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Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 43(1)

ISSN

0041-5715

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Publication Date

2022

DOI

10.5070/F743156315

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A King or A Priest in the City of 201 Gods: Interrogating the Place of the Oòni in the Religious system of Ilé-Ifè in Southwest Nigeria

Ayowole S. Elugbaju

Abstract

The tradition of the origin of the Yorùbá people of Western Nigeria, Republic of Benin, Togo, and the Diaspora indicate one source, Ilé-Ifè, where the varieties of their indigenous political system originated. However, since the colonial period, a debate remains about the place of the Oòni, the King of Ilé-Ifè, in the political and religious systems of the Yorùbá nation, which has led to a perennial discourse across Yorùbáland. Using literature, primary sources such as oral interviews, and participant observations of rituals and festivals spanning several years, this study critically analyses the position of the Oòni in the religious system of Ilé-Ifè. The findings of this study reveal that the festivals in Ilé-Ifè are within the purview of certain family compounds headed by the Ìsòrò (king-priests). It also discovered that the mandatory performance of the Oòni in Ifè festivals is limited the Ìdìó, Olójó, Edì, Ìtápá, Pokùlere and Ifá festivals only. The participatory role of the Oòni is reflective of the commemoration of the important culture heroes of Ile-Ife who have reigned before Lajamisan, the originator of the current dynasty in the Ìtápá festival of Obàtálá, Ìdìó festival of Odùduwà, Olójó festival of Ògún, and Pokùlere festival of Obalùfòn. The study further reveals that in the Edì and Ifá festivals, the Oòni re-enacts the performance of the previous Ifè kings in the epochal events in the history of Ilé-Ifè considered important enough to be re-enacted. In line with existing debate about the nature of the religious or political status of the King of Ifè, this study concludes that the structure of the Ifè religious system does not underscore the Johnsonian theory ascribing the role of a chief priest to the Oòni.

Keywords: *Ilé-Ifè, Oòni, Yorùbá festivals, Yorùbá Religion, Òrisà, Ifá*

Ilé-Ifè is a town that stretches over the Ifè Central and Ifè East local governments in Osun State in present-day Nigeria. It has been a recurrent theme of research for several decades, and despite the numerous works of literature that emerged from these studies, especially from the 1950s to 1980s,¹ a lot of questions cutting across the socio-cultural and socio-political spheres of Ilé-Ifè remain unanswered. This problem of existential questions can be attributed in part to the limitations resulting from the secrecy associated with collecting oral information interwoven with Yorùbá traditional religion.² Consequently, these questions about the early history of Ilé-Ifè have become subjects of never-ending debates today—a phenomenon indicative of a gap in knowledge requiring the attention of researchers. One of these questions, which this paper attempts to explore, is the origin and place of the Oòni among the Yorùbá people. The theme of this paper is drawn from an existing debate about the servile origins and the priestly roles ascribed to the Oòni, the king of Ilé-Ifè. The institution of the Oòni is as old as Ilé-Ifè itself. For decades, there have been debates about the veracity of the history describing the Oòni as a chief priest with a slave provenance charged with the duty of overseeing the 201 deities spread across Ilé-Ifè. Despite the abundance of extant studies on this subject matter, it is evident that the roles and obligations of the Oòni within Ilé-Ifè itself has not been taken into consideration to establish if it indeed reflects that of a priestly role. As such, this paper will attempt to add to the growing list of what Isaac Adeagbo Akinjogbin has called “piece-meal” studies on Ilé-Ifè by investigating the roles of the Oòni in the daily and the periodic activities of the deity worship in Ilé-Ifè by employing primary data (specifically oral interviews), participant observations of rituals and festivals spanning several years, and secondary data.³ This paper therefore sets out to shed further light on the roles of the Oòni in the Ifé socio-cultural practices by exploring the activities of the Oòni in the rites, rituals, and festivals in Ilé-Ifè. As it will show, the festivals in Ilé-Ifè are predominantly within the realm of the family compounds of the *Ìsòrò*), and the Oòni only participates in select festivals: the *Ìdìó*, *Olójó*, *Edì*, *Ìtápá*, *Pokùlere*, and *Ifá*. This paper refutes previous literature that designates the Oòni as Ifè’s chief priest. Rather, it asserts that the value of the Oòni’s participation in these festivals

lies with the commemoration of not only the past kings of Ifé but also vital epochs in the history of the town.

Tracing the Origin of the Problem

Before colonial and contemporary times, Yorùbá towns seemed to have generally subscribed to a common Ilé-Ifè origin. This is reflected in several maxims such as, *Ifè, ibi ojúmó tí'n mó wá* (Ifè, the place from where it dawns), *Ifè olóri ayé gbogbo* (Ifè, the head of the world), and the appellation reflective of the place of Ilé-Ifè in the Yorùbá tradition of origin, *Ifè Oòdáyé*, (Ifè, where the creation of the world took place). It can be suggested that the primacy of Ifè among Yorùbá towns was amplified by an Òyó tradition that recorded that the people, ministers, officials, and the war chiefs of Òyó revolted against an Aláafín known as Awole for ordering and sanctioning a military exercise against Ilé-Ifè, which was regarded as a sacrilege at the time.⁴ Furthermore, in 1886, Henry Higgins, a commissioner sent by the colonial government in Lagos to mediate among the belligerent Yorùbá groups, recorded that the Aláafín of Òyó at the time did not want Ilé-Ifè to be left deserted but wanted the people of Ifè to return to their homes because they were the father of all and all people came from Ifè.⁵ Among the Yorùbá, Ilé-Ifè, is the *ilú aládé* (city of the crown or the crowned city), and the Oòni, the King of Ifè, is *Oba t' ón gba idòbálè oba* (the king who receives obeisance from other kings).

