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PECULIARITIES OF GBATITI FESTIVAL IN OYO ROYAL DOMAIN

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Abstract

Igba Titi is the dramatic performance of the Queens (Ayabas) in the palace and it is specifically designed and recited to entertain the king of Oyo (Alaafin) and to praise the heroic deeds of his ancestors. This cultural performance is uniquely performed by the King's wives alone hence this paper examines the royal performance of Queens (Ayabas) during the Igba Titi festival in Oyo Alaafin. The aesthetic value of the festival and the special roles played by the Ayabas in the palace to promote the cultural heritage of the kingdom. The training process for the Ayabas, the paraphernal involved during the festival and the spectators for the festival. The paper made use of both primary and secondary sources. Interviews were granted eminent personality in the palace, chiefs, royal kingmen, and two among the Ayabas so as to elicit more information.

Introduction

Yoruba women occupied a significant place in the pre-colonial political and cultural organization, religion, family life and the economy. To date, few scholars have investigated women's contribution shaping both pre-colonial and post-colonial Yoruba land but interest in this aspect of history is growing (Laray Denzer 1994) as can be seen from the increasing number of scholarly publications and students work on this subject. But amazingly, these is negligible or little scholarly work on the women in Royal Domain. It is a general belief that Ayabas are just confirmed into the inner court where they sit down to enjoy the affluence of the palace on daily basis. Their freedom is limited when compared with ordinary woman in the society. They could not move outside the palace except when sent on important assignment. The custom has made me to belief that the position of Ayaba though enviable but is not desirable. This was my belief until I got a privilege information of Igbatiti festival and Yungba performance which is specially designed by Ayabas to entertain the King. The beauty and uniqueness of the festival spur me into this research. Desiring to know more about the various activities performed by the Ayabas in the palace and ways in which they contributed and promoted the culture of the kingdom. The role of the royal wives (Ayabas cannot be overemphasized in the Yoruba palaces. There are vital support groups to the existence peace and counseling, prosperity and long life of the king. They serve as life wire and lubricant for the king and without them the palace would have been like a ghost place and many rites would have been in extinction.

Nnwonkoro a song traditionalist of the Akan Women of Ghana as quoted in Omojola (2009) has rightly observed that not much is known about the techniques and processes of musical composition in preliterate societies. In answering to the yearning of such people and even myself (the researcher) commenting on the relative lack of scholarly attention to the creative process in African songs and traditions, this paper tends to unearth and describe the contribution of palace women to the glamour and grandeur of the royal domain. The composition of song, the drum that are ensemble and rhythm produced during Igbatiti festival in Oyo palace. Among the festival observed in Yoruba land and Oyo in particular Igbatiti is unique and peculiar because it involves only the royal wives while the king (Alaafin) is the dancer. It is rated as one of the most developed and elaborate oral poetic genres in Africa (Finegan 1970, Barber 1971).

The Yoruba generally place a high premium in festivals and it is a platform for social interaction and unification among the people. Igbatiti festival has special connection with the politics of the palace as it involves the favourites of the king in the palace. It is one of the festive period for the Alaafin has his Ayabas perform and he watches with good admirations while others such as palace guards, friends, invited guests serve as spectators. This festival can only be performed in the palace unlike many other festival such as Masquerade (Egungun) Oro cult or Beere festival that are performed in the public.

The festival is dated back to the era of old Oyo-ile. According to Chief Ogunmola the practice has being in existence since 1837 when the present Oyo had not been established. The kings wives often entertain Alaafin at victory during war or enliven him when they observed that he was not happy or to encourage him when facing challenges. The practice continued when the new Oyo was established in 1837. Igbatiti literally means beating of calabash. As it implies, it is a performing art which it involves the beating of a big calabash turned upside down over a calabash filled with water. The calabashes were of varying sizes and were beating to the rhythm of its accompany song Yungba music. Yungba and Igbatiti may be performed at the same ceremony, but sometime, Yungba may be performed without its accompany calabash beating (Olukoju, 1978) Igbatiti is performed only by royal wives and this make collection of data for the study a herculean task because it was not easy to have an access to Ayabas. I have to look for female guide, an elderly stateman and a palace chief who granted me audience to interview them on the topic.

Methodology

To locate people for interview on Igbatiti dance performance was equally problematic since the traditional performers are the royal wives who rarely come to the public except when occasion demanded or when they are on official duty as may be assigned by the king.

The younger wives of the reigning monarch, perhaps, owing to their westernization show no interest in the topic and the elderly ones that are interested could not be easily approached except on kings approval. I found a guide in person of Mr. Bolaji Akeusola (who is very close to the palace) and also my degree students. He granted me access to picture taken during one of the recent Igbatiti festivals in the palace. I was also granted interview by one of the palace Chiefs, Chief P.O.Ogunmola (Otun of Oyo) and some close relatives to the monarch. Other materials relied on are secondary sources such as textbooks and journals.

