

Awon Festival Songs as Folk Beatitudes

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Abstract

Traditional festivals are often laced with folklore and folksongs with which custodians celebrate and savour the aroma of their cultural heritage. As a form of orality or performative art, festivals are imbued with aesthetic templates that encompass moral lessons as well as performance modes that guide and delight the community in its daily life. Awon festival is a good example of a folk celebration that is rich in songs and other performance modes. In providing answers to the question on the significance of the songs, the paper explores the entertaining as well as the didactic tunes of the selected songs which usually accompany dance performance as an integral feature of the annual traditional Awon mass wedding events. It x-rays the typology of the songs and the contextual reference from the point of view of content and form. These songs are collected through recordings of the folk performers during the 2019 edition of the annual festival. The translation of the songs was largely done by the researcher and with reference to a publication by Wole Oke entitled: *My People, their Tradition; Custom and Culture* (1996). The finding of the paper is that festival songs in Awon festival take the form of ballad, which is a communicative genre in the community and for the audience at large. The study provides a rich exploration of the aesthetics of Awon festival dance to compensate for the little scholastic attention given to this integral component of the festival. The rendition during celebration serves the purpose of instruction, renewal and comic relief. It is recommended that the festival songs be explored as mythic and spiritual fountains that invigorate the belief and confidence of the custodians.

Keywords: Awon, Festival, Songs, Ballad, Folks

Introduction

The African traditional forms of marriage are quite rich in form and content. These form and content constitute its features and in turn colour its aesthetic flavour. It is the aesthetics of the form of marriage that is of utmost interest to this researcher. Marriage is part and parcel of culture and the way a marriage institution is organized or performed depends on the culture of the people as custodians of a particular type of marriage institution. Culture is defined by G. Richards as:

A process or a product of the individual or group of activities. For example, culture can range from 'high' culture such as the arts to 'popular' and 'contemporary' culture which can include such diverse activities as football, music and television. (8)

Above all, marriage could be in the form of a festival that is celebrated annually especially in the traditional sense. A rich cultural practice is imbued with musical accompaniment. Traditional dance which is usually accompanied by singing modes are of similar aesthetic flavour as cultural practices reflective of African performance endowment African ethnic groups as custodians. In simple terms, traditional dances and songs are integral part of culture. Functionally, dance and any song constitute interactional modes with which people entertain themselves. Under this, we refer to dance and songs with which a marriage becomes lively and enjoyable for all and sundry who may participate in it.

Songs which may accompany traditional type of marriage can be poetry(chant) or music. In other words, there are songs which require drumming and to which people dance or sway their body. There is also the poetic aspect (poetry) which is not rendered as songs but chanted as poems. Yet, some poems can also have drumming accompanying them. While other 'alien' forms of marriage are usually accompanied with singing and drumming, the traditional form of marriage blends poetry with music. This is notable in Yoruba form of marriage as a traditional marriage. The richest aspect of these songs is that of bridal chant. This form of poetic song is called Ekuniyawo.

Awon mass wedding is a traditional wedding practiced in Shao, Moro Local Government Area of Kwara State, Nigeria. One of the performative aspects of the mass marriage is the Awon Dance which is usually accompanied by songs called Awon Festival Songs. Awon dance came into force as part of the main event in 1993 during the celebration and it has since become part of the event featured on Awon Day. The publication of the Kwara State Council for Art and Culture publication captures the retrieval process and time of the dance.

The dance was rejuvenated during the 1993 Awon to add colour and glamour to the festival. It involves the aged among the women folk. These never tired culture activists (women) engage in the very energetic and highly galvanizing dance. The very alluring traditional musical instrument is orchestrated by the bata drum. (11)

There is also the other musical feature which is Ekun iyawo (bridal chant). But while Ekun iyawo is chanted by brides, Awon festival songs are rendered by the Awon

Dancers. The songs usually come alive as performances during the grand finale of the festivities. The dancers engage in the singing mode for audience's consumption but more for their family members and community folks. The content of the songs connotes blessedness as each festive season brings about rejuvenation and joy.

Statement of the Problem

Awon mass wedding festival is rich in several aesthetic aspects. As such its rich content and form are entertaining and tourist friendly. The musical content of the festival constitutes its poetics which of course reinforces the literariness of cultural practice. There is also the chant that is rich in panegyric called bridal chant or *ekun iyawo*. While scholastic attention has been paid to other aspects of the festival, the musical aspect especially the songs called Awon festival songs have been neglected. Yet these songs are rich in aesthetics in terms of form and content.

