



Spiritualism and Immortality in *Ìba Orogún* Rites in Ile-Ife, Nigeria

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Abstract. Spiritualism and immortality of the soul are prominent in Yoruba (African) thought system. The spiritual thought system is exemplified in *Ìba Orogún* rites which must be performed for deceased wives by the living co-wives of the same family in Ile-Ife. It was called *Èkúnòórò* (Early wailing song) but it is now called *Ìba Orogún* (celebration of the departure of a co-wife). This change is to avoid the negative attachment to *èkún* (cry) which connotes sadness. The rite consists of funeral dirges that are performed by the co-wives and to which the children of the deceased must dance. Data were collected from some *Obìnrin Ile* (Co-wives in the family) in some compounds in Ile-Ife. Interviews were also conducted with them. Sociological theory of Literature is used to analyze the data. The paper found out that the *Ìba Orogún* rites as means to bid the soul of the deceased a farewell from her living co-wives in the compound, possesses a spiritual content. It also found out that *Ìba Orogún* ritual is so important that any child that is yet to perform the ritual for a deceased mother should not move near the venue of such rituals talk less of attending, drinking or tasting the food.

Keywords: Spiritualism, *Ìba Orogún*, Immortality, death, deceased, Co-wives, Compound.

1. Introduction

African indigenous thought system and philosophy is concerned with the fact that the dead whether young or old do not die permanently but find one way or the other to live in another world or on earth in another body, not minding the type of death or the way they died.

Death is very important to all creatures on earth and it marks their ends in the physical world. When the condition of men calls for death, death will actually come. No one stops death. Every creature will live its

time on earth and pass away. Death comes but once in the lifetime of every creature. Whatever is going to happen to human beings after death, they will first taste death.

Yoruba people see death as transition from the realm of the living to the realm of the dead as ascertained by Omigbule (2019:194). This idea of transition from dead to living cannot occur without the concept of spiritualism. There are many meanings and definitions to spiritualism. The one we are concerned in this paper is the one that involves human souls and spirit.

On spiritualism and Immortality, Oxford Dictionary and Collins <https://www.successconsciousness.com> defines spiritualism as ‘relating to or affecting the human spirit or souls as opposed to material or physical thing’. For Collins Dictionary, ‘spiritualism means relating to people’s thoughts and belief, rather than to their bodies and physical surrounding’. According to American Encyclopedia (1989:189) ‘spiritualism is the belief that after death the human spirits exists and can communicate with the living through medium or psychics.

From the definitions of spiritualism above, it is obvious that there are spirits and they do interact with who they want. The evolution of spiritualism as pointed out in the World Book Encyclopedia (2014: 796), started from the modern spiritualists in the 1848 in the United States. As pointed out by the Encyclopedia, Katherine and Margaret fox who were sisters from Hydesvill, New York near Rochester, heard knocking in their home. They were unable to ascribe the knocking to any material source and therefore came up with a code to understand the noise they thought was sending them messages. This points to the fact that spiritualism has been in existence for ages.

Going by the fact of the belief that the spirits of the dead can communicate with the living through medium or psychics as pointed out by the Academic American Encyclopedia, it is true that the living also do communicate with the dead. The Yoruba also maintains an interaction of the physical and spiritual realm. Salami (1991:7). According to <https://www.hauntedrooms.co.uk>, this communication of the living to the dead can be achieved through numerous ways such as dreams, visions, scents, coincidences, awareness of everything around, seeing or looking for white feathers around, songs and the unconventional routes. Songs being the simplest of these numerous ways is adopted by the *Obirin-ilé* (Association of married women in compound) in Ile-Ife who are the *Ìba-Orogún* spiritual singers. This involves just opening one's mind, one's heart and talking to the deceased in a song mode as if they are still around. Even though the deceased is not physically present, their immortality is affirmed.