Indirect observation technique was also adopted. Some of the royal children who lived outside the palace were interviewed and explanation was given by them and they also performed by Igbatiti while my friends and I constituted the audience.

Igbatiti Performance Style

The uniqueness and peculiarity of the festival attract the attention of the researcher. Each time the Queens (Ayabas) are set for the festival, they are seated round the calabashes on the mat. Performing through a full ensemble of Igbatiti, the rings (Oruka) are worn round the fingers to produce more effective sound as they beat the calabashes.



The Ayabas in action with Alaafin Adeyemi III praying for them during "Igba titi" Festival

As shown in the picture, Igbatiti must be performed while sitting down on the mat with their two laps gripping the mortal firmly. The significance of the position is said to be customary, for women when saluting their husband or superior, thus their kneeling or sitting is a sign of respect for the king. At the sitting/kneeling position the drum is artistically beaten with Yungba song being recited to complement each other. Every Yoruba oral poetry genre has a distinctive vocal style and are noted for their tone of performance. The performance of Igbatiti festival shows that the palace women are very intelligent and creative and are not idle or burden to the king but the performance rite shows that they are

well organized in a manner that facilitate the elevation of women beyond the domestic space; the performance also expresses the often powerless domain of king's wives as an exhausted position of social responsibility in the palace affairs. This work reveals that Ayabas have great influence on the king's disposition and condition. The festival is occasionally performed to entertain the king and to make him happy.

Igbatiti Song/Oral Chant

According to Omojola (2009) historical and oral sources pointed to the vibrancy of musical ensembles as an integral part of palace protocol in ancient Yoruba palaces. The functions of such ensembles include routine activities like saluting the king and royal dignitaries as well as announcing the imminent arrival of visitors which constitute the uniqueness of the palace in Yoruba land. This scene is always performed by the talking drummers and bulge players as who continue to function on daily basis. Igbatiti song and chant are specially composed for the king to affirm the supremacy of the political authority of Alaafin. The (Ayabas) sing in the presence of the Alaafin and the chiefs and other spectators as Ayabas perform and display before him expressing their gratitude to the king for counting them worthy of serving him. They sing to praise the king's love, care and his welfarism packages made available to them. The act is performed as a form of entertainment to gladden the king's heart. Some of the songs which are sung by the Ayabas are written below as collected from the Ayabas and some chiefs in the palace through secondary sources. The collection from the incumbent Alaafin depicts the present Alaafin Adeyemi III is a lover of tradition. It goes thus:

	Meaning
Lile	Lead
'Layiwola Atanda	Layiwola, Layiwola Atanda
Emi letori e ku o	I can die because of you
Ojoun poo mo onjo	You certainly dance very well
Egbe	Chorus
Ojoun poo mo onjo Layiwola	You certainly dance very well
Lile	Layiwola
Kokoro nje o latese wuyewuyey	Lead
Egbe	I can see you moving your feet majestically
Ojoun poo mo jo Layiwola	Chorus
	You certainly dance very well
	Layiwola

Lile	Lead
'Layiwola, Oba wa	'Layiwola, our king
Egbe	Chorus
Atanda loba wa	Atanda is our king
Lile	Lead
Layiwola oyayi pupo	Layiwola you are admirable
Egbe	Chorus
Atanda rewa loba	Atanda is a handsome king
Ipele II	Set II
Lile	Lead
Layiwola Oko lku	Layiwola, the master of death
Egbe	Chorus
Tiku ogbodo pa	Death dare not kill you
Lile	Lead
Layiwola oko arun	Layiwola the husband of disease
Egbe	Chorus
Ti arun ko gbodo se	Disease dare not inflict
Lile	Lead
Layiwola gba yii pupo	Layiwola man of integrity
Egbe	Chorus
Atanda loba tiwa	Atanda is our worthy king
Lile	Lead
Layiwola kade o pe lori	May Olayiwola live long
Egbe	Chorus
Atanda ki bata o pe lese Atanda, may your reign be prosperous.	

These and many other songs are chanted in praise of the incumbent Alaafin during Igbatiti festival. Other chants that are collected from the royal family members are written below references are made to Alaafin Ladigbolu's majesty, depicting his flamboyance and affluence as a royal father during his tenure. The other one that shall follow after his another song being sung to praise Alaafin Gbadegesin Ajeigbe Ladigbolu who reign between 1956 to 1965 and was the son of the former Alaafin Asiyanni Ladigbolu who reign from 1911 to 1944.

