

A Semiotic Appraisal of Ayélèrémè Festival in Ìpè Àkókó, Nigeria

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Abstract

Yorùbá traditional festival is a veritable source of data for the study and understanding of the general ways of life of the Yorùbá at home and in the Diaspora. Observation shows that not much scholarly works had been done on festivals in Àkókó Area of Oòdó State, Nigeria. This paper brings forth the cultural semiotic analysis of Ayélèrémè festival in Ìpè-Àkókó. Cultural semiotics is a signification theory investigating a sign-system in a culture. Our findings show that Ayélèrémè festival which is a sign-related festival is performed in commemoration of what Ọkpàrà did to his wife at the arrival of their first child. Among the codes used in the festival are Ùtà, iconizing the presence of Ọkpàrà and his wife and number of Agbóginá strings signifying the number of first born children. The paper suggests that a building be inscribed with the names of Ọkpàrà and his wife to immortalize them.

Keywords: ùtà, ọkpàrà, itèlè, ègùn, agbóginá

Introduction

Ògúnbà (1978:4) defines traditional festival as ‘... an indigenous cultural institution, a form of art nurtured on the African soil over the centuries and which has, therefore, developed distinctive features and whose techniques are sometimes totally different from the borrowed form now practiced by many of our contemporary artists’. Traditional festival is not alien to African people; it comes once in a year. Ògúnbà (1978:3) asserts that traditional festivals abound in many communities in Africa. People come out in their best, and the festival is characterised by eating, drinking and general rejoicing. The coming together of the people is re-enacted, and many people for the first time in the year meet on festival occasions (Ìdòwú, 1962:109, Awólàlú and Dòpámú, 1979:149). Festivals cement the relationship of people in a community while it serves as a source of history exposing certain roots of the laws or norms, taboos and specially guiding the behavioural pattern of the people within a given culture. The annual festival is primarily to thank the divinity connected with the festival for his past blessings and protection. It is also to ask for his blessings on the worshippers’ trade and other activities and to propitiate him that all may be well with them through the year. As to origin of festival, Àyántáyò (2006:2) explains that folklorists believe that the first festival arose because of the anxieties of the early people who did not understand the forces of nature and wished to placate them.

There are festivals that have connotations that their origin is based on the historical development of the community. Babáyemí (1980:48) opines that not all festivals give reverence to divinities and ancestors. Awólàlú and Dòpámú (1979: 150) ascertain that there may be festivals that are for the purpose of training the youth to be strong, brave and industrious, while others may be for the purpose of upholding morality. Babáyemí (1980:48)

makes mention of Argungu festival in Kebbi State where fishermen only perform the festival to select the best fisherman of the year.

From the foregoing, it can be gleaned that there are divinity-related festivals as well as non-divinity-related festivals in Yorùbáland. However, while scholars have researched other Yoruba festivals, no comprehensive study has been carried out on Ayélèrémè festival in Ìpè Àkókó-South-East of Oṅdó State of Nigeria. Akokoland which is located in North-Eastern part of the frontier Zone of Yorùbáland, is a geographical expression of people with diverse cultures that share boundaries with Kabba and Yagba (now in the present Kogí State to the north and northeast). Àkókó spans from a large percentage of the Local Governments in Oṅdó State; out of the present eighteen Local Government Areas in the State, Akoko has four: Àkókó North-East, Àkókó North-West, Àkókó South-East and Àkókó South-West. Ukpe (Ìpè Dialect) which is one of the towns in South-East Local Government Area of Oṅdó State is one of the towns Fábóyèdè (2015:48) classified under Òwò-Àkókó on the basis of dialectal spoken categories. Others include Òkà, Ìkàré, Àkùngbá, Súpàré etc. Their dialect is generally mutually intelligible with the exception of Ìpè. Ipe people speak Yorùbá as second language to enable them communicate with other Yorùbá from within or outside Oṅdó State. Ìpè is about six miles to Ìṣùà and Èpìnmì. Ìpè people like some other Yorùbá towns, migrated from Ifè around twentieth century (Akómọláfé, 1976:5). Ifè is regarded by Yorùbá as an ancient city where creation and civilization began in earliest times (Adémákinwá, 1958:32-38, 45-46). The strategic location and distribution of geographical features influenced human habitation and the practice of agriculture. Their nature of land is undulating with numerous hills and mountains (Akómọláfé, 1976:2-3). Their earth crusts are always well-watered by constant rainfall between May and September of every year. This study intends to carry out a semiotic investigation of Ayélèrémè festival in Ìpè Àkókó with a view

to deepening our understanding of the nature, cultural importance in preserving signs and symbols of the people of Ìpè as an ancient community through their festival performance.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this work is based on semiotics. Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols and their use or interpretation. Signs may be representational in either concrete or abstract form. The study of connotation constitutes the core of contemporary semiotics. Danesi (2004) is of the opinion that ‘connotation’ allows human to expand the application of signs creatively. According to Danesi, everything that stands for another object is a sign so far it is interpretable. Semiotics is not restricted to language use alone, it is connected to all that are sign related.

