

## WOMEN, RITUAL, AND MODERNITY: THE ÒSÉ (ÌJESU) FESTIVAL OF ÒKÈMÈSÍ-ÈKÌTÌ AS CULTURAL HERITAGE

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**Abstract:** This study probes the central role of the *aya-owa* (royal wives) in the *Òsé-Ijesu* (New yam) festival in Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì, showing how the women sustained and adapted to changes owing to the influence of modernity. Substantial scholarly energy has been expended on festivals in Africa, with scholars focusing on the audience-performer interactions, dramatic elements, performative aesthetics and the ritualistic aspects. There is limited scholarship on women's roles and the implications of contemporary changes in the *Òsé-Ijesu* festival. The study adopts a qualitative ethnographic research method; data is drawn from participant observation, detailed note-taking and unstructured interviews with participants during the 2013 *Òsé* (New yam) festival in Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì. The data was subjected to coding and interpretative analysis to determine women's agency and the modern changes in the patterns in the *Òsé-Ijesu* festival. The study reveals that some indices of the new yam festival have experienced a constant flux of modern culture, like Western hair attachment, dress styles, etc., due to the mobile nature of culture and its nexus with other cultures around the globe. The study concludes that women's strategic adaptation in the festival can lead to both social integration and potential cultural tensions.

**Keywords:** Women, ritual, modernity, *Òsé (Ìjesu)* festival, cultural heritage, Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì

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## 1. Introduction

Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì, *Òsé* (New yam) festival is a ritualised thanksgiving festival celebrated yearly before the consumption of new yams. The festival is multi-dimensional in nature. It is not only a channel to strengthen the bond between the three ruling households in Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì - the *Akepe*, *Aniye* and the *Omiringunsi* ruling houses, but also a means to re-emphasise the connection of the ancient town to Ile-Ife, the origin of the Yorùbá race. Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì, like Yorùbá towns, has its origin in Ile-Ife, the ancient seat and ancestral home of the Yorùbá race. History has it that Oyelagbo, one of Oduduwa's granddaughters, left Ile-Ife after the demise of her father Olofin, to found Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì. In recognition of her as the founder of the town, Oyelagbo's statue and her husband's image adorn the King's palace in Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì, as seen in fig.1 below.



**Figure 1:** Picture taken by the authors on the 7/08/2012

*The Statue of Oyelagbo, her husband and entourage drawn on the Palace entrance wall of Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì*

In honour of Oyelagbo, the present Oba, Alayeluwa Oba Michael Gbadebo Adedeji, CON, JP Ariyowonye II, Owa-Oye of Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì, during the 2012 *Òsé* festival, affirms that the royal wives from the three-ruling households in the ancient town of Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì anchor the *Òsé* festival yearly. Noticeable changes are, however, observed in the overall *Òsé* festival in contemporary times; not only do the royal wives exhibit modern artefacts (hair attachment and clothing materials, among others), but they also sing songs from Christianity, which is alien to Africa. These changes raise a fundamental problem: while the festival has endured through time, modernity seems to be reconfiguring its core aesthetic and ritual structures in ways yet to be sufficiently explored by existing studies, especially regarding women's strategic adaptation of the festival and the wider cultural implications of these evolving practices. Therefore, in this study, we will investigate how women sustain the *Òsé* festival in Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì, modern influences and the implications of these changes for cultural heritage preservation.

## 2. Literature Review

Festivals in Africa have accumulated substantial critical scholarship. The extensive insights of many scholars continue to shape the perspectives on African festivals as both a cultural phenomenon and artistic form (Finnegan 1970; Olajubu 1977; Ogunba 1978; Ogunbiyi 1981; Akporobaro 2005; Olaniyan 2012; Patrick & Oyewo 2026; etc.). Traditional festivals are an integral, dynamic part of the culture of an unalienated African, an occasion to which he responds spontaneously (Benarfa & Boutagouga, 2024). As Olaniyan (2012) observes, Ogunba (1978) reveals that festivals are “sprawling multimedia occasions” that often incorporate diverse forms (p.355). Festivals are platforms for propagating unity amongst kith and kin, and for passing on folklore from one generation to the next (Patrick, 2022, p.157). The features of festivals that will be examined in this study negate the popular assumption by some scholars that traditional festivals in Africa are not more than occasions for the re-enactment of past deeds (Marti 2004). The re-enactment of a particular traditional festival suggests a strict confinement to what was in place over the years, and this assertion is quite difficult to sustain since no two performances can be said to be the same. Festivals are innovative and flexible, responding to changes in culture, innovation, and modernity (Patrick & Oyewo, 2026, p. 7). Ogunba (1978) validates this when he observes that festivals have “a high dynamic potential, especially their great adaptability to the current environment” (p.6). It is against this background that it is relevant to identify significant changes in the *Òsé* festival of the *Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì* people of Nigeria and to discuss the implications of such changes.

