A King or A Priest in the City of 201 Gods: Interrogating the Place of the Oóni in the Religious System of Ilé-Ifè, Southwest Nigeria

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Abstract
The tradition of the origin of the Yoruba people of Western Nigeria, Republic of Benin, Togo, and the Diaspora indicate one source, Ilé-Ifè, from where the varieties of their indigenous political system originated. However, since the colonial period, a debate still questions the political or religious place of the Oòni, the King of Ilé-Ifè, in the political and religious systems of the Yoruba nation leading to a perennial discourse across Yorubaland. Using literature and primary sources such as oral interviews, participant observations of rituals and festivals spanning several years this study critically analyses the position of the Oóni in the religious system of IléIfè. 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) and also that, while the Oóni is mandated to participate in Ìdìó, Olójó, Edì, Ìtàpá and Ifá festivals only, his participation is, however, reflective of his position as a scion of Odúduwa in the Ìdìó festival, and for the others, the place of the past Oóni in the historical events that serve as the basis for these festivals.

Keywords: Ile-Ife, Ooni, Yoruba festivals, Yoruba Religion, Òrìsà, Ifá

Introduction

Ilé-Ifè, which the geographical scope of this paper covers, is a town that stretches over the Ifè Central and Ifè East local governments in Osun State (Osun State Government) 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 (Omer-Cooper 23-31), a lot of questions mostly cutting across the socio-cultural and socio-political spheres of Ilé-Ifè remain unanswered. This problem of unanswered existential questions can be attributed to the limitations resulting from the secrecy associated with collecting oral information interwoven with Yòrùbá traditional religion, for instance (Olaniyan 39). Consequently, these questions have become subjects of never-ending debates today, particularly in works of literature and public spaces – a phenomenon indicative of a gap in knowledge requiring the attention of researchers. One of such questions, which this paper attempts to explore, is the origin and place of the Oóni among the Yòrùbá people. The theme of this paper forms one of the attendant questions from earlier research works that have continued to re-surface. The pieces of evidence deployed in the several subsequent paragraphs which were collected during the fieldwork for this paper indicate that several works of literature that have argued the slave or priestly ascribed to the origins and position of the Oóni fall within the category of the traditions that were manipulated and modified in attempts to support the claims to the paramountcy of the kings concerned (Law 207-222).

Background of the Study

The institution of the Oóni is as old as Ilé-Ifè itself. However, for decades, there have been debates about the historicity of the Oóni being a chief priest with a slave provenance charged with the duty of overseeing the 201 deities spread across Ilé-Ifè. Therefore, it is pertinent to attempt to trace the origins of this contention. Before the colonial and contemporary times, Yòrùbá towns seemed to in several maxims such as, '*Ifè, ibi ojúmó ti'n mó wá*,' (Ifè the place from where it dawns), '*Ifè olórí ayé gbogbo'* (Ifè the head of the world) and the appellation reflective of the place of Ilé-Ifè in the Yòrùbá tradition of origin, '*Ifè Oòdáyé*,' (Ifè where the creation of the world took place). It can be suggested that this primacy of Ifè among Yòrùbá towns was amplified by an Òyó tradition which 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, at the time, was regarded as a sacrilege (Johnson 188-189). Furthermore, in 1886, Higgins, a Commissioner sent by the Lagos government to mediate

among the belligerent Yòrùbá 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 (Johnson 557).

Ilé-Ifè's position in Yòrùbáland as the place from which virtually all Yòrùbá towns claim to have originated was given further credibility in the last two centuries with the archeological discoveries of incomparable bronze and terra-cotta sculptures, mostly of human figures. Ilé-Ifè, among the Yòrùbá, is the *ìlú aládé* (city of the crown or the crowned city) and the Oòni, the King of Ifè, as *Oba t' on gba idobale oba*, (the King who receives obeisance from other Kings). It is regarded as the source from where their indigenous monarchy system spread. The Yòrùbá people also held the belief that the crowns of other Yòrùbá towns emanated from Ilé-Ifè. This universal belief in the common origin of the Yòrùbá monarchy system found credence in the resolution of the crown conflict of 1903. Apart from resolving the conflict for which he was invited to Lagos for, the Oòni at the time was recorded to have said no other person had the power crown to monarchs across Yòrùbáland other than him (Onabanjo 414).