According to Òpéfèyítímí (1997:43), Saussure (1974:114) opines that signification is the relationship between the two parts of the sign, which is the signifier and the signified.

The signifier----sign-----the signified

(Object/word) medium idea in (concept)

As it is apparent, the sign occupies the centre position as the intermediary between the signifier and the signified. Hence, the meaning given to a sign is a response which requires yet another interpretation. Selden (1985:53-54) refers to the words of Saussure saying that the relation between signifier and signified is arbitrary. There is no natural bond between them. What one sign connotes to a particular individual may definitely be different from another especially in different cultures as a matter of convention. Issues of signs and sign processes are the main concerns of semiotics studies.

According to Jamieson (1985:54), semiotics is concerned with codes and rules of application of ‘codes’. Codes are best referred to as utilised by enactors and audience apparatus within a context of a performance to understand an idea construed in communication into meaningful substance. Codes can be verbal or non-verbal. Non-verbal aspect includes: body adornment such as tattoos; imprints or designs on typical dresses; colours, leaves used in and at shrines and groves etc.

Cultural Semiotics is a field of research that studies signs as an essential part of cultural life and communication. Culture is the social behaviour and norms found in human societies. We can know culture (and reality) by means of signs, through the process of signification. Cultural semiotics involves all cultural processes of communication made possible by a basic system of signification. Cultural semiotics as a theory provides a scientific frame work for the empirical investigation and comparative description of all cultures in the world. The strength of cultural semiotics therefore, lies in the fact that it focuses on matters of cultural phenomena. It is concerned with how meaning is generated and communicated.

In this work, we shall focus on cultural semiotics which is signification theory which examines a sign-system in Yoruba culture and various modes of representation employed by Ìpè community, to express their thoughts, feelings and ideologies in Ayélèrémè festival. It is believed that this theory would go a long way in understanding Ayélèrémè festival.

Early Works on Yoruba Traditional Festivals

Many scholarly works have been carried out on traditional festivals in Yorùbá land; Oḷájùbù (1972), Ìdòwú (1973), Ògúnbà (1978), Ògúnfòlákàn (2008), Dangel (2008), George (2008) and Arówóşẹgbé (2014, 2017). Ìdòwú (1973:184) depicts that the Yorùbá celebrate the Egúngún and Orò festivals in honour of their ancestors annually. Oḷájùbù (1972:1) asserts that Egúngún (masquerade) is a corpse in human accoutrements. During the festivals, the

spirits of the departed are called by name: animals and food offerings are made to them accompanied by prayers. Orósùn festival in Ìdànrè is in commemoration of Orósùn; a female deified ancestor (Akíndé, 1994:8). Orósùn was one of the wives of Olófin Arẹmítán (an Oba). She was childless but loved by the king. Her co-wives hated her because of the king's caring affection towards her. They conspired against her; she left the palace and got disappeared into ground near a hill which is later known as Orósùn hill till today. The people of Ìdànrè perform Orósùn festival once a year to appease her so that they can have bountiful harvest, peace, progress and good health (Tourism in Oṅdó State: 2008). George (2008:17-19) depicts that the people of Ilé-Ifẹ in Ọsun State perform Yẹyẹmòólú festival in remembrance of Yẹyẹmòólú's good character. She was one of the wives of the first Olófin Ọsángangan Ọbamákin (an Oba). She is being appeased with different rituals during the festival so that their needs would be met. Igogo festival comes up in Ọwò. Ọrọnsẹn, the wife of Olówò, the Oba of Ọwò in Oṅdó State left Olówò's palace in anger because of the conspiracy from her co-wives thereby causing her a breach of her taboos. The attempt to look for Olówò's wife brought about Igogo yearly festival (Dangel (2008:<http://www.cgidd.com>. Retrieved: 2008-08-20, owoigogofestival.blogspot.com). Other festivals meant to honour ancestors and legendary heroes and heroines of some Yoruba communities are Mọrẹmi festival in Ọfà, Lísàbí festival at Abeokuta, Olójó and Edi festivals at Ilé-Ifẹ (Olúpọnà, 1991:32).

Arówóşẹgbé (2014:239-260) asserts that there are first-born-related festivals whereby people rejoice at the birth of their first born. Such festivals include Ẹrókòde festival in Àfò, Ọwọ̀wọ̀ festival in Ìfira and Ẹlú festival in Ìdó-Àní. Arówóşẹgbé notes that the traditional societal perception of a barren woman and a woman having her first pregnancy as stillbirth is responsible for the woman's zealous attitude towards children, child-bearing and child-caring.

What is deduced from the above is that there are ancestor-related festivals in Yoruba land. This is in support of the view of Ògúnfólákàn (2008:www.cbaa77.com/benin-orosun) that ‘In Yorùbá land, festivals are celebrated in remembrance of heroes and heroines who one way or the other have been deified’. There are also non-divinity-related festivals where the members of the community just entertain themselves. There are also first-born-related festivals where mothers and relations rejoice at the arrival of their daughters’ first-born babies. Observation shows that there is little or no enough work on first-born-related festivals to the best of our knowledge, the gap which this work tends to fill. The people of Ìpè Àkókó perform *Ayélèrémè* festival to rejoice at the arrival of their first child. This work therefore, tends to examine *Ayélèrémè* festival to know the meaning inherent in the festival. It will also serve as a way of preserving the performance of the festival so that it could be accessed by future generation.