Lile
Gbadegesin Alabi fowo tire ko eeyan ire jo

Oko Kaleatu ni 'Badan
 Gbadegesin Alabi ko mo Ede
 Ti fi I soko ara Ede
 Bee ni ko mo Ejigbo
 Ti fi I soko ara Ejigbo
 Ko mo Imokin
 Ti fi I soko ara Imokin

Egbe

Gbadegesin Alabi
 Ohun to wu o Olowo ni I fowo re ra

Meaning

Lead

Gbadegesin Alabi used his money to administer his good people
 Husband of Kaleatu at Ibadan
 Gbadegesin Alabi did not know Ede town
 Yet he became husband of a woman of Ede
 Neither does he know Ejigbo
 When he became husband of a woman from Ejigbo
 He did not know Imokin
 When he became husband of a woman from Imokin

Chorus

Gbadegesin Alabi
 What pleases you is what you use your money to buy

The chant eulogies Alaafin Gbadegesin for his good sense of administration, pleasant personality, kindness which endeared him to his subject. The oral chant reveals the popularity of the king during his time, his fame and wealth exposes him to get marry to different caliber of women outside his domain.

meaning

Alayeluwa Oba
 Oba alayeluwa, iku baba yeye
 Alase, ekeji orisa

Your royal highness the king
 The king, your royal highness
 death that kills
 The father and the mother
 The great authority, second in command
 to the deity

These greetings are often employed to salute the Alaafin to acknowledge his powers, to show the extent to which he was respected and revered by his subjects.

The king's best characteristics, his royalty, courage, diplomacy and ancestry were usually emphasized in the song over his less flattering attributes. During Igbatiti festival, nothing negative nor dirty utterance is allowed.

Below is another eulogies that depict the royal qualities of Alaafin Ajeigbe (1956-1968) and Alaafin Asiyabi Ladigbolu between 1911 and 1944. (source: as given by one of the Ladigbolu grandson)

'Atobatele Asiyabola Ladigbolu
 Omo Agboluaje, Omo Ajjoru ke riri
 Omo oberiri – lookun
 Omo Osupa – le-ani ni-o-gun
 Omo owo e ba too ko lo tun un se
 Omo Abiodun
 Omo Ogun-eranko-ni-wo
 Oba o-gun-efon ni-patako idi

Meaning

Who already like a king had an abundance of everything
 Asiyabi is also known as Ladigbolu a descendant of Agboluaje, offspring of he who rises in the middle of the night and radiates a great light (through his costly and shining apparel gloriously in the dark,
 Offspring of one who often says "the moon appears in the sky and we complain about his appearance. He whose hand we can reach it should hasten to straighten it, offspring of the late king Abiodun.

The king who rides the animal on the horn

The king who rides leisurely on the buffalo's back

Clothes worn during Igbatiti festival are essential Yoruba traditional attire usually worn during occasions. The Ayabas tied Aso-Ofi round the chest with beautifully adorned hairstyle that is neatly weaved and decorated with beads. The dress is uniformly worn by all participating Ayabas.

Training

Most of these Ayabas neither had prior knowledge of the oral chant before they got married to the king; nor have anything to do with the festival until they found themselves in royal domain. The younger Ayabas are specially trained by the elder Ayabas headed by Iyamode. Iyamode is the eldest woman in the palace who is well versed in all the norms and ethics of the palace. She is among the Ayabas but the mother of the palace. Among the elderly Ayabas who also trained younger ones are Ayaba Abibat Adeyemi (the oldest among the Ayabas) Ayaba Raimat adeyemi (Iya Ile-koto, the second eldest) and Ayaba Barister

Basirat Adeyemi. The 'Teachers' are usually experienced chanters especially the wives of the former king who had performed the festival for their husband. The 'pupils' are the wives of the king.

In Yoruba palace tradition, there is no limit to the number of wives a king could acquire. Infact the numberless depicts his glory, wealth and often added glamour to his domain.

Hence, there is continuity in the tradition, as new Ayaba arrives iyamode is the prominent teacher in this act (a high female palace official) Johnson (1970) explains that teachers instructed pupils under Iyamode's strict supervision. Aside, the Igbatiti oral chant, other songs such as Yungba, oral poetry and 'Orin orori' are also taught in the palace.

Curriculum

The curriculum (though not formally outlined) is often strictly followed by Iyamode to train the Ayabas. The curriculum included teaching the names and history of the royal lineages, memorizing of praise song, oral chant, poetry (Oriki) and palace ethics. Dos and don't of the palace, taboos and tradition. Igbatiti pupils are the wives of the king. Johnson (1921) noted how important the training was and commented thus:

"their teachers come to (Iyamode's apartment three times daily lasting for three months or more until the learners are perfect in their studies. Small corporal punishments such as twisting of the ears and cracks on the heads are not spared on these occasions, if they are not quick at catching words or if their memory (fail) (s) them.