The irruption of modern culture on the indigenous African culture has been an important concern for many modern African scholars. There is no gainsaying that all the culturally perceived ills notable in the colonialisèd nations are traceable to the colonial encounter with Europeans (Guerniche & El-Mechta, 2024, p.212). The view of Falola (2018) that most African cultures were “transformed because of colonialism” (p.1) is apt in this context. He reveals further that “the colonial experience transformed African cultures to the extent that many Africans became strangers to the tradition as of old, suffering alienation in the process” (p.1). The result of the irruption of colonialism in Falola’s view is that “the Europeans were able to give more of their culture to Africans” (p.2). The aftermath of the acceptance of the coloniser’s culture brought cultural changes to most African cultures. The opinion of Sarr (2024) corroborates Falola’s earlier view. Sarr affirms that the colonial invention through the slave trade not only weaned Africa of her population, but also deprived her of human resources, which led to the economic progress of the Western world. A noteworthy contention of his study is the systematic process through which the West invades African culture. To him, the African continent did witness again the second wave of colonialism that pauperised it culturally, economically, socially and developmentally. Nigeria was not exempted because the country had witnessed political assassinations, Civil War, coup d’états, as well as political corruption and military dictatorship in the contemporary period. Western education was introduced to show all the power and glory of Europe to the people of their colonies. Sarr (2024) further argues that the Western education brought to Africa was weaponised to force Africans to accept the imported culture without questioning, while discarding their indigenous culture. (p.152). While this claim may not be far from the truth, there are other factors, such as “underdevelopment” (Taiwo, 2010, p. 22) and insensitivity on the part of leaders, that are responsible for the present predicament of Africa.

Some other scholars share other divergent opinions. Insight from Richard Rathbone’s (2002) study undermines the ascription of modern culture to the West alone. He opines that Africa has been experiencing modern culture before their contact with the West. In his submission on the evolution of modern culture in Africa, he opines that “the current inhabitants in Africa are descendants of historical communities whose cultures, language and

historical experiences enormously varied while changing greatly over millennia” (p.18). According to him, white racists and/or Afrocentric thinking and writing which suggest that Africans were all much the same before European contact are not only “ignorant but pervasive” (p.18). By referring to those critics who assumed that the African continent was static before European contact, he refutes the linkage of ‘modernity’ or ‘modern culture’ to the Western world and affirms that there had been “internal long-distance trade in West Africa where varieties of commodities like fish, salt, hides and kola” (p.19) were sold before colonial contact, therefore the States that constitute the African continent had always been relating with each other for commercial purposes.

In the same vein, Abanyam (2012) reveals that some standard practices in African Societies before the colonial contact disengage African modern culture from the West:

Before the advent of modern science and its application technology, the Africans knew how to brew beer, distil local gin, preserve corpses, weave cloths, make pots of different shapes, colours, and sizes, build houses, make astronomical observations, heal diseases of different types through herbs and roots, rear cattle and do many other things. But what happened to those indigenous sciences today? Some of them have been lost because of the influence of the Western scientific paradigm (p.105).

Abanyam (2012) argues that Africans have a relatively rich body of indigenous knowledge and related technologies, which have been used for thousands of years to solve their problems. But because of the fact that no society is static and cultural infusion is inevitable in societies across the globe, most of the aforementioned cultures are no longer in existence, but some are still being reckoned with in some parts of Africa. In other words, although Africa had its culture in place, intact and not fragmented until the acculturation of Western modern culture via colonialism, it must be stressed that the degree of stability of such is questionable since Africa had also been experiencing its unique modern culture. The crux of this research is therefore to show that just like other fields of endeavour; the impact of modern culture can be seriously felt in *Òsé* festival.

