

# AN APPRAISAL OF OSUN OSOGBO AS A FESTIVAL THEATRE

*Olaniyan Modupe Elizabeth (Ph.D)*

Department of English and Literary Studies Ekiti State University, Ado-  
Ekiti, Nigeria

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## Abstract

This research looks at a Nigerian festival from the theatrical point of view. The popular Osun Osogbo festival in the South-Western part of the country has been chosen for the purpose. The research looks into the ways in which the festival is being celebrated from the beginning to the end, i.e from the preparatory aspect of the festival to the actual performance, in terms of the day- to - day activities. The research is divided into three parts. The first part deals with the account of the various myths surrounding the origin vis-à-vis the worship of River Osun goddess. The second part gives an account of the day-to-day activities of the celebration of the festival as witnessed by the researcher. The third part gives an analysis of the various characteristics of a festival theatre and relates same to Osun festival to see whether it fits into what can be called a theatrical performance.

The researcher observes that there are theatrical elements like dramatic personae, arena, costume, spectacle, music and dance etc embedded in the festival and therefore can unequivocally be called a festival theatre

The paper concludes that if the various cultural festivals of Nigeria could be upgraded to national and international status like the Osun Osogbo festival, they would not only boost the nation's tourist attraction, they would also boost the internally-generated revenue of the Nigerian Nation.

The paper therefore recommends that the cultural values of the country should be annexed to attract international status in order to boost the economy of the nation.

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**Keywords:** Tradition, Africa, Festival, Performance, Osun, Nigeria

## Introduction

Writing on traditional African festival drama, Oyin Ogunba (1998) affirms that in traditional African drama, the great artistic institution uses the festival and that the festival is not merely a religious occasion. In its realization, a festival's religious foundation is often tied to a veritable

carnival of dance drama and ritual drama. It is in this sense that the festival is the prime artistic institution of traditional Africa. The festival is the only institution which has the framework that can coordinate virtually all the artistic forms of a community. Each traditional festival lasts for a considerable time-days or weeks. Each tends to have a story or a myth to perform and each makes use of its own peculiar style in the dramatic realization of the story. Each year, there is a cycle of performances which evokes much of the history of a community and also brings to light all the artistic forms of the community-costuming, masking, drumming, chanting, drumming etc.

A festival is a celebration, a commemoration to mark a particular event or a situation. It is also a communal gathering because it involves everybody in a community. Osun Osogbo festival in Osogbo town, Osun state in the South Western part of Nigeria, is celebrated in a very unique way. No other town or village celebrates it on a large scale like the people of Osogbo. Although, other towns like Ede, Ido-Osun, Ilesha, Otan-Ayegbaju and Ikirun celebrate Osun festival, none of these towns celebrates it as it is uniquely done in Osogbo.

The festival is an annual event which commemorates the day Osogbo town was founded by the first Ataoja, Oba Larooye, about 450 years ago. The festival has become a major cultural event in Nigeria and it attracts people from all walks of life. It is celebrated in August of every year.

The whole events in the festival last for two weeks but out of the two weeks, the major events happen only in seven days. Each of these seven days is significant to the festival. The first day marks the clearing of the bush around the main roads from Gbaemu area of the town to the palace. The clearing exercise of the town's main road is to make sure that over-grown shrubs and weeds that might hamper the easy influx of visitors to the town are cut down. The second day marks the lighting of the sixteen (16) lamps, which must be kept burning till the following morning when a sacrifice will be offered to the past wives of the King. The fourth day marks the feasting of the people of Osogbo by the Ataoja, the King; the fifth day is marked with the sacrifice to the King's head and the crown; the sixth day is the worship of the earth goddess or the Ojo Ogboni (the Ogboni's day) while the seventh day, the grand finale, marks the worshipping at the shrine. At this juncture, a brief account of each day's event would be necessary but before this is done, it would also be expedient to trace the origin of River Osun vis-à-vis its subsequent annual celebration.

### **The Origin of River Osun vis-à-vis the Celebration of the Festival**

There are many myths surrounding the origin of the river vis-à-vis the festival, but three of them will be traced in this paper.

### **The First Myth**

According to Beier (1969), Osun was one of the wives of Sango, a king in Oyo Ajaka in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. When Sango was banished from Oyo because of his high-handedness which eventually led to the rebellion against him, he took his wives, children and followers with him while leaving. On getting to Koso village, he was deserted by many of his wives and followers, leaving only Osun with him. Sango consequently, hanged himself on Ayan tree and Osun was said to have changed into a river in Osogbo, where she was deified because of her support and loyalty to her husband. She had since then been worshipped as a goddess of fertility.