Justification of the study

The justification of the study of Awon festival songs lies in the need to explore the lyrical and didactic texture of the songs. The songs as it were have not been adequately explored by literary scholars. In addition, Awon festival songs are an integral component of the aesthetics of the traditional cultural festival.

Methodology

The study is a qualitative one that is based on content analysis. In carrying out the study, the researcher employed the following approaches: observation, participation, interview and recording. The 2019 edition of the annual event was observed through participation.

In gathering data for the study, the researcher participated in the 2019 edition of the annual celebration. It was during the celebration that songs rendered by Awon Dancers were recorded. In addition, interviews were conducted for some members of the group specifically to shed light on the meaning and referents of the songs. Some of the dancers interviewed gave their names as Mrs. Fatimoh Oladunni, Serah Omowumi, Mrs Salami, among others.

Other scholarly materials on traditional festivals and in particular Awon mass wedding were consulted. These were sourced from online and print sources.

History of Awon Festival

Awon Mass Wedding Festival is annually celebrated by the people of Shao Community. The festival dates back to 17th century based on the instruction of a

goddess who was a guest of the community for eighteen days. The goddess was initially encountered by a hunter called Omo Larele on one of his hunting expeditions. The duo had met at a spring which required that the hunter dip his hand into the spring for him to drink the water. The goddess who appeared in human form was a one-breasted woman and gave her name as "Awon". She had claimed ownership of the spring but gave express permission to the hunter to continue to drink from the spring. She later appeared to the hunter as a guest in the larger community of Shao. On her departure, she gave the instruction to the community folks that marriageable maidens be given out in marriage en masse annually on a chosen day to commemorate her visit. She had added that should the community folks heed her instruction, Shao would grow in leaps and bounds translating into protection, fulfillment of the people's desires and blessings.

His Royal Majesty, the Ohoro of Shao, Oba (Dr.) Bamidele Alabi Adegbite (2019), in attesting to the story, says the goddess directive has always been carried out on yearly basis since the one breasted woman disappeared to become a pull of water, hence the annual celebration of Awon Mass Wedding Festival. The festival is usually an event which every son and daughter of the town looked forward to with excitement. Like the Indonesians, the people of **Kwara** State also have a day on which they give out their spinsters in marriage. It is an enduring traditional mass wedding among the Shao in Moro Local Government Area of the state. That day, everything changes. The town wears a new look and its people are happy once again to celebrate their beloved Awon festival. The mass wedding has become a rallying point for the people. The festival has become a ritual and part of the culture of the Shao community. In the words of Chief Wole Oke, who is the Jagunmolu of Shao land and former secretary of the pan-Yoruba socio-cultural organisation Afenifere, **Kwara** State Chapter. "Shao has a very rich history that distinguishes them from their immediate neighbours. Awon festival is "the most prominent and well established of their cultures as a cultural heritage, that dates back to the beginning of history of the community; it is as old as the town itself and it has become the pride of the people."(96)

The nature of African festival requires diverse approaches by scholars in terms of analyses and exploration. In capturing the nature of traditional festivals, a few definitions will suffice. Festival could be a period agreed upon by members of communities for celebration of epochal events in the life of the community. This may be for the purpose of honouring gods, goddesses, heroic figures, ancestors or spirits among others. In another perspective, Oyin Ogunba contends that:

In traditional Africa the greatest artistic institution is the festival. Contrary to

popular understanding, the festival is not just a religious occasion; if it were, it would hardly command more than tiny fraction of the interest it generates among the people.(4)

Awon mass wedding festival is in the category of traditional festivals in Nigeria with which it shares significant forms. These festivals are Osun Osogbo festival, Argungun festival, Eyo festival, Olojo festival, Gelede festival, New Yam festival, Ojude Oba festival among others. Scholars from different field of study have shown interest in these festivals through robust and deep researches. For instance, Modupe Olaniyan in her article entitled, "An Appraisal of Osun Osogbo as a Festival Theatre" examines Osun Osogbo from the theatrical perspective. She lists those theatrical characteristics of the festival as Modupe looks at Nigerian festival from a theatrical point of view. She says "artificiality, arena or stage, impersonation or mimesis, loose end, purposefulness or theme, audience, costume and makeup etc." (33). Above all, festivals can be didactic, entertaining and educative as the celebration exudes values, virtues, valour and love.

