

Greek and Indigenous African Festivals: A Comparative Study

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Abstract. The association of indigenous Africans with nature is not a peculiarity. In the Greek world, the Dionysus festival was a compendium of various festivals and were celebrated at the dawn of civilization in Athens and the Anthesteria was considered the oldest of such festivals. Many days of the year were dedicated to the celebration of the festivals. Using aesthetics as a springboard, the study examines the psychological and philosophical undercurrents of festivals in the two cultural environments and concludes that entertainment and religious reasons were the underlying imports of the performances of festivals the world over.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Eje, Masquerades, Festivals, Performance, Costumes

1. Introduction

For the sake of clarity, it is imperative that we attempt a detailed study of the segments that were associated with Greek festivals. No doubt, the festivals were celebrated in obvious worship of Dionysus at Athens. According to Pickard-Cambridge (1973), the oldest of the performances is known as Anthesteria and had a peculiarity in its celebration as it was associated with the wearing of a crown of flowers by boys and girls who were maturing from infancy. An obvious parallel may be found in the various maiden dances in the African world and the motives behind them may not be different even when there was hardly any visible diplomatic

and trade links between the two races during the period under review. Thus, the question of diffusion may not be applicable. What cannot be denied is the fact human beings, the world over, evolved with time and were, naturally inclined towards maintaining cultural and artistic yearning of the people especially when the focus was on the younger generation.

Like the African parallels, the performances were associated with the desire to nurture their younger ones through the path of morality, honesty and perseverance. That was the drive in the African world. Christopher Janaway (2006) finds the same motivation in the writings of Plato. According to him, Plato's opinion about the art was geared towards motivating the young ones who would graduate to be the guardians of the cities to pursue among other things, creativity, harmony and "...what is fine and graceful in their work, so that our young people will live in a healthy place and be benefited on all sides, and so that something of those fine works will strike their eyes and ears..." (3). The motive in the western world was geared towards blessing the children. Whichever way one approaches the two backgrounds, the aesthetic goal may not be too different from each other. The celebration was also popular in other Indo-European cultures. The children were dressed and garlanded during the festival. It was the case that various chapters in the lives of the people were attended by celebrations in order to prepare the people for a hitch-free undertaking. Indigenous African parallels exemplified by the

Yoruba world specifically referring to Omidan (maiden dance) at Ondo, Ero at Ipele (both in Ondo State), Ovia Osese in Ogori Magongo in Kogi State, Nigeria, and others. During Omidan and Ero, prayers were said as a form of rite against the hitches that might confront them on life's bumpy highways.

The Dionysus festival was held amid unrestrained consumption of wine usually retrieved from the last autumn's grapes which they drank after pouring libations to Dionysus. The reason for the libation was to seek the blessing of Dionysus before drinking it and to make the wine amenable to the people by removing any impurity from it through the rite. Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, are books that greatly reflect the adaptation of oral scripts into the written literature of the people. The unrestrained consumption of wine was a remembrance of the primordial example where Orestes was entertained prelude to his cleansing. A desire for mutual relationship with the numinous reality and other sundry elements is believed to have, primarily, informed the rites, and festivals. The inherent entertainment is secondary as it provides the leeway for the contextual harmony that is instrumental in the propagation of the cultural dynamics. For the sake of clarity, it is necessary that background information is provided about Orestes especially for the benefit of readers that are not familiar with Greek literature.

Peleus and Thetis (the couple later gave birth to Achilles who later fought in the Trojan War) were performing their wedding. How old was he then during the Trojan War? However, a goddess named Eris was excluded from the list of the invited guests. She came anyway and she threw a golden apple into the wedding. Inscribed on the apple was a message: To the fairest. Three goddesses contested for the apple. The fabulous nature of the Trojan War confronts a reader as the conflict of chronology becomes apparent when it is understood that the wedding between Peleus and Thetis to which Eris was not invited led to the birth of Achilles who incidentally played active role in the Trojan War. Except some lengthy years seemed to be the case after the wedding which gave Achilles

enough time to take part in the Trojan campaign, the question of credibility becomes a glaring one.

