of 'exploring Yoruba cultural heritage for excellence both within and outside Nigeria', its involvement cannot be divorced from the mainstream OPC's ethno-nationalist inscriptions on the political and cultural landscape of the Yoruba, who predominantly occupy the south-west – and, of course, by extension, that of Nigeria more widely. Reading Oodua ritual in this way underscores its significance as a site of crucial historical and cultural renegotiations – what may be described in the words of Gaston Bachelard, as paraphrased by Keesing (1987: 161), as “reverberations” of a culture in ritual'.

### **Changes: keying into and/or building on tradition**

There are areas of significant change in the Oodua ritual and there are aspects that may be identified as traditional in the sense that they are constants in the ritual process. The constants should also be understood as signifiers that can be decoded by the culturally knowledgeable within the broad interpretative schema of Yoruba ritual, ritual in African cultures, or even ritual in non-African societies. The broad schema can also help the non-culturally knowledgeable to access the ritual's messages if they want to know the history and cosmological principles on which the community of the ritual frames its culture and traditions. This implies that ritual, particularly when it is faith-based or faith-related – an act of religion – reflects practitioners' perception of the metaphysical and their understanding and organization of their worlds, according to beliefs that derive from or connect to the practitioners. Thus, the Oodua ritual is an act of the metaphysical that encodes the essence of the traditional community of the ritual. History, culture, society, governmentality (as inherited and incorporated into contemporaneous social frames) and art – as well as the processes relating to them – form the locus of the ritual's message while the ritual is patterned on the inherited structure of understanding the metaphysical. Focusing on the changes in the ritual means moving beyond an interest in the traditional ritual processes to reflecting more on important milestones, factors and actors in the contemporary historical progression of the people as imprinted on the framing and contents of the ritual.

Broadly, three areas of crucial change in the process of the ritual are covered in the present discussion: changes regarding date fixing (*idijo* or *imojo*); changes regarding the sacred offering; and changes regarding the procession or convergence of the audience. Prior to the involvement of the OFF, the fixing of the date was a single act or rite exclusively directed by a circle of initiates who were high up in the hierarchy of

the ritual's custodianship and held titles as priests of Oodua sacred worship. Like other such rites in a good number of prominent rituals in Ile-Ife, this rite also involved the palace of the monarch – the Ooni. The expression *s'etutu imojo lese ooni* (performance of the rite of date fixing at the feet of the monarch) underpins the involvement of the palace, which defines and guides the act. In the now expanded frame of the ritual performance, a date separate from the one authorized through *imojo* is usually chosen by the OFF during which appeasement (*etutu*) to the deity is performed. It is noteworthy that this is characterized by the willing involvement of the priests, who seem not to be bothered by the OFF's own choice of date, perhaps due to the increased visibility this has brought to the ritual.<sup>8</sup> In other instances, the date fixing might involve telephone conversations between the chief convener of the OFF, Are Gani Abiodun Ige Adams, and the Obadio (the chief priest of Oodua). However, the offering of the sacrifice more strictly requires physical attendance, although this might take the form of proxies; in the latter case, the priests offer to perform the sacrifice on behalf of the OFF because of its inability to be physically present.<sup>9</sup> Although the Ooni is notified as a matter of courtesy in reverence for the monarch and as a way of inviting the distinguished presence of the monarch to grace the occasion, such a notification does not equate with the very solemn act of spiritual consultation involving the Ooni or the palace vis-à-vis date fixing as required in the traditional process of the Oodua ritual. The OFF's own choice of date for participation in the Oodua ritual may be connected to the obvious substantial financial requirements for participation. It might be the case that it needs to raise funds for the expenses of its participation. It might also be the case that choosing a separate date of its own facilitates recognition of the OFF and its interest in the ritual. After all, the OFF ought to be seen as acting in accordance with its mandate of commitment to festival promotion and its involvement in a whole special day would enhance recognition of what it stands for and would attest to its steadfastness in that regard.<sup>10</sup>