Alessandro Falassi presents a general overview of traditional festival. This is contained in his insightful work: Study on *Festival: Definition and Morphology*, where he identifies certain common performance rites that are present and inherent in all festivals. He labeled these rites as "building blocks of festival" (3). He concludes that ritual acts are constituent parts of festivals "since they happen within an exceptional frame of time and space, and their meaning is considered to go beyond their literal and explicit aspects" (3-4). Kehinde Akano has also worked on Awon festival bridal chant known in local parlance as *Ekun Jyawo*. A close study of Awon festival dance is that of Kazeem Rufai-Ahmed in "The Roles of Cultural Festivals in Managing Human Behaviors in Awon Mass Wedding Festival of Shao People." He observes that Awon dance is an important aspect of the Shao Awon mass wedding festival, and that it reflects the peculiarity of the lifestyle of the people of Shao. He alludes to the peaceful co-existence of the community as akin to the performative rhythm of the festival.

Songs, Festivals and Aesthetics

In traditional African cultural setting, songs or chants often come alive during performance unlike in the western setting where songs may be put down in black and white before performance. Songs exist in the subconscious of the African as a repertoire. It comes into life whenever an occasion demands for it or the need arises with reference to performance or singing. Thus one can conclude that song enjoys

life in performance.

One of the characteristics of song is its performative attributes. With reference to Malinowski's conceptualization of oral material or performance in its raw form, "an unperformed oral material like oral song risks being termed ineffectual and partially non-existent." Song is realized as a performance in terms of tone, rhythm, theme, and flavour among others. All of the above aptly captures songs in a typical African community setting where writing is still secondary and the rate of literacy still low. In a more familiar term, song in Africa is oral as it is prone to performance occurring between the singer(s) and their audience.

As observed by Modu an oral song which may be social or ritual is a communicative system between the singer and his or her audience. It is the context produced by a celebration or a festivity that brings about a particular type of song or songs. For an occasion, an event, a scene or an issue to be celebratory, certain repertoire of songs could fit into it. Thus, such songs are improvised to address or complement the event. This is because songs are not being sung but as a spontaneous response to a contextual demand. Omojola (154) writes that "the prevalence of improvisation and extemporization techniques in Yoruba music highlights an important idea of Yoruba music." He adds that:

Yoruba music form is often conceived as a process rather than a wholly pre-determined form. Although the performer (singer or instrumentalist), usually has a set of stock phrases which may constitute dominant or important themes of a particular performance, the specific organization of such phrases as well as the composition of new foreground details are done on the spur of the moment. (154-156)

Omojola's position may be totally applicable to Awon Festival Songs. Like the didactic nature of some of the tracks of the songs, improvisation is possible to fix issues in certain occasions or scenes and this surely highlights the adaptability and flexibility of the repertoire. Also, these wedding songs are processes but they exist as quotable or 'sing-able' texts which are synonymous with Awon Festival contexts and events. These songs exist in the latent mind until another festive season except improvised in similar celebrative mood or events requiring songs. As Omojola has pointed out of songs in several ways, Awon Festival Songs exist as a 'set of stock phrases' with their 'dominant themes' (155) retrievable for a particular performance on the spur of the moment. This performance often comes alive majorly and traditionally during wedding celebrations in the name of the river goddess, Awon, and in some other contexts where traditional marriage rites are being performed.

For instance, songs are performed to excite the audience, incite or inspire an audience; it may be to scold or satirize an audience; draw the attention of the audience to a particular incident or scenario for comparison. Songs may be rendered to preach or as moral gospel, rekindle historical memories, energize the performers or for spiritual inspiration. Ultimately, songs are sung to create fun or entertain, create comic relief and provoke laughter, celebrate, praise, immortalize or stigmatize. Even in the prison yard, songs are being sung or orchestrated to entertain, provoke laughter, create fun, abuse or set tone for combat among the prisoners.

Awon Festival Songs characteristically fit absolutely into the above painted scenario and for some of the reasons adduced as akin to oral songs in African setting and of course any other setting all over the world where human beings reside and interact as long as they could speak and understand Yoruba language. Even if the audience does not understand Yoruba, so far they can perceive the tune and enjoy the melody.

