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AN EXPLORATION OF PERFORMANCE CODES AND UTILITARIAN FUNCTIONS OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL FESTIVALS THROUGH EWÌ-OLÓÒRÉ-ÒGÌDÌGBÒ

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Abstract

Yorùbá culture, traditional festivals play a vital role in cultural and religious expressions, yet many of these festivals, particularly those celebrated at the grassroots level, remain undocumented and underexplored in scholarly discourse. While considerable academic attention has been given to widely known festivals such as ÒṣunÒṣogbo, Mọ́rèmí, OjúdeỌba and Èyọ̀, among others, localised festivals like Ewì-Olóòrè-Ògìdìgbò remain largely ignored, despite their rich performative and religious content. This gap has created a limited understandịng of the diverse forms of indịgenous performance embedded within Yorùbá religious festivals. This study, therefore, investigates the role of performance as a central feature of Ewì-Olóòrè-Ògìdìgbò Festival, jointly celebrated in Ìpọ̀lẹ́-Ìlọ̀rọ̀ and Ulé-Ahùn, two neighbouring communities in Èkìtì State, Nigeria. The study aims to identify and analyse the performance codes within the festival and to interpret their cultural and symbolic meanings. It adopts a descriptive and analytical methodology, relying on participant observation, oral interviews with custodians, and textual analysis. The theoretical framework is based on **Performance Theory**, particularly as propounded by Richard Schechner, which views performance as a culturally structured and socially embedded act. Findịngs reveal that the festival incorporates multiple layers of performance such as chants, dances, rituals, masquerade displays, symbolic objects, and

processions, each with its own spiritual and communal function. The festival not only serves as a platform for worship but also a platform for artistic expression, historical memory, and communal solidarity. It is recommended that conscious efforts be made to document, preserve, and promote such festivals, as they remain vital to the continuity of Yorùbá cultural identity and indịgenous performance traditions.

Keywords: Divinities, Ewì-Olóòré-Ògìdigbò Festival, Performance, Yorùbá traditional religion

Introduction

Human beings are distinguished from other living creatures by their ability to think critically and reason logically. This unique cognitive capacity enables them to organise their societies, utilise their environment effectively, and engage in socio-cultural practices that bring value and comfort to their lives. Every human society living within a defined geographic space develops its own way of life. These shared and patterned ways of living constitute what is called culture.

Culture encompasses the socio-economic, socio-religious, and socio-political activities of people within a society. Part of this cultural expression includes leisure-time practices such as daylight and moonlight plays, traditional games,

the narration of folktales, as well as more formal and ritualistic practices such as ceremonies and festivals. Festivals, in particular, involve singing, dancing, and ritual acts commemorating seasonal transitions or venerating specific deities. Among the Yorùbá, and by extension, across many African societies, special periods of the year are designated for the worship of gods and goddesses. These periods often align with the planting season, harvest season, the onset of rainfall, or the dry season. The deities honoured during such festivals may be ancestral figures including historical indịviduals who contributed significantly to their communities as warlords, healers, sages, or spiritual authorities. These revered indịviduals are believed to have transmogrified, becoming natural phenomena such as rivers (e.g., Ọ̀ṣun, Ọbà, Ọya), rocks (e.g., Olósùntà of Ikẹ̀rẹ̀ and Òkèbàdàn of Ìbàdàn), or sinking into the earth (e.g., Ògún in ÌrẹEkiti).

Numerous Yorùbá festivals reflect the aforementioned beliefs, including the Olósùntà Festival in Ikèrè-Èkìtì, Ọ̀ṣun Festival in Òṣogbo, Ẹ̀yọ̀ Festival in Lagos, Olúmọ Festival in Abẹ́òkúta, and Orosun Festival in Ìdànrẹ. The Ewì-Olóòré-Ògìdìgbò Festival which is celebrated in the twin communities of Ìpólé-Ìlọ́rọ̀ and Ulé-Ahún in Èkìtì, is one such example. It commemorates and venerates the deity Olóòré and is characterised by a range of performative expressions, including dance, gesture, song, music, chants, processions, and ritual enactments. This study, therefore, examines the various forms of performance as embedded in