Ilé-Ifè is regarded as the source from where the Yorùbá indigenous monarchy system spread. The Yorùbá people also believe that the crowns of other Yorùbá towns emanated from Ilé-Ifè. This universal belief in the common origin of the Yorùbá monarchy system found credence in the resolution of a 1903 dispute in which the Akarigbo of Shagamu argued that the Elepe of Epe had no right to wear a crown. Apart from resolving this conflict, for which he was invited to Lagos, the Oòni at the time was recorded to have said no other person had the power crown to monarchs across Yorùbáland other than him.⁶ The primacy of Ilé-Ifè and, consequently, the Oòni in Yorùbáland, has been argued to have probably resulted from the rise of Ifè as a military and commercial center.⁷ Thurstan Shaw, for instance, suggested that Ilé-Ifè's proximity to the bend along the Niger River places the city in the middle of north-south trade that propelled it into a

center of commercial prominence.⁸ Also, as Horton argues, this military and economic rise was followed by a decline, which resulted in the emergence of successor states and the eventual fatherly status accorded to Ilé-Ifè.⁹ These kings and their towns may have looked to Ilé-Ifè as the source of their legitimacy and ancestors respectively, and thus there appears to have been the recognition of the primacy of Ilé-Ifè in place, with a system of relative equality beneath it. Akinjogbin discussed this system in his *Ebi* theory, which espoused that the structure of fraternity and equality among Yorùbá towns hinged on widespread agreement to a common origin but with Ilé-Ifè as the first among equals.¹⁰

The period between the latter part of the 19th and the mid-20th centuries recorded profound changes in the socio-political structure and socio-cultural practices across Yorùbáland, leading to several contradictions and attendant contests.¹¹ The challenge to the primacy hitherto enjoyed by Ifè and the Oòni across Yorùbáland can be traced to interactions between the colonialists and the Yorùbá kings, a phenomenon regarded as “dubious” by Adepegba.¹² Nonetheless, it may be that the distortion of Yorùbá tradition that led to rivalries among Yorùbá kings that plagued Yorùbáland for several decades began with the captives resettled in Sierra Leone and ex-slaves of Yorùbá origins. Upon resettling in Yorùbáland in the closing parts of the 19th century, these returnees erroneously referred to the entire subgroups as Yorùbá: a term initially used to denote Òyó and associated towns.¹³ A notable example of such returnees was Samuel Johnson, whose work, a seminal study on Yorùbá history, was perhaps the first research to suggest that the Aláafín of Òyó was the King of the independent non-Òyó kingdoms such as Ifè, Ìjèbú, and Èkìtì.¹⁴ This was despite the various European accounts that reported that Yorùbá was a term solely used as a demonym for the people within Òyó town and its dependencies. For the first part of his work, Johnson relied heavily on palace griots, probably leading him to narrate the early history of the present-day Yorùbáland with a migrant Odùduwà of Mecca origins as the founder. Nonetheless, this description is synonymous with the account of the origin of the Yorùbá (Òyó) people as given by Sultan Bello of Sokoto and published by Clapperton in 1829.¹⁵ Considering that the account given by Sultan Bello was made available in 1829, and the Òyó tradition was collected around the same time but was not

published until 1921, one can conclude that the account given by Sultan Bello either influenced the tradition given by Òyó or that both share a similar source.

Atanda credits the source of the account related by Sultan Bello to a Katsina Muslim scholar named Dan Mansani, who resided in old Òyó in the 17th century.¹⁶ Be that as it may, Johnson's theory further suggested that the sons of Odùduwà went out to establish their towns, with Oranmiyan inheriting the land at the demise of Odùduwà, leading to the emergence of a priest birthed by a slave as the successor in Ilé-Ifè.¹⁷ Therefore, this account can be interpreted to mean that the throne of the Oòni in Ilé-Ifè is of servile origin with a priestly role and has no blood ties to Odùduwà, the originator of Yorùbá monarchy. Consequently, the place of the Oòni in monarchy in Yorùbáland becomes illegitimated. In contrast, Aláafín, the king of Oyo, despite not occupying the seat of Odùduwà located in Ilé-Ifè, was projected to assume the position of a legitimate ruler for having Odùduwà ancestry through Oranmiyan. To make up for not possessing the throne and crown in Ilé-Ifè, the two factors suggesting paramountcy, the Òyó version of Yorùbá history implicitly reduced the origins and relevance of the Oòni to nothingness.

Scholars often blame colonialism for the contention over the priestly role of the Oòni. Adepegba in *The Descent from Odùduwà* suggested that the "dubious nature" of the colonialists was responsible for the distortion of the arrangement and the system of monarchy in Yorùbáland.¹⁸ The colonialists may have indeed obfuscated many of the Yorùbá traditions, particularly in the course of establishing the Native Authority System. But the representation of the Aláafín as the paramount King of Yorùbáland seemed to have been the sole doing of the locals, particularly the Aláafín of the period. In letters written to the colonial officers, the Aláafín repeatedly referred to himself as the King of Yorùbá. This was in spite of the fact the colonialists referred to him as the King of Òyó in several of their written responses.¹⁹ Eventually, the British signed a treaty with the Aláafín, acknowledging him as the overall ruler of Yorùbáland. This may have been due to the importance of trade with the hinterlands, particularly Ibadan, and the ceremonial obeisance that Ibadan, the most powerful Yorùbá state at the time, paid to the Aláafín.²⁰ Furthermore, the colonialists proceeded to set up administrative structures in Yorùbáland while

being aware that a number of Yorùbá rulers made false claims to the British officials about the hierarchy of the monarchy in Yorùbáland.²¹ Be that as it may, the provincial arrangements of several of the Yorùbá towns into a single entity would lead to a series of disagreements that continued into the post-colonial period, when states had to be created to mitigate what seemed like a perpetual rivalry between monarchs.²²

While many of these rivalries seem to be resolved today, the contest between the Aláafín and the Oòni lingers. This contest not only spurred a debate, but also split the Yorùbá public into two camps with one side arguing the supremacy of the throne and crown of Ilé-Ifè regardless of who was in possession of them, and the other arguing for the primacy of the Aláafín using Òyó tradition as contained in Samuel Johnson's work.