Immortality in its own case, Makinde (1973) says: "Immortality in Yoruba language means 'Àìkú' (that is deathless). While it was referred to by The Academic American Encyclopedia (1989:57) as the attribute of survival after physical death, World Book Encyclopedia (2009:67) has it as a term for the theory or belief that human life continues after death. It stresses further that immortality requires a person to have another part known as soul or spirit which is nonphysical that will survive death and that the soul or spirit is considered as the source of a person's thought and will. It also sheds light on the belief of many Christians that each person's body will be raised on the last day and be reunited with its soul and the final judgment will be conducted by God in such a way that the bodies and souls of the deceased just go to heaven and the bodies and souls of the unjust go to hell.

In Yoruba cosmology immortality occurs in a way that the soul goes to another world or reincarnates in another body. The other world that the soul goes can be the world above or another world on earth. Going to another world above is when the soul goes to live permanently in heaven which refers to home (*Ilé*). The idea of going to another world on earth is the idea of reincarnation which can be to reincarnate in another body on earth or another world on earth. On reincarnation in another body or another world on earth, Oduwole (1997:19) categorizes reincarnation in Yoruba world view into three. These are names showing the coming back to life of one's dead father or mother, *Àbíkú* (born-to-die children) and *Àkúdàáyà* Examples of names pointing to the coming back of one's father or mother that she gave are

Babátúndé and *Yétúndé* meaning father has returned and mother has returned respectively. We also have other names like *Babáwánwá* (father has searched for me) and *Yeyéwámírí* (mother has searched for me). According to her, *Àbíkú* are the children who frequently die and come back as another child with marks previously put on them. From this, we can deduce that *Àbíkú* children have no compassion for their parents or other relatives. As regards the *Àkúdàáyà*, Oduwole says they settle down in a new place where they are not known but disappear when they meet someone who recognizes them. Buttressing her point on this, *Àkúdàáyà* are the set of people that met their death suddenly without attaining the old age but complete their lives in a new location. She gives the example of the *Egúngún* (Masquerade) cult as another evidence of the belief of the Yoruba people in immortality of the soul, as well as a manifestation of the representation of the dead in the world. The belief of the Yoruba people is that *Egúngúns* come from home (world above) to visit people on earth and go back home.

The reality of immortality according to the belief of the Yoruba of South-Western Nigeria is also asserted by Adagbada (2019:190). Her standpoint is also on reincarnation. She opines that humans reincarnate in order to re-select their destiny and accomplish their life ambitions which they were unable to realize in the previous world. From the submissions of various scholars cited, it is clear that immortality is one of the various aspects of spiritualism in Yoruba thought system.

2. Performance of *ÌbaOrogún* rites and its status in Ile-Ife today

Ìba Orogún is a ritual and a form of celebration that consist of songs by women who are living co-wives to a deceased wife in the family. It is a rite that must be performed for deceased women whether old or young by the living co-wives in each compound in Ile-Ife. It is a rite that must be performed for any late wife of a family with or without a child as long as she partook in it even once in her time on earth. It was called *Èkún Òórò* (Early Wailing) but it was now *Ìba Orogún*. (celebration of the departure of a co-wife). This is due to the negative attachment to the word "*èkún*" (wail).

The rites consist of funeral dirges that are performed by the co-wives and to which the children must dance. It contains spiritual contents which are to bid the soul of the deceased a farewell from her co-wives in the compound. Any child that is yet to perform the ritual for a deceased mother should not move near the

venue of such rituals and should not drink or eat the food. *Ìbaorogún*rites usually come after the deceased might have been buried. It might be on that day or any other day as agreed by the child/children (*Omọlòdókú*) of the deceased. The compound wives (*Obinrin-ilé*) will give the deceased child/children the list of the items (*Ìkàrò*) for the performance. These are different kinds of food, lunch and drink items that vary from compound to compound. Each item usually has a specified number. Examples of such items with their numbers are forty wraps of yam flour (*àmàlà*), forty pieces of meat, one big pot of stew, one big pot of melon soup, one big pot of boiled “*ògùnmo*” vegetables, one big pot of “*òsùn*” vegetables, one big pot of draw soup, one big gourd of traditional drink made of guinea corn (*bùrùkùtù*), ten big bottles (*ságo*) of palm wine, a bowl of bean balls (*àkàrà*), thigh of a duiker (*itan igalà*) and 20 cold pap (*ẹkọ*). Nowadays, there is no dictation of type of food and drinks and the quantity of the items have reduced drastically to the economic status of the children of the deceased. In the past, the women would purify the day by casting kola-nut (*obi*) to seek the peace for the day. The husband and or the children would provide a life goat. The goat is killed at the frontage of the house of the deceased. The husband and the children of the deceased would step on the blood of the goat with their left legs in order to separate the living from the dead. The meat is distributed raw among the women. The goat is to serve as a replacement for the deceased. Today, killing of goat to represent the deceased is no longer in practice. Other relations of the deceased must have their contributions in the items provided no matter how buoyant the children of the deceased are.