the Ewì-Olóòré-Ògìdìgbò Festival and explores their socio-religious significance to both the participants and the broader Yorùbá community, and by extension, Africa.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Performance Theory for its analysis. The proponent of the theory is Richard Schechner who defines performance as an activity by an indịvidual or group in the presence of and for another indịvidual or group" (Schechner, 1988). Schechner also describes performance as a form of ritual theatre, shaped by the context of its enactment: the space in which it is performed, the indịviduals involved, and the sociocultural condịtions under which it unfolds.For any act to qualify as performance within this framework, it must exhibit certain defining features: the principle that everyone is a performer; a special ordering of time; symbolic and heightened value assigned to objects; the use of designated performance spaces governed by specific rules; observance of ritual processions; and arrangements that evoke festive and ceremonial emotions. Schechner's model recognises performance as an integrated process involving audience, space, time, and symbolic meaning. Corroborating Schechner's proposition, Goffman (1969: 23) believes that everyone in the society is a performer. He argues that "Through the cloth we wear, the conversation held, or the food we eat, all are a performance designed as a signal system to ourselves and to others of our place within our social groups."

African Traditional festivals

Several scholars have carried out extensive research on African traditional festivals. However, this study places emphasis on Yorùbá traditional festivals in particular. Religion is an integral component of culture, and festival is a core expression of African traditional religious practice.Ògúndèjì (2012) avers that:

The etymology of the word 'festiva' can be traced to the Latin word 'fest', 'festilis' and 'festat'. It came through middle French into Middle English. The Latin-equivalent of festival are festivals and festirum which means feast day. (Ogundeji, 2012:4)

As expressed by Ògúndèjì's aversion, a festival is a joyful communal expression that brings together large numbers of people, both from within and outside the host community, to commemorate a significant event or venerate a particular deity through pomp and pageantry.Ọ̀páọ̀lá (2001) views Yorùbá festival from ethno-religious perspectives. He explains that:

Festivals are celebrated based on peoples' belief in gods or deities who become objects of worship as a result of their powers when they were alive… Some of these gods are rated very high and their festivals are celebrated on annual basis by many Yorùbá groups while others are celebrated by only a few people. (2001:)

A specific day, week, or month of the year is designated for each festival, and these chosen periods remain sacrosanct. The number of worshippers participating in a festival depends on how widespread belief in the associated deity is. For example, global festivals such as those dedicated to Ògún, Ṣàngó, Ọ̀ṣun, or Ifá attract larger populations than regionalized or family-based festivals.

A broad range of scholars have contributed to the study of Yorùbá traditional festivals, including Ìdòwú (1962), Dáramọ́lá and Jẹ́jẹ́ (1967), Ògúnbà (1978), Adéoyè (1979), Awólàlú (1979, 1989), Ajíbóyè (1993), Ọlágòkè (1999), Ògúndèjì (2000), Ọmọ́sunlé (2002), Dọ̀pàmú (2003), Adéjùmọ̀ (2007), Adégbìtẹ́ (2010), Dòsùnmú (2011), Adémijù-Bẹ́po (2012), Fálẹ́yẹ (2015), and Fásheun (2017) among others. Dáramọ́lá and Jẹ́jẹ́ (1967), in their foremostYorùbá textbook, *Àṣà àtiÒrìṣà Ilẹ̀ Yorùbá* (Culture and Deities inYorùbáland), explore extensively, some of the most revered Yorùbá deities. Their work documents the origins of these divinities, the processes and rituals of worship, the roles of adherents, associated taboos, eulogies, totems, and sacrificial items. The deities discussed include Ifá/Ọ̀rúnmìlà, Egúngún, Orò, Agẹmọ, Òrìṣà-Oko, Ṣàngó, Ṣànpọ̀nná, Ògún, and Èṣù. This publication stands as one of the earliest scholarly efforts to present an in-depth analysis of Yorùbá deity worship and festival practice.

Adémijù-Bẹ́po (2012:94) explores the aesthetic components of the Ladeoko Festival in Ìsọ̀nà Ward, Ìlẹ́ṣà. She describes the festival as “a paradigm of African

choreo-musical performance spiced with drama, a cultural heritage festival with aesthetic and theatrical dimensions." Her analysis highlights the performative elements such as songs, dances, acrobatic gestures, music, and rituals as key features of the festival.