The primacy of Ilé-Ifè and consequently, the Oóni in Yòrùbáland has been argued to have probably been because of the rise of Ifè as a military and commercial center (Horton 128). Thurstan Shaw, for instance, suggested that Ilé-Ifè is located somewhere in the bend along the Niger river and this places Ilé-Ifè in the middle of north-south trade (Shaw 233238) that propelled the city into a center of commercial prominence. However, this military and economic rise were argued to have led to a decline resulting from the emergence of successor states and the eventual fatherly status accorded to Ilé-Ifè (Horton 69-149). Despite the emergence of several states after the decline of Ilé-Ifè, the Yòrùbá people seemed not to have generally debated superiority among their kings. However, while these kings and their towns may have looked to Ilé-Ifè as the source of their legitimacy and ancestors respectively, there appears to have been a system of equality and the recognition of the primacy of Ilé-Ifè in place. Akinjogbin discussed this system in his *Ebi* theory which espoused the structure of fraternity and equality among Yòrùbá towns hinged on a widespread agreement to a common origin but with Ilé-Ifè as the first among equals (Akinjogbin 1-167).

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 Yòrùbáland, thereby leading to several contradictions and attendant contests (Falola 36-54). The contest of the primacy hitherto enjoyed by Ifè and the Oóni across Yòrùbáland can been traced to interactions between the colonialists and the Yòrùbá kings, a phenomenon regarded as 'dubious' by Adepegba (Adepegba 77-92).

However, it can be suggested that the distortion of Yòrùbá tradition consequently leading to contests that plagued Yòrùbáland for several decades began with the recaptives and ex-slaves of Yòrùbá origins. Upon resettling in Yòrùbáland in the closing parts of the 19th century, the returnees erroneously referred to the entire subgroups as Yòrùbá - a term initially used to denote the town of Òyó and its dependent towns (Ellis 2-3).

A notable example of a Yoruba returnee was Samulel Johnson whose work despite being a seminal study on Yòrùbá history was also 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 for instance (Johnson 15-45). This was despite that European explorers reported, in various accounts, that Yòrùbá was a term solely used as a demonym for the people within Òyó town and its dependencies. For the first part of his work, Samuel Johnson relied heavily on palace griots, probably leading him to narrate the early history of the present-day Yòrùbáland with a migrant Odùduwà of Mecca origins as the founder.

Nonetheless, this tradition is synonymous to the account of the origin of the Yòrùbá (Òyó) people as given by Sultan Bello of Sokoto and published by Clapperton in 1829 (Atanda 3-19). As such, considering that the tradition given by Sultan Bello was made available in 1829 and the Òyó tradition was collected in the same 19th century but was not published until 1921, one can, therefore, conclude that the account given by Sultan Bello either influenced the tradition given by Òyó or that both share a similar source.

Atanda (3-19) 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. Be that as it may, Johnson's tradition 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 as the successor a in Ilé-Ifè (Johnson 9). Therefore, this account can simply be interpreted to mean that for having a priestly origin with no blood ties to Odùduwà, the throne in Ilé-Ifè becomes reduced to nothingness while despite not occupying the seat of Odùduwà, the Aláafín becomes a legitimate ruler for descending from Odùduwà and inheriting the lands from Odùduwà respectively. In a short sentence, to *A King or A Priest in the City of 201 Gods...* make up for not possessing the seat and crown of Odùduwà, the two factors suggesting paramountcy, the Òyó version of Yòrùbá history implicitly reduced the origins and relevance of the Oóni to nothingness.