*Imojo*, of course, is a recurrent feature of other prominent rituals in Ile-Ife, such as the Itapa ritual and the Orisalase ritual. However, the role of the Obadio (the chief priest of Oodua) seems to be one that can be bypassed in fixing the date for the OFF's participation. This is contrary to the more or less obligatory nature that defines the Obadio's participation in the pristine process on whose fringes the OFF's involvement is an act of Oodua ritual performance. With the OFF's annual presence at the Oodua ritual, *idijo* (the rite of date fixing), which previously was a single act, has been conducted twice. The first date fixing, properly known as *idijo*, marks the open or public start of the ritual process. It involves making an offering to Oodua – the deity to be venerated and commemorated. Unlike *idijo*, date fixing for the OFF's participation is devoid of the traditional sanctity. While *idijo* involves divination to determine the date that is most appropriate for starting the ritual, participants, including the Ooni's representatives, assembling at a fixed sacred spot in the palace grounds, and traditionally obligatory processes and materials, the fixing or picking of the date by

<sup>8</sup> This could be observed in the generally genial disposition of the priests of Oodua towards me; they believed that I could help boost the patronage and popularity of the ritual through my scholarship.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with the Obadio, Chief Farotimi Faloba.

<sup>10</sup> This conjecture resonates with the usual operative technique of the OFF as revealed in the chief convener's conversation with myself and Insa Nolte.

the OFF is different. It is rather casual, although it is usually brought to the attention of the Obadio, who can give his consent only after due consultation with the Ooni, the overall custodian of ritual institutions in Ile-Ife. It should be noted that, while *idijo* is meant to be based on divine instruction, date fixing by the OFF is not – at least, not obviously. Again, with the annual involvement of the OFF, there is now an overlap in the traditional Ife schedules for the Oodua and Obatala rituals. In other words, the coterminous timeframes for the Oodua and Obatala rituals are no longer what they used to be. For instance, the seventh day and the ‘midpoint’<sup>11</sup> of the Oodua ritual is supposed to be the day when the ban on drumming in the entire town is lifted and also the day of the date fixing – *idijo* – for the Obatala devotees. The Obatala procession to the palace is supposed to be marked by ‘lone drumming’ to signify the lifting of the ban on drumming, which is expected to have been observed over a period of time across the entire town. Today, the elongation of the process of the Oodua ritual occasioned by the involvement of the OFF means that it partly coincides with the time traditionally marked out for and strictly observed as the main period of the Obatala ritual. Date fixing by the OFF appears to enjoy a rare privilege from the ritually rooted people of Ife. However, this has not been without some friction. For instance, at one time, the OFF, it was reported, unilaterally fixed a date for its involvement in the Oodua ritual and arrived for its usual addition to the process but had to be told that its presence coincided with the Pokulere ritual, which forbids the free movement of people around the ancient town of Ile-Ife. The group had to halt its planned action and take temporary refuge in commercial and other accommodation in the town. Since then, the latitude for picking a date for its involvement that the OFF previously enjoyed has had to be adjusted so that the procedure involves the Obadio. The Obadio can inform the OFF of the suitability of a proposed date based on the schedules for rituals in the town, particularly the Obatala ritual.

This reveals how the OFF’s involvement has caused a shift in the previously rigid adherence to times traditionally allotted to each of the two prominent rituals. The concession implied in this shift is noteworthy because of its observable friction-free implementation. This development should call attention to the background of violent eruptions that is said to be a characteristic of the annual encounter between Oodua and Obatala devotees in the past. It could be logically inferred that the general atmosphere of ritual experience in Ile-Ife has taken a considerably congenial turn. This, however, begs a question. Would this have happened if the need for the shift were different? And what in particular accounts for the willing concession being made to ensure the accommodation of the OFF? We could hazard some guesses: (1) the spirit of renaissance that was welcomed after a long period of low patronage of the ritual; (2) the elitist status of the OFF, which probably commands respect among the people of Ife; (3) an implicit identification with the ethno-nationalist aspirations of the OPC/OFF; (4) respect earned by the OPC group, which is the foundation of and propelling force behind the OFF, based on its well-established ethno-nationalist profile; and (5) the promise – and, indeed, the fulfilment of that promise – of a boost to the macro-economic activities of the community of the ritual, Ile-Ife, among others. To reflect points (1) and (2), we make reference to an interview conducted in line with this inquiry. Five out of six devotees

<sup>11</sup> This appears in Olupona’s (2011: 246) account and was confirmed in an interview with the Obadio of Ife, Farotimi Faloba.