Ògúndèjì (2000), in *Ritual as Theatre, Theatre as Ritual: The Nigerian Example*, interprets African festival performances as forms of drama. He argues that the events reenacted during festivals are dramatized representations of historical and spiritual occurrences. According to him:

The ritual events in the festival usually manifest dramatic and theatrical features in various kinds and degrees. Communication among the performers on one hand and between performers and audience on the other is usually enhanced through music, chants, songs, drumming, acrobatics and miming (Ogundeji, 2000:5).

His observation affirms that Yorùbá festivals are rich in performative components that involve the physical, emotional, and spiritual engagement of participants to recreate the acts of deities, whether globalised or localised.

Fálẹ́yẹ (2015) offers a semiotic reading of the Àwòrò-Òsè and Isinro Festivals of Ìlá-Ọ̀ràngún in Southwestern Nigeria. Her work specifically focuses on the symbolic and communicative features embedded in the performance. She explains how socio-cultural ideologies shape these features

to reflect the identity and beliefs of the community. On the performative aspects, she notes (2015): 140):

There are enactors or performers within the structural events of the fourteen-day activities in the Isinro festival. These include indịvidual personalities or groups of people who take part in either the ritual, sacred dance or de-ritualising aspects of the various presentations (Fálẹ́yẹ́, 2015:140).

Fáṣhehùn (2017), in her study Dramatic Features in Òrànfẹ, Ọbà and Ògún Festivals of Òǹdó Kingdom, identifies key theatrical features embedded in the three festivals. These include episodic plot, performance space, costume, procession, props, music, and dance. Her work reinforces the view that performance is central to Yorùbá traditional festivals. Once performance is removed, the festival becomes incomplete; hence, performance is not just important; it is indịspensable.

The work emphasises on the centrality of performances in Yorùbá traditional festivals particularly Ògún, Ọ̀ránfẹ and Ọba festivals, meaning that once performance is removed from festivals, it becomes dry, hence performance is indịspensable in Yorùbá traditional festivals.Dòsùnmú (2011) presents a general perspective on African traditional festivals, highlighting the diversity of motivations for

festival observance, including religious, historical, social, political, and economic purposes. Yet, he emphasizes that regardless of their objectives, all traditional festivals are characterised by a wide range of performative expressions. He notes (2011:135),

Festivals in different parts of the world are performed for diverse reasons. These range from religious to the historical, the social to the political and at times can even be motivated by economic imperatives of the people. Dòsùnmú in his work affirms that festivals, irrespective of the purpose for which it is observed are performed and such performances are filled with dances, songs, music, chants and rituals.

Awólàlú (1979:99) discusses key performative elements that constitute traditional worship and festival practice. He identifies the following performative elements in festivals : (i) Liturgy – which consists of ritual form and its content including prayer, music and dancing (ii) sacrifice – offering for different purposes (iii) cultic functionaries – the officiates and attendants at worship (iv) sacred places – where worship is carried out – shrines, temples, and altars. Awólàlú's categorisation offers a foundational framework for understanding how Yorùbá festivals integrate performance through rituals, music, chants, sacrifices, and sacred spaces.

Taken together, the views of these scholars establish that Yorùbá traditional festivals are periodical or annual events in which verbal, non-verbal, musical, and poetic performances are employed to worship deities, commemorate sacred events, and reaffirm communal identity.

Forms of indịgenous festivals in Yorùbá land

Various scholars have worked on the categorisation of indịgenous festivals in Yorùbá communities. These include Adédèjì (1978), Ọmọ́sunlé (2002), Ògúndèjì (2005), and Adégbìtẹ́ (2010). One common observation from their different perspectives is the belief that all Yorùbá traditional festivals possess theatrical or dramatic elements. Consequently, the categorisations offered by these scholars are largely theatre - or drama-oriented. Adédèjì categorises traditional performances into four types, namely: Story Theatre, Festival Theatre, Ritual Theatre, and Masque Theatre. Ògúndèjì (2005: 222), drawing from Nigerian experience, classifies performances into Sacred Ritual Performances, Ritual Festival Performances, Deritualising Performances, and Deritualised Performances. In his own categorisation, Ògúnbà identifies four broad groupings of Yorùbá festivals: festivals of gods/goddesses; festivals of rulers as egúngún icons; festivals of ancestors; and festivals of purification (or festivals of the master).

