

AGBON-URHOB0 FESTIVALS AND FEMALE PROHIBITIONS: A 21ST CENTURY DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT

The Urhobo nation is endowed with several forms of traditional festivals which are celebrated periodically to preserve and promote the cultural values and heritages of the people. In this paper, we investigated the cultural reasons for the seclusion of the womenfolk from certain rituals during traditional festivals in Agbon-Urhobo communities in Delta State. The data for this study were collected through in-depth interviews of respondents that have insight into Agbon festivals and women prohibitions from certain rituals. The study adopted the purposive sampling technique which gives the researchers freedom to select respondents who have profound knowledge of traditional festivals in Agbon Clan. The interviews lasted for three days with the interviewer recording the oral data with a tape and also taking notes of respondents. The oral data obtained from the key informants were carefully transcribed and translated into the English version. Two research assistants were recruited to handle the tape recorder and take notes while the researcher asked the unstructured questions. Besides the primary data, secondary materials were consulted to substantiate the arguments and the views of the respondents from the field. The qualitative data were analyzed using descriptive and analytic methods since the information is non-numerical based. The findings show that traditional festivals in Agbon Clan are characterized with female prohibitions. Though culture is dynamic, the Agbon people still hold unto their strong cultural beliefs and practices, hence women are excluded from certain rituals during traditional festivals. Informants argue that the men serve as mediators between the living and the dead, and they also preserve and protect the cultural values and heritage of their communities. Unlike the men, the women cannot keep family or community secrets and oaths taken during traditional rites and rituals. They are regarded as “unclean” and so during festivals they could desecrate sacred places especially when they are under their menstrual period.

Keywords: Festivals, female prohibitions, Agbon-Urhobo, culture, modernity

INTRODUCTION

African societies are endowed with various forms of traditional festivals which have attracted scholarly attention. Though numerous studies have been done in the areas of folksongs, rituals, dramatic performances, themes, music, symbols and techniques, masquerade dances and boat regatta, to mention a few, no significant research has been carried out on Agbon-Urhobo traditional festivals and women prohibitions in the 21st century. There are campaigns and movements for gender equality in most cultural societies including Nigeria but it appears African communities particularly the Agbon and Urhobo land in general have not made any significant change in accommodating the womenfolk in all their cultural practices. Even the rapid growth of Christianity, the new media, and education awareness for gender equality have not eroded the prohibition of the womenfolk from major rituals that characterize traditional festivals in Urhobo society. The thrust of this study, therefore, is to investigate the cultural reasons for the seclusion of women from certain rituals during traditional festivals in Agbon-Urhobo communities in Delta State.

Traditional festivals are supposed to be celebrated by all inhabitants of a community including non-indigenes because of their significance in societies. According to Omoko (2016:118) festival serves as “a platform for the people to rejuvenate and reaffirm their loyalty to the ancestor and protect their common values.” Adeoye (1979) on his part notes that “traditional festivals provide opportunity for the elders to pass on folk and tribal love to younger generations. Traditional festivals of many ethnic group anchor the preservation of unique customs, folktales, costumes, occupations and religious life of the people” (cited in Abioye, 2017:103). In addition to the view above, Omosule (2010:90) states that “festivals are vehicles that are directed towards cultural and socioeconomic charters that encompass the beliefs in deities”. The foregoing arguments affirm that traditional festivals are meant to re-enact primordial events to promote peace and harmony among a particular group of people and between the living and the dead or the gods. Whichever views shared by scholars for the celebration of traditional festivals, the reasons for the exclusion of the womenfolk from certain events equally call for investigation. Apart from the above this work will focus on some major festivals among the Agbon people when and how they are celebrate in their communities.