### **The Second Myth**

Another myth about the origin of the river also claims that Osun was the wife of Sango, the powerful Alaafin of Oyo. It was then the common practice in Oyo that the Oyomesi (the king-makers) were feasted by the Alaafin during meetings. Since the King's wives were accorded the duty of preparing the various dishes, Osun and Oba were responsible for the preparation of the food.

As the custom was and still is, in Yoruba land, the King's wives prepared the food in turns. However, it was discovered that whenever Osun prepared the food, the Oyomesi would eat just a little, because the food was not palatable. But when Oba prepared the food, it used to be finger-licking. Osun's action was not only embarrassing, but shameful because of her status as the senior wife of Sango. Hence, she put the shame aside and went to Oba to teach her how she used to prepare her food.

Oba seized this opportunity to discredit Osun and told her a lie that whenever it was her turn to prepare the food, all she used to do was to cut a small piece of her ear and cooked it with the soup. Osun believed her story and when it was her turn to prepare the food, she cut a small piece of her ear in the soup. When the meal was served, the Oyomesis (the king makers) saw the pieces of human ear in the soup, and they mistook it for poison. There was pandemonium in the palace as they turned the food upside down.

The shame was too much for Osun and she committed suicide by turning herself into a river after declaring her enmity with Oba who also became a river after the death of Sango. The myth proves the enmity between these two rivers to this day and hence the song:

O da'ye ojo miran  
K'a to f'omo Oba f'Osun

Meaning: It is only in another life time that Oba's child can be betrothed to Osun's child.

### **The Third Myth**

The third myth and perhaps the most credible and reliable about the worship of Osun river, according to Adedeji (1981), says that during a particular period in history, Osogbo was invaded by the Fulani warriors from the Northern part of Nigeria. Considering the history of the Fulanis as war-mongers, the Osogbo people stood little chance of winning the war. When these invaders came to the outskirts of Osogbo, they had to cross the Osun River before they could get into the town and they were hungry. Miraculously, Osun disguised herself as a food vendor and sold to the invaders poisoned food which they ate and they all died. This made the people to win the war even without fighting it. In appreciation of her historic assistance, the people, led by the King, Oba Larooye, the first Ataoja offered sacrifice to the goddess in the groove which eventually developed into the present annual celebration of Osun festival.

Despite the inconsistencies in these myths, two things feature prominently. These are the facts that:

1. Osun once lived as a human being; the wife of Sango, the powerful King of old Oyo town and,
2. It was as a result of her good deeds that made her to be deified and worshipped which eventually led to the present annual festival.

### **The Celebration of Osun Festival.**

The annual celebration of Osun festival is always a special period and an occasion for joy, merriment and spectacle. This is because the festival is one of the most (if not the most) popular and crowd-pulling traditional festivals in the South-Western part of Nigeria.

The festival is celebrated in August every year. The date for the festival is usually fixed by the elders of Osogbo, consisting of the King, the Chiefs, and the Chief Priests and Priestesses of Osun River. The festival runs through two weeks but is only within seven days in the two weeks that the major events take place. Some rites and rituals known only to the Priests and Priestesses of Osun are usually performed in-between the days. The Egungun festival among which is Ladomi which lasts for nine days precedes the Osun Festival, in preparation for the goddess of Osun River.

As earlier said, only seven days of the two weeks have major events in the festival. The event in each of the seven days will be discussed as follows:

#### **Day One: Iwo popo (Clearing of the main roads)**

This is the opening day of the worship of River Osun. It is the clearing and cleaning of the town. On this day, heads of every household would come and present the King with gifts especially farm products like

yam tubers, kola nuts, goats, e.t.c, and congratulating him on his ability to witness the year's festival and praying that he sees the subsequent ones.

The significance of Iwo popo is in the fact that the town must be presentable to the spirits and expected visitors. It also symbolizes the traditional clearing of the town's main roads of weeds and over-grown shrubs that might hamper the influx of spirits and visitors to the town. Iwo popo is an evident indication that adequate preparations have been made for the celebration of the festival. The King with his entourage will dance round the town amidst singing and dancing with a lot of merriment going on at the palace. Thus, the festival has been heralded in and invited guests are being expected.

### **Day Two: Ina Olojumerindinlogun (Lighting of the 16 Lamps)**

Two major events take place on this day. The first is paying homage to the deceased Kings and second, the lighting of the sixteen lamps (Ina Olajumerindinlogun). The first event is done in the early hours of the day while the second one is done in the late hours of the day. The homage is usually paid where the departed Ataoja (kings) were buried. What is done is making appeasement to the deceased by the reigning Ataoja, asking them to guide him in ruling the land.