In specific terms, Awon Festival Songs, in terms of themes, provide a panoramic view of the spirituality and organic link between community folks and their natural environment. These songs are equally instructive with the inherent moral lessons in them. The lyricism is also prominent which accentuates the entertaining effects and the melody of the ballads. In terms of categorizing the songs, the typology entails occupational, moral, comic, satiric, heroic/panegyric, and mythic among others. The beauty of it all is the messages or instructions for the folks in tune with the festive mood and celebration spirit within a culturally defined context. The songs are in repertoire that comes into play during celebration or festivity. Remember, the festival is a traditional mass wedding where several marriageable maidens are given into marriage in a single day amidst pomp and pageantry. The festival songs have their form and contents but profoundly a kind of resourceful aesthetics that provides a cultural and spiritual compartmentalization for the folks and tourists inclined towards spiritual fulfillment, moral redemption and psycho-affection. It is safe and pertinent to explore the songs for effective analysis and interpretation as modes of edification, instruction and blessedness.

Excerpts of Awon Festival Songs

Apart from bridal chants solely performed by the 'brides of the day'. Awon Festival is rich in songs of various types. Traditionally, there are groups of singers or composers, who at different stages of the celebration engage in singing during the festival celebration. As already noted, these songs are rendered in tunes, themes and tones.

We must also note that Awon Festival Songs are performed and not merely sung or rendered because the songs accompany Awon Dance. It is a medley of instruction on moral obligations; a touch with nature or environment and occupational endowment of the folks as custodians of the traditional marriage festival.

We shall consider the performance by one of the groups in terms of their songs. The first group which is representative of the most original as the image of the festival of course, are the Awon Dancers.

Awon Dancers usually comprise women who are in the fifties and above. They are usually drawn from Ile Alawon (Awon Compound) and Ile-Iboo (Iboo Compound) numbering about fifteen (15). In the recent time, young married women in their thirties and forties are being co-opted into Awon Dancers due to modern trends and innovations introduced into the festival. They usually file out during the celebration in corporate dresses for performance.

To enhance the performative aspect of songs, the women sing by encircling themselves or filing out in cyclical shape around themselves. Their dance steps would always give them away. And to round off the performance, they would untie their head gear (gele) and start running as if pursuing one another as they vanish from the arena.

Transcription and Translation of the Selected Songs

Excerpt I

Iyawo bimo leekan,

Chorus: Koromi boju

Boolo olo, obun

Kolobanile (3x)

Translation

A bride bears her 1st child and
there is no water to wash her
face, you can divorce if you like,
those you met at home are not dirty

The song is a warning for a newly wedded wife who tends to be lazy and dirty. The innuendo-cum song points to her dirty and lazy habit. She is depicted as lazy, and dirty because she could not wash her clothes let alone her face. She does not always have water in her pot and other containers for the house cores.

The dancers warn her in the song track that others or her co-wives before her live hygienic life and are not as dirty as she might want to be because they rise to their

duties.

In the olden days, a new bride was known for her being up and doing: waking up early enough to do house chores. She would fetch water into different pots among other containers for use; washing her clothes and those of her husband, mother-in-law and father-in-law. She is expected to have water for her use but if she complains of not having water enough for her use, she is frowned at and often described as lazy and dirty. So, a new bride is usually being warned by the Awon Dancers as a form of instruction during Awon Dance.

Excerpt II

Lele lonfe o, Lele lonfe,
Ajoda di taya lele lonfe (2x)
Omi makun o, omi makun
Ko ito waa we omi makun(2x)

Translation

It breezes, it breezes, Ajoda, the
swimmer turns a swimming tyre
let the river swell; let the river swell
it is not enough for us to swim (2x)

In these songs, the dancers allude to the capacity and largeness of River Awon, after whom the festival is named and where the river goddess resides. They acknowledge the depth and wideness of River Awon describing how it swells seasonally. But they are happy at the swelling of the river and now that it breezes because they know the swimmers often enjoy the seasonal swimming exercise and as farmers who may have farms across River Awon as they swim through. The person, Ajoda, is their arch-swimmer and he often turns himself to swimming gourd or when the river reaches its peak in volume. This attests to the link between river Awon, the people of Shao and the annual Mass Wedding Festival that we have come to know about the dancers. Ajoda is a symbol of every dexterous and skilful swimmer from ile Alawon (Awon Compound) because they are traditionally trained to be swimmers. There is a spiritual bond between them and the River Awon.