Extant studies have at different points attempted to finger colonialism for many of the problems bedevilling Africa with the contention in the priestly role of the Oóni being one of such. Adepegba in *The Descent from Odùduwà* suggested that the 'dubious nature' of the colonialists was responsible for the distortion of the arrangement and system of monarchy in Yòrùbáland (Adepegba 77-92). The colonialists may have indeed obfuscated many of the Yòrùbá traditions particularly in the course of establishing Native Authority System. The representation of the Aláafín as the paramount King of Yòrùbáland seemed to have been the sole doing of the locals, particularly the Aláafín of the period. In the letters written to the colonial officers, the Aláafín repeatedly referred to himself as the King of Yòrùbá. This was despite that the colonialists in several of their written responses, referred to him as the King of Òyó (Johnson 574-575). Eventually, the British signed a treaty with the Aláafín acknowledging him as the overall ruler of Yòrùbáland but this may have been due to the importance of trade with the hinterlands, particularly Ibadan and the ceremonial obeisance which Ibadan, the most powerful Yòrùbá state at the time, paid to the Aláafín (Adepegba 77-92).

Furthermore, the colonialists proceeded to set up administrative structures in Yòrùbáland despite being aware that a number of Yòrùbá rulers made false claims to the British officials about the hierarchy of monarchy in Yòrùbá (Adepegba 77-92). Be that as it may, the provincial arrangements of several of the Yòrùbá towns into a single entity would go on to lead to a series of contests extending as far as the post-colonial periods when states had to be created to mitigate what seemed like a perpetual rivalry between the monarchs.

However, while many of these rivalries seemed to have been resolved today, the contest between the Aláafín and the Oóni appears to have remained. This contest split the Yòrùbá public debate into two camps with one hand arguing the supremacy of the throne and crown of Odùduwà regardless of who was in possession of them. While on the other hand, there is the argument for the primacy of the Aláafín using Òyó tradition as contained in Samuel Johnson's work. Despite the numerous works written to further this debate for either side, it is evident that the roles and obligations of the Oóni within Ilé-Ifè itself has not been taken into consideration to establish if it indeed reflects that of a priestly role. Therefore, this paper will attempt to add to the growing list of 'piece-meal' (Akinjogbin xvii) studies on Ilé-Ifè by investigating the roles of the Oóni 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.

The Oóni in Literature

Ifá is perhaps the most famous indigenous literature of the Yòrùbá people. It embodies the totality of Yòrùbá 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 Oóni Alànà kan Èsùrú was made (Omidirepo, Orisabukola. Personal Interview. 20 November 2018). In this verse of *Ifá*, it was recorded that the King of the period, usually regarded as Odùduwà, went on a journey. When the time for *Odún Olójó* (Olójó festival) approached, there was the need for the *Adé Arè* (Arè crown) to be worn for a procession to the *Òke M'ògún* (Ògún shrine). And due to the absence of the Oóni, a palace courtier usually regarded, in this verse, to be an *erú* (slave) known as Alànà kan Èsùrú was nominated from among the palace courtiers to wear the crown for the Olójó festival procession. Thus, becoming a king whose role, it was to tend to the deities in Ilé-Ifè (Omidirepo, Orisabukola. Personal Interview. 20 November 2018). Although several people inclusive of Ifá priests directly interpreted this to mean the slave origins of the Oóni, however, 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 Oóni.

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 Oóni. This account is credited to Samuel Johnson whose work is titled *'A History of the Yòrùbá*'. This account 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 was delivered of 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 (Adediran 88-89), Àdìmú was put in the position of a caretaker to take charge of the treasures and the worship of national deities. And when the seat of government in Yòrùbáland moved to Òyó, Àdìmú, the son of the slave, became supreme at Ilé-Ifè and consequently, his successors are regarded as 'high priests' or 'fetish worshipers' 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 are indicative of a disparity.

The earliest literature to have given the position of the Oóni a religious colouration was the work written by Leo Frobenius who explored Yòrùbáland around the year 1910. During his exploration of Ilé-Ifè which coincided with the early beginnings of the reign of Oóni Adémilúyì, Leo Frobenius employed terms such as 'prince of the church' to describe the King and 'holy city' to describe the town. Although Frobenius stated, he had heard information about Ilé-Ifè from his encounters with explorers who described 'the great cities of the Niger on the southern borders of the Sahara, Timbuktu and Wagadugu…' in which he said heard that 'Ilé-Ifè was mentioned as the first of five great places and it was only when in Atakpame in South Togoland that I identified it with Ifè' (Frobenius 69). What informed the religious connotation he ascribed to the Oóni and IléIfè is not entirely clear and cannot be pinpointed in his work. However, the work provided an insight into the socio-political and politico-religious structure of Ilé-Ifè during this period.