The Study Area

The Urhobo nation is the fifth of all the major ethnic nationalities in Nigeria with twenty-four kingdoms which include Agbon, Eghwu (Ewu-Urhobo), Orogun, Agbarha-Otor, Ughienvwen, Ughelli, Agbarho, Okpe, Okparabe, Arhavbarien, Olomu, Udu, Ewreni and Ogor. Other kingdoms are Agbarha-Ame, Mosogar, Idjerhe, Oghara,

Effurun-Otor (Ephron), Umiagwa-Abraka, Oruarivie-Abraka, Uvwie, Ughwerun and Okere-Urhobo. However, this research will focus on only Agbon Clan which comprises of Igun, Ovu, Okpara, Kokori, Isiokolo, and Eku, to mention a few. Since all these towns could not be covered within the time frame for this research, only three major communities were visited. These are Eku, Ovu and Okpara.

METHODOLOGY

The data for this study were collected through in-depth interviews of indigenes that have insight into Agbon festivals and women prohibitions from certain rituals. The study adopted the purposive sampling technique which allows researchers freedom to select the towns and the respondents who have profound knowledge of traditional festivals in Agbon clan. The interviews lasted for three days with the interviewer recording the oral data with a tape and also taking notes of respondents. The oral data obtained from the key informants were carefully transcribed and translated into the English version for the sake of non-native speakers. Though some ingredients of the original texts were lost during the exercise, the researchers were able to retain vital information that would help in achieving the objectives of this paper. Besides the primary data, secondary materials were also consulted to substantiate our arguments and the views of respondents from the field. The qualitative data were generated through unstructured interviews and analyzed using descriptive and analytic methods. This is simply because the data collected are non-numerical base.

Research Participants

Two research assistants were recruited to handle the tape recorder and take notes while the researcher asked the unstructured questions. The key informants were pre-informed before the interviews to enable them get prepared for the exercise. Those who disappointed us scheduled another date for the interviews. During the field investigation, some participants were assured of the confidentiality of their identities since they do not want their names mentioned in the work because of their personalities in society.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

There are several works on traditional festivals as an aspect of oral literature which have received great attention from scholars across the world especially in the areas of ritual performances, themes, music, dance patterns, symbols and techniques, to mention a few. Some of the studies on traditional festivals include Oyeweso (2013), Titus (2013), Omoko (2016), Opare (2014), Akintan (2013), Ezenagu and Olatunji

(2014), Ukachukwu (2007), Idamoyibo (2014), Reo (2001) and Ayodele (2015), to mention a few. These scholars investigated traditional festivals from different perspectives. For instance, Ayodele (2015) examines the implications of women's exclusion from Oro Cult for socioeconomic equity among the Awori people in Ojo Local Government Area of Lagos State. He argues that "whereas non-initiate is allowed to behold the Oro Cult, female members of the community were secluded from casting any form of glance, substantial or slight on the Oro. Any woman that violates this expectation pays dearly for it"(559). The researcher further reveals that it is not just Awori women that are excluded during the festival, "Both female Awori and non-initiate male Awori indigenes are culturally excluded from the activities of Oro Cult, prohibited from accessing public spaces during Oro festival and also from beholding the Oro" (557). Ayodele's study will enrich this research since it focuses on the exclusion of the womenfolk in spite of modernity.