Ọmọ́sunlé (2002: 51) presents a more elaborate classification of Yorùbáland festivals. According to him, there are fifteen distinct types: Hegemonic Festival, Festival of Transition, Secular Festival, Thanksgiving/Harvest Festival, Cleansing/Purification Festival, Didactic or Retributive Festival, Phenomenal Festival, Divinatory or Deital Festival, Ritual or Sacrificial Festival, Commemorative Festival, Fertility Festival, Situational or Paralysis Festival, Ancestral Worship Festival, Heroic Festival, and General Focus Festival.Adégbitẹ́ (2010: 133–137) simplifies the classification of indigenous festivals into three major types. These are: festivals used to celebrate agricultural products; festivals held in memory of powerful figures; and festivals that commemorate particular historical events in the community. Similarly, Kirby (1976) contributes an earlier categorisation of traditional festivals into seven types. These include: Simple Enactment, Ritual and Ritualised Enactment, Storytelling Performances, Spirit Cult Enactment, Masquerade Enactment, Ceremonial Performances, and Comedies.Fálẹ́yẹ (2015: 38) also provides a classification of performances and festivals, which she divides into Sacred Ritual Drama, Festival Ritual Drama, Familial Drama, Deritualising Drama, and Deritualised Drama.

From the foregoing, it is evident that scholars have made concerted efforts to classify Yorùbá festivals based on their religious, dramatic, historical, and social functions. These

diverse classifications attest to the centrality of performance and theatre in the celebration and preservation of Yorùbá cultural and spiritual heritage.

Performance codes

Codes are the instruments used by enactors or performers and the audience to communicate or interpret the acts of performance. They are generally employed to convey ideas within a performance. Several scholars have classified or categorised codes in their studies. These include Guiraud (1975), Johansen and Harsen (2002), Chandler (2006), and Adéṣànyà (2014). Guiraud (1975) identifies three types of performance codes: logical, aesthetic, and social codes. Johansen and Harsen (2002) distinguish between digital and analogue codes. Chandler (2006) identifies social, textual, and interpretative codes. Adéṣànyà (2014: 67–69) categorises performance codes into two main groups, verbal and non-verbal. Verbal codes comprise speech forms expressed in arbitrary symbols, while non-verbal codes are expressed through bodily and non-bodily means, including the head, eyes, face, hands, and body.

The codes are not ends in themselves but rather means to an end. Performance codes are employed in such a way that all segments of a performance are effectively communicated by the performers to the audience, enabling them to understand each scene. Corroborating this view, Fálẹ́yẹ (2007: 67) observes that:"For a performance to communicate, it is observed that performers make use of

words/speeches, actions, dance and dresses which are considered as codes".

Performance properties and types

Properties are the objects employed by performers to communicate with the audience during a performance. According to Nkanga (2005:191),

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Properties can be placed on the stage as part of the stage setting. If handled directly by an indịvidual actor, such props are classified to be actor's hand props. And if placed on the stage as part of the setting, they become set props.

The implication of Nkanga's statement is that some properties are handheld and actively used by the performers, while others are placed on the stage to enhance the visual or thematic aspects of the performance. Regardless of their use, whether held or placed, these properties serve as catalysts for performance, enabling the performers to effectively communicate meaning and emotion to the audience.

Several scholars have developed different models of performance codes. Among them are Kowzan (1968), Ògúndèjì (1988), and Fálẹ́yẹ (2015)**.** Kowzan proposed a thirteen-code model comprising the following elements: word, tone, movement, gestures, mime, music, sound effects, lighting, costume, make-up, hairstyle, décor, and accessory**.** Ògúndèjì's (1988) model, an adaptation of

Kowzan's, comprises eight codes**:** (i) linguistic code, (ii) acting code, (iii) musical code, (iv) illuminational code (v) costuming code (vi) setting code (vii) characterisational code and (viii) plotal code.

When Kowzan's and Ògúndèjì's models are compared, several compressions become evident. Theword and tonecodes in Kowzan's model are condensed into linguistic codein Ògúndèjì's. The movement, gestures, and mime codes are merged into enacting code**.** Likewise, music and sound effectsbecome the musical code**;** lig thing becomes illumination**al** code; and costume, make-up, and hairstyle are collapsed into the costuming code**.** Finally, décor and accessories are subsumed under setting code**.** The characterization and plotal codes are the two additional categories introduced by Ògúndèjì.