Going further, Frobenius provided a tabular representation of the indigenous administration of Ilé-Ifè by explicitly listing the Oóni and the ruling officials in Ilé-Ifè and the deity they're responsible to (Frobenius 280). Despite the spelling errors in the table which can be ascribed to language differences, the table provided a representation of the list of some of the Ifè chiefs and the worship of the deities they

officiate. Some of the chiefs, like Chief Baléà and gods like Obagèdè (spelt Abagede), 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 (27-28). However, data gathered during the fieldwork indicate that the Chiefs Lówá Ìjàrúa, Àgùrò, Àróde and Jàrán were at no time worshippers of Lájamísan (a deified culture hero who founded the present ruling dynasty). This is due to the fact that the four chiefs were palace courtiers whose origins had no links with that of the Oóni (Fasogbon 33). Instead, these four palace courtiers were linked with the worship of the deified palace courtier usurper Lájùwà, the usurper (Blier 393).

Ìjèsà Chronicles: An Historiographic Tribute provides an interesting perspective of the Ìjèsà on Ifè history. The work is set within the framework of migration, as seen in the work of Samuel Johnson; however, 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 the displacement of Lamurudu, Odùduwà left Egypt and migrated to Sudan from where he ended up in IléIfè. In this work, Ajíbógun, the first king of Ilésà, was positioned as the person whom the sustenance of the political structure of Ilé-Ifè fell upon after the demise of Odùduwà and the migration of his children. The work posited that, Owá Ajíbógun handed over the leadership and control of IléIfè to the lineage of Obalùfòn Aláyémore who was regarded as a priest. The literature went further to hinge the argument on 'Enuwá' and 'Modéwá' as some of the vestiges of the presence of Ajíbógun in the affairs of IléIfè (Agunlejika 16).

Interestingly 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-up both sides of the road at the palace gate from which the office of Lówá (the Oóni's chief palace courtier) emanated. Some of these lineages found at the palace gate today include Òkòró compound and Sèru Compound for instance. Also, Modéwá, 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 Oóni called on to run certain errands (Omisakin, Femi. Personal Interview 8 December 2017).

Testing the Verisimilitudes of Literature Palace Servants and the Usurpation of the Ife Throne

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 consisting of eight chiefs. Locally, they're known as Modéwá, a descriptive term derived from *omode i ha* (this youth come) or that it was initially known as Modéorowá (princely youths) (NAI, Ifè Div. 1/2, File 109). The Ifa verse describing the ascension of a palace courtier to the throne of Ile-Ife, which has been related above, appears to be known in Ile-Ife, particularly among Ifa diviners. While the cultural history of Ife recognizes the usurpation of the throne by an individual regarded as a palace servant holding the position of a Yégbata, it is also, however, 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 (Gillon 196). For further analysis, the Ifè oral history records that a certainly ranked Emesé (palace courtier) known as Lájùwà, otherwise spelled as Lajua, rallied support among the palace servants to oust the King.

While the Ifa verse and the oral accounts in Ife share certain similarities, they, however, 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 Oóni. In contrast, the latter suggests that the reign of the usurper palace servant was truncated and replaced with the reign of Oóni Lajamisan, an acclaimed descendant of Oranmiyan (Akinjogbin 100). This, therefore, suggests that while servants may have usurped the throne at certain points in history, the rulership of the city has, however, been returned to the ruling clans whose candidates are subjected through a rigorous, complex process of assessments to ascertain ancestry before enthronement.