***Ayélèrémè* Festival in Ìpè**

Ayélèrémè is a firstborn-related festival performed in Ìpè Àkókó, in commemoration of what Ọkpàrà did to his wife when the wife was delivered of her first pregnancy successfully.

Who is Ọkpàrà?

It was revealed that Ọkpàrà was a hunter that migrated from Benin in Edo State, Nigeria in company of his sibling to found Ùkwè (Ipe Dialect) but the sibling moved forward to found Ọwò; the two towns are in Oñdó State of Nigeria. Whenever he was about to locate his sibling, he played a traditional flute from which sound the name Ùkwè came from. Ọkpàrà was a nice leader and everybody liked him. He was rich, brave, accommodating but childless for sometime. Later on, the wife conceived and was delivered of a baby boy. Ọkpàrà became so happy at the arrival of the baby that he decided to make the naming ceremony an elaborate one whereby he could bless the town people in cash. On a chosen day, everybody gathered at

the market place since that was always a gathering place for members of the community. Ọkpàrà's wife sat on a seat brought from her house; she was not strong enough (because of her age) to remain standing while the ceremony was on. Ọkpàrà stood behind his wife, dished out cowries (money spent then), touched his wife's forehead from behind, prayed for the wife and threw the cowries into the midst of the people standing after saying 'èyin òtòsì, ẹ gbà' (oh yee poor, have this). Everybody present except the old people struggled to have at least a cowry. According to him, he did that to honour his wife that he believed had brought good luck to him by giving him a child in his old age. He also believed that members of his community should be blessed for witnessing the birth of the child. After this, they danced back home. The community decide to take Ọkpàrà's action of blessing people through his wife as precept; they add honouring their wives to the joy they exhibit whenever their wives are delivered of their first babies successfully. The people decide to have a day in the month of September when they would have lesser work to do on their farms for celebration. All families concerned celebrate together. It thus becomes a yearly festival to be performed by any qualified husband and wife once in their life-time.

The Pre-Requisite for Ayélèrémẹ Festival

Safe delivery of first pregnancy is the pre-requisite for any woman to take part in Ayélèrémẹ festival; everybody prays for safe delivery for any pregnant woman. Immediately a woman is delivered of her first pregnancy safely, the mother-in-law makes signs to summon the other women together to rejoice with her by singing and clapping. They spread the good news to their in-law's house. The woman's mother and her relations also join in the celebrations. While dancing, women and children hold leaves (the type of leaves they hold depends on the sex of the baby as would be explained later). The mother of the new born baby, her mother and her mother-in-law (husband's mother) are now qualified to take part in the next

Ayélèrémè festival. Any woman that had her first pregnancy as stillbirth is regarded as an unfortunate woman bringing bad luck to her husband and parents and as such, not qualified to take part in Ayélèrémè festival.

Ayélèrémè Festival

The female celebrants (mothers of first-born babies) for the current year are called Ìtèlè while those that performed theirs a year prior to the current year are called Ègùn. Ìtèlè visits the market the last day of Ùgè festival (a festival prior to Ayélèrémè festival) to declare her intention to participate in the forthcoming Ayélèrémè festival. She dresses moderately; wearing beads and rubbing làálè (Yorùbá cosmetic) on her feet and palms. She moves round and greets people saying:

È kú ojà o. How is market

Ìtèlè ló n kí yín o. Ìtèlè greets you

After they might have exchanged greetings, they give her gifts such as onion, fish, tomatoes, pepper, tubers of yam, depending on what each market woman sells. A young lady that accompanies Ìtèlè to the market carries home whatever she is given in the market. From that day, Ìtèlè seldom takes part in any serious work at home. Other women in the family help in cooking and in any other preparation towards the celebration. She dresses up every day and makes herself attractive wearing saworo in her ankles. Every evening, Ìtèlè goes from one house to another to say hello to relations and to collect gift from well-wishers. While moving round, she recites oríkì orílẹ̀ (Yorùbá lineage praise poetry) of her husband's lineage as well as that of her parents. The woman, her mother and the mother-in-law participate in the festival although they may not go round with Ìtèlè. Every evening, the Ìgbòyá (old women that were once Ìtèlè), go to the stalls of their respective streets at the market place to dance. A

day prior to the festival day, the husband provides *iṣu* (yam) (20-40 tubers), *ẹja gbígbe ńlá* (big dry fish), *ẹran igré* (dry bush meat), all in a big tray, *ẹgúsí* (shelled melon) in a dish, *irú* (locust beans) in a dish, *ata gbígbe* (dry pepper) in another dish, *garawa epo* (a tin of palm oil) and a big bowl of *ẹpà rogodo* (groundnuts of cream colour); this type of groundnut is different from the common peanuts. *Ẹpà rogodo* is round in shape as seen in Figures 1a & 1b while figure 1c shows the roasted common peanuts.