### 3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative ethnographic research approach, which is most appropriate because it offers a solid framework for understanding ontological traditions and cultural practices within their natural environments. Narrative data were obtained during the 2013 *Òsé (Ìjesu)* Festival of *Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì* through detailed note-taking participant observation, and semi-structured interviews with the *aya-owa* (royal wives). Unstructured interviews were held in 2012 with the reigning monarch and one of his senior wives. Structured interviews with select subjects, such as members of the *Aya-Owá* clan, palace personnel, and people who attended the festival, were held in 2013. The fact that the *Òsé* festival is strictly anchored by the royal wives of Okemesi-Ekiti makes collecting data for this research almost an impossible task. Palace restrictions barring accessibility to the *aya-owa* (royal wives) chanters during *Òsé* festival meant attending the festival with the consent of Oba Alayeluwa Michael Gbadebo Adedeji, CON, JP Ariyowonye II, Owa-Oye of *Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì*, in the company of *Olori Ore-Ofe*, one of the wives of the incumbent king, who happens to be a friend. While an unstructured interview was conducted twice in 2012 with both the incumbent king and the most elderly of the royal wives, structured interview was carried out during the 2013 *Òsé* festival. Field observation focused on the key ritual activities of the festival, such as *Pípalé ebora*, *Ìbeléwò*, *Òwúro Ìbòrùn*, and *Ayeye Odún*. Access to informants was made easier by the permission granted by the *Owa-Oye* of *Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì* and help from *Olori Ore-Ofe*.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1 Preparation for Òsé Festival

The preparation of the Òsé festival starts with the Chief Priest of Òsé, who doubles as the *Olúwo* of Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì, fixing the dates to celebrate Òsé after consulting with the oracle. He then proceeds to the *Aya-Owá àgbà* (the eldest of the royal wives) to notify her. The significance of this action is to quickly notify other women in her group, especially those staying outside the community. She, however, takes caution while sending this message to avert propagating the news of the incoming festival before the formal announcement by the incumbent king. The King is then informed that all the festivals celebrated in Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì revolve around him, and Òsé is not an exception. The King's commitment to making Òsé festival a success cannot be overemphasised. He provides money for buying all items needed for the rituals that constitute the Òsé festival. Ritual items such as kolanuts, dry gin, palm wine, rams, cocks, and brooms, among others, are purchased, while foodstuffs are not left out.

Special meals are prepared for all and sundry, so the king and this community cheerfully bear the cost of entertaining with food, kola nuts and palm wine because they are sure of divine blessing in return. Not only does the incumbent king spend money on preparation to receive visitors and friends to make the celebration colourful, but he and the Chief Priest also receive various gifts from sons and daughters of the community, both domiciled and visiting, for the special occasion.

The king equally augments whatever amount of money is in the purse of the *Aya-Owàs* to enable them to buy a beautiful uniform for the celebration of the Òsé festival. The essence of wearing a uniform during the festival is to prevent segregation because of social or economic differences among the royal wives. Messages are then sent to the chiefs of the town, well-wishers, friends and relatives. In contemporary times, an invitation letter is sent to the administrative headquarters in Aramoko-Ekiti and individuals whom the Oba, being an elite, deems fit to invite. As it was practised in ancient times, a town crier was also assigned to announce around the community to notify the people of the upcoming Òsé festival.

Lastly, the community must be ceremonially cleaned. This is necessary to purify the land against any sort of defilement that may avert the success of the Òsé festival celebration. Suffice therefore to examine the propitiatory rite by the royal wives of Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì that precedes the Òsé festival celebration. The appeasement ritual is done not only to appeal to the divinity and other spirit beings that will be visiting the Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì land for protection, but also to atone for the past failures and misdeeds of the royal wives themselves, who will anchor most aspects of the festival and of the entire community.

Two days to the commencement of the Òsé festival, a group of people, including the incumbent king, the Chief Priest of Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì, alongside the *Aya-Owà*, led by the eldest of them and the drummers, dance from the Owà's palace to the boundary of the town, where the remains of the ancient *Kiriji* war are kept for archival purposes. At the boundary, the *Aya-Owà* will sweep the ground, after which the Chief Priest of Òsé will slaughter a goat and sprinkle its blood around the boundary for purification and atonement. The slaughtered goat will be taken by a young trainee of the Chief Priest, who, on the instruction of his boss, shares it with drummers who performed at the ritual. The group's joyous dance from the boundary of the community to the palace signifies the beginning of the Òsé festival, and it is usually two days before the festival proper begins. From that day to the main day of the festival, the palace is usually filled with people who are beautifully dressed, especially the royal wives who plait their hair and beautify it with beads. The four major activities of the Òsé festival are:

*Pípalé ebora*- Cleaning of the past kings' graveyard

*Ìbeléwò* - Inspecting the kings' graveyard

*Òwúro Ìbòrùn* - A morning of using blankets to cover shoulders

*Ayeye Odún*- Get together of the festival

#### 4.2 The Roles of the Aya-Owá in the Ritual of Òsé Festival

Òsé festival in ancient times used to last seven days, but due to changes in the people's worldview, it has been reduced to four days. Oba, Michael Gbadebo Adedeji, CON, JP Ariyowonye II, Owa-Oye of Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì, during an unstructured interview in the 2012 Òsé festival, states that the activities of the first three days of the festival include diverse rituals from morning till dawn each day, while the last day is dedicated to the *Obalará* compound, being the direct household (Aniye ruling household) of the incumbent King.

The first day of the festival is set aside for cleaning the graveyard of kings in Okemesi-Ekiti (*Pípalé ebora*). Graveyards of kings in all Yoruba communities are sacred places from which the public is barred, and the graveyard of Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì kings is not an exception. The incumbent king, during an unstructured interview on the 2012 Òsé festival, substantiates this claim that people are not allowed into the graveyard, not even members of the ruling houses. He recalled an occasion when one of his daughters was sent to the graveyard for something important on a particular afternoon. She was said to have returned in a fearful mood to report that she had heard voices asking her, “What are you doing here? If not for the fact that you are our child, you would have been engulfed!” This incident negates Adeboye’s (2016) observation that home burial “guarantees that the graves of the deceased are within easy reach for regular contact and offerings” (p.5). This claim does not align with the outcome of the unceremonious visit of the princess to the graveyard of kings in Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì as explicated by the incumbent king above. From the reaction of the ancestral fathers buried behind the palace, one can argue that the innocent young princess is spared only because she has the royal blood running through her veins. If it were a non-royal person, it is possible that the person might not be spared.

The above claim further buttresses the sacredness of the graveyards of deceased ancestors, especially kings in Yorubaland in general and Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì in particular. Their graveyards are powerful even in their dead state. However, given the position of the *Aya-Owas* and the need to perform the ritual cleaning of “*ile-ebora*” during the new yam festival, the women are not denied access to the kings' graveyard in Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì.

The *Aya-Owas* start the highly significant ritual of cleaning the graveyard of kings in the community very early at dawn on the festival day. They converge at the market square, which is a walkable distance to the palace, around 5:00 am and file in a single line to the graveyard of kings in the community, singing a song to identify with their husband-king's lineage, thus:

*Lilé: Òní mà l'orò ilé*

*Ègbè: Òní mà l'orò ilé oko mi*

*Lilé: Òsé mà l'orò ilé*

*Ègbè: Òsé mà l'orò ilé oko mi*

Lead: Today is the lineage festival

Chorus: Today is my husband's lineage festival

Lead: Ose is the lineage ritual

Chorus: Ose is my husband's lineage festival

The women, as evident in the song above, are notifying the Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì community of the commencement of the festival. This song serves as a prelude to other activities of the festival. It foregrounds the belief that the women have in the Òsé festival, which they confess to be the festival of their husband's household. The depiction of the women here reflects

Kolawole's position that African women do not project individualism but embrace and cultivate collective consciousness, mutual reciprocity, and role sharing, which prevents family dislocation (1998, p.30). The women, however, change their song immediately they get into the graveyard of the kings to the song below:

<p><i>Lilé:</i> <i>Nilé nlá, a ó ye bàbá wò</i> visited</p> <p><i>Ègbè:</i> <i>Nilé nlá, a ó ye bàbá wò,</i> visited the big mighty house</p> <p><i>Lilé:</i> <i>Bódún bá dé, a ó ye bàbá wò,</i> <i>Ègbè:</i> <i>Bódún bá dé, a ó ye bàbá wò,</i> <i>nilé nlá</i></p> <p><i>Lilé:</i> <i>Nilé nlá, a ó ye bàbá wò</i> visited</p> <p><i>Ègbè:</i> <i>Ológún adé, a ó ye bàbá wò,</i> <i>nilé nlá</i></p>	<p>Lead: In the mighty house, father shall be visited</p> <p>Chorus: In the mighty house, father shall be <i>nilé nlá</i> in</p> <p>Lead: At the festival, father shall be visited</p> <p>Chorus: At the festival, father shall be visited in the big mighty house</p> <p>Lead: In the mighty house, father shall be visited</p> <p>Chorus: Custodian of twenty crowns, father shall be visited, in the mighty house</p>
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The songs above confirm the authenticity of the sacredness Yoruba people attach to the world of the living, the dead and the unborn. It underscores the mythical belief of Africans in general and the Yoruba in particular about 'ile' (earth), which Ogungbile (2009) says "most culture refers to as mother earth" (p.87). 'Ile' is also known as "Apepe-Ale, Ogere, Afokoyeri and Alapo-ika" (p.87). The songs are metaphors that might not be understood without the knowledge of some creation myths. Ogungbile's (2009) account of the myth of creation is very apt here. He submits that 'ile' is one of the female primordial deities who once resided in heaven. She, however, out of her brave, courageous and caring nature, offers herself as the place of settlement for spiritual beings after which human beings (that are created from it, "ile", as accounted for in another myth) populate it (p.87). From the myth, "ile" served as a host for spiritual beings used directly by Olodumare to carry out different assignments for Him, one of which is the creation of human beings. Thus, "ile" is not only connected to spirit beings alone, but its nexus with human beings also cannot be underestimated. The Aya-Owas, who understand the dual character of "ile" as "good" and "bad" (p.88), take it upon themselves to continue caring for "ile" of the "ile-ebora" that possesses a "big belly" or "womb" that contains their powerful husband-kings.

The wives of the ruling households here appease the spirit of the dead kings through the humility displayed by sweeping and mopping clean the graveyard of their husbands and kings. While humbly performing this assignment, the women pray to the gods and goddesses to not only provide them food but also for the general welfare of the Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì community.

The women thereafter proceed to the Owa's palace, where they shower him with encomiums through different song renditions. It must be emphasised that songs constitute an important aspect of the Òsé festival celebration, and all through the Aya-Owas render different songs as the ritual demands. As we argued elsewhere, that Òsé festival song belongs to "women's oral genre since it empowers them for self-actualisation and self-empowerment" (Oladiran 2014, p.24). On the second day of the festival is the "Ìbeléwò", that is, the inspection of the kings' graveyard. This is the only day in the year that non-royal persons are allowed into the graveyard of kings in Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì. Few visitors and guests are allowed at the permission of the incumbent king to enter this sacred place in Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì, but they are restricted to the open space before it. The Ìbeléwò ritual is an interesting one as the incumbent

king dances with his wives and the Chief Priest to pay the deities a special visit. He thereafter takes his seat close to one of the graveyards during this ritual.

Here, the *Aya-Owá* renders the lineage panegyric of the ruling household in Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì, raising their hands as if hailing them thus:

<i>Ògbóbómójà, ekùn Oko Olori</i>	Ogbogbomoja, the brave man, the queen's husband
<i>Ó bá olómo méfà pín</i>	, who shares six children with their mother
<i>Ó ní kí olómo mú méjì</i>	two to the mother
<i>kí òun mú mérin</i>	four to himself
<i>Tí olómo bá rojú</i>	if the mother complains
<i>Òhún maa gba méfà pátápátá</i>	he takes all the six children to himself
<i>Orumomoru</i>	Orumomoru
<i>Òjìmòjìmo èejò tí n gun àgbon</i>	Ojimojimo, snake that climbs the coconut tree,
<i>Ajìwonjìwo ilèkè</i>	one with many various beads
<i>Agbón-òn-gbe òkun</i>	undrainable sea
<i>Alagbalúgbú Òsà</i>	mighty and endless lagoon
<i>Òsà ibá se bì Òkun</i>	should the lagoon act like the sea
<i>Kò ní jé kí ayé gún</i>	the world would have been in disorder

The value ascribed to *oriki* by the Yoruba cannot be underestimated. Barber (1991) asserts that it is “crucial in making the relationships, human and spiritual...reveal connections and hidden faces in society that would not otherwise be accessible” (p.2). The historical account explicated by *oriki* in linking the present with the past is an aspect underscored in the rendition of the *Aya-Owá* in the panegyric above. Barber's view is very apt:

*Oriki* commemorates personalities, events and actions that people consider important. They provide a way of thinking about social relationships within and between families, and a way of promoting and expressing the rivalry of ambitious individuals. They are the living links through which relationships with Orisa, the gods, are conducted, and it is in *Oriki* that the past is encapsulated and brought into the present, where it exercises a continual pull. *Oriki*, then, are one of the principal discursive media through which people apprehend history, society, and the spiritual world (1991, p.4)