The Oòni in Literature

Ifá is perhaps the most famous indigenous literary corpus of the Yorùbá people. It embodies the totality of Yorùbá culture spread across the 256 *odú* that make up the *Ifá* system. In one of the several *odú*, specifically in the *odú Òbàrà méjì*, a reference to a slave known as Oòni Alànà kan Èsùrú is made.²³ In this verse of *Ifá*, it is recorded that a king of Ifè in the remote past, usually understood to be Odùduwà, went on a journey. When the time for *Odún Olójó* (Olójó festival) approached, there was the need for the *Arè* (Arè crown) to be worn for a procession to the *Òke M'ògún* (Ògún shrine). And due to the absence of the king, a palace courtier thought to be an *erú* (slave) known as *Alànà kan Èsùrú* was nominated from among the palace courtiers to wear the crown for the festival procession. Thus, *Alànà kan Èsùrú* wore the crown and became a king whose role it was to tend to the deities in Ilé-Ifè.²⁴ Although several *Ifá* priests directly interpreted this story as revealing the servile origins of the Oòni, the oral history of Ilé-Ifè appears not to have any record of any *Emesé* (palace courtier) known as *Alànà kan Èsùrú* that became an Oòni.

The Òyó account of Àdìmu, a son of a votive slave, is perhaps the most well-known of all the narratives projecting a religious position for the Oòni. This account is credited to Samuel Johnson's *A History of the Yorùbá*. It suggests that a certain woman known as Olúwo was condemned to death. Still, because she was

pregnant, she was accorded a temporary pardon. Eventually, she delivered a son known as Àdìmú who, according to Johnson, “was put in perpetual service to the gods in Ilé-Ifè, especially the god Óbàtálá.” As a result of the dispersal of the several grandsons of Odùduwà, Àdìmú was put in the position of a caretaker of the treasures and the worship of national deities.²⁵ When the seat of government in Yorùbáland moved to Òyó, Àdìmú, the son of a slave, became supreme at Ilé-Ifè; consequently, his successors are regarded as “high priests” with the title *Àdìmú* or *Òwòni* contracted from “*Omo Olúwo ni*” (the son of the sacrificial victim) and are subject to the Òyó King. While it appears people of Òyó origin regard this account as a fact, several observable pieces of evidence in Ilé-Ifè indicate a disparity.

The earliest literature that positioned the Oòni as a religious leader was written by Leo Frobenius, who explored Yorùbáland around the year 1910.²⁶ During his time at Ilé-Ifè, which coincided with the early beginnings of the reign of Oòni Adémilúyì, Frobenius employed terms such as “prince of the church” to describe the King and “holy city” to describe the town.²⁷ What informed the religious connotation he ascribed to the Oòni and Ilé-Ifè is not entirely clear and cannot be found in his work. Nevertheless, Frobenius provided insight into the socio-political and politico-religious structure of Ilé-Ifè during this period. Going further, Frobenius provided a description of the indigenous administration of Ilé-Ifè by explicitly listing the Oòni and the ruling officials in Ilé-Ifè and the deity they serve.²⁸ Despite its spelling errors, which can be ascribed to language differences, the table provided a representation of some of the Ifè chiefs and the worship of the deities they officiate. Some of the chiefs, like Chief Balèà and gods like Obagèdè, seem not to be accorded appropriate representation and recognition in the present time. Nonetheless, many of these chiefs and their associated deities exist today, and they agree with the representation of the state council as provided by Frobenius.²⁹ In contrast to Frobenius’s data, subsequent fieldwork indicates that the Chiefs Lówá Ijàrúá, Àgùrò, Àróde and Jàrán were at no time worshippers of Lájámísan (a deified culture hero who founded the present ruling dynasty). This is because the four chiefs were palace courtiers whose origins had no links with that of the Oòni.³⁰ Instead, these four palace courtiers were linked with the worship of the deified palace courtier Lájùwà, the usurper.³¹

Adeoye Agunlejika's *Ìjèsà Chronicles: An Historiographic Tribute* provides an interesting perspective on Ifè history: that of the Ìjèsà, a Yorùbá subgroup. Like Samuel Johnson's book, the text is set within the framework of migration. Nonetheless, specific salient differences abound. In this work, Odùduwà is also the son of a Lamurudu (Nimrod), said to be a king of ancient Egypt who was displaced. The work further posits that because of Lamurudu's displacement, Odùduwà left Egypt and migrated to Sudan, from where he traveled to Ilé-Ifè. In this account, Ajíbógun, the first king of Ilésà, was the person upon whom the sustenance of the political structure of Ilé-Ifè fell after the demise of Odùduwà and the migration of his children. Agunlejika related that Owá Ajíbógun handed over the leadership and control of Ilé-Ifè to the lineage of Obalùfòn Aláyémoré, who was regarded as a priest. The author went further to hinge the argument on Enuwá and Modéwá as some of the vestiges of the presence of Ajíbógun in the affairs of Ilé-Ifè.³² For the Ifè people, Enuwá, which is an elision of *Enu Owá* (Mouth of Owá or Junction of Owá) belongs to specific lineages that line both sides of the road at the palace gate from which the office of Lówá (the Oòni's chief palace courtier) emanated. Some of these lineages found at the palace gate today include the Òkòró and Sèru lineages, for instance. Also, Modéwá is an elision of *Omodé i há* in Ifè dialect, while in Òyó it is *Omodé yí wá* (this child come forth). This expression has, over time, evolved into a form of appellation used to refer to a group of palace courtiers whom the Oòni called on to run certain errands.³³