Hera, Athena and Aphrodite immediately claimed the apple. They all asked Zeus to be the judge. Zeus knew how much trouble he would face should he decide in favour of one of them because the other two would pitch their tents against him. So, Zeus descended on Mount Ida and met Paris, the son of Priam who was farming there and mandated him to be the judge. Paris was the youngest son of Priam, king of Troy and Hecuba his consort. When he was born, it was foretold he would be responsible for the downfall of Troy, as relayed through a dream of Hecuba. He was sent out of Troy in what looks like the case of King Oedipus. He was in Mount Ida where he remained a shepherd prior to the visit of Zeus. Paris could not decide who would be the winner because of the fact that he was a mortal.

A similarity between King Oedipus and why he was banished from the land at birth and the case of Paris who was equally taken to the mountain to be killed but later became a farmer explains the nature of oral tales such that a single tale may become another story as it crosses geographical boundaries where structural changes are likely to be introduced to the tale in order to suit the environment that is borrowing the item. The goddesses decided to make it easier for him. They would offer him gifts. Hera offered Paris power; all of Asia. Athena offered him great wisdom, and great luck in battle. He would be the best strategist in the world. He loved this idea, but he waited to hear Aphrodite's offer. Aphrodite offered him two things. She first offered her body and later promised him the hand of the most beautiful lady in the world, Helen. Paris fell for Aphrodite's gifts. Hera and Aphrodite vowed vengeance. Paris soon went home to Troy thereafter and with the help of Aphrodite, he sent a fleet of ships, broke into Menelaus' palace in Greece and Helen was kidnapped. He also took a lot of valuable materials with him.

The Trojan War began from there. The Trojan War was imminent and the last hurdle was the

need for a fair sail to Troy. The gods were angry and would only be pacified with the sacrifice of Agamemnon's daughter named Iphigenia. This he did without the approval of Clytemnestra. While he was away in Troy for nine years that the war lasted, a pact was sealed between Clytemnestra and Aegisthus as they began to sleep with each other. The infidelity culminated in the murder of Agamemnon by the duo when he returned from Troy

The drinking spree was meant to entertain Orestes and all were required to drink in silence and without sharing of cups. Orestes was the son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. He killed his mother in order to avenge the death of his father who was killed by Clytemnestra and her concubine named Aegisthus. The elopement of Paris with Helen the wife of Menelaus, Agamemnon's brother necessitated a reprisal attack because it constituted an infringement on the ethics of the Greece who considered it a great crime for a guest to seduce the wife of his host. And that was exactly what Paris the son of Priam did. It is debatable if the gods and goddesses were not responsible for the Trojan War in view of the parts played by them prelude to the war.

2. Theoretical Framework

The tool of analysis shall be aesthetics. It is the case that the evolvement of artistic and cultural performances may be tied to what Beardsley Monroe (1958) considers "psychological aesthetics" and "philosophical aesthetics". "Psychological aesthetics" is relevant to the search for correspondence between the Greek world and indigenous Africans in the evolvement of similar performances at a time when there could not have been any link with each other and thus corroborating the holarchic model and "the view that behaviour is motivated by the arousal of desires in conjunction with beliefs regarding the capacity and opportunity to satisfy them" (Wonderly, 1991: 314). The goal is the examination of "the causes and effects of works of art" and these may be enough in the comparative analysis of the two environments. "Philosophical aesthetics" may not be given much emphasis in the study as minimal attention

may be paid to the "meanings and truths" of the artistic devices (3-4). The holarchic model's claim which holds "that behaviour is motivated by the arousal of desires in conjunction with beliefs regarding the capacity and opportunity to satisfy them" may be sufficient to meet the need of the study for definition (Wonderly, 1991: 314).

3. Application / Analysis

Indigenous Africans, like all peoples of the world prior to the advent of western civilization, exhibited a conceived environmental influence on their activities. They conferred potency on natural forces and accorded positive and negative influence in human virtues and foibles on the cosmic essence in the belief that both physical and metaphysical phenomena are one continuum. Indigenous African philosophy and practices therefore emphasize the need for all mortals to conform to the unwritten spiritual constitution for the purpose of promoting orderliness and societal quietude in justification of the claim that phenomenal gods and goddesses are watchful of the activities of all mortals. Fear compelled decorum as a result of the knowledge of the impending sanctions from the gods.