The *oriki* of the ruling lineages in Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì is carefully composed and used by the *Aya-Owas* not only to bind the ruling houses together but also members of the community as a unit. The memory of the past is invoked, as the women tactically refer to an incident of adoption that happened in the distant past, where a king adopted the children of a particular woman, whose identity is not disclosed; such children would have mixed up with the royal household in Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì; and the likelihood of enthroning such children as king(s) of the land in years to come cannot be overruled. The eulogy chanted by the royal wives reaffirms the confidence of the deified fathers of Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì in the incumbent king, who is also enlightened on the heroic deeds of the deified ancestral fathers of the land, and thus is charged to bend or stand firm where and when necessary. The eulogy describes the king's connection with his relatives and genealogy. The rituals that accompany this *oriki* performance are similar to those of the *Yungba* chant in Oyo Alaafin as described by Jegede (2006). They are the removal of head-ties, pouring of libation, salutations (the women raise their hands as if hailing both the dead and the incumbent kings), sharing of kola-nut and invocation as the *oriki* is being chanted with all seriousness.

By way of metaphor, the king is compared to *Orumomoru*, the big, strong and dreadful snake that is colourful. Drawing further from other imagery, the king is compared to a mighty

and endless lagoon, an undrainable sea of waters. These nature images create awe and the immense power enjoyed by the King, which correlate with natural laws. The beaded snake draws attention to the royal snake, glorious in outlook, yet dangerous and poisonous. The symbol of the kingly power, the snake, is as attractive as it is dreaded. Cunning and sacred, it is a metaphor for what the king represents for the people and the emotions he invokes. The various beads, with different colours, depict the different attributes that royalty manifests.

In the first stanza of the eulogy, the ancestral king is referred to as a lion. Lions, as kings of the jungle, are fearless animals that could be used to depict royalty and kingship. These attributes are used to describe the great characteristics of the kings who have reigned and ensured that the land never fell into the hands of their enemies. They are “lion husbands”, strong, proud and domineering. The use of exaggeration or hyperbole, a common feature of panegyrics, is to reinforce the larger-than-life attribute of the kings and the ancestral royalty. The place of the women here is that of a mediator. They mediate between the ancestral fathers of the land and the community itself.

The third day of the festival is the *Òwúro Ìbòrùn*, that is, a morning of using a shawl to cover the shoulder. Participation at this ritual is limited to a group of people that includes the incumbent king and his council in chief, the Chief Priest of the *Òsé* festival, the *Aya-Owá* and the researcher whose assistant was not allowed into the palace very early on *Òwúro Ìbòrùn*. On such a day as this in ancient times, kings would use ‘*àrán*’, that is, velvet, to cover their shoulders after wearing their regular dresses, while the Chief Priest of *Òsé* and men in the kings’ traditional council would use ‘*aso-òkè*’ instead of *àrán*. This unique tradition is sustained as the king uses ‘*àrán*’ to cover his shoulders, while the chiefs use various kinds of clothing materials. Of interest is the fact that the Chief Priest of the *Òsé* festival used ‘*sányán*’, a type of *aso-òkè*, which is called *baba-aso*, that is, father of fabrics, in the 2012 and 2013 *Òsé* festival. The Chief Priest uses cold water and kola-nut to pray special prayers for both the incumbent king and his subjects, as seen in figure 2 below.



**Figure 2:** Picture taken by the authors on the 08/08/2012

*The Chief Priest of Òsé and Some Chiefs during the 2013 Òwúro Ìbòrùn Day*

In appreciation of the fact that the King, being an enlightened personality, stays abreast of the culture of the ancestral fathers of the land in propagating the culture of the *òwúro Ìbòrùn*, the *Aya-owas* sing thus:

*Ó mà gbórò yo*  
*Àrè mú Èdú o, ó mà gbórò yo*  
*Ológìnní lówùjo*  
*Àrè mú Èdú o, ó di Ológìnní lówùjo*

He promotes the culture  
 Aremu Edu promotes the culture  
 He becomes a cat in the society  
 Aremu Edu becomes a cat in the society

\*

*Bí è ó ba mo n*  
*Alárè mú la mò*  
*Ológún adé, olá rẹ̀ là ñ je*

If you know not a man  
 Alaremu, we know  
 Custodian of twenty crowns,  
 we are enjoying your wealth.

*Olóri owó, olá rẹ̀ là ñ je*

A prosperous man, we are  
 enjoying your wealth.