Once the art was mastered, they became master in their own right and could assume the responsibility of teaching others in the future. Gbadebo (1992) in his work opines that festival serves as a means of entertainment among the Yorubas. The music and dances associated with the festival gladden the heart of the merriment. He further explains that Yoruba festival is an opportunity to express their culture through the music played, the food served and the dresses that are worn. Igbatiti festival serves as a means of entertainment for the king and his guests. The cultural performance displayed the costumes; the rendition with special sonorous voice produced adds glamour to the festival.

Festivals have spiritual value in Yoruba land. It is a way of paying their vows and the expression of gratitude to gods and goddesses. Igbatiti festival is specially composed to eulogies the king and his ancestors, at each occasion, Alaaafin would dance to the music produced and even go ahead to spray his Queens (Ayabas) to express his appreciation. It also serves as a unifying form among the ayabas whereby they rehearse together, dress uniformly and planned together for the festival. This pave way for cooperation and mutual relationship amongst the people. Those who are connected by spiritual link tend to be loyal and faithful to one another. They developed sense of belonging which foster unity and

progress. Igbatiti festival serves as a unifying force among the ayabas and it promotes mutual understanding. It also serves as means of acculturation, preserving and promoting cultural heritage, it also imparts informal education into the younger generations through the recitation of oral genres, chants and it arouses their interest to learn how to beat calabash, dancing steps and other protocols that preceeded the festival.

Social change and its impact on Igbatiti festival

In any situation of historical change, there are always element of continuity (Njoku, 2004) society is subjected to constant processes of change and adaptation. Among the external influences that daily rock the wheel of African tradition are European civilization, globalization and many others. There is no dispute to the fact that royal patronage are on daily basis declining while new models of entertainment such as tourism (tourist centre), relaxation centre, modern sport activities have crept in and replace the traditional ways. Traditional form of entertainment are being eroded and replaced with relaxation provided by radio, television home video and many other modern indoor games. Palace domain is not an exception to these modern facilities. This is what Dasylla describes in Adesola (2009) as inter-cultural influences. The impact of Western Education and foreign religions and culture are devastating to African tradition. The new trend contributed immensely to the declining popularity of Igbatiti and Yungba in the palace. It was often practiced in those days but now it is not as often as it used to be in those days. It could be as a result of intricacies it involved such as training, practicing and learning processes.

Igbatiti Uniqueness and Perculiarities

The festival is relatively different from other forms of festivals performed in Yoruba land. As earlier mentioned the festival is exclusive to the palace and performed only by the Ayabas and Alaaafin is the major dancer while the invited guest serves as the spectator who watch with keen interest.



The Ayabas in action with Alaaafin Adeyemi III spraying them with money during "Igba Titi" Festival

The Ayabas serve as the chanters and the drummers. Aside, Igbatiti festival, Yungba and Orin Olori (kings wives songs) has social similarities. They are rare royal court music and the three (3) differ from other royal poetry. They are mainly cultivated and practiced in Oyo, the royal base of Alaafin. The official royal bands in most parts of Africa are predominantly female and restricted to the palace. Igbatiti with Yungba could not be performed by anybody else except those approved by the tradition (royal wives).

On the other hand Yungba could be performed for other royal chiefs and is traditionally permitted in Bashorun (head of Oyo Mesi (king's maker) and second in command to Alaafin. It could also be performed in the following chiefs domain.

Baba Iyayi - head of prince

Ona Isokun - the official father of Alaafin

Alapinni - who by virtue and his traditional office was the head of religious affairs.

The custodian of oral history also drum and sing to 'Sekere' beating in praise of past and incumbent Alaafin.



The Custodian of Oral History (The Sekere Drummers, the man with Microphone is relating & praising Alaafin and his ancestors)

Conclusion

The importance and role of women in African traditional festivals cannot be overemphasized if given a desired attention. Women in royal domain participate in various cultural functions and their contributions should not be glossed over in African terrain. The traditional festival such as Igbatiti, Yungba and Orin Olori depicts women, intellectual ability and creativity, hence, it deserves International Publication. It promotes Yoruba cultural heritage, unearths the royal women's contribution to socio-cultural activities in the palace and also encourages the young ladies in the palace.

Igbatiti has been an age long palace tradition practiced since the existence of the first old-Oyo-Ile a court music with socio-cultural functions, is a form of royal entertainment, a repository of Alaafin royal songs. If given wide publicity, it might enjoy cultural relevance. The festival could serve as an International Cultural Festival (ICF) which people from other part of the world would come and witness through which the economy of the town can be boosted. Since the festival is educative and informative (through the oral chant) it could also be promoted if the modern media houses would publicize through special programmes involving the chanters, the royal band involvement. There is no doubt that Igbatiti festival is unique, didactic and informative.

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