The Social Structure of Ilé-Ifè and the Progeny of the Oóni The Yòrùbá people have a complex system of socio-cultural practices said to have originated from Ilé-Ifè. The town holds this position of importance for being the nucleus of Yòrùbá religious systems. This probably informed the expression of Basorun Ogunmola in the 19th century, specifically during the Yòrùbá internecine wars of the 19th century when he 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 (Akinjogbin 98-99). This system of the worship of deified culture heroes is probably reflected in the maxims reflecting the importance of sacrifices and ritual murder in Ifè. There appears to be several of these maxims, but the two relevant to our studies are *ebo ni Ifè n je* (Ifè thrives on sacrifices) and a much longer one which describes the penchant of the Ifè to ritually murder people, particularly the non-Ifè *a kin duro ki won ni Ifè Oóni, a kin bere ki won ni Ifè Ooye, eni ba duro ki won ni Ifè Oóni, ebo ni won fi oluwa e se* (we don't stand to greet them in the Ifè of Oóni we do not bow to greet them in Ifè of survivors whoever stops to greet them in the Ifè of Oóni such a person is ritually murdered.)

Ilé-Ifè is, today, made up of three different classes of natives. 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 (Ogunremi 1-98). The third group is that of family compounds founded by migrants and settlers from other Yòrùbá towns such as Ilésà, Ìwó, Òkè Ògùn, and Ìbàdàn to mention a few (Hassan 45; Awoyode, Adeboye. Personal Interview. 20 October 2019). Today these family compounds are regarded as Ifè, the socio-cultural practices of the latter group, however, seem imported from their towns of origins or derived from the Modéwá status which they have been said to have often formed a part of at various points in time (Bascom 33-35). For the former two groups, their socio-cultural practices are rooted in the primordial ancestral practices cutting through the several phases of life and death. The complexity and frequency of the rituals enmeshed in ancestral worship were simplified with the local socio-political structure such that the town of Ifè traditionally consisted of two parts, the *Òtún* Ifè (Ifè on the right side) and *Òsì* Ifè (Ifè on the left side) with the former being made up of the *Ìharefè* group, while the latter is made up of the *Ìsòrò* group (Fasogbon, 23) which will mostly serve as the focus of this paper. The *Ìsòrò* group consists of the preOdùduwà era kings and a varying number of priests responsible for the propitiation and general worship a plethora of deified culture heroes. The members of this group oversee the worship, rituals, and the totality of all the facets of religious adherence to these

deities. This group of people is also regarded as Lord Spirituals (Fasogbon 21-30).

Clanship, Indigenous Religion, and Festivals

As earlier stated, Ilé-Ifè is divided along the lines of clanship such that each Òrìsà (deity) owned certain quarter. For instance, Ìrànjé-Ìdìta is headed by an Oloja, a position alternated between the Obalésùn and Obaládè lines; Ìddó is headed by Omipétu; Ìlórómù is headed by Obalúru; and Odin is headed by Lókòré to mention a few (Fabunmi 20). Furthermore, the pattern of the religious system in Ilé-Ifè suggests a decentralised system of deity worship. Apart from the attachment of each of the 200 deities to the foundation of each of the clans in Ilé-Ifè, the worship, festivals, and initiation processes appeared to be a private affair of lineages. The data gathered from the members of the Óbàtálá lineage at Igbó Ìtàpá in Ilé-Ifè for instance suggest that Óbàtálá worship, like the several other deities in Ilé-Ifè, was at no time under the Oóni or an Àdìmú as suggested by Samuel Johnson farm (Obalesun, Dada. Personal Interview. 22 November 2018). It was 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 (Orisadare, Tunji. Personal Interview. 30 November 2018). In specific terms, the adherents, or members of the Óbàtálá clan indicated that the lineage is headed by a person known as *Olójà*, a position described to be that of the king-priest who not only plays the role of a king but serves as the leader for the worship of their' father,' Óbàtálá farm (Obalesun, Dada. Personal Interview. 22 November 2018).

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 (Olaniyan and Akinjogbin, 39) in which the family of a deity perform. 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 (Frobenius 188-192) thereby making the Oóni an outsider to the followership, rituals,

and festivals of these deities. Thus, showcasing the difference in his ancestral lineage and that of the clans founded by the 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 Oóni is not a religious one, there exists, however, several festivals that mandatorily require the participation of the Oóni.