These practices amount to the collective ethos of the people and the wisdom informing them represents the prevailing psychological and intellectual thrust of the people. This explains why it has survived in spite of the threat posed by civilization because within these practices lie religious, moral and artistic dexterity which inform their significance. Consequently, their propagation is fundamental to the growth, cohesion and continuity of tradition. These festivals are attended by libations and physical demonstrations and they receive societal approbation. The need to shed blood, for instance, lends religious solemnity to them and their efficacy cannot be denied. Among such surviving relics is the sacrificial role of the carrier, who symbolises the burden of the community. The annual cleansing rite is fundamental to the progress of the society. Ademola O. Dasyuva (1995) considers rituals to be a means of communication with the

supernatural forces.

In pre-literate African society, ritualism was simply the articulated, complex and highly institutionalized structured activities involving objects and events employed under circumstances specified for communication with the supernatural forces. These forces were believed to be sources of all effects (89-90).

Thus, rituals, sacrifices and annual festivals epitomize religious fervency to the phenomenal gods whose influence is total and devastating. And hardly could there be any endeavour unless their support is first ensured and necessary sacrifice offered. Research too has shown that the quest for the cosmic essence is not limited to any particular race. Consequently, festivals are the miniaturized sensibilities of pastoral people (Ibitokun, B. M. 1993: 70).

The roots of festivals are in the pre-literate era. Primeval man was not without an organized concept of God. The prevailing religion was pantheism and nature was considered to be the sum-total of God. Some of these paradoxical developments had yielded to the currents of civilization, while quite a substantial remnant becomes visible; subsisting in the collective psyche of the people. Today, festivals in Yoruba-land constitute the soul and energy of societies which negation amounts to the scuttle of societal fabrics.

Festivals of atonement are performed in many Yoruba towns and many western countries of the world. The quest involves the redemption of societal ills and the ultimate is the paradoxical slaughter of human victims in the past. However, the human victims have now been replaced by animals and in the case of Oluwen in Ode Irele, his performance is limited to the symbolic enactment of the primordial example. Although the human scapegoats exhibit no mental and physical prowess characteristic of Homeric heroes, they display an uncanny selflessness and submission tending towards the divine. The atonement ritual is a product of a number of factors; first among which is the recognition of human excesses and negation of natural order especially through the commission

of mortal sins such as murder, incest and suicide. Fundamental to the appeasement ritual too is the indisputable helplessness of human beings before the supreme will of phenomenal gods. The choice of carrier depends largely on accident of birth especially where such victims descend from a noble or lowly birth.

In Yoruba-land, a non-native is favoured in compliance with the axiom *a ki n f'omo ore b'ore* that no one may appease the god of Ore with the god's own offspring. Like Achilles, Odysseus and Hector, the carriers among the Yoruba especially Oluwen and Tele in Ode Irele and Ile- Ife respectively undertake a battle at the metaphysical realm. They confront aggrieved gods in a battle in which the villain is determined and the vanquished known. At the end of the encounter, Oluwen and Tele are devoid and robbed of their humanity. They are literally dead in order to redeem the larger society from its afflictions. What is more, they exude innocence tending towards the divine amid unparalleled indifference to personal desires.

The indigenous communities and towns in Yoruba-land celebrate many festivals and it is difficult to trace their origins. Any attempt at providing archetypal parallels becomes cumbersome as claims and counter-claims are made which show that the historical explanation that informs their origins is lost, forgotten or shrouded in ritualized obscurity. However, festivals are offshoots of a primal cause with diffusion and infiltration responsible for their emergence from one culture to another. Where originality may be found, especially when artistic excellence can be imputed to them, diffusion seems to have taken place in a mutual sequence of give and take. The masquerades that are spectacular in their costumes, gaits, masks and nuances betray a common origin and their functional thrusts differ from one culture to another.