There is little structural difference between Ògúndèjì's performance model and that of Fálẹ́yẹ (2015), except for differences in nomenclature. Fálẹ́yẹ's (2015:71) model includes:

Fálẹ́yẹ renames Ògúndèjì's linguistic codeasverbal code; his characterisational and plotal codes are renamed non-verbal code; his setting and illuminational codes are termed structural, locale, and characterisational codes**;** and his acting and costuming codes are grouped under enacting codes. According to Fálẹ́yẹ, the verbal codes refer to all speeches, chants, and recitations**.** The non-verbal codes include dances and gestures, facial and body expressions,

carved images, paraphernalia, make-up, hand props, and stage/local objects. The musico-poetic codes include songs and other orchestral elements. The structural, locale, and characterisational codes cover the sequential order of events, times and places of enactments, and the identities of key performers. Lastly, her tonality codes encompass sacrificial objects, ceremonial attire, stage and body decorations, hand-held instruments, and make-up**.**

For the purpose of this study, the performance codes are grouped into two overarching categories: Non-verbal codes which include, dances, gestures, images, make-ups, characterisation, sacred props, body adornments, and other physical or symbolic expressions; and musico-poetic codes, comprising everything orally expressed, such as songs, chants, speeches, and recitations.

Ewì-Olóòré-Ògìdìgbò festival in Ìpóle-Ìlọ́rọ̀ Èkìtì and Ulé-AhúnÈkìtì

Ewì-Olóòrè-Ògìdìgbò Festival is one of the several localised festivals in Èkìtì State, Nigeria. It is exclusively celebrated in two contiguous Èkìtì towns, namely: Ìpọ̀lẹ̀-Ìlọ́rọ̀in Èkìtì West Local Government Area and Ulé-Ahùn in Ẹfọ̀n-Alàáyè Local Government Area. The festival is held in veneration and remembrance of a deity known as Olóòrè-Ògìdìgbò. In Ìpọ̀lẹ̀-Ìlọ́rọ̀, the festival is observed in the month of October, while in Ulé-Ahùn, it is celebrated in March.

The festival is rich in colourful performances that include dances, chants, songs, music, gesticulations, and rituals. It features a variety of performers, including the king, the Àhòrọ̀ (priests), the Ùlágọ̀ (masquerades), the wúndíà (virgin maidens), the Aláràn, and the audience. In Ìpọ̀lẹ̀-Ìlọ̀rọ̀, the festival is preceded by twenty-seven days of restriction, during which the king undergoes priestly initiation, followed by Ìhẹ̀rẹ̀kù (the festival eve), and then seven consecutive days of performances held both in the morning and evening.In contrast, the Ulé-Ahùn version of the festival does notinclude a period of restriction or king's initiation. The festival begins with *Ìgbàgbọ́*, approximately nine days before the grand finale, and includes two days of celebration, a three-day interlude, and the seventh-day climax, known as *Ìjẹ*. Each performance during the festival is deeply symbolic and follows established traditions. The events are conducted at sacred and designated performance sites, such as shrines, palace forecourts, masquerade groves, and other ancestral spaces. Every activity, such as dance, chant, ritual, or procession, is performed with utmost reverence, reinforcing both spiritual beliefs and communal identity.

Performances in Ewì-Olóòré Ògìdìgbò

Some scholars have attempted definitions of performance. For this study, the definition by **Fálẹ̀yẹ (2005:148)** is adopted. She defines performance as: "An act which is subject to creation, re-enactment and presentation before a set of identified people. "From this definition, one can

deduce that performance is an **art form**, a creative act that draws from memory, historical continuity, and symbolic purpose. It is re-enacted from an earlier reality and is presented before a specific audience, carried out by designated performers within a shared cultural space.

In Ewì-Olóòrè-Ògìdìgbò Festival, seven core performance features or codes are identified. They are highlighted as follow: (i) everyone as a performer, (ii) ordering of time, (iii) valorisation of objects, (iv) place of specific performance, (v) display of festive emotion, (vi) procession through symbolic areas and (vii) intense social interaction and solidarity. All these features flow through each segment ofEwì-Olóòré-Ògìdìgbo festival performances.