The study by Oyeweso (2013:4) investigates the origin, nature and socio-cultural significance of Osun Osogbo festival. He posits that "Sacred and secular rituals associated with the annual celebration of Osun festival are re-enactments of some historical events associated with the founding and early history of Osogbo." According to the author, "the Osun sacred rituals are those activities which are conducted in seclusion by the Ataoja and the Osun priests and priestesses and which reaffirm the sacred bond and re-open the path between the goddess and the people of Osogbo" (4). This study will add value to the current work as it focuses on traditional festivals. Titus (2013) in his study explores the roles of music in Olokogbe festival among the Panyan community in Yagba-West of Kogi State. Though the author's attention is on the use of music during Olokogbe festival for documentation, it will be of great relevance to this research which also focuses on traditional festivals in society. The current work extends scholarship by investigating the reasons for the exclusion of the womenfolk from certain rituals during traditional festivals in Agbon Clan. Another study worthy of note is that by Omoko (2016) which examines the dramatic and poetic contents of the Idju festival of the Agbarha-Ame people of Warri, Delta State. He argues that "through the various rites, rituals and other dramatic and poetic performances, the people are able to connect with their history as well as engage in different forms of cultural artistry with which they distinguish themselves as a people"(94). The author also highlights the dramatic pieces that are enacted during festivals to include songs, mime, dance and impersonation. In advancing his argument, Omoko notes that "the Idju festival thus provides the avenue for the people to make supplications to Oghene (Supreme God) for preserving their lives and granting them peace and prosperity in the land"(118). The work above will resonate with the current paper that focuses on traditional festival in one of the Urhobo

Kingdoms in Delta State.

The study by Ezenagu and Olatunji (2014:44) investigates the potential of harnessing the cultural aesthetics of Awka (Imoka) traditional festival to promote tourism. They identify traditional events that thrill the spectators during the Imoka festival to include mock battle to “test one’s strength and endurance of pain,” “theatrical displays by the eldest woman in Ifite Awka and the masquerade,” “dance of the gods”, “initiation into the masquerade cult” and festivities which are of great significance for the solidarity of communal life. The scholars conclude that the Imoka festival otherwise known as the dance of the gods is a masquerade festival which affords Awka the opportunity to showcase their cultural heritage for tourism promotion. Although the foregoing studies investigate traditional festivals from different areas, the purpose of this paper is to examine the prohibitions of the womenfolk from major rituals in traditional festivals in Agbon Clan despite the agitation for gender equality that has been holding sway in the 21st century.

Festivals as Periodic Events in Agbon-Urhobo Society

Among the Urhobo people as could be found in other African societies, the custodians of customary laws and traditions are saddled with the responsibility of fixing dates for the traditional festivals. In most cases, the ivie (traditional rulers), the ilorogun (chiefs) and the chief priests meet to decide the period the festival shall be celebrated. This tradition is similar to that of the Yoruba people of Western Nigeria and according to Abioye (2017:6) the Festivals are “carefully planned by the traditional institution in the community”. He further reveals that it is “the Obas (king) and his chiefs that approve traditional festivals, which involves outpouring of libations, rejoicing, winning and dinning, general fun fare, and merry making.” The study conducted by Akintan (2013:267) shows that “these various festivals have their raison d’etre as well as their position in the traditional calendar of the people, this calendar is usually kept by dedicated priestesses who are both young and old.” Fixing the period (date) for traditional festivals in the various communities in Agbon-Urhobo land is not the duty of the priests alone but a unanimous decision of the community heads, the council of chiefs and the chief priests.

Most festivals in African societies are celebrated annually and the Urhobo society is not an exception; however, there are occasions where they are marked biannually, every three to ten years or even twenty-five years depends on the significance of the festivals to the people celebrating them. Among the Agbon people, festivals are annual events besides those that are probably celebrated in every two, three, five or twenty-five years. During the festivals, all indigenes have various roles to play in order to attain a success. The men, women and the youths which involve both males

and females constitute the participants. For instance, the monarch, chief priest, the oldest male (Okpako Orere) in the village perform particular duties before, during and after a festival that attract both indigenes and non-indigenes from far and near. They meet at the king's palace, deliberate on how the festival shall be celebrated peacefully, decide the period of the festival and make the date known to members of the public through a town crier. In most Urhobo communities, as could be found in other African societies, the chief priest has the prerogative right to consult the oracles, ancestors or the gods on behalf of the people to ascertain the right time for the festival. Also, the womenfolk led by the oldest woman (Okpako Eghweya) perform a specific function even though it might not be as important as those performed by their male counterparts. She summons, mobilizes the women and encourages them to support the community leaders to ensure a hitch-free celebration. The youth chairman with his executives also coordinates all the youths of between fifteen and forty-five years of age, to keep the community clean. In fact, they implement whatever decisions taken by their traditional ruler and his chiefs.