(three from each of the Obatala and Oodua circles of devotees, all of whom had been involved in the extended part of the Oodua ritual facilitated by the OFF) agreed that the involvement of the group does not diminish the ritual's sacred value, since the traditional rites reserved for the initiates are not compromised by the OFF's involvement. The only person who disagreed, an Obatala devotee, took the position that all aspects of Yoruba culture had already been compromised because of all sorts of influences, although this compromised situation does have its positive value. Other rituals in Ile-Ife have also experienced change due to pressure from different forms of modernity: the introduction of new technology, growing population mix, continuous increase in human and vehicular movement, and changing fashion trends, among others. Points (3) and (4) may be difficult to confirm because they fall within the exclusive preserve of the initiates, who were reluctant to provide answers to such questions. Hence, one is left either to make conjectures or to risk using information that does not effectively address the concerns about which that information was sought. Regarding point (5), all symbols are to be given recognition as equal players on the semantic field in order to determine how each one speaks to the cultural and/or social dimensions of the reality in which people live. Overall, it can be argued that the OFF's involvement in the ritual has been positively transformative, in the sense that the intervention puts to the test and consequently affirms the ritual's capacity to tolerate infringements on its traditional processes. It has also been positively transformative in terms of the wider reception of the ritual as an artistic and cultural act that can be used for ethnic and/or political ends. Records of the display of opulence by the OFF at the Oodua ritual, as at other Yoruba rituals the organization has been promoting, testify to the OFF's pride in freely identifying with the ritual and its desire to encourage large-scale awareness of its mission and success.

Change regarding the offering is an interesting aspect of the Oodua ritual in its enlarged or adjusted version. Traditionally, offerings are made by the Ooni, priests of Oodua (as a collective), priests of some other deities with separate places of worship, such as the Araba (the chief priest of Ifa), women of Idio (wives of male descendants of the Idio lineage in Ile-Ife) and the Ogungbe (a special group in charge of certain sacred rites performed from time to time for the Ooni). The OFF has appropriated for itself a position like those traditionally assigned to individuals and groups. It also makes an offering, but we might wonder what purpose the OFF's offering is intended to serve. Is it to metaphysically communicate or be involved in such a spiritual exchange? Does it buy into the idea of the ritual as a hallowed act? Whether or not it is a spiritual act, the OFF's offering to Oodua could serve the purpose of etching into people's consciousness the Yoruba ethno-nationalism that the group champions, particularly among members of the OFF and OPC, even if members of the general ritual congregation are not impacted as much. This resonates with an explicit remark made by Chiedozie Okoro vis-à-vis Chief Gani Adams and the OPC. While not discounting the important role that historical experience may play in the building of 'a politico-economic thought structure', and while justifying the kind of ideology subscribed to by the OPC, Okoro contends: 'Spiritual/religious consciousness has a way of raising up group awareness or the sentiment of a people' (Ogbeidi 2005: 24–5).<sup>12</sup> What this

<sup>12</sup> Michael M. Ogbeidi is the editor of a collection of essays in honour of Chief Gani Adams, *Leadership Challenge* (2005). Two copies of the book were graciously sent to me from Lagos by Chief Gani Adams and

implies is that cultural affirmation may serve as a soothing balm for an ethno-nationalist group facing the reality that a nation like Nigeria may remain indissoluble.