<insert figure 1a here>

<Insert figure 1b here>

<Insert figure 1c here>

All these would be carried to the in-law's house by the women (excluding the female celebrant) in the husband's house. The husband would also provide the same foodstuffs for his household.

The female celebrant is always in white apparel. Each holds a piece of iron resembling a hoe. An emblem representing the presence of *Ọkpàrà* and his wife is a stool called *Ùtà* as shown in figure 2.

<Insert figure2 here>

Figure 2: Ùtà

Although the festival is not to celebrate *Ọkpàrà* at death and could not be regarded as an ancestor-veneration-related festival but the people still need to honour *Ọkpàrà* for the part he played in honouring his wife and the way he blessed the people; the character they emulate in him. *Ìpè* people regards *Ọkpàrà* as a great figure who is worthy of respect and emulation whose remembrance should be coordinated by respected members of the society. Hence, they employ *aworo* (priests) to coordinate their activities. There are two *àwòrò* (priests); one priest keeps *Ùtà* in his house to be brought out during *Ayélerémè* festival coming up once a year

while the other priest takes care of sacrifice. The two priests work hand-in-hand to make the festival a huge success. No *àwòrò* is appointed until the demise of the incumbent *àwòrò* but there should be no delay in appointing and installing another occupier to any of the vacant posts. The two priests should live a holy life; they should abstain from wicked acts to avoid sudden death. *Oba* (the King) declares the day for the commencement of the festival. The festival commences on the ninth day of *Oba*'s declaration and takes nine days. On the first day, which is always a market day in that community, the priests in white apparel go to *Okpàrà*'s shrine situated in the bush to inform him that they are about to honour their wives as he (*Okpara*) honoured his wife at the birth of his first born. The priest in charge of ritual takes along a white cock. If nobody deviates from the rules governing the people for instance no one steals another person's property, no adultery, the palm frond that was laid at *Okpàrà*'s shrine for a whole year remains fresh. At such a time, the cock brought will not be offered as sacrifice; they only pass on the information and return home. On the contrary, if any of the *àwòrò* or any member of the community sinned the palm frond left at the shrine will not be found. *Àwòrò* in charge of rituals would offer the white cock as a propitiatory offering to appease *Okpàrà* (although, *Okpàrà* is not a deified ancestor at least to this festival). It is believed that since they are emulating *Okpàrà*'s care for his wife, they should also emulate his way of life. After this, a dry palm frond would be found instead of a fresh one. *Àwòrò* will then replace it with a fresh one. The two *àwòrò* (priests) visit the market place for people to see them before their departure. Their coming to the market place opens that year's celebrations.

The following day, all *Ìtèlè*, and their relations gather to dance in an open space. Each *Ìtèlè*'s husband will be in attendance with his friends. Each husband and members of his family will be spraying their *Ìtèlè* with money. They also throw money to be scrambled for into the midst of participants. A rich husband is known for the denomination of money thrown. Nowadays,

those Nigerian banknotes of various denominations are the valuable ones; people seldom throwing money for fear of being destroyed. Petty things like biscuits, sweets, peppermints and chew-gum are being thrown out. Ìtèlè dances to her father's house to give reverence to him before going back to her husband's house. The father, full of joy sprays money on his daughter. On the third day, every Ìtèlè visits her well-wishers especially those that showed up at the gathering two days ago thanking them for coming; they may as well present her gifts which may be either in cash or kind.

On the fifth day which is another market day, as early as 3:00 a.m., iyán (pounded yam) would be prepared in both Ìtèlè and her parents' houses respectively. The husband provides raw items like tubers of yam and stew ingredients for the two houses. Other homes/houses where there is no Ìtèlè may not prepare iyán but every home has to fry akara (which will be a mixture of èpà rogodo and grated işu (groundnut and yam). Very early in the morning, every woman (excluding Ìtèlè) in the community goes to her husband's farm to bring fresh tubers of yam of different species like eléúşú (white guinea yam), òlò (yellow guinea yam), ewùrà (water yam) to be grated. All women in each house grind èpà rogodo (groundnuts) provided.

The ground dry èpà rogodo (groundnuts) will be mixed with the grated yam to make it fluid (that is why they have to get fresh yam) and make it ready to be fried to make àkàrà. Whoever that is not buoyant enough to purchase the special groundnuts may buy beans instead. Akara balls is fried in every house regardless of the presence of Ìtèlè in that house or not but the ones fried in Itele's house are bigger and wider. They are called èzò dàmìdàmì in Ipe dialect (big and wide akara balls). While frying, it is one at a time. Only five loaves of the èzò dàmìdàmì would be exchanged between the two families for their consumption; one on a tray. The husband will add pounded yam, an unsliced bush meat to his own. The wife's parents also give to their daughter; box full of clothes, dishes, coolers and white lace apart from the one inside the box. While Ìtèlè's household prepares èzò dàmìdàmì (big and wide