Everyone as a performer

Schechner (1988) observes that in traditional African festivals and rituals, **everyone present, whether actively involved or not, is part of the performance**, and this observation holds true for Ewì-Olóòrè-Ògìdìgbò Festival. In the celebration, the entire community participates in one form of performance or another. These include the king, the priests (*Àhòrọ̀*), the masquerades (*Ùlágọ̀*), the virgin maidens (*wúndíà*), the women (*Àgbàáyà*), and even the audience. The **king** performs symbolic and ritual roles, especially in Ìpọ̀lẹ́-Ìlọ̀rọ̀ where he goes through **twenty-seven days of spiritual seclusion**. During this period, he is forbidden from seeing certain people, particularly women, and is believed to be engaging in spiritual fortification. The

priests (Àhòrọ̀), who are male traditional worshippers, serve as intermediaries between the deity and the people, performing libations, chants, and sacrifices. The **masquerades (Ùlágọ̀)** entertain, protect, and dramatise ancestral presence. The **virgin maidens (wúndíà)**, chosen for their symbolic purity, dance and chant in processions, offering aesthetic beauty and spiritual symbolism. The **women (Àgbàáyà)** perform songs and chants rooted in oríkì and folklore, while the general **audience** chants, dances, sings, and responds interactively to the unfolding events.Thus, from the **spiritually active** to the **aesthetically symbolic**, everyone plays a performative role, either as principal actor, supporting character, or responsive participant. This inclusivity reinforces the communal essence of the festival and positions performance as a collective, lived experience.

Ordering of time

Another prominent feature of performance in Ewì-Olóòrè-Ògìdìgbò Festival is the **special ordering of time**. In traditional African festivals, time is not treated as abstract or mechanical, as in the Western linear sense, but rather as **event-centered and ritually ordered** (Ògúndèjì, 2018). Time in this context is sacred and purposeful, determined by the spiritual rhythm of the performance, the expectations of the gods, and the readiness of the community. In Ìpọ̀lẹ̀-Ìlọ̀rọ̀, the celebration of the festival **lasts thirty-five days**. It begins with the king's **twenty-seven days of spiritual fortification**, followed by **Ìhẹ̀rẹ̀kù (the festival eve)**, and

culminates in **seven days of active performance**, which take place both **morning and evening**. These seven days are marked by specific ritual events and symbolic enactments that follow a strict chronological sequence passed down through generations. Similarly, in Ulé-Ahùn, although the period of celebration is shorter, the **ritual calendar is meticulously observed**. It begins with **Ìgbàgbọ́**, the pre-festival purification stage that occurs **nine days before the final celebration.** This is followed by **two days of enactment**, a **three-day interlude**, and then **Ìjẹ**, the climax of the festival, on the seventh day.This sacred structuring of time lends **meaning and weight to each phase** of the festival. The **rhythm of performance** is not arbitrary; it is rooted in cultural logic, cosmological belief, and ancestral instruction. It also serves as a mnemonic device, preserving the historical and spiritual order of the festival across generations.

Valorisation of Objects

The **valorisation of objects** is another key performance feature in Ewì-Olóòrè-Ògìdìgbò Festival. In traditional Yorùbá performances, objects used in rituals and festivities are not seen as ordinary; they carry **symbolic, spiritual, and historical value**. These objects, ranging from costumes to instruments, and from sacred items to body adornments, serve both aesthetic and functional purposes within the performance context. The Ewì-Olóòrè-Ògìdìgbò Festival makes use of several of such objects. These include **white wrappers, beaded gourds, Àdìrẹ and Àṣọ-**

Ọ̀kè fabrics, bells, cowries, wristlets, anklets, and **face paints**. All of these items are intentionally chosen and ritually empowered. For instance, the **white wrapper** worn by the king or priests symbolises purity and sacredness; **cowries** represent wealth, power, and ancestral connection; while **Àṣọ-Ọ̀kè** is reserved for dignified appearances and royal authority. These objects are also connected to **oríkì** (praise poetry), chants, and songs, which further reinforce their meanings. The **drums and beaded gourds** are not just instruments, they are communicative tools used to invoke the deity, recount ancestral exploits, and energise the performers and audience. In essence, the materials used in the festival are **valorised through cultural knowledge and performance practice**. Their meanings transcend form or utility; they are **sacred props** that activate memory, identity, and ritual connection.