The Oòni as a Chief Priest: Finding Evidence

The palace servants form an important part of the local administration in Ilé-Ifè. They are grouped into different sections forming the hierarchies through which individuals advance to the peak of the Modéwá institution consisting of eight chiefs. Locally, they are known as Modéwá, a descriptive term derived from *omodé i ha* (this youth come) and were previously known as Modéorowá (princely youths).³⁴ The Ifá verse describing the ascension of a palace courtier to the throne of Ilé-Ifè, which has been related above, appears to be known in Ilé-Ifè, particularly among Ifá diviners. While the cultural history of Ifè recognizes the usurpation

of the throne by an individual regarded as a palace servant holding the position of a Yégbata, it is also stated that the usurpation was quickly detected and the perpetrator murdered, thereby putting an end to an entrenchment of the reign of a palace servant.³⁵ Furthermore, Ifè oral history records that a ranked Emesé (palace courtier) known as Lájùwà (also spelled Lajua) rallied support among the palace servants to oust the king. While the Ifá verse and the oral accounts in Ifè share certain similarities, they differ in the continuity that followed the disruption. The former indicates that the ascension of the palace servant to the throne marked the servitude origins of the Oòni. In contrast, the latter suggests that the reign of the usurper palace servant was truncated and replaced with the reign of Oòni Lajamisan, a descent of Oranfe³⁶ who has also described as a descendant of Oranmiyan.³⁷ This, therefore, suggests that while servants may have usurped the throne at certain points in history, the rulership of the city has been returned to the ruling clans whose candidates are subjected through a rigorous, complex process of assessments to ascertain ancestry before enthronement.

The Yorùbá people have a complex system of socio-cultural practices said to have originated from Ilé-Ifè. The town holds the important position of being the nucleus of Yorùbá religious systems. This may be why, during the Yorùbá internecine wars of the 19th century, Basorun Ogunmola, a prominent military leader during the peak of the Ibadan empire,³⁸ sent messengers to negotiate terms of peace between the Ifè and the Modákéké so that the cradle of the race may not be in perpetual desolation and for the ancestral gods to be worshipped.³⁹ The importance of the rites, rituals, and festivals dedicated to the worship of deified culture heroes in Ilé-Ifè is captured in maxims and the *oríkì* (praise poem) of the town. For instance, the maxim *ebo ni Ifè n je* (Ifè thrives on sacrifices) suggests the essentiality of recurrent sacrifices in Ilé-Ifè. Karin Barber provides perhaps the most elaborate description of the importance of *oríkì* (praise poem) for the understanding of a people and their institutions⁴⁰. Also, *oríkì* is crucial to unravelling certain aspects of Yoruba historical past as demonstrated by Bolanle Awe⁴¹, there exists an excerpt in the broader *oríkì* of Ilé-Ifè that describes the practice and importance of sacrifices and rituals to the town:

*a kìn dúró kí won ní Ifè Oòni,
 a kin bere kí won ní Ifè Oòyè,
 ení bá dúró kí won ní Ifè Oòni,
 ebo ní wón fì olúwa è se
 àpadárí eni, àpalàdò èniyàn
 ebo ojoojúmó, nùú mú ilé won sù nùú lo⁴²*

we don't stand to greet them in the Ifè of Oòni
 we do not bow to greet them in Ifè of survivors
 whoever stops to greet them in the Ifè of Oòni
 such a person is ritually murdered
 to kill and behead, to kill and slice out the liver of human
 the daily sacrifices are what discourages one from visiting
 their homes.

That ritual and sacrifices are done every day in Ilé-Ifè, as indicated in the *oríkì*, should suggest that the people of Ifè perhaps have an established socio-cultural or socio-political system structured around these religious requirements.

Today, Ilé-Ifè is made up of three different classes of indigenes. The first group consists of the aboriginal Ifè belonging to the compounds founded by the deified Ifè culture heroes. The second group includes the compounds founded by some specific prominent figures regarded as descendants of some of the Ifè culture heroes.⁴³ The third group is that of family compounds founded by migrants and settlers from other Yorùbá towns such as Ilésà, Ìwó, Òkè Ògùn, and Ìbàdàn.⁴⁴ Today, these family compounds are regarded as Ifè. The socio-cultural practices of the latter group seem imported from their towns of origins or derived from their Modéwá status.⁴⁵ For the former two groups, socio-cultural practices are rooted in the primordial ancestral practices as indicated in the *oríkì* (praise poem) of Ilé-Ilè. The complexity and frequency of the rituals associated with ancestral worship in Ilé-Ifè spread across the political dichotomy of the town consisting of the *Òtún Ifè* (Ifè on the right side) and *Òsì Ifè* (Ifè on the left side). The former is made up of the Ìharefè group, while the latter is made up of the Ìsòrò group.⁴⁶ The Ìsòrò group consists of *Olójà* (pre-Odùduwà kings) and primarily, a varying number of priests responsible for the propitiation and general worship of a plethora of deified culture heroes numbering about 201. The members of this group oversee the worship, rituals, and the totality of all the facets of religious adherence to these deities.⁴⁷