àkàrà) others prepare àkàrà of any size or shape. Ìtèlè has to prepare more àkàrà balls because other people, despite the fact that they prepare àkàrà in their various houses, still come to Ìtèlè's house to partake in her àkàrà. Ìtèlè's parents will bring iyán (pounded yam) to their in-law's house for the consumption of every man in that household. The husband will also prepare food for his extended family since he too, is a celebrant. In addition to this, he needs to prepare food to entertain his guests and well-wishers. All male members of the extended family will converge at the husband's house to rejoice with him for the safe delivery of his wife. The husband takes half of the food brought from his in-law's house and returns the other half. The men eat the food provided by Ìtèlè's husband and the half taken from the one brought by the in-law. After this, everybody prepares for market show which is the main performance during Ayélèrémè festival. The quality of the white material worn by each Ìtèlè connotes how rich the husband is. Each Ìtèlè ties wrapper round her waist, ties small cloth with a knot at the back round her chest. She plaits her hair, rubs her waist and kneels to feet with osùn (cam wood), uses làáli (Yorùbá cosmetic) round her feet and covers her skin with tattoo. She can use beads to decorate the hair as shown in figure 3.



Figure 3: ITELE

She ties şaworo (small shells) round her waist, on top of it, is bèbè (beads). She can also tie another şaworo round the ankle. She holds cowries tied together in each of her hands while dancing. As she shakes her body while dancing, şaworo supplies the music. No drum is used. Nowadays, Ìtèlè wears bùbá (Yorùbá blouse) on top of her wrapper as shown in figure 4 below.

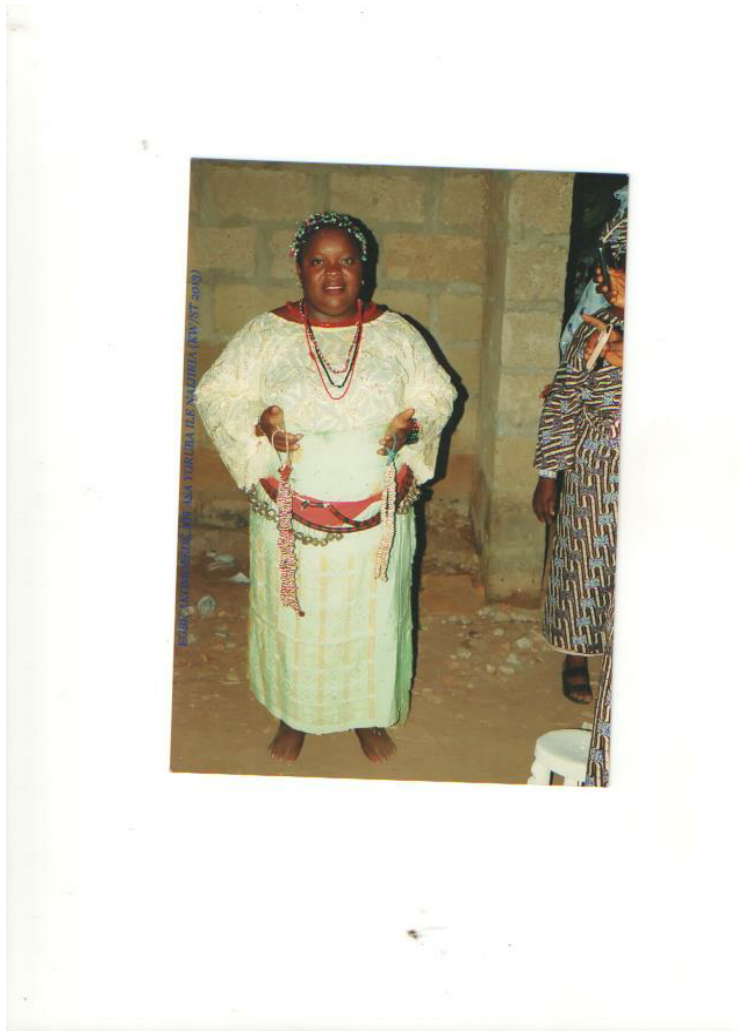


Figure 4: ITELE 2

While going to the market, the husband and his family, Ìtèlè's parents and extended family members and other well-wishers join Ìtèlè to the market place to await the arrival of àwòrò Ûtà (Ìtà priests). Àwòrò Ûtà carrying Ûtà (which is covered with white cloth) on his left shoulder zooms round the market twice before heading back home. It is revealed that however fast this àwòrò might be, he must not fall neither must he stumble. If any of these happens he will surely die before another Ayélèrémè festival comes up. Àwòrò's departure opens that day's performance. Each Ìtèlè dances round the market twice and joins her husband where the latter stays awaiting her arrival. The husband stays behind his wife like Ọkpàrà did, holds money, and stretches his hand forward to touch his wife's forehead for

prayer. He then throws the money into the midst of participants who are mostly young ones who can struggle for it. The husband does this as many times as he has money to throw to the participants. It becomes survival of the fittest among the youths; the amount each person is able to get depends on how strong and how fast they are to overpower those people around them. Only youths can take part in such exercise, it is not by law but because of the energy such exercise demands. The husband can give elders money wherever he meets them if he likes. On the next market day which is the 9th day of the festival, Ìtèlè and her relations visits the market to thank the market women and to buy presents like kola nuts, sugar cane, bitter kola, groundnuts (common one), walnuts etc. to be distributed to all well-wishers and relations that are unable to go to the market as gift from the market. In the evening, Ìtèlè prepares iyán (pounded yam) for the oldest man in her husband's family who prays for her in return. On the following day which is the tenth day of the festival, the two àwòrò (priests) offer thanksgiving offering at the shrine situated in the bush. This thanksgiving closes the festival till the following year when a new set of Ìtèlè will celebrate another Ayélèrémè festival.