*Omo olóri ade,*  
*Olá, rẹ̀ lanù je*

Royal child,  
 We are enjoying your wealth.

\*

*Alárè mú so 'Mè sí d'Èkó o /2x*  
*Gbedemuke*  
*Eni inúbi kó forí e solè,*

Aremu has turned 'Mesi to Lagos/2ce  
 real enjoyment!

*Alárè mú so 'Mè sí d'Èkó o*  
*Lagos Gbedemuke*

Whoever is angry, should knock  
 his head against the floor.

Aremu has turned 'Mesi into  
 real enjoyment!

The role of the *Aya-owa* here, through their song rendition at the *òwúró Ìbòrùn* and during the *Òsé* festival in general, could be said to be a repository of tradition and history of the *Òkèmèsí-Èkítì* community. The women not only foreground the culture of respect for elders, culture of liberation of kith and kin, culture of belief in the Supreme Being, culture of belief in the divinities and spirits, culture of belief in the ancestors, culture of belief in life after death but also culture of morality, culture of marriage and virginity, and importantly, culture of preserving the Yoruba language and tradition. The *Aya-owa* use their creative power to compose beautiful songs to keep a record of what is happening as regards the aforementioned and many more. The women preserve this unique culture because failure to do so may lead to its death. The songs above are some of the beautifully composed songs by the royal wives to either keep a record of the happenings in the community or open up historical records for promoting tranquillity in the town.

The first song above in this category is used to record that, despite the incumbent king's high level of Western education and exposure (being a man of many travels), he still respects and allows the community's culture to continue to flourish. Instances of cases where traditional rites or festivals no longer thrive are not strange among the Yoruba people any more. One of such is the '*Osoosi*' festival of Ibadan, as revealed by Ogunba (1978), which has faded out of sheer neglect.

In the second song in this category, '*Bí è ó ba mo ni...*' the *Aya-Owà* project portrays the incumbent king as a wealthy king who is not selfish but shares his wealth with all and sundry. The use of terms like '*Ológún adé*', '*Olóri owó* and *Omo olóri ade*,' that is one with twenty crowns, a prosperous man and one with a head that wears a crown, shows that Oba Micheal

Gbadebo Adedeji is indeed a wealthy king. The *Aya-owà Agbà's* reference to the king's generosity of giving them money to complement whatever they have in their purse to buy the beautiful *aso-ebí* for *Òsé* festival equally testifies to the fact that the king is not selfish. His belief in the principle of "live and let live" is thus highlighted. This trait, as seen in the king, prompted the women to sing the last song in this category – "*Alàrè mú so 'Mè sí d'Èkó ó gbédemuke...*" The *Aya-Owà* composed this song to keep the record of the outstanding renovation that is seen in the 2013 *Òsé* festival. The renovation covers every section of the palace. Right from the '*ile-ebora*' (the graveyard of kings), which was initially dusty, to the courtyard where the king relaxes and discusses issues of the community with his council members, the whole palace is upgraded to a first-class oba's palace.

The *Aya-Owà* in years earlier than 2013 used to spend quality time cleaning and preparing to receive the king and members of his council at both '*ojúde oba*' and '*ilé-ebora*'. However, in the year 2013, both places were beautifully renovated. Floor tiles have been made such that women no longer have to spend more time than necessary cleaning the floor. This development implies that in the 2013 *Òsé* festival celebration, women only spent little time sweeping and mopping the floor to take a neat and beautiful shape. The entire palace was repainted with bright colours, especially the palace courtyard (*gbàgede oba*). The venue of the ritualised kola-nut throwing on the "*òwúró Ìbòrùn*" of the *Òsé* festival, where the king and his chiefs occasionally relax and discuss issues that pertain to the community's development, was reconstructed as seen in fig. 3 below. Traditional stools, built in the courtyard, were painted, and the environment was beautified for the *Òsé* festival.



**Figure 3:** Picture taken by the authors on the 10/08/2013

*The Renovated Palace Court of the Owá-Oyè's Palace*

Aside from the aforementioned, new leather furniture replaced the old and outdated ones in the two sitting rooms in the main palace. The offices attached to the main palace and the research centres within the palace were also upgraded. To this effect, the *Aya-Owá*, who were surprised at the rapid development in their community, stressed that "Aremu has turned

Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì into Lagos”, the centre of civilisation in Nigeria. They even appeal to whoever was not pleased with the development to “knock his head against the floor”. The renovations also extend to the status of Ooyelagbo, which is repainted to give a conspicuous effect, such that anyone entering or going out of the *Owá-Oyè*’s palace will notice it easily. This rapid development in Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì is new in the community’s history. The *Aya-Owá*, some of whom have witnessed the reign of two to three kings in the land, see a need to include the transformation of Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì in the oral archive of the town, and hence the composition of the songs discussed above.