Ilé-Ifè is divided along the lines of clanship such that each *Òrìsà* (deity) owns certain settlement quarters headed by the leading chiefs of the deity clans, considered to be representatives of these deities. For instance, Ìrànjé-Ìdìta is headed by an *Olójà* (another term for king), a position alternated between the Obalésùn and Obaládè lines of Obatala clan; Ìlórómù is headed by Obalúru, the head of Oranfè clan; and Odin is headed by Lókòrè, who is considered to be a representative of Obameri to mention a few.⁴⁸ The pattern of the religious system in Ilé-Ifè suggests a decentralized system of deity worship. Apart from the attachment of each of the 201 deities to the foundation of each of the clans in Ilé-Ifè, the worship, festivals, and initiation processes appear to be a private affair of these lineages. The data this researcher gathered from the members of the Óbàtálá lineage at Igbó Ìtápá in Ilé-Ifè, for instance, suggest that Óbàtálá worship, like the several other deities in Ilé-Ifè, was at no time under the Oòni or an Àdìmú, as suggested by Samuel Johnson.⁴⁹ Members of this lineage further related that Óbàtálá worship is embedded within the structure of the lineage designed around the known off-springs of Óbàtálá, whose appellations became cognomens for priestly offices in the lineage compound.⁵⁰ In specific terms, the members of the Óbàtálá clan indicated that the lineage is headed by a person known as *Olójà*, who not only plays the role of a king, but also serves as the leader for the worship of their “father,” Óbàtálá.⁵¹

The clan and deity worship leadership structure, as seen in the Óbàtálá group, appears to be a widespread practice across Ilé-Ifè. The origin of each of the Ifè gods is strongly featured in the early history of Ilé-Ifè. Therefore, festivals in Ilé-Ifè are mostly a re-enactment of ancient historical events in which the family of a deity perform.⁵² Furthermore, it can be said that due to the deification of culture heroes, clan leadership and deity worship system was developed based on factors that shaped the history of the clan and the culture hero. For the people of Ilé-Ifè, deity worship is regarded first as a family affair such that adherence to a deity is based on blood ties thereby making the Oòni an outsider to the followership, rituals, and festivals of these deities.⁵³ Thus, the organization of Ilé-Ifè’s social structures showcase the difference between the Oòni’s ancestral lineage and that of the clans founded by the deified culture heroes of Ilé-Ifè. While the preceding suggests that deity worship in Ilé-Ifè is decentralized

to the clan or family level and the position of the Oòni is not a religious one, there nonetheless exist several festivals that require the participation of the Oòni. There are as many festivals as there are family compounds in Ilé-Ifè. Festivals are daily aspects of life in Ilé-Ifè, such that festivals tail one another and sometimes occur concurrently.⁵⁴ Ilé-Ifè is regarded as the city of 201 gods⁵⁵ however, it appears only about six festivals mandate the participation of the Oòni and they are the Pokùlere, Ìdìó, Olójó, Edì, Ìtápá, and Ifá festivals. While the role played by the Oòni in these festivals is a central one, the Oòni does not play the role of a chief priest. The functions of the Oòni in these festivals can be described as a re-enactment of notable historical events.

The Oòni in Ife Festivals

A number of studies have discussed the Pokùlere, Ìdìó, Olójó, Edì, Ìtápá, and Ifá festivals.⁵⁶ These previous studies and numerous others have presented certain aspects of the ritual drama contained in these festivals. While these texts are vital to this study, they have nonetheless stopped short at examining the roles of the Ooni in these festivals. By carefully dissecting these important festivals and beaming focus on the Ooni, this paper has established that the festivals are commemorations of the past rulers of Ilé-Ifè, and certain historical events considered vital in the evolutionary process of the city. For clarity, the Pokùlere festival features the encounter between the Òsángangan Obamakin group of Ùgbò at Irewo and a certain Oòni in time past whose identity is unclear. The Ìdìó festival details the emergence and the demise of Odùduwà in the Ilé-Ifè indigenous political space. The Olójó festival recounts the usurpation of Ògún, who was reportedly expelled from the site where the palace is now located. The Edì festival re-enacts the defeat of the marauding Ùgbò, who intermittently caused unrest in Ilé-Ifè as resistance to the changes in the indigenous political structure. The Ìtápá festival features the re-enactment of the conflict between Óbàtálá and the Obameri/Odùduwà military alliance which led to the return of the former as king and the demise of the latter. The Ifá festival recounts the encounter between Òrúnmìlà the diviner and Odùduwà.

The Pokùlere and Ìdìó festivals are highly confidential festivals. They take place at different periods of the year and are

hosted by different groups in the Ìlàré and Ìrémo quarters. These festivals share a common attribute of being strictly nocturnal. This aspect cordons the festival from public participation, which has impacted data collection. Be that as it may, the *Pokùlere* festival requires that the Oòni partake in a procession from his palace to the Ilérò, a conclave of Ùgbò lineages related to or descended from Òsàngangan Obamakin, scarcely clothed.⁵⁷ The historical event commemorated in this festival is not evident from the data collected, but the nudity of the Oòni during the festival procession can be interpreted as the memorialization of the reign of Òsàngangan Obamakin otherwise known as Obalùfòn Ògbógbódirin, and his son, Obalùfòn Aláyémòrè. At any rate, the members of the Òsàngangan Obamakin group of Ùgbò consisting of the Obalára, Obawinrìn, Obariyùn, Obarenà, Lówágbàfin, Woyèà-sírí, and Owájàn, to mention a few, do not only play host to the Oòni but perform priestly roles such as rites and rituals that the Oòni is subjected to. Participation and processions in the Ìdìó festival is restricted to the male descendants of the Ìdìó lineage but Jacob Olupona, in his *Ifè the City of 201 Gods*, was able to present aspects of the festival. Although a review of Olupona's work is not the concern of this paper, it is pertinent to point out that it agrees with the information gathered from correspondents in the field, who say that the festival is a celebration of Odùduwà, specifically his life and eventual demise. Informants also reinforce the claim that the Obadiò is the chief priest of the festival while the Oòni and Obàloràn play the roles of venerating a previous Ifè monarch.⁵⁸