Place-specific performances

In Yorùbá indigenous performance traditions, space is not a neutral or passive montage or backdrop rather, performance spaces are spiritually and culturally charged and deliberately deployed based on ritual significance, ancestral memory, and communal symbolism. In both Ìpọ̀lẹ̀-Ìlọ̀rọ̀ and Ulé-Ahùn, the performances take place in designated and sacred locations that carry symbolic and historic meaning. In Ìpọ́lé-Ìlọ́rọ̀ Èkìtì such performance spots include the palace, the burial grounds of the previous (dead) kings, the Èyélumòse spot, the Ìdí Ọ̀mọ̀ (Ùròkòjà), (Ùgbòròkò), the Ugbó Egúngún (masquerade grove). At

Ulé-Ahún, the main specific places of performance are the frontage of the shrine, front of the palace, the Òkìtì Àpòyíká, Òkìtì Àbá Olórí Aó, Òkìtì Ọmọlore and Ugbó Egúngún (masquerade grove) while the drummers, maidens, king, chiefs, queens, masquerades and priests perform in the open. Performance arenas are places that are indịspensable in a festival. They are synonymous to a stage (in a theatre) of a modern drama. Ògúndèjì (2000: 34) views such places of performance assettings with spiritual essence; they are the eyes of the earth (ibití ilẹ̀ gbé lójú). The sacred spots (eyes of the earth), emphasised by Ògúndèjì are inherited spots that must have been chosen or established through divination or as a result of a certain special or mysterious event that occurred there. Ògúndèjì identifies two types of places of performance in a typical traditional festival setting namely: the secluded or private place of performance and open or public place of performance. In the case of Ewì- Olóòrè -Ògìdìgbo Festival performance in Ìpólé-Ìlọ́rọ̀ Èkìtì, there are three types of stages identified. They are: sacred or private place of performance, semi-open or semi-public place of performance and open or private place of performance.

The first and foremost stage is a sacred and secluded one called Ugbóròkò. It is the exclusive performance arena for the Chief Priest and other Àhòrò. It is a sacred place carved out and separated with palm fronds. The second sacred stage is Igbó Ùgbàlẹ̀ EégúnÙlágọ̀ (The sacred grove for Ùlágọ̀ masquerades). The masquerades use the place for

rehearsals, fortification and dressing for performance. The second place which is the semi-publicplace of performance is the Ìhẹ̀rẹ̀kù arena where the king and other Àhòrò (Priests) stay by the lamps that must not go off till daybreak and a place for midnight performance in which satirical songs are rendered. The third one is the open place of performance at the front of the palace where all the performers, townspeople, guests and visitors are free to watch performances, dance along and move freely throughout the seven days of the festival.

There are two stages of performance in Ewì – Olóòrè - Ògìdìgbo Festival of Ulé-Ahún Èkìtì. The first performance stage is sacred and the other one is an open or public place of performance. The sacred performance stage is the masquerade grove which is used as the stage for rehearsals, fortification and dressing. The second stage of performance is an open performance arena where performances (about ten different ones) are held by all the performers during Ewì- Olóòrè-Ògìdìgbo Festival dances. It is freely used by the king, chiefs, queen, drummers, masquerades, priests, audience, including guests and tourists/researchers. Every performance occurs openly at the front of the king's palace.

Display of festive emotions

The Ewì-Olóòrè-Ògìdìgbò Festival is rich in the display of festive emotions, which is a critical component of traditional performance. These emotions, such as joy, excitement, spiritual ecstasy, reverence, and communal

pride, are not artificially imposed but naturally flow from the participants and observers as they engage with the performance. In traditional Yorùbá aesthetics, emotion is considered a vital communicative element that binds performers and audience, making the experience vivid, memorable, and spiritually charged. Fásheun (2017: 1) submits that:

A festival can be seen as a series of performance involving plays, dances, drumming, acrobatic displays, processions, singing and chanting usually organised as agreed upon where people of a particular community come together to dine and wine to celebrate and share common tradition.

Ewì-Olóòrè-Ògìdìgbo Festival manifests all the activities stated in Fasheun's submission as both the performers and audience display great and high emotions whenever they behold the beautiful costume and displays of the king, the dances of the masquerades and maidens, the gestural movements of the priests who turn out in their best traditional dresses to sing, dance and chant to the cacophonous, melodious and rhythmical beats of the drummers. The initiation of Olúpọ̀lé and the activities on the festival days elicit great emotions from the people – laughter, smiles, hugging, gesticulations, dances and feasting.