The second event of the day is lighting of the sixteen lamps. The event takes place in the evening around 7: oopm and it lasts till the following morning. The sixteen lamps which represent the sixteen Odus in Ifa (the 16 chapters in Ifa oracle) are mounted on a piece of metal about 17cm high.

The event usually takes place in the main market place and people would come to watch the lamps burning. The Ataoja then dances round the burning lamps (also known as Osanyin's lamp) three times. He is followed by the Chief priests and priestesses and other people at the gathering. The lamps are kept burning throughout the night, till the dawn of the following day.

### **Day Three: Ojo Ayaba (Day of the Queens)**

This is the day set aside for the entire women-folk in the community, who are being represented by the wives of the King. All the King's wives, both dead and alive, are appeased; sacrifices are made to the deceased wives. The event takes place in the palace.

### **Day Four: Ojo Ajo Oba (The King's Feast)**

The festival continues with the Ataoja showing his magnanimity to his subjects, especially the less-privileged ones by giving them gifts. The second event of the day is called the Ojo Ajo Oba when the Chiefs, the Princes and Princesses with some other important dignitaries are specially

feasted by the King. The feasting is accompanied by singing, dancing and merriment.

#### **Day Five: Ibori and Ibo-Ade (The purification of Crowns)**

This is a palace event that is exclusive to the King, Chiefs, the priests and priestesses of Osun. It is a solemn event. It is both the appeasement to the ‘head’ of the King and the sacrifice to the crowns in the palace. It is the Ibori that is done first. Appeasement is made to the ‘head’ of the King. The essence of this ceremony lies in the fact that the Yorubas believe that it is the head that guides and directs one’s action in life, and therefore should be appeased, periodically.

Immediately, the king’s ‘head’ is appeased, the Ibo-ade (the purification of the crown) is performed. It is a common practice for the Ataoja to wear a new crown on every festival year. Hence, the new crowns are purified and sacrifices are made to the old ones. This is necessary because since the King’s ‘head’ has been appeased, the crown that would be worn on it should be purified, so as not to contaminate the head again. The entire King’s paraphernalia of office - staff and Irukere - (Horse tail) are also purified.

#### **Day Six: Ibo-Ile (The appeasement of the Earth goddess)**

This event is also exclusively a palace event and it is performed at the resident of the Baale - the head of the palace. He is to the palace as the King is to the town.

The Yorubas believe that the earth can be hot or cold. If it is cold, it would bring fruitfulness but if it is hot, it causes doom by bringing epidemics like small-pox, chicken pox, e.t.c. to the people. Hence, the sacrifice to the earth-goddess is in order to make the earth comforting to the people.

After the mother-earth has been appeased, the King feasts the *Ogboni* cult members in the community. This is why the day is also called *Ojo Ogboni* (the *Ogboni*’s day).

#### **Day Seven: The Festival Day**

This is the climax of the festival and it is the worshipping at the shrine. The activities start around 4:00am with the crowing of the “Osun Cock”. The Cock (an Osun priestess) goes round the town waking up everybody with her crows. Dressed in a short skirt called “yeri” with a short blouse to match, she carries a pair of “emele” drum (a small talking drum) which she beats as she imitates the cock crowing-“keke ree ke, akuko Osun nko” (“kek ree ke, Osun’s cock is crowing”).

It is gathered that the Ataoja in company of Iya osun, Aworo Osun and some other top priests and priestesses would make a secret visit to the shrine very early in the morning after the “cock” has finished her own

routine. It is during this time that the Ataoja makes most of his supplications to Osun and sacrifices are made. After this, they all come back to the palace for the normal crowdly procession which would be led by the Arugba. This procession, which includes everybody, leaves the palace for the shrine around 10: am in the morning.

The Arugba is the carrier of the big calabash in which all the materials to be used for the sacrifice to Osun are put, hence, the title A-rugba (one who carries the calabash). The Arugba is always a virgin, chosen among the children of the reigning Ataoja. It is believed that the Osun chooses her Arugba herself through Orumila, the oracle. The term of office of Arugba covers three years after which she is married to whoever is chosen for her by the goddess through Orumila.

The Ataoja's procession, led by the Arugba usually walks the whole 5km distance from the palace to the shrine, with some devotees supporting the Arugba because of her heavy load which would be emptied into the river to feed the fishes therein.

After the content of the calabash has been thrown into the river, the people would then start to make their supplications to the goddess. Some people would even take part of the water home because it is believed that it possesses therapeutic and magical powers. While the worshipping is going on, a lot of singing, dancing, wrestling and acrobatic displays are taking place as side-attractions, outside the shrine.

The merriment continues while the Ataoja and his entourage leave for the palace, to entertain the invited guests, who usually include state functionaries like the Governors and his Commissioners and even National and international dignitaries.