The Osògún is regarded as the chief priest for the Olójó festival. He also serves as the head of all Ògún devotees in Ilé-Ifè. Tradition suggests that the Osògún emanated from the encounter between Ògún and a daughter of Obawara, the king of Iwaraland, broadly described by William Bascom.⁵⁹ During the Olójó festival, the Oòni, Sòokò Láékùn, and Lówá Ìjàrúá lead a procession with a sword and the crown that Ògún lost in his struggle to prevent the usurpation of his throne and palace.⁶⁰ The vestiges of this struggle are reflected in the relations between the Oòni and Osògún. For instance, the Osògún is not expected to be anywhere on the palace grounds or have close contact with the Oòni. When he does enter the palace, he is barred from sitting while the Oòni is bound to give him his utmost attention in order to hurry him

out.⁶¹ This practice probably reflects the risk posed by the Osògún to the Oòni due to the history behind how the Ògún lost his position in the broader Ifè indigenous political system.⁶² Several works of literature have discussed the Edì festival. It appears from available evidence that the festival is mostly an affair restricted to the Oòni, the Modéwá-Emese, and certain members of the Ife apex court, known as Ilé-Molè. Apart from Chief Yekere, several members of the Ìsòrò (Lord Spiritual) and the Iharefe (Lord Temporal) groups play little to no role in the festival.⁶³ The Chief Yékéré and Chief Érí hold the position of chief priest for the festival.⁶⁴ The Oòni plays the role of Òrànmíyàn or Obalùfòn, the two personalities often argued to have been the Oòni during the period of invasion of Ile-Ifè conducted by the Obawinni group of Ùgbò, which is dramatized in this festival.⁶⁵

The Ìtàpá festival is one of the most significant festivals in Ilé-Ifè. It revolves around the establishment of Ilé-Ifè and the alliances that shaped the city's inter-clan relations. The festival Ìtàpá (to throw kicks) derives its name from the physical combat the Óbàtálá and the Obamerì groups engaged in during the festival in times past.⁶⁶ It was said that at times, both groups attacked each other by weaponizing *ewó*, a celt-like metal used to make percussions during *Òsè Òrìsà* (weekly deity veneration) or festivals. The event includes two festivals that run almost concurrently—the Óbàtálá and the Obamerì—but the focus of this paragraph will be limited to that of the Óbàtálá festival since it is the one that involves the Oòni. The festival is a re-enactment of the protest exile and re-absorption of Óbàtálá back into Ilé-Ifè. The priestly roles in this festival are played by the Òlójà of Ìrànjé Ìdita and the sixteen chiefs of Ìrànjé Ìdita, drawn from the Ìlésùn and Ìlálè groups of Óbàtálá clan, headed by Obalésùn and Obalálè, respectively.⁶⁷ During this festival, which lasts for several weeks, a particular day known as *Àsè Oòni* (the banquet of the Oòni) is allotted to the Oòni during which he engages in a procession that requires him to walk unclothed from his palace to the Óbàtálá temple about seven times with calabashes of several foods and condiments.⁶⁸ Although this practice has been tweaked to suit the demands of modern times, several of the leaders at the Óbàtálá temple interpreted the Oòni's participation as a representation of the supremacy of Óbàtálá over the past and present rulers of the town. It does not place the Oòni in the position of a chief

priest because, according to the priests, it is not “the festival of his fathers.”⁶⁹

The foremost literature that extensively explores the Ifá divination system in Ilé-Ifè is *Ifá Divination: Communication between Gods and Men in West Africa* by William Bascom.⁷⁰ Apart from providing insights into the likely origins and technicalities involved in the Ifá divination system, it also includes a list of the known chief priests and the historical background of each office. These include Àràbà and Agbóngbòn, the foremost chief priests in the Ifè hierarchy of diviners.⁷¹ In addition to describing the likely origins of Ifá and the historical backgrounds of the offices associated with Ifá priesthood, the book also provides information about the Oòni’s involvement in the *Ifá* festival. It provides an account of the visitation of a certain number of Babaláwo Olódù (senior Ifá priests) who are entertained by the Oòni, who, in turn, conduct the Ifá divination of the year for the Oòni and the town. This event was described by a certain Babaláwo in Ilé-Ifè as one that must yield a particular Odú (Ifá chapter) known as *Èjì Ogbè*, the leading Ifá chapter of the entire 256 Odú. This chapter of Ifá is often referred to as “Ifá Oòni” (the Ifá of the King).⁷² Also, existing accounts of tradition in Ilé-Ifè reveal that the basis for participation of the Oòni in the festival is connected to the encounter between Òrúnmilà and an Ifè king, described in certain quarters as Odùduwà.⁷³ This is couched in the encounter between both mythical and historical figures as a result of the extra-marital affair between Òrúnmilà, the diviner, and a certain wife of Odùduwà. When Odùduwà discovered the relationship, Òrúnmilà was transformed into an *ekùn* (leopard) with the help of the deity Èsù, the messenger and trickster god. It is due to this event that the Àràbà (the head of all Ifá chief-priests in Ilé-Ifè) wears a particular painting of white dots on his body and leads a procession to the palace to commemorate the encounter between Òrúnmilà and Odùduwà on a specific day known as *Ojó Ìléfîn* (the day of white chalk painting) during the Ifá festival.⁷⁴