Procession through symbolic areas

A major feature of the Ewì-Olóòrè-Ògìdìgbò Festival is the ritual procession through symbolic and sacred areas within

the community. In Yorùbá traditional performance, movement through space is never arbitrary; it follows an inherited ritual pattern, where each location signifies a specific spiritual or ancestral connection. The procession is usually filled with great solemnity and fanfare. In Ipole-IloroEkiti, Chief Aláwẹ̀, followed by the king, would take a procession round Ìlọ́rọ̀ quarters The procession commences from the palace down to Ìdí Ọ̀mọ̀ (centre of the town), down to Odò ọ̀jà and back to the palace. The followers of the king (Àhòrò chiefs, Chiefs, hunters, youths and others would be congratulating and hailing the king as he moves side by side with the first wife carrying the igbáàdeesí by his right and other wives by his left; while other adherents and community members follow him.At Ulé-Ahún, the main procession occurs during Ugbagbo when the masquerades followed by the towns people lead a procession from the route outside the masquerade grove to the arena of the palace. After paying obeisance to the king, the king would lead them in the procession round the sacred spots such as "Òkìtì Àbàlórí Ao", "Òkìtì Àpòyíká"Òkìtì Ọmọlore", and offer prayers and subsequently instruct them to return to their houses.

Intense social interaction and solidarity

The Ewì-Olóòrè-Ògìdìgbò Festival fosters communality and economic development, which are fundamental to traditional Yorùbá performances. In Yorùbá worldview, festivals are not solely religious or aesthetic events, they are **social institutions** that promote unity, reaffirm kinship

ties, and reinforce collective identity. It is also a period used to reunite and celebrate with their family members, playmates, age-groups and others. Beyond family units, the festival also fosters inter-family**,** inter-clan, and inter-quarter relationships. People come together to perform roles, contribute resources, and participate in the collective memory of the community. Elders, youth, women, children, and titleholders all have defined responsibilities during the festival. This collective engagement strengthens the communal fabric and affirms the place of each participant within the social and spiritual hierarchy of the town. In essence, the Ewì-Olóòrè-Ògìdìgbò Festival is not merely a ritual event but a social performance of unity, an enactment of cultural togetherness and a reinforcement of the belief that communal harmony is both a spiritual and societal necessity**.**

Conclusion

In conclusion, from our analysis, it is evident that the Ewì-Olóòrè-Ògìdìgbò Festival is not a mere cultural event celebrated annually; it is a vibrant cultural expression which embed spiritual and religious elements. Aside the cultural and religious significance, it is socially relevant as it that binds the people, recalls ancestral memory, and affirms the place of performance in Yorùbá worldview. Aesthetically, it has certain codes which foreground the artistic aspects alongside its religious functions. For instance, the **women, known as Àgbàáyà,** perform songs and chants rooted in oríkì and folklore, while the general

audience chants, dances, sings, and responds interactively to the unfolding events. The chants are replete with various stylistics ornaments which add glamour to the festival. From the **spiritually active** to the **aesthetically symbolic**, everyone plays a performative role, either as principal actor, supporting character, or responsive participant. Its sociocultural and socioeconomic significance are evident in how it attracts natives and visitors who cooperate to ensure its success, regardless of their social status or religious affinity.

Based on the foregoing, its continued celebration and preservation will not only benefit the immediate communities but also contribute meaningfully to the broader discourse on African traditional performance and heritage.

Based on the findịngs of this study, it is evident that Ewì-Olóòrè-Ògìdìgbò Festival is not just a religious celebration but a rich repository of indigenous performance. The festival reflects the essence of Yorùbá cultural values through music, chants, dances, rituals, and communal participation. These elements do not only preserve religious beliefs but also sustain the aesthetic and performative traditions of the people.It are important that conscious efforts are made by the community, scholars, and cultural stakeholders to preserve and promote the festival. Traditional custodians should ensure that younger generations are adequately involved through oral instruction, observation, and participation in performances.

Government and cultural agencies are encouraged to support the documentation and promotion of such festivals, as they remain valuable tools for cultural continuity. Finally, the festival should be used as a tool for economic growth and development. For example, creating stands for food vendors, photographers, video recorders, and booksellers would empower small scale initiatives. Also, habitable buildings like hotels and inn should be provided so that tourists could feel at home and at the same time contributes to the economic survival of the community

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