The procession to the palace of the Ooni, which used to take place twice, now occurs three times, and, again, varies due to the changes foisted on the ritual courtesy of the OFF's involvement. This addition is not as noteworthy, as its process is rather loose compared with the solemn and structured version of the longstanding ritual. Through the additions brought to it by the OFF, the Oodua ritual process is extended in reference to the pre-existing acts of the ritual. The traditional process of the ritual entails the following, listed using the terms used by ritual practitioners and as they are understood by the traditional community to which the messages of the ritual are principally addressed: *ikidan/orungbe* (opening of the *orungbe* rite), *idijo* (date fixing), *bibo awon iya* (appeasing the witches), *ojo oru* (day of the sacred pot), *iwole obalufon* (entry of *obalufon*), *osan* (sacrifice at noon), *bibo ona* (sacrifice to the path), *ikale* (stoppage of drumming), *esinsin kobale* (joint breakfast at dusk), *ase isoro* (merriment of senior initiates), *ipiwo* (offering of the sacrificial animal), *ireja* (market raiding), *ase oba* (merriment of the *Obadio*), *ita odun* (day of merriment and commemoration of the legendary female ancestor, Ledi), *bibo aje* (sacrifice to the goddess of riches), *iteni ota* (rite for the female *Molomu* – female descendants of Idio lineage spread within Ile-Ife and the larger Yoruba territories), *imetutu* (prognostication and offerings), *ase-Ooni* (merriment of the Ooni), *bibo osun Oodua* (appeasing Oduduwa's Osun), *arufin* (prognostication to desired ends), *ojo-iperu* (day of deliberation), *itunwopa* (public re-enactment of the sacrifice of the *owo*) and *ipadawole* (close of the ritual).<sup>13</sup> From the explanations of each of the rites that have guided these translations, the ritual is a comprehensive re-enactment of the Ife's shared beliefs about (possibly imaginary) entities that are considered to be their ancestors, about places, acts and institutions they revere, and about the history held as originary and crucial to their existence.

While it is not new for Yoruba rituals to transform, it is remarkable that the transformation being foisted on the Oodua ritual by the OFF speaks to the kind of political dynamics that reinforce the relevance of ethno-nationalist agency and its drivers, such as the OPC. This is an important perspective for understanding Nigerian socio-political structures and the importance of culture, and how the connection between culture (at the ritual performance level) and society (in its inclusive and dynamic state) is exploited by the OPC through the OFF. The dynamics of the politics in question are rooted in perceived social injustice, which accounts for the high level of poverty in Nigeria, as in almost all other African countries. This factor, in conjunction with others, continues to provide a justification for ethno-nationalist action, such as that carried out by ethno-nationalist groups in Nigeria like the OPC. In

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I received them on 19 November 2024. Okoro is a contributor to the book; his contribution is entitled 'The ideology of Oodua People's Congress: origins, growth, development and functions'.

<sup>13</sup> The translations are my own, but I was greatly assisted by explanations provided by the *Obadio* and the *Tedimole* – two principal actors in the ritual. The two versions are not semantically at variance. It is important to note that the stages of the ritual highlighted in this discussion are more numerous than those identified by Olupona (twenty-three rather than ten). Those identified alongside English translations provided by Olupona are as follows: announcement of the date, preparations, opening the ancestral gate of the Oduduwa compound, feasting and ritual, entering the ritual (*iwole odun*), the ritual drama of the Oduduwa ceremony, the sacrifice (*ipiwo*), *iteni ota* and *iwuye molomu*, bringing the sacrificial blessing to the palace, and ending the ritual (Olupona 2011: 234–47).

this context, some questions require answers. First, the Oodua ritual was originally a communal act with the primary aim of revitalizing life in the immediate and the larger Yoruba social space; how can its functional essence be realized through the conjoined old and new ritual processes? Second, according to which principle(s) of association known to or acceptable within the ritual framework will the circle of initiates – the principal ritual performers – operate in a valid way without obstructing the functional essence of the ritual? And how will this functional essence, if and when realized, be harnessed or tapped into by the OFF? Third, are any sacred symbols added through the involvement of the OFF? Fourth, if there are, how does their efficacy compare to that of those symbols that have always been part of the ritual? And fifth, regardless of whether they are as symbolically charged or not, can all the symbols be put on the same semantic field?