### **Why Osun Festival can be regarded as a Festival Theatre- An Appraisal**

Before one can call a festival, a theatrical performance, certain characteristics must have been seen to be present. Such characteristics, according to Obafemi (2001:48), include among others;

1. Presence of Dramatic Personae or Performers
2. Artificiality
3. Arena or Stage
4. Impersonation or Mimesis
5. Loose end
6. Purposefulness or Theme
7. Costume and make-up
8. It must be procedural
9. It must be Communal in nature.
10. Audience

Each of these elements will be treated one after the other.

## **Performers**

Before a theatre can be said to have taken place, there must be performers, i.e. the actors and actresses. The presence of the audience who will watch the performers is also crucial. In African theatre, the audience is the active and participatory one, who moves both in the spirit and body with the performers. It should also be noted that there is no dichotomy between the stages and the auditorium like western theatre. At the Osun festival for instance, the Ataoja, the Priests and Priestesses with other worshippers go about together, singing and dancing to and from the shrine. There is no strict demarcation.

## **Artificiality**

Actions in the festival are representational. This is in agreement with the view that “art is a reflection of reality”. It is not reality itself. According to Dasylva (2004:52) “theatre is a condensation of everybody’s life”. It is this sense that brings about the element of selectivity in African theatre.

## **Arena Or Stage**

The arena or stage is another important element that is present in Osun festival. There are many arenas. The first is the main market place where the King and his Chiefs with the priests and priestesses of Osun perform the Iwo-popo. There are other arenas in the palace where the Ibori and Ibo-ade take place. The final arena is the Ojubo where the first Ataoja made the original covenant with the goddess. The Ojubo is located in the large court-yard called Agbala Osun.

The other arenas are on the street. This makes the festival look like situational-drama as people move about dancing and singing. They also go to the houses of important dignitaries.

## **Impersonation or Mimesis**

Impersonation or imitation is an integral element of African theatre. Imitation is an innate quality of human beings. The Oxford Companion to English language (2002:309) defines imitation as “the act of mimicking a person or thing for entertainment”. Ola Rotimi (1981:77) supports this claim in his definition of theatre that “theatre within a cultural setting, at any rate implies an imitation of action... or a person or person in action; the ultimate objective of which is to edify or to entertain, sometimes to do both”.

He goes further to explain the use of mimetic impulse in mimicking a life experience or the behaviour of some people. So African theatre can be said to have been borne out of imitation.

In Osun festival, there is the element of impersonation where the reigning Ataoja plays the role of the late Ataoja Larooye who first made the

original pact with the goddess. Also, instead of the water goddess coming up to bless the people, it is now the Chief priestess that comes out.

### **Loose end**

Osun Osogbo festival is loose. It does not have a fixed setting. Other side-attractions and improvisations are going on simultaneously as the sacrifice is going on, at the Ojubo or the worship arena. While the priest and priestesses are busy performing the rites, there are side-attractions like wrestling, acrobatic displays, singing and dancing outside the main arena.

### **Purposefulness**

The festival has some purposes which it serves in the lives of the people. For instance, it serves as a curative/therapeutic purpose as well as integrative and political purpose.

### **Costume and Make-Up**

There is also the use of colourful and elaborate costumes and make – up during the festival. Everybody is in a colourful mood as the Chief Priestesses and the Oloris (i.e. the Queens) plait their hair with colourful beads. The King also appears in colourful flowing regalia with other worshippers.

### **Procedural**

The festival lasts for about two weeks. There are laid down procedures to be followed before fixing the dates. Activities are fixed on certain days of the festivals. For example, during the lighting of the 16 lamps, the procession is led by the Arugba, who is followed by the King, priests and priestesses before any other person.

### **Communal**

The festival is communal in nature. It also attracts people from all works of life. It serves as a sort of communal integration, bringing the people together, in spite of their different political or religious differences.

### **Audience**

The audience of Osun festival is an active and participatory one. Both the main actors- the priests, priestesses, kings and chiefs move to the shrine to worship the goddess in a convoy, singing and dancing.

With all these characteristics, Osun Osogbo festival can convincingly be regarded as a festival theatre. There is also the use of music and symbols e.g., the carved image at the shrine which represents the goddess.

## Conclusion

Osun Osogbo festival is a traditional festival that has not lost its values and significance in the whole of Yoruba-land of Nigeria, and indeed the world. The festival impacts the sense of cohesion, integration and solidarity into its adherents, thus resulting in the unity which prevails in Osogbo in particular and the good neighborliness it enjoys with other towns and villages. As a festival of international standard, which the people can identify with, the groove has been developed into a tourist centre thus, fetching Nigeria a lot of foreign currency and attracting international investors into the country.

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