Excerpt III

Gboun mi, Efufu lele gboun mi rodo Awon lodo
Chorus: Gboun mi, Efufu lele gboun mi rodo Awon lodo

Translation

Carry my voice, gentle breeze, carry my voice, to Awon goddess in the river

Chorus: Carry my voice, gentle breeze, carry my voice, to Awon goddess in the river (2x)

The dancers invoke the wind to carry their voice to the Awon, the river goddess in her abode. The song further attests to the spiritual link between the custodian of the festival and their origin, the river goddess. The song registers that the community folks are in tune with nature as bestowed on them by the cultural abode.

Excerpt IV

IyanAkanbi legboka le o

Iyan Olabisi legboju le 2x

Be ko yan tan o Bekoka tan o 2x

Eeya roju eebo si jo 2x

Translation

The pounded yam from PaAkanbi is your delicious meal

The pounded yam from Pa Olabisi is your delicious meal

When you finish eating pounded yam and amala

Kindly take to the floor and dance (2x)

The fun and pageantry with which the festival is endowed are inclusive of eating and winning. The natives normally treat themselves and their visitors to a good, pounded yam and amala. The mention of Akanbi and Olabisi refer to their icons and that they are predominantly farmers. To drum home their point that the festival's flavour include good food, and dance, the singers remind the audience who must have been deliciously fed, to step in to the arena and felicitate with them by dancing to their melodious songs.

ExcerptV

Mo mowo gbelekoto de o 2x

Refrain: Elekoto 2x

Ibu nbu latu'we

Refrain: Elekoto

Ibunbu Latuwe

Refrain: Elekoto

Taloje tudo laarin

Refrain: Elekoto
 Ki eja oja won lomuje
Refrain: Elekoto
 Koda o tu won re sale
Refrain: Elekoto
 Ebami pe awon kingbo o (2x)
Refrain: Awon oo 2x

Translation

I bring you Elekoto (2x)
Refrain: Elekoto
 We swim in the river by the side
Refrain: Elekoto
 Nobody dare jump into the middle of the river
Refrain: Elekoto
 Let fishes bite him by the nipple
Refrain: Elekoto
 Let the river drown him in its depth
 Join me in praising AWON (2x)
Refrain: AWON 00

From the songs, the singers allude to river Awon, the ongm of their annual celebration. As an icon and mythical fortress, the mass wedding festival is so named after the goddess, Awon and River Awon, where the goddess lives. The river links the community folks with the goddess and significantly, the annual mass wedding celebration renews the tie between them. The festival is celebrated in traditional way.

Excerpt VI
 Omimaakuno
 Omimaakun
 Koitowawe
 Omimakun

Translation

Let the water swell
 Let the water swell
 It is still not enough for us to swim in

The singers remind the audience of their competence to swim and their being endowed with a river as spectacle of swimming across the river which requires

competence on the part of the swimmer. We are also informed of the abode of fish and that river Awon is rich in fishes. Of course, whoever does not know how to swim should not venture to jump into the river because such person might drown. During the season, the river is always at its brim, full of water. The folks are at peace with their heritage -river, goddess and the festival. The period of the celebration though in October, the volume of water is usually scenic, pleasant to behold. They are proud to be associated with everything Awon Festival.

Excerpt VII

Aako o o olorun ejo 2x

Wiweloweoo

Sinoo

Kaoo 2x

Be le'ye ma ndun loko 2x

Translation

Aako bird, your neck is like that of snake

It is coiling

Birds often communicate in sonorously

In the farm(2x)

To further buttress that they are completely in tune with nature, their abode and environment, they mimic birds and describe some of them in terms of physique and colour. In this excerpt, the bird called Aako, is praised as a bird endowed with long neck coiling like that of snake comparing its neck with that of snake. These are beautiful images which are part and parcel of nature as found in their local entity or their abode.

Conclusion

Awon Festival Song has been treated from the socio-aesthetic and historical perspectives. The exposition has revealed the mythic background of the festival as well as the environment and custodians. The lyricism and cultural value of the songs have been analysed. These songs are mainly rendered seasonally particularly during the celebration of Awon mass wedding. The content of the songs often remind the folks of their natural attachment. The songs are musically rewarding and spiritually fulfilling, hence their benevolence and blessedness not only to the folks but tourists and scholars with discerning mental and psychological faculties.

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