Conclusion

In conclusion, Ilé-Ifè is deeply rooted in culture-hero worship, and it is no wonder that it is regarded as the center of Yorùbá indigenous religion. This paper shows that the festival, rituals, and

sacred spaces are possessions and prerogatives of clans reputed to have been founded by certain culture heroes. This, therefore, indicates that Ilé-Ifè has a broad religio-cultural system responsible for the continuity of festivals in the town within which the roles of the Oòni are limited. The roles of the Oòni in the Ife festivals are that of reverence for Odùduwà in the Ìdìó festival; the representative of a conciliatory Odùduwà or Òsángangan Obamakín who annually seeks authority from Óbàtálá to retain leadership in Ilé-Ifè in the Ìtápá festival; and for the others, the place of certain kings in some remarkable events in the history of Ilé-Ifè considered worthy of commemoration such as Olójó and Edì. Shedding further light on the centrality of clanship to the religious system of Ilé-Ifè, this paper contributes to the perennial debate about the priestly position of the Oòni within the broad network of monarchy across Yorùbáland. This paper explored the festivals in Ilé-Ifè, particularly the festivals considered to be important to the continued existence of the state, and analyzed the function of the Oòni within these festivals. Extant studies of this subject have explored other aspects, such as the interactions between colonialists and Yorùbá kings, and artworks. This paper has attempted to fill the gap in the literature exploring the place of the Oòni in the religious structure of Ilé-Ifè. It has thus far established that the festivals in Ilé-Ifè are hosted by certain clans, and that it is not Oòni but the clan heads who play the role of priest, and in certain cases, the combined role of a king and a priest.

Notes

¹ See John Omer-Cooper, "The Contribution of The University of Ibadan to the Spread of the Study and Teaching of African History Within Africa," *Journal of The Historical Society of Nigeria* 10, no. 3 (1980): 23-31.

² Richard Olaniyan and Isaac Adeagbo Akinjogbin, "Sources of the History of Ife" in *The Cradle of a Race: Ife from the Beginning to 1980*, ed. Isaac Adeagbo Akinjogbin (Port Harcourt: Sunray Publications Limited, 1992): 39.

³ Isaac Adeagbo Akinjogbin, "Introduction" in *The Cradle of a Race: Ife from the Beginning to 1980*, ed. Isaac Adeagbo Akinjogbin (Port Harcourt: Sunray Publications Limited, 1992): xvii.

⁴ Samuel Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas: From the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1966): 188-189.

- ⁵ Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas*, 557
- ⁶ Olabisi Onabanjo, *Aiyékòótó*, (Ibadan: Syndicated Communications, 1991), 414.
- ⁷ Robin Horton, "Ancient Ife: A Reassessment," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 9, no. 4 (1979): 128.
- ⁸ Thurstan Shaw, "A Note on Trade and the Tsoede Bronzes," *West African Journal of Archaeology* 3, (1973): 233-238
- ⁹ Horton, "Ancient Ife," 69-149.
- ¹⁰ Isaac Adeagbo Akinjogbin, *Milestones and Concepts in Yoruba History and Culture*, (Ibadan: Olu Akin Publishers, 2002): 1-167
- ¹¹ Toyin Falola, "Ibadan Power Elite and the Search for Political Order, 1893-1939," *Africa: Rivista Trimestrale Di Studi E Documentazione Dell'Istituto Italiano per L'Africa E L'Oriente* 47, no. 3 (1992): 36-54
- ¹² Cornelius Adepegba, "The Descent from Odùduwà: Claims of Superiority among Some Yoruba Traditional Rulers and the Arts of Ancient Ife," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 19, no. 1 (1986): 77-92.
- ¹³ Alfred Burdon Ellis, *The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples of the Slave Coast of West Africa: Their Religion, Manners, Customs, Laws and Language* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1894), 2-3.
- ¹⁴ Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas*, 15-45.
- ¹⁵ Joseph Adebawale Atanda, "The Origins of the Yoruba Reconsidered," *Odu: A journal of West African Studies New Series*, no. 25 (1984): 3-19
- ¹⁶ Atanda, "The Origins of the Yoruba Reconsidered," 3-19.
- ¹⁷ Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas*, 9.
- ¹⁸ Adepegba, "The Descent from Odùduwà," 77-92.
- ¹⁹ Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas*, 574-575.
- ²⁰ Adepegba, "The Descent from Odùduwà," 77-92.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Abiola Sodimu, *The Man of the People: His Life, Political Ambition, Incarceration, and Death*, (Lagos: Miral Printing Press, 1998) p. 20.
- ²³ Orisabukola Omidirepo (sub-chief Ifa diviner) in discussion with the author, November 20, 2018.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Biodun Adediran, "The Early Beginning of Ife the Ife State," in *The Cradle of a Race: Ife from the Beginning to 1980*, ed. Isaac Adeagbo Akinjogbin (Port Harcourt: Sunray Publications Limited, 1992): 88-89.
- ²⁶ Leo Frobenius, *The Voice of Africa: Being an Account of the Travels of the German Inner African Exploration Expedition in the years 1910-1912*, (London: Hutchinson, 1913).
- ²⁷ Ibid., 69.
- ²⁸ Ibid., 280.
- ²⁹ Ibid., 27-28.
- ³⁰ Martins Oladinni Fasogbon, *The Ancient Constitutional History of Ile Ife Ooyelagbo*, 21-24.