Ìbaorogún rites in Ile-Ife is never performed in the absence of the children of the deceased. On the day of the performance, the children of the deceased will dress well and come to dance to the spiritual songs by the wives. In the past, the wives would have eaten and drank before the performance but nowadays the reverse is the case. The musical ensembles for the dirge is “*kèrègbè*” (big huge rounded calabash or gourd), “*şèkèrè*” (small rounded calabash with net and beads) and a selected number of clapping intervals as a style. As the child/children dance, friends and relatives that accompanied them will be spraying them with money. The children are not to take from the money, no matter how much accrued to them during the ritual. The whole money sprayed on them must be dropped into the big gourd. The guards are broken after the performance. Nowadays, breaking of guards is counted as a wasteful act. The guards are kept with one of them to be used another time when

such occasion arises. The money in the guard is used for buying uniform for social outings.

According to Sheba (2003:64), Yoruba oral tradition has it that, *iba Orogún (Èkún Òórò)* originated from the incident that happened to a slave who died in the evening and her master who was equally her husband did not announce her death until the following morning. He refused to announce her death so that people especially women would not come to mourn her that evening and disturb his sleep. When it was dawn the women gathered and wept for the demise of the slave. When they were asked the reason for the wailing, they answered “*á n sunkún òórò*” (we are weeping in the morning for her). Not quite long to the time when a free woman died and they started mourning her immediately. This resulted in an epidemics. It was then discovered from the oracle that the outbreak of the epidemic was due to the way the bond woman was treated at her demise. The women were then mandated to be wailing very early in the morning for the demise of anyone of them. It was that incident that led to the regular performance of the rites in Ilé-Ifè.

The deceased is always mentioned and the *oríkì* (panegyric) of the deceased is one of the contents of the dirge. Therefore, when it is being rendered, the children and relative of the deceased are most of the time weeping as a result of the demise of their beloved. There can even be a case of one or more of the children going into trance when deeply touched by the dirge but the elders of the compound wives will quickly take care of the situation so as not to get out of hand. If the deceased has a child or children not yet grown up enough to be able to perform it, such a child or children will perform it any time they are matured and ready for it. However, people around them will keep on warning them not to attend such a performance that are arranged for others. The reason for this is that since the deceased has pertook and socialize with her co-wives while on earth, she might not be at peace with such a child or children and her spirit might be hunting them. The dirge is usually rounded up with prayers for the children.

3. Spiritualism and immortality in *ÌbaOrogún* rites in Ile-Ife

Spiritualism and immortality in *ÌbaOrogún* rites in Ile-Ife are shown in various ways to confirm their prominence. In the excerpt below, the dirge is telling us that the deceased is a sojourner on earth and she has gone home (Ilé) because no one lives on earth forever. Earth is taken to be the place of luxury and enjoyment.

Ìyá relé o Mother has gone home
 Ilé rẹ̀ ló ló she went to her home
 Ènikanòsogesoge no one indulges in the
 enjoyment of earth
 Kò gbàgbé ilé and forgets home

The deceased is assumed to be present in spirit enjoying the ritual ceremony while her children and relatives are physically present taking part in the ceremony.

The first excerpt below tells how her children and people dress well to celebrate her wealth and richness even at death. The second excerpt refers to the deceased children who dress well to celebrate their mother at death. The deceased (Efundoyin) is taken to be a pretty and a rich woman, not bother about death but very cheerful and contented because she does not die a permanent death.