Traditionally, the highlights of the Oodua ritual run from mid-December to early January. They now extend to the end of January or some time in February, once the OFF's additions are considered. The ritual usually involved twenty-three acts. The involvement of the OFF, however, has introduced three major additional acts:<sup>14</sup> date fixing for the OFF performance; offerings to the deity of Oodua by the OFF; and congregating in front of the palace of the Ooni. Indeed, rituals can act upon and can be acted upon. Either way, there is an implication for society. Knottnerus's theoretical formulation that emphasizes 'the role ritualization plays in the formation, reproduction, and transformation of social structure in groups embedded within a larger social environment' (1997: 257) speaks to the way in which the structure of the Oodua ritual could now be seen as imbricated. As Kapferer (1979) highlights, in the analysis of ritual, '[s]ymbolic meaning and representational and reflexive perspectives' continue to dominate the way we investigate rituals. Hence, two senses in which the present discussion is greatly indebted to Kapferer's study are worth highlighting: (1) his interest in 'how rites change or transform the situations to which they are directed'; and (2) his notion of ritual being 'a dynamic in virtuality'<sup>15</sup> ... a force that can pragmatically intervene in ordinary realities'. On the strength of important disclosures made by randomly selected ritual congregants, it is clear that the Oodua ritual is being made to impact the ethnic consciousness of Yoruba ritual congregants and how the agential activities of the OFF modify the ritual's performative structure as a reflection of a crucial political undercurrent in Nigeria.

### Significations

The ritual manifests two strong indicators of the possibility of harmonizing two broad concerns that often appear irreconcilable or antithetical in the understanding of Nigeria as a nation, and, in particular, of Nigeria's administration as a geopolitical entity: the ethnic (regarding the country's constituents) and the national (regarding Nigeria being a collective). How a possible harmonization of these opposing sides of a people's life could be attained is signified in the ritual's non-discriminatory appeal for sponsorship

<sup>14</sup> The locals do not have names for these different segments of the process the Ori Olokun has added to the age-old practice; though to say that it is age-old does not imply that the process has always been repeated without any form of modification.

<sup>15</sup> Kapferer's idea of 'virtuality' shapes Plancke's study of the water spirit dance rituals in rural Punu society (Plancke 2014).



and its wide receptivity of prospective participants, irrespective of their beliefs. This tendency seems to be innate to the ritual. However, the OFF factor in how the ritual is performed today gives that quality a clear visibility. Granted, the OPC might recognize and leverage this quality of accommodation to popularize its ideology and mobilize potential subscribers with the aim of advancing its mission through a legitimate and overtly innocuous ally that actively features in major Yoruba rituals – the OFF. This understanding requires that one emphasizes the ethno-nationalist context and, arguably, the ethno-nationalist views of the OFF, which, although it proclaims itself to be apolitical and cultural, maintains a very strong affiliation with the OPC and has entered into an alliance for the promotion of rituals across major Yoruba-dominated cities in Nigeria over the last two decades. The OFF's involvement invariably becomes a part of the aesthetics of the ritual, and this article shows how, through the principles of aesthetics, the ritual amounts to a medium for perpetuating a significant socio-political action: the ethno-nationalism of the OPC. Viewed as an art form, the OFF's involvement can be analysed according to artistic standards. Certainly, the appearance of the OFF – through which the OPC is reflected both in body and in spirit – is an entertaining show, the sacredness (known and unknown) of their involvement notwithstanding. Nonetheless, it might suffice to give a summation of this aesthetic dimension of the Oodua ritual; it can be assessed according to the standards of ritual actors, costumes, the stage, the moderator, the audience, action, props, dialogue and even script. While the twenty-three traditional acts and the additional theatrical elements introduced by the OFF's involvement work together to serve the central purpose of renewing the physical and metaphysical interaction that is the foundation of the community, the OFF's artistic addendum is primarily about ideological persuasion. This persuasion by the OFF is aimed at getting the people whose interests it is designed to serve to at least identify with it. Certainly, the main ritual and the additional parts provide entertainment and convey a number of meanings (social, cultural, philosophical, religious, educational, historical, political and economic). The two sides of the ritual differ in their promptings and orientation. This ethno-nationalist reception of and/or intervention in the ritual affirms Ogundiran's (2020: xiii) notion of Yoruba rituals: 'generative actions' used in translating the 'Yoruba experiences into new practices or traditions'.