- ³¹ Suzanne Preston Blier, “Kings, Crowns, and Rights of Succession: Obalufon Arts at Ife and Other Yoruba Centers,” *The Art Bulletin* 67, no. 3 (1987): 383-401.
- ³² Adeoye Agunlejika, *Ijesa: A Chronicles: An Historiographic Tribute*, (Lagos: Comforthez Books, 2011): 16.
- ³³ Omifemi Omisakin (Mole Chief) in discussion with the author, December 8, 2017.
- ³⁴ National Archives Ibadan, Ifè Div. 1/2, File 109, Federal Council of Ifè Chiefs (Egbe Isowopo Ijoye Esindale Ifè) to His honour, to The Chief Commissioner Western Region on 8th October, 1951.
- ³⁵ Werner Gillon, *A Short History of African Art* (England: Penguin, 1991), 196.
- ³⁶ Isaac Adeagbo Akinjogbin, “The Growth of Ife from Odùduwà to 1800,” *The Cradle of a Race: Ife from the Beginning to 1980*, ed. Isaac Adeagbo Akinjogbin, (Port Harcourt: Sunray Publications Limited, 1992): 100.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 100
- ³⁸ Bolanle Awe, “The End of an Experiment: The Collapse of the Ibadan Empire 1877-1893,” *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 3, no. 2 (1965): 221-30
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 98–99.
- ⁴⁰ Karin Barber, *I Could Speak until Tomorrow: Oriki, Women and the Past in a Yoruba Town* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press 1991).
- ⁴¹ Bolanle Awe, “Praise Poems as Historical Data: The Example of the Yoruba Oriki.” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 44, no. 4 (1974): 331-49.
- ⁴² Olaposi Ogunremi, *Oriki Agboole Ile-Ife*, (Ile-Ife: Joyland Publishers, 2012): 1-98.
- ⁴³ Olaposi Ogunremi, *Oriki Agboole Ile-Ife*.
- ⁴⁴ Lanre Hassan, “The Historical Evolution, Structure and Administration of the Indigenous Quarters in Ilé-Ifè” (M.Phil. Thesis, Obafemi Awolowo University, 2005): 45 and Adeboye Awoyode (Anglican Very Reverend) in discussion with the author, October 20, 2019.
- ⁴⁵ William Bascom, *The Yoruba of the Southwestern Nigeria* (London: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969): 33-35.
- ⁴⁶ Martins Oladinni Fasogbon, *The Ancient Constitutional History of Ile Ife Ooyelagbo* (Lagos: Unity Comm. Printers, 1985): 23.
- ⁴⁷ Fasogbon, *The Ancient Constitutional History of Ile Ife Ooyelagbo*, 21-30.
- ⁴⁸ Ajayi Fabunmi, *An Anthology of Historical Notes on Ife City*, (Ife: J. West Publications, 1985): 20.
- ⁴⁹ Oladotun Dada (Iranje-Idita King-priest) in discussion with the author, November 22, 2018.
- ⁵⁰ Tunji Dare (Iranje-Idita Chief) in discussion with the author, November 30, 2018.
- ⁵¹ Oladotun Dada (Iranje-Idita King-priest) in discussion with the author, November 22, 2018.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, 39.
- ⁵³ Leo Frobenius, *The Voice of Africa*, 188-192.

- ⁵⁴ Ebenezer Adegoke, "A study of the role of women in the burial rituals of the Ife of southwestern Nigeria" (University of London, PhD Thesis, 1995): 539-540.
- ⁵⁵ Jacob Olupona, *City of 201 Gods: Ilé-Ifè in Time, Space, and the Imagination*, (California: University of California Press, 2011): 1-365
- ⁵⁶ Ibid; Walsh Michael, "The Êdi Festival at Ile Ife." *African Affairs* 47, no. 189 (1948): 231-238 and William Bascom, *Ifa Divination: Communication between Gods and Men in West Africa*, (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1991).
- ⁵⁷ Dierk Lange, "Preservation of Canaanite Creation Culture in Ife Culture in Ife," *Between Resistance and Expansion: Dimensions of Local Vitality in Africa*, ed. Peter Probst and Gerd Spittler, (Hamburg: Lit Verlag, 2004): p. 141.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid., 223-248 and National Archives Ibadan, Ifè Div. 1/2, File 109, Federal Council of Ifè Chiefs in which it was reported that Obàloràn was not only a servant to Omìtótó, a consort of Odùduwà, but he also served as the custodian of Igba Iwa (sacred calabash) which equally belonged to Oduduwa.
- ⁵⁹ Lanre Hassan (Ministry of Defence) in discussion with the author, November 10, 2018, and William Bascom, *The Yoruba of the Southwestern Nigeria*
- ⁶⁰ Ibid., June 8, 2018.
- ⁶¹ Olawale Elusanmi (Farmer) in discussion with the author, June 8, 2018.
- ⁶² Adisa Fadire (Farmer) in discussion with the author, June 8, 2018.
- ⁶³ Osumare Omisade, Chief Gbonka, and Chief Alasa (Mole priests) in discussion with the author, November 15, 2018.
- ⁶⁴ Efunlade Ifakola in discussion with the author, June 5, 2018.
- ⁶⁵ Efunlade Ifakola and Taiwo Famakinde in discussion with the author, June 5, 2018.
- ⁶⁶ Orisabukola Omidirepo (sub-chief Ifa diviner) in discussion with the author, February 3, 2018.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid.
- ⁶⁸ Egbewole Awosemo in discussion with the author, August 25, 2017; Fasogbon, *The Ancient Constitutional History of Ile Ife Ooyelagbo*, 27.
- ⁶⁹ Egbewole Awosemo in discussion with the author, August 25, 2017.
- ⁷⁰ William Bascom, *Ifa Divination: Communication between Gods and Men in West Africa*.
- ⁷¹ Fayemi Ayeifa (Ifa diviner) in discussion with the author, September 10, 2018.
- ⁷² Ibid.
- ⁷³ There is a common practice of ascribing historical events, personage, and materials to Oduduwa. From a closer observation, it can be deduced that this happens due to the want for legitimacy as a result of the popularity of Oduduwa in Yorubaland. This practice has proven to be a major problem in the research of Ife history, and this has misled several researchers who have mixed up periodization of an event through the misplacement of a *dramatis* or material or event in the period of Oduduwa.
- ⁷⁴ Orisabukola Omidirepo (sub-chief Ifa diviner) in discussion with the author, November 20, 2018.