The difference in nomenclature, notwithstanding, the Egungun masquerade is a religious cult in Ode Irele whereas, it is entertainment bound at Osogbo during Agbegijo. Trade and inter-marriage are

responsible for the trans-currency of different practices across geographical boundaries with each society introducing modifications in the masks, costumes and functions. Such large-scale similarities lend credence to the dispersal theory. Among the Yoruba, the claim to descent from Oduduwa constitutes a veritable factor in the diffusion of ideas, proverbs, myths and beliefs but the existence of such cultural inclination in contiguous areas could only be explained through the dispersal theory. The masquerades are known as Eregun in Ode Irele, eegun among the people of Oyo/ Osun and Egungun among the Ijebus. Among the Igbos of Eastern Nigeria, they are referred to as Egwugwu. These striking similarities are pointers to a common origin while the myth surrounding their personalities, as well as the religious aura buttresses the mythico-cultural essence of these cults across societies.

Diffusionist theory cannot constitute a monolithic instrument for the explication of performance as most of the practices did have definite origins and equally salient is the dispersal from one geographical area to another. Agbo festival in Agbowo, Ogun State could be traced to Iwopin with Madam Efunpotun serving as the agent of diffusion to her native town at Agbowo (Okesola, 1967:293). The beauty, entertainment and the cohesive instrument of Agbo festival fascinated Madam Efunpotun. The same may not be easily claimed about the correspondence between festivals in Greece and indigenous African communities.

Trade link was a potent factor in the diffusion of the cult across geographical frontiers and the performance combines both artistic and religious functions. Arguably, masquerades perform religious functions strictly, especially in their original cultural state. Among the Yoruba, performance is preceded by the pouring of libations and prayers; and practitioners of Obaluaye are the noted exponents. Members usually sprinkle balm on the land as an antidote against small-pox. Within the Yoruba milieu, where borrowing too may be inferred, creativity seems to have been injected subsisting in prophecy and resolution of domestic conflicts. The rural Dionysia too began primarily as a

means of stirring nature and thereby compelling the land to yield its best “when it seemed to be slumbering”.

Entertainment eventually obliterated the religious undertone and unhindered aesthetic values relegated it to a secondary importance. Pickard –Cambridge A. (1973) captures the orgies associated with the festival which initially was a performance in honour of Dionysus:

.....but there need be no doubt that in the merry-making which accompanied the festivals, plenty of wine was drunk, and in historical times, these rural festivals were regarded as being held in honour of Dionysus. Nor is it known at what date dramatic performances first came to be associated with some or all of them (43).

In Yoruba-land, as in Greece, festivals fulfil religious imperatives and are accompanied by entertainment and it thus becomes difficult to separate them from their artistic preoccupation as this has successfully displaced the religious colouration in them. Iweh festival in Igbotu, Ondo State, is a purification measure during which cultural mores are relaxed and sexual excesses do not attract any sanction no matter their magnitude. Such immorality represents the quest for religious fulfilment. It is significant that ladies could be sexed on the bare ground in the open during Iweh. Married women are not spared and relations too may mate as incest is ruled out. Sex is hawked and denounced too during Boabo at Igbobini. The land is believed to be cleansed thereby. Such sexual bouts are discontinued and its exhibition after the festival attracts sanctions from the unwritten moral code of the land.

Geographical contiguity is a major factor in the diffusion of festivals. In Ode Irele, Eje festival which provides ample opportunity for the convergence of members, had, recently become a common feature of the people of Ode- Omi and Ajagba. Ere in Ode Irele, Boabo at Igbobini and Iweh at Igbotu exhibit the same traits in their performances. Igbobini is located within a distance of four kilometers from Ode Irele and Ju, a ritual of transition associated with high – ranking people is indistinguishable from Ijengen

in the latter town. In the light of their proximity from each other a possible mutual influence could be deduced from these common rites of passage.

Ritual occurs on a daily basis among the Yoruba. Apart from days set aside for the celebration of festivals, libations and offerings are made as occasions call for them. Here, much importance is attached to the worship of deities along with other ceremonies that tend towards birth, marriage and eternal transition (Durosimi-Jones, 1983: 7). The Yoruba are pantheistic and they celebrate objects, natural phenomena and personalities considered to be responsible for enhancing creation, development and survival of the people over the years.

(1) **Ijengen** festival in Ode Irele

Classification: Transition

Motif: (Eternal journey) morality, joy, devotion

Other festivals exhibiting the same tendencies are:

Odun omo Iya Meta at Isanlu Isin, Ju at Igbobini, Igogo at Owo, Odun Iwemo at Ado Ekiti, Oke 'badan in Ibadan etc.