Alápásá ya pásá Everyone dresses well
 Alágbùlé yà gbùlé Everyone puts on their
 best robes
 Èfúndoyin rẹ̀ arẹ̀wá Efundoyin a pretty woman
 O gbégbèwá tì sílé Plenty money is in the
 safe
 Bí aṣo wọ̀lẹ̀ láàfin Like palace drawing robes
 Èfúndoyin rẹ̀ o kú orò Happy celebration to you
 Efundoyin

Spirituality and Immortality of the soul are also shown in the following excerpts as the deceased is being appealed to not to forget her children. In the first excerpt, they called her attention to the fact that she was dead and has been shrouded with white clothes and as such should look after her children. They also sent greetings through her to other dead relatives. The second excerpt pleads to her to come back in earnest as a child in the family.

(1) Àlà o ró o You are shrouded with white
 Ìyá máa kíyè sòmọ̀ rẹ̀ o Mother keep watching
 over your children
 Àlà oró You are shrouded with white
 Okú máa kíyè sòmọ̀ rẹ̀ o he dead keep watching
 over your children
 Àlà o ró You are shrouded with white
 Okú máa kí òkú lórùn The dead extend my
 greetings to other relatives
 in the World beyond
 Àlà o ró o You are shrouded with white

(2) Tètè dé, tètè dé o Come back in
 earnest
 Èfúndoyin tètè dé o Efundoyin come
 back in earnest
 Kowá sòmọ̀ Come as a child

Immortality and spirituality of soul is further expressed in the excerpt below in that the relatives of the deceased takes the heaven where the deceased is going as home (*ilé*) and therefore implored her to greet the people at home as soon as she gets home and she should equally don't forget to help them greet the dead people she might meet on her way (*èrò ònà*)

Bí o délé o kílẹ̀ o Greet people at home
 when you get home
 Bì o dònà o kèrò ònà Greet people you meet on
 the way

Àtètè délé
 As soon as you get home
 Iṣẹ̀ mi làkójẹ̀ o
 Deliver my message first
 Bí o dònà o kèrò ònà
 Greet people you meet on the way

The idea of reincarnation as a form of immortality is shown in the excerpt below. The deceased was assumed to be the gathering well dressed with crown on her head and precious beads on her neck
 Mo rí yèyè rẹ̀ o I saw your mother
 Yèyè rẹ̀ dé adéowó your mother puts on a
 cowry crown
 Mo rí yèyè rẹ̀ o I saw your mother
 Yèyè rẹ̀ wọ̀ ègbàilẹ̀kẹ̀ your mother puts on a
 precious beads
 Mo rí yèyè rẹ̀ o I saw your mother

Spiritualism is visible in the excerpt below. The dirge is rendered with an assumption that the deceased is physically present and communicated with. The deceased was told to just look back to see her children celebrating her.

Èfúndoyin wèyìnřẹ̀wò! Èfúndoyin look back!
 Omọlayọ̀ rẹ̀! As your children celebrate you!
 Wèyìnřẹ̀wò! Look back!
 Omọlayọ̀ rẹ̀! As your children celebrate you!

The excerpt below also exhibits spiritualism. The deceased was implored not to trouble her children since they have done the needful by performing the rites but she should rather protect them as they are free to attend such performances.

Òpáọ̀ míṣẹ̀ dé any thing that can cause fear
 Ohunalalẹ̀ fòkòpá o stone any form of calamity to
 death
 Òpá orí ogbe situation-caused fear
 Ohunalalẹ̀ fòkòpá o stone any form of calamity to
 death

4. Conclusion

The paper analyzed spiritualism and immortality in *ÌbaOrogún* rites in Ilé-Ifè. It discusses the performance and the present status of the rites in Ilé-Ifè. The study emphasizes that *ÌbaOrogún* rites are rites that must be performed for a deceased wife by her living co-wives in the same compound in Ilé-Ìfèto bid the deceased farewell and create an unending existence of the deceased into her child's or the children's memory in the non-physical sense. Through close observation of the performance of the rites, the study discovers that it is nice for the child or children of the deceased to celebrate their mother at death by observing the performance. The study establishes that immortality is one of the various aspects of spiritualism. The work concludes that immortality and spiritualism is apparent in *ÌbaOrogún* rites in Ilé-Ìfè as a form of relationship between the living and the dead.

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