Participants during traditional festivals include indigenes who are initiates and non-initiates, and non-indigenes of the community. In various communities, irheren (priests/priestesses), iphraghwa (youths) and the eghweya (womenfolk) are active participants and they usually dance from a section of the town to another singing songs with acrobatic displays that remind the indigenes of primordial events. Most of the events that characterize festivals in Agbon (Urhobo) communities are performed in public places such as usuada (streets), afieki (market square), ogwan (cult house), uworhan (shrines), urhie (river), and so on. Like other societies, traditional festivals in these communities are of great significance to the people and this varies from one community or festival to another. Some of the cultural events may signify protection, guidance, wealth, fertility, health, anti-diseases/afflictions, mortality rate, and morbidity rate, to mention a few. However, our question in this study is why should the womenfolk continue to be prohibited from vital rituals during traditional festivals? At this juncture, we shall examine traditional festivals in three major Agbon communities, namely; Okpara, Eku and Ovu.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The Okpara Festivals

Okpara is among the major communities in Agbon Clan in Ethiope East Local Government Areas of Delta State. Our field investigation reveals that the Okpara people have history of celebrating a total of five traditional festivals with three of them being marked every twenty years. These festivals are the Edjenu festival, the Eni festival and the Ibi cultural festival. These three festivals are celebrated as

carnivals to bring sons and daughters of Okpara together to always be in touch with their ancestral homes. Symbolically, the Edjenu represents “god of the sky,” the Eni Festival stands for “the Elephant” while the Ibi represents the great exploits of past warriors of the community. Each of these festivals is celebrated between the months of January and April every twenty years. In preparing for any of the festivals, there is what the Okpara people refer to as “Efi”, the rendezvous, where the structure of any of the festivals is prepared. This is the traditional sacred enclave carved out at the outskirts of a particular street- the Osa Street where the structure of any of the festivals is prepared. It symbolizes where Okpara, an Oghriki plant, was erected.

Women are forbidden from entering the “Efi” because traditional women are regarded as “unclean.” In addition, women are generally flippant and are not able to keep secrets as required by tradition. Since rituals done at the “Efi” require high level of confidentiality and secrecy, women by their nature are forbidden from entering the sacred place. They can easily be provoked to divulge the secrets of the process of the creativity of the structure or act. However, during the period when the above major festivals are celebrated as annual cultural events in the month of August to mark the traditional end of year thanksgiving to the god and goddess of the Okpara people. There is restriction of movements of womenfolk while their male counterparts enjoy freedom throughout the celebration. This shows that modern civilization has not fully infiltrated the cultural practices of the Agbon-Urhobo people in this 21st century.

The Echeroko Festival of Eku

Most often, African festivals are observed in commemoration of past events and also as a means or method of deification of deities. That is, worshipping, sacrificing and paying homage to the various deities in the land. Echeroko means “god of war” and to Chief Okpako Ekovi, who was interviewed in Eku main town, it was a war god which later metamorphosed himself into an animal called Edjenekpo (tyger) during the war against the enemies of Eku. The Echeroko festival is celebrated every September in appreciation of what the god has done for them in the past especially their victory in wars. The above affirms the view of Awolalu and Dopamu, (2005:153) that “most festivals are associated with specific divinities, spirits or ancestors and they are, therefore, religious in outlook” (cited in Akintan, 2013). Whichever dimension the Echeroko festival takes, to the people of Eku at home and in diaspora, the celebration is significant because it helps to preserve the custom and tradition of the indigenes for future generations. It also serves as a kind of unifying forum for the people and strengthens the social bonds connecting the people and the value that inspire their general life.