The Oóni in Ifè Festivals

There are as many festivals as there are family compounds in Ilé-Ifè. Festivals are daily conducts in Ile-Ife and this is such that, festivals tail one another and sometimes occur concurrently (Adegoke 539-540). Ilé-Ifè is regarded as the city of 201 gods (Olupona 1-356); however, only five festivals mandatorily require the participation of the Oóni and these festivals are Ìdìó, Olójó, Edì, Ìtàpá and Ifá festivals. While it seems that the role played by the Oóni in these festivals is a central one, it, however, appears that the Oóni does not play the role of a chief priest. The functions of the Oóni in these festivals can be described as a re-enactment of notable historical events reflecting the positions of past kings of Ilé-Ifè

The Ìdìó, Olójó, Edì, Ìtàpá, and Ifá festivals have formed themes of numerous researches. The pieces of evidence explored for this study indicate that these festivals are respectively hinged on the commemoration of the position and demise of Odùduwà the first king of Ilé-Ifè; the usurpation of the throne and place of Oóni Ògún who was expelled from the site where the present palace is now located; the commemoration of the defeat of Ùgbò marauders who intermittently caused unrest in Ilé-Ifè; the re-enactment of the conflict between Óbàtálá and Obamerì/ Odùduwà; and the re-enactment of the encounter between Òrúnmìlà, the diviner and Odùduwà, the King. The Ìdìó festival is somewhat a highly confidential festival with participation and processions being mostly restricted to the male descendants of the Ìdìó lineage and within the Ìdìó compound respectively. However, Jacob Olupona, in his 'Ifè the City of 201 Gods' (Olupona 224-248), was able to present aspects of the festival. Although the review of the work written by Olupona is not the concern of this paper, it is, however, pertinent to point out that it agrees with the information gathered from correspondents on the field, which says that the festival is a celebration of Odùduwà, specifically his life and eventual demise. It also agrees that

the Obadìo is the chief-priest of the festival while the Oóni and Obàloràn play the role of the offspring celebrating the life and death of their father (Olupona 223-248).

The Osògún is regarded as the Chief-Priest for 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 (Olafiranye, Dapo. Personal Interview. 10 November 2018). During the Olójó festival the Oóni, Sòokò Láekùn, and Lówá Ìjàrúa lead a procession with the sword and the crown which Ògún lost in his struggle to prevent the usurpation of his throne and palace (Hassan, Lanre. Personal Interview. 8 June 2018). The vestiges of this struggle are reflected in the relations between the Oóni and Osògún. For instance, the Osògún is not expected to be anywhere on the palace grounds or have a close contact with the Oóni. This prohibition is further extended to presence of Osògún in the palace, and this is such that, whenever an Osògún visits the palace, he is barred from seating while the Oóni is bound to give him utmost attention in order to hurry him out of this palace (Olawale, Elusanmi. Personal Interview. 8 June 2018). This practice reflects the risk posed by the Osògún to the Oóni due to the history behind how the Ògún lost his crown, throne, and palace (Adisa, Fadire. Personal Interview. 8 June 2018).

Several works of literature have discussed the Moremi festival. However, it would appear from available evidence that the festival is mostly an affair restricted to the Oóni; the palace chiefs and the compounds they are selected from; and individual houses that make up the Modéwá and Ilé-Molè such as the Alásá family compound and Gbònká Èbìrì family compound to mention a few. While the family compounds making up the Ìsòrò (Lord Spiritual) and the Iharefe (Lord Temporal) groups play little to no roles in the festival (Chiefs Gbonka, Osumare, and Alasa. Personal Interview. 15 November 2018). The basis of the festival has been explored by several research works (Walsh 231-238), however, as stated in these works of literature, data collected from field research indicate that the Chief Yékéré holds the position of the Chief Priest for the festival and Chief Èrí and Àmúrù Morèmí assist him (Efunlade, Ifakola. Personal Interview. 05 June 2018) while the Oóni plays the role of Òrànmíyàn or Obalùfòn, the two personalities often argued to have been the Oóni during the period of Ùgbò invasion which

is regarded as the basis for the festival (Famakinde, Taiwo. Personal Interview. 5 June 2018)