A Semiotic Appraisal of Ayelereme Festival

Having given the synopsis of Ayélèrémè festival, it is assumed that an examination of the festival from a cultural semiotic perspective will give room for proper understanding of the festival as it affects the cultural lives of the people. Signs come in various forms and function differently. Signs could be grouped into two: verbal codes and non-verbal codes as discussed below.

Verbal Codes

All the vocalised text that are used in the performance of Ayélèrémè festival are treated as the verbal communication codes which include greetings, presents bestowed upon people and oríkì orílè chants.

Ìtèlè's Greetings

A market prior to the festival period, Ìtèlè visits the market to inform the market women of her intention to take part in the forthcoming Ayélèrémè festival. Instead of saying this, she says:

Ìtèlè n kí yín o Ìtèlè greets you

On a normal day, the above statement would be regarded as ordinary greeting in which the people around are supposed to return the greeting. During Ayélèrémè festival it is not ordinary greeting. It signifies securing the attention of the market women so that they can present her gifts. This is depicted in the reaction of the market women who present her with different gifts depending on what they sell without telling them to do so. This action is in line with Yoruba adage that says; 'Yorùbá kì í fì gbogbo ẹnu sòrò' (Yorùbá people do not talk anyhow). This is also in conformity with the culture of the people. A Yorùbá adage says: 'Òrò àjọsọ ní í jẹ ọmọ mi gbénà' (It is a matter discussed earlier that one says my child can interpret code-language/ ability to interpret code-language is based on the prior discussion. The people of Ìpè are aware of Ìtèlè's intention hence, they give her present at her greetings.

Presents Bestowed upon People

Ìtèlè's husband says: 'ẹyin òtòsì, ẹ gbà' (You poor, have this). In a day-to-day activity of the people, the above statement would be regarded as an insult; such gift will never be accepted. During Ayélèrémè festival, it is regarded as a way of bestowing blessing on the people as Ọkpara did. After this festival nobody uses this type of statement any longer. We have to say

here that throwing of money is not peculiar to this community alone; in some parts of Yorùbá land, during burial ceremony, children of the deceased do throw money into the midst of participants while the latter struggle to get some of it. The money is thrown without saying anything. The act of throwing money or other things on the two occasions are the same but the notion of performing the act is different from each other. During burial ceremony, the children of the deceased are trying to show their wealth and to make their deceased parents great even after their death. It is done while dancing round the town carrying the corpse. This part of burial ceremony is not compulsory; it is only to make the burial ceremony more elaborate. In Ayélèrémè festival, the motif behind the throwing of money is quite different; Ìtèlè's husband has the notion of enriching the purse of the poor people in the community like Ọkpàrà did. This is the most important aspect of Ayélèrémè festival and it should take place at the open space which is the market place. The act is compulsory for the husband. The amount spent by any husband during this festival, connotes how much love he has for his wife and child. In some African societies, marriage is not fully recognized or consummated until the wife has given birth. First pregnancy becomes, therefore, the sign of complete integration of the woman into her husband's family and kinship circle (Mbiti 1969:110). Yorùbá, like other people in Africa, therefore, attach importance to child-bearing. Unfruitful marriage is not only a misfortune but also a curse, since the couple have not contributed to the continuity of the family and of the society. Therefore, when a child is born especially, a first pregnancy, there is jubilation (Awólàlú and Dòpámú 1979:174). The birth of a child is the concern not only of the parents but of many relatives including the living and the departed. Everybody in the community rejoices at the birth of a first child.

The chanting of Oríkì orílẹ̀ (Yorùbá lineage poetry)

Ọlátúnjí (1984:67) rightly quoted Babalọlá (1966:24) saying that 'the reciting or chanting of the appropriate oríkì in honour of the ancestors of a particular family causes members of that

family who hear the performance to feel very proud of their pedigree, and if they are then away from home, they also feel exceedingly homesick'. Oríkì has a comprehensive citation being presented about him. It is oríkì which tells where a person originates from, how powerful his ancestors were, how wealthy they were, and all the noble things they had done (Láṣebikan 1958:32). Chanting oríkì like this is the most deciding factor in assessing the competence of every Ìtèlè. Ìtèlè would like everybody to know her identity, she would like people to know that she is not a bastard, she knows her lineage. Apart from people knowing Ìtèlè's identity, it is a way of asking for gifts. The amount collected by any Ìtèlè depends on how versed she is in chanting her parents and husband's family oríkì orilè (family lineage).

Non-verbal Codes

The non-verbal codes in this work include; carved image, leaves, taboo, sacrifice, number and names with their significations as explained below.