(2) **Obiton** at Ondo, **Ero** at Ipele, Ovia Osese at Ogori etc.

(a) Classification: Evolvement

(b) Motif:

(Regeneration/Transformation) growth, stage development etc

(i) Birth conforms to the will of nature as a means of rejuvenating her.

(ii) Through time, age comes and man develops from one cycle to another.

(iii) Each age has its own challenges, especially adulthood.

(iv) As a result of the transitoriness of life, man metamorphoses into a different realm.

(v) Ijengen provides a leeway for the peaceful transition for the achiever. In the case of Obiton at Ondo, Ero at Ipele, and Ovia Osese at Ogori members are initiated into a new age grade.

All the motifs in Yoruba indigenous festivals can be reconciled under three all embracing motifs. They are joy, morality and devotional motifs. The explication of festivals may be marred by the whims and caprices of researchers which development could lead to the

identification of multiple and conflicting motifs. The three compartments identified in this present study under which different festivals could be herded remove whatever ambiguity may beset the intellectual analyses of all indigenous performances.

Decorum is fundamental to the development of societies. However the unwritten moral codes of indigenous societies are unconsciously trampled upon thus disrupting the fabrics of nature. Purification rituals are, therefore, geared towards a resolution of such conflicts through recourse to a widespread negation of mores sequel to the cleansing bid. The underlying principle is that lawlessness must be unleashed at a magnitude that necessitates purification. The associated demonstration emphasizes the necessity for moral rectitude as its negation could mar both the physical and spiritual essence of the community. Ore, Iweh, Boabo and Edi festivals are potent examples of such ceremonies.

Festivals in Yoruba-land depict the attitude of the people towards entertainment and ritual propitiation. Today entertainment plays a central role in them. However, this might not have been the case originally. The originators were indisputably pursuing a religious motif. Regrettably, the demise of the custodians of such values who did not hand down all the needed spiritual essence for which efficacy could be enhanced was, perhaps, largely responsible for the reduction of the religious motif to the level of insignificance.

Ijengen, a funeral rite for highly placed indigenous chiefs was performed by nine birds in the medieval era and were invited through the chanting of all the enabling incantations. The inability to conjure these birds leaves modern men gaping with pathetic nostalgia at the loss of a vibrant culture of transition. This development is equally applicable to many festivals in Yoruba-land generally and what remains today is a re-enactment of a religious value and in its place is crave of modern men for entertainment especially in mime, imitation, music, drums, dance and possession.

4. Conclusion

Festivals are important to the Yoruba and a year without them will lead to decadence. Life would literally ground to a halt and except during war, every native looks forward to such celebrations. People from neighbouring towns converge while commercial activities are suspended. Boabo, Ere and Ogun festivals in Ondo State draw a large crowd during which freshness is injected into the body framework of the communities through entertainment, rejuvenation and convergence (Mbiti, 1981:137). The rituals cleanse the communities of their accumulated crimes, abuses and ills. More so, crucial filial resolutions are made just as the rituals uphold the ethics of the societies. Favours are solicited especially success in business, blessing against barrenness and above all, peace (Mbiti, 1981:137). Festivals are entertainment and religious celebrations that emanated from the desire of the people to put all impediments in their agrarian, social and cultural sophistication at bay. They add colour and impetus to both personal and communal rituals (Mbiti, 1981:136). The religious motif in festivals combines worship with pleasure. They are significantly synonymous with merry-making and musical performances that are tied to the history and foundation of the towns (Famuyiwa, 1992:82-3). The yardstick for apprehending festivals is the subjection to a specific timing and the cyclic movement of time confers legitimacy on what ordinarily is unusual (Soyinka, 1982:241). An orchestrated change occurs in the activities of the people. Every member is involved but the degree of involvement may be tacit or total. Where abstinence could be perceived, psychological conditioning compels decorum in view of the inescapable consequences of a negation. The two cultures finding expression in Greek and African environments may have brought about the festivals as a way of entertaining one another. If there was any borrowing, especially as humanity has been claimed to have evolved from the same source cum origin, it will take more than a critical analysis to authenticate.

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