However, in the course of the preparation and celebration of the festival, women are forbidden from performing certain rites before and during the festival. Beginning from the annual clearing of the paths leading to the Echeroko Shrine, women are not allowed to participate in the exercise because they are traditionally forbidden from seeing the shrine. In addition, a night before the festival, the titled men move round the major streets of the town between the hours of 1:00 am and 3:00 am, invoking the ancestral spirits of the land. Women are strictly required to be indoors throughout the period of marauding and any woman who mistakenly sees the titled men in performance is automatically rendered childless by the gods. The various inhibitions placed on women in the course of the celebrating the festival are to ensure secrecy, prevent desecration, sacrilege and stealing the art for exportation. It is equally worthy of note that despite the inhibitions placed on the women, they still play vital roles of sensitizing members of the community about the date of the festival and the need for general participation during the celebration. This is done by the womenfolk (the Ewheya) especially those who have attained menopause.

The Ovu Ughere Festival

The Ovu Ughere festival of the Ovu people is marked in every February to commemorate the heroic exploits of their past warriors. During the festival, all the acclaimed warriors come one after the other to narrate their various heroic achievements in the past year. After their narratives, the climax is the struggle for the gourd (calabash). Here, the gourd is placed in a strategic position in the “Efi” where all indigenes can from a distance see the gourd and the acclaimed warriors with their cutlasses battle one another in a fight to reach out to the gourd. Usually at the end of the battle, the most powerful warrior who might have protected himself from the various cuts of machete inflicted on him by his colleagues happily picks the gourd and in celebration, dances to the admiration of spectators as an index of his supremacy among all the warriors for that year. During the above events, women are strongly prohibited from entering the “Efi” where the warriors are battling for the gourd. Historically, this prohibition is said to be spirituality dictated by the god. Apart from the foregoing, field investigation reveals that there are specific reasons for the exclusion of the womenfolk from rituals and rites during traditional festivals in Agbon vis-avis Urhobo society as presented below.

Cultural Reasons for Seclusion of Womenfolk

The reasons for the seclusion of women from certain important rituals during traditional festivals among the Agbon-Urhobo people of the Niger Delta are numerous and interwoven. These are discussed below.

Patriarchal Society

Urhobo is patriarchy in nature and this is evident in their proverbs, wise sayings and nomenclatures. For instance, Urhobo elders would say that Ohoraye bovworere-en (a hen does not crew in a community), Evie oghwaran obaro iye-e (no one is more superior than the first son of the deceased during sacrificial offerings), Oshare egbe ruwevwi (Man is the pillar of the home), Aye bere vwe-e (A woman does not break kola nut in the presence of men) and according to information obtained from a respondent in the field, the Agbon-Urhobo like most African societies portrays the superiority of men over their female counterparts. According to Johnson Adjan, a famous Urhobo traditional song performer, "Aye ge gbe-e" (a woman does not preside over sacrifices in the coven). In addition, men are considered as pillars in every family and community so some of them are often initiated into cult groups and have the privy to vital information that would equip and prepare them for future tasks that will promote the cultural and traditions of the land. In some communities, cleansings and initiations into secret cults are done during festivals but these are usually restricted to the men and the youth, although in some cases, the cleansing might be extended to the women and children especially when the rites have the potency of warding off evils, sicknesses, diseases, afflictions, and misfortunes from the community.

Gender Inequality in Society

The tempo for gender equality has increased in recent times particularly in political, social, economic and religious settings but in festivals which are the vital aspect of the cultural heritage of a group of people, the womenfolk appear to perpetually be at the mercy of the patriarchal system that subjugates and deprives them of certain facts and information about their own cultural practices. They are treated as aliens who are not allowed to have insight into the rituals performed by the priests and initiates and their significance. For instance, masquerade dances are common in traditional festivals among the Yorubas, Ibos, Ijos, Urhobos and Efiks, to mention a few, and they take different forms with masks that symbolize the cultural events, experiences and ideas. In Agbon-Urhobo communities, there are masquerade dances performed with masks usually worn by male dancers who are initiates with the exclusion of the womenfolk who only participate by clapping, singing, shouting and dancing behind the unidentifiable masqueraders. The men and youths (initiates) are allowed into the uvuen (sacred room) while the women are restricted to roles described above.