Ùtà

Ùtà is a small stool used by women in their kitchens. Every woman has her own. It was the stool that belonged to Ọkpàrà's wife that was brought to the market place when the husband celebrated the birth of his first baby. In Ayèlèrémè festival, Ùtà connotes Ọkpàrà and his wife; the presence of Ùtà at the market place reminds the people of Ọkpàrà's wife that first brought the stool during the celebration of her first child. Keeping Ùtà at home indicates keeping Ọkpàrà at home; since his corpse cannot be kept. Bringing Ùtà to the market connotes bringing Ọkpàrà to the market so that he can as well bless the people. In addition, it is assumed that after the departure of Ùtà, each husband connotes Ọkpàrà and each Ìtèlè connotes Ọkpàrà's wife. The couple jubilate and people join them to celebrate. Among the people of Àkókóland, there are first-born related festivals whereby a day is fixed for all

concerned to celebrate first-born related festivals. There is no emblem required but in Ayélèrémè festival, Ùtà is used to remind them of the person they imitate.

Leaves

The type of leaves women and children hold depends on the sex of the baby.

Ìyeyè leaves (plum leaves) connotes female baby. In Yoruba land, the juice of the young leaves is given to children for stomach-trouble. An infusion (àgbo; vegetable decoction) of the bark is used to cure coughs: the pulverised, dry bark is applied as a dressing after circumcision (Abraham 1962:154). Women are noted for the part they play when it comes to child caring, hence, in first-born-related festival, the plum leaf connotes female child.

Akòko/Ìkòsè leaves depicts male baby.

In Yorùbá land, Akòko leaf is also placed on the head of a new king or chief as anointment for a successful tenure in office (Abraham, 1962:44). It is commonly seen round fetish-groves, it is believed to be the abode of spirits. Yoruba people ascribe anything powerful to male hence, Akoko leaves is used to connote male child.

Taboo

A Yorùbá adage says ‘A kì í rógùrò kádún’ (one does not remain in standing position throughout the year) meaning that it is never a taboo for someone to fall but in Ayélèrémè festival, falling on the part of a priest is a taboo and it connotes death. When a priest falls while performing his duty, it is assumed that he is not careful enough and has mocked the divinity whose mouth-piece he represents therefore his life pays for it.

Colour

Colours are used conventionally within a culture and not as a matter of universality alone. Whitish cloth symbolises the peaceful nature of a divinity and the sacredness of the shrine environment (locale). Both priests in Ayélèrémè festival are in white regalia signifying their holiness. The Ûtà which is painted white is also covered with white cloth. Ìtèlè's clothes are white. White cock is offered as propitiatory sacrifice. Ọkpàrà's shrines are painted white. One would like to ask the significance of colour white in Ayélèrémè festival. Generally in Yorubaland, colour white connotes holiness. White connotes peaceful feelings as a replica of purity. Colour white symbolises goodness. White attires are worn by people especially people who are not expected to participate in or do evil. In Yorùbá land, most gods and goddesses that are described and represented with white colour are practically accepted as being good. For instance, the representative of Ọbàtálá; the arch-divinity and Deputy of Olódùmarè in the ordering of things is always in white. Ọbàtálá is even referred to as 'the king of whiteness' (Awólàlú and Dòpámú 1979:78). Using colour white in Ayélèrémè festival connotes the goodness of Ọkpàrà and his wife. In other words, if the two àwòrò put on white garments and live a sinful life, it means they are deceitful; hence, the god exposes them by hiding the palm frond. In addition, colour white in Yorùbá land is regarded as the older among all colours. A Yorùbá adage says: *adiyẹ funfun kò mọ ara rẹ lágba'* (a white hen fails to recognize itself as an elder). When somebody is addressed this way, the meaning is that the person has lost its position as an elder in that context. So, offering white cock as sacrifice unto Ọkpàrà connotes offering the best unto him. For the two priests to dress in white regalia depicts them as the head in the festival. No wonder then, without the priests, the festival cannot hold; they are the one to declare the festival open and close under the tutelage of Ọkpàrà.

Sacrifice

Sacrifice is of vital significance in any traditional religion. Sacrifice generally in Yoruba land is to propitiate the divinity. It is also to thank him and ask for more blessing but the sacrifice offered during Ayélèrémè festival is with a difference. The sacrifice is to know the whereabouts of the palm frond that had been there for a year. The disappearance of the palm frond had exposed either the priests or the community as sinners. The community would know this when the white cock was not brought back home. After the sacrifice, only a withered palm frond to be replaced by fresh one would be found. Divination is the practice of attempting to foretell the future, reveal the unknown or find out the wish of a divinity or spirits. Those who engage in the art of divination are called diviners. They may either be priests connected with the cult of certain divinities or they are men of power. Diviners are consulted when something is lost, when a barren woman desires children, when there is an inexplicable disease, when one has a strange dream etc. Different systems of divination are used. Some diviners use a four-valve kolanut but in Ayelereme, the system of divination is an offering of a cock. Therefore, a white cock signifies a system of divination

Number

Àrokò (symbol) manifests in the number of days the festival lasts. The king is the sender. He proclaims the day. The king always proclaims nine days to the commencement of Ayélèrémè festival every year. Ayélèrémè festival takes nine days. “Nine”, an odd number indexically points to the cosmology of the Yoruba that the ninth day of any event brings about favour. “*ojó kẹ̀sàn-án yóò san wá*” (the ninth day would bring us favour). Yoruba people pay attention to number in significant manner; odd numbers such as three, seven and nine are specially revered in most important events. It is the wish of the people of this community

like any other areas in Yorùbáland that the period is a favourable one. Most of Yorùbá traditional festivals come up on the ninth day after the announcement given by the Oba.