The Ìtàpá festival is one of the significant festivals in Ilé-Ifè. The festival revolves around the establishment of Ilé-Ifè and the alliances that shaped the inter-clan relations in Ilé-Ifè. The festival 'Ìtàpá' (to throw kicks) derives its name from the physical combat the Óbàtálá and the Obamerì groups used to engage themselves in during the festival in the time past (Omidirepo, Babatunde. Personal Interview. 3 February 2016). It was said that at times, both groups attacked each other with '*ewó,*' a celt-like metal used to make percussions during Òsè Òrìsà (weekly meetings) or Odún Ìtàpá (Obatala festival) which holds annually. The festival includes two festivals that run almost concurrently – the Óbàtálá festival and Obamerì festival – but the focus of this paragraph will be limited to that of Óbàtálá festival considering it is the aspect that involves the Oóni. The festival is a re-enactment of the expulsion and re-absorption of Óbàtálá back into Ilé-Ifè. The chief priest for the festival is the Òlójà of Ìrànjé Ìdìta, a position that is rotated between the Ìlésùn and Ìlálè groups of the clan headed by Obalésùn and Obalálè respectively (Omidirepo, Babatunde. Personal Interview. 3 February 2016). During this festival which lasts for several weeks, a particular day known as '*Àsè Oóni*' (the banquet of the Oóni) is allotted to the Oóni during which he engages in a procession that requires for him to walk from his palace to the Óbàtálá temple about seven times with calabashes of several foods and condiments (Awoseemo, Egbewole. Personal Interview. 25 August 2017) while being assisted by a group of palace chiefs known as the *Omirin* (Fasogbon 27). Although this practice has been weakened to suit the demands of modern times, several of the leaders at the Óbàtálá temple, however, interpreted this role of the Oóni to be the appeasing role which Odùduwà or Obalùfòn played to bring the civil war in Ilé-Ifè to an end. It does not place the Oóni in the position of a Chief priest because, according to the priests, it is not 'the festival of his fathers' (Awoseemo, Egbewole. Personal Interview. 25 August 2017).

The foremost literature that extensively explored Ifá divination system in Ilé-Ifè is perhaps *Ifá Divination: Communication between Gods and Men in West Africa* written by William Bascom. Apart from providing insights into the likely origins and technicalities involved in 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 Ife hierarchy of diviners (Ayeifa, Ifayemi. Personal Interview. 10 September 2018). In addition to the information provided in the literature about likely origins of Ifá and historical backgrounds to the offices associated with Ifá priesthood, the work also described a part of the involvement of the Oóni in the Ifá festival. It provides an account about the visitation of a certain number of *Babaláwo Olódù* (senior Ifá priests) who are entertained by the Oóni and they, in turn, conduct the Ifá divination of the year for the Oóni. 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 Oóni'* (the Ifá of the King) (Ayeifa, Ifayemi. Personal Interview. 10 September 2018).

Also, it was discovered that the basis for the participation of the Oóni in the festival is connected to the encounter between Òrúnmìlà and Odùduwà. This is couched in the encounter between both mythical and historical figures as a result of the extra-marital affair between Òrúnmìlà, the diviner and a certain wife of Odùduwà. And as such, when Odùduwà discovered the relationship, Òrúnmìlà was transformed into an ekùn (Leopard) with the help of the deity Èsù. It was further revealed that it was 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 Òrúnmìlà and Odùduwà on a specific day known as Ojó Ìléfìn (the day of white chalk painting) during the Ifá festival (Omidirepo, Orisabukole. Personal Interview. 20 November 2018).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the pieces of evidence deployed in the several paragraphs above suggest that Ile-Ife is deeply rooted in culture-hero worship, and it is no wonder that it is regarded as the seat of Yoruba idolatry. However, 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 Ile-Ife has a broad religio-cultural system responsible for the continuity of festivals in the town within which the roles of the Oóni are limited. The roles of the Ooni in the Ife festivals are that of a scion of Odùduwà in the Ìdìó festival; the representative of a conciliatory Odùduwà who annually

seeks authority from Óbàtálá to retain leadership in Ile-Ife in the Ìtàpá festival; and for the others, the place of certain kings in some remarkable events in the history of Ile-Ife considered worthy of commemoration such as Olójó and Edì.

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