On the strength of Euba's observation of Yoruba rituals as yearly commemorations of primordial ancestors (2014: 98, 101), the OFF may be said to be involved in the Oodua ritual not simply as a participant in the annual commemoration of a primordial ancestor called Oodua, or some other deified or equally primordial ancestors whom the sacred essence of the ritual is believed to serve.<sup>16</sup> Although the OFF's involvement is not obviously ethno-political within the ritual arena, it strongly appears to be a crucial means of enlisting the ritual for ethnic politicking by the OPC, which has been revealed to be behind the OFF.<sup>17</sup> The OPC's occasional call for a Yoruba nation where the equity and safety of the interests of Yoruba people could be guaranteed is almost impossible to achieve in view of the geopolitical arrangement of intricately

<sup>16</sup> From experience of other Yoruba rituals, particularly those of Ile-Ife, a ritual bearing the name of a god or goddess is often an occasion for metaphysical communication with related others. The syncretic nature of Yoruba religious belief underpins this position.

<sup>17</sup> This information about the OFF was provided during an interview with the leader of the OPC who is also a prominent member of the OFF board of trustees.



interwoven diverse ethnic groups, an arrangement that has existed for a long time. Therefore, for an organization agitated by a perceived lack of equity and justice for the ethnic group it represents and that agitates, as a result, for an assurance of equity and justice for its chosen ethnic group, the ritual is also what Paul (1980: 289) calls a 'symbolic solution': that is, a crisis of consciousness is resolved for the OPC membership, if only partially, if the perceived injustice remains.

## Conclusion

The involvement of the entwined bodies of the OPC and the OFF in the Oodua ritual is as significant as the ritual's transformation. Rather than remaining an assemblage of symbols for memorializing the past as a key part of life in the present, the Oodua ritual has partly become an instrument for negotiating a key reality in contemporary Nigeria. Cultural remaking, social negotiation and reconstruction, and entertainment through inherited and non-inherited symbolic gestures are the dominant themes of the ritual's artistic dimension. That the OPC and the OFF use the ritual as an instrument of identity reconstruction, affirmation and ideological persuasion fabricated out of a Yoruba collective memory is evident from the bodies' strategies of mass mobilization and appropriation of the ritual schema in pursuit of their aspirations. Since rituals are a traditional art form, the changes the Oodua ritual has undergone under the social pressure of ethno-nationalism are testament to the fact that art reflects society. If this reflection is noticeable in the performative structure of the ritual and its symbolic constituents, it is equally so in the constitution of the audience. Of course, the kind of entertainment that a performative art like a ritual offers has always been accessible to a diverse audience. However, the diversity and sophistication of the audience that the involvement of the OPC and the OFF has brought about are on a different level. In addition to the readily available audience at the site of the ritual – Ile-Ife – others of diverse shades are drawn from the African diaspora, culture enthusiasts and promoters, tourists and government functionaries. As a cultural practice and art form that has endured from time immemorial to present-day Nigeria, the Oodua ritual offers a template for understanding the nature and effect of the pull exerted by contemporary Nigerian realities on indigenous traditions. An understanding of the ritual's changing nature – such as the one hopefully offered in this article – reveals the ways in which the prescriptive and restrictive paths of tradition are negotiated and pushed towards a more liberal and inclusive cultural context. This appears to be a possibility that ethnic champions seem to realize, but a reality that the less politically and culturally conscious – particularly ritual adherents – may not immediately come to terms with. As various traditions will continue to be exploited to the political and quasi-political advantage of diverse ethnic groups in Nigeria, cultural and art forms such as the Oodua ritual might serve the purpose of offering pathways to understanding important cultural and political undercurrents – and, in turn, to gainfully understanding an ethnically complex country like Nigeria.

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**Morufu Bukola Omigbule** is Associate Professor at the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, teaching undergraduate and postgraduate courses in Literature in English, Postcolonial Literature and Folklore. A fellow of the African Humanities Program (AHP) of the American Council of Learned Societies, a fellow of Gent University, Belgium, and visiting scholar at universities including the University of Oxford, Omigbule is the author of *Rituals of Ile-Ife, Nigeria: narratives and performances of archetypes*.