Names

Ègùn

Ègùn connotes women that took part in Ayélèrémè festival the previous year. They are known by the way they dress. They hold a long sugar cane in their hands which they use as walking sticks. Sugar cane is sweet, *Ègùn* likens their position to the sweetness of sugar cane; this means they enjoy their position as they are now full-fledged married women since they are with children of their own. *Ègùn*'s message to Ìtèlè is that the next level for them is to become *Ègùn* after the festival which is the most enjoyable part of their matrimonial life since the successful delivery of the first pregnancy remains the sign of complete integration of a woman into her husband's family. It should be noted here that *Ègùn* in Ayélèrémè festival is different from the name of an ethnic group located majorly in Lagos and Ògùn States in the South Western part of Nigeria that are also found in neighbouring West African countries, notably the Republic of Benin and Togo (Porto novo People).

Agbóginá

The mother-in-laws (husband's and wife's mothers) hold agbóginá (strings of cowries). Each of them holds the number of agbóginá signifying the number of first born children (grandchildren) she has produced. In Yorubaland, celebrants use symbols that connote their position in the ceremony. For instance, a child of the deceased parent wears beads round his neck during funeral ceremony which gives him an oríkì (Yorùbá praise name) 'òmọ olókùú abàjà lórùn' that is a child of the deceased having beads round his neck. In Ayélèrémè

festival, holding agbóginá connotes grandmother and the number of agbóginá held connotes the number of her first born children.

Èzò dàmìdàmì

Èzò dàmìdàmì in Ayélèrémè festival refers to a big and flat àkàrà cake that can only be fried one at a time and can only be fried during Ayélèrémè festival. It must be fried in a house where there is an Ìtèlè. Frying Èzò dàmìdàmì connotes that Itele now has a larger family to cater for; she has her own family, her parents and relations, her husband's relations and her own children. By providing epa rogodo or ewa (beans) for big akara balls (Èzò dàmìdàmì), Itele's husband tells her that Ìtèlè now has a big family to cater for. The same thing applicable to Itele, she is telling people of the community that she is ready to accept everybody as her own people and can feed them so far her husband provides the raw food. Both Itele and her husband send the message across to the people of their community through the preparation of Èzò dàmìdàmì which is the sign.

Conclusion

In this paper, it is established that Ayélèrémè festival is a firstborn-related festival. It is celebrated once in one's life time. It is to commemorate what Òkpàrà did to his wife at the birth of their first born. It is believed that Ayelereme festival has a minimal ritual context and which celebrate communal bonding and social intercourse. It is also an exercise for youths while trying to enrich their different purses. However, from the semiotic perspective, it is depicted that the festival itself is a sign-related festival. It signifies the most joyous day in the life of Òkpàrà; a good leader which the people now emulate. The signs are divided into verbal and non-verbal codes for easy explanation. The verbal codes include Ìtèlè's greeting that connotes asking for gifts from market women while her husband's use of language connotes his happiness and love for the wife. Non-verbal codes include Ùtá, leaves, taboo,

colour, sacrifice, number and names. *Ìtèlè* signifies Ọkpàrà's wife that had a first born. The husband signifies Ọkpàrà that blessed poor people of the community. *Ùtà* signifies the presence of Ọkpàrà and his wife. A moral lesson to be learnt is that it was the good behaviour of Ọkpàrà that is worthy of respect and emulation. Ọkpàrà thus taught his people the importance of children in the society. Married women also realise that they are nothing without children hence they rejoice at the birth of their first child. Rejoicing at the birth of first born is not peculiar to the people of Ìpè Àkókó, it is common in every part of Àkókó land (four Local Government Areas) (Arówòşęgbé, 2014: 238-260). It is observed that women having their first pregnancy as stillbirth are regarded as unfortunate set of people. The fault may not be that of the woman; it is therefore recommended that women should change this perception of their fellows to reject the debasing constraints imposed on them by culture as Arówòşęgbé (2014:257) once suggested although womanism is not employed in this work.

Observation shows that the number of women participating in *Ayelèrémè* festival reduces every year. Modern women especially, Christians believe that the festival is an ancestor veneration and according to them, it is against their new religion. This means that the future of this festival is not as bright as the people thought. Although, *Ayelereme* festival is not in celebration of Ọkpàrà at death rather, it is in commemoration of what Ọkpàrà did to his wife yet for the simple fact that sacrifice may be present, one would take it to be an ancestor veneration related festival.

Careful observation sees the festival as first-born-related festival and women rejoice at the birth of their first born. Therefore, the festival could not be left unperformed because of the importance attached to children in the society. Based on these findings and observations, the paper suggests that a building like town hall, civic/event centre be constructed with an inscription of Ọkpàrà and his wife to immortalise his name in addition to the performance of the festival.

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