Women and Desecration

Findings also show that Agbon-Urhobo tradition forbids women from participating in certain rites in society especially during their menstrual period. For instance, women who are under menstrual circle are not expected to stand before a monarch and genuflect (as greetings). According to Michael Uduvwo, an informant who was also interviewed in the field, such menstrual flow would not stop until sometime is done. If culture prevents such women from attending rituals and rites to be performed in the palace of a king, for instance, it becomes difficult for them to be aware of the activities marking the celebration of their cultural festivals. So, women are prohibited from festivals for fear of desecrating sacred places and hindering the blessings from the gods and ancestors of the people.

Men as Mediators and Custodians

Our investigation further reveals that among the Agbon people, men have been saddled with the responsibility of interceding on behalf of the families, quarters and the communities in general. They mediate between the dead and the living, appease the gods and ancestors, seeking forgiveness where members violated any of the customary laws and also propitiate for guidance, provision and protection from evil machinations in society. In an interview with Ogbodu Obukohwo at Kokori, the respondent reveals that women are not expected to propitiate the ancestors/gods in our society. Even if there is an urgent need for sacrificial offerings to the ancestors, a male child (of five years) may be invited and given instruction to serve the drinks and offer the items for the ancestral worship. Besides, certain customary laws, oral history, origin of communities and kingdoms, deities, land boundaries and sacred streams, to mention a few, are transmitted from generation to another through the men and elders of the communities. They know historical antecedents of events like festivals and wars won and lost to neighbouring communities or clans and how peace and normalcy was restored to the land.

Family Secrets and Oaths

The findings of this investigation disclosed that men are capable of keeping certain family and community secrets and oaths of allegiance they sworn to during their initiation rites. According to Isiboge John, a respondent from Isiokolo who was granted an interview, women cannot keep secrets about certain sensitive rites performed during cultural festivals neither can they uphold covenants entered such as initiations into cults of warriors, priests and custodians of laws, from getting to public domain. Besides, in every marriage, women totally submit to their husbands, who operate outside the family. Aye kporovwe (a woman goes into marriage) and so

sensitive issues pertaining to the community or ethnic nationality, for instance, might be exposed to the husband who hails from a different place, kingdom or ethnic group. These are some of the numerous reasons why women are prohibited from actively participating in certain rituals during traditional festivals in spite of modernity. Communities in Agbon Clan are growing rapidly yet certain aspects of the cultural values and heritage resist the influences of feminist agitations for gender equality in this 21st century.

CONCLUSION

The paper has shown that women prohibitions among the Agbon (Urhobo) people in Delta State is attributed to several cultural factors in spite of the modernity and rapid growth of Christianity in most communities that constitute this clan. Our investigation has revealed that women are excluded from certain rituals during traditional festivals majorly because Agbon, like most African societies, is patriarchal in nature with the men acting as mediators between the living and the dead, preserving and protecting the cultural values and heritages of their various communities. Besides, the men consider the women as highly emotional and open-minded as such they cannot keep certain family or community secrets and oaths taken during traditional rites and festivals. Since women are expected to get married, they might also reveal sensitive secrets to their husbands who might be non-indigenes. Above all, women are regarded as “unclean” as in some African societies during festivals because they could desecrate sacred places when they are under their menstrual period.

All the reasons above have implications on research in African Oral Literature in this 21st century as female researchers as well shall be restricted from entering shrines and other sacred places during traditional festivals. Where only the male counterparts are granted freedom of movement and association, women might not get the firsthand information they require rather they would rely on data and information from men which might even be doctored.

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