Immediately after the ritual of the *òwùrò-Ìbòrùn*, the *Aya-Owa* dance to “*dùndún*” music and perform some important rituals at the shrine of “*Yeye Lobirin Oja*”. While others are dancing to the shrine of the market deity, one of the youngest wives of the royal lineages carries the new yam, which is a symbol of appreciation for the farm produce, carefully to the shrine, and the priestess of the deity performs a ritual at the deity’s shrine, using the yam and water. The priestess uses the items to pray for a peaceful and fruitful commercial year for the whole community, as seen in Fig. 4 below. The use of water at this stage is highly significant. Crops need water to grow. Water is a solvent and symbolises peace. The Yoruba believe that water has “the capacity to purify and to eliminate illnesses” (Eva-Marita, 2001, p.55).



**Figure 4:** Picture taken by the authors on the 10/08/2013

*The Priestess of Yèyé Lóbirin Ojà Performing a Ritual during the 2013 Òsé Festival*

The priestess appeals to the deity to make the New Year a successful one for the whole community. Some of the women then say personal prayers before the deity before they dance to an open place close to the entrance of the palace, where they display a bargaining session of buying and selling. This time, the bargain is anchored by a neutral elderly woman in the community who bargains with the *Aya-Owas* and succeeds in buying the yams at a very low price, as seen in figure 5 below. This aspect of the festival is highly significant as it suggests that commercial activities in Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì will be favourable in the community.



**Figure 5:** Picture taken by the authors on the 10/08/2013

*The Aya-Owá and Female Chiefs at the Ritualised Yam Selling*

The women thereafter dance to the *Owa-Oye's* palace to relay the success of the *Òsé* festival to the King. From this end henceforth, the *Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì* community is free to commence eating the new yams. The 2013 *Òsé* festival shows that the eating of the new yams actually starts from the palace, as people are seen in the palace eating roasted yams and drinking either palm wine, beer or soft drinks alongside. The notable change, which depicts modern culture of drinking palm wine to gulping beer and soft drinks in the celebration of *Òsé* festival amongst others, will be discussed to show the adaptable nature of *Òsé* festival in *Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì*.

#### *4.3 The Impact of Modernisation on Òsé festival in Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì*

*Òsé* festival, like most traditional festivals in general, has an exceptionally enduring quality which makes it linger on despite the harsh effects of modernity. The enduring nature of the *Òsé* festival qualifies it to adjust to the current reality of our modern world and thus prevents it from going into the state of oblivion. Ogunba's (1978) report that festivals have "a high dynamic potential, especially their great adaptability to the current environment" (p.6) validates the enduring nature of traditional festivals, and the *Òsé* festival is not an exception to this tradition.

*Òsé* festival, in ancient times, lasted for seven days, but due to the fact that people in modern society do not have enough time for anything, a problem caused by the complexity of present-day reality, it has been reduced to four days. The incumbent king justifies the reduction of the days spent in celebrating *Òsé* festival in recent times and gives the following reasons; first, most of the *Aya-Owá*, whose contribution into making *Òsé* festival a success cannot be substituted, now have secular jobs within and outside *Ekiti-State* and it may be difficult for them to take time off their duty posts for a whole week all in the name of celebrating *Òsé* festival. This fact is not peculiar to the *Aya-Owá* alone but also applies to both indigenes and friends of the community who would have loved to witness and share the festive joy with the king, in particular and the community in general. Furthermore, one cannot rule out the possibility that indigenes of the community who have never witnessed the *Òsé* festival celebration may be denied a chance of watching it performed if the celebration is not compressed into four days. The reduction from seven to four days is to cater for such people who wish to identify with the community during the *Òsé* festival. The implication of the reduction can be hinged on the fact that people are consciously adjusting to modern social realities in contemporary times.

Modern culture is equally notable in the 2013 *Ìbeléwò* ritual. Unlike in 2012, when the *Aya-Owá* had to wet the dusty floor before sweeping and mopping the graveside one after the other, the observable general renovation of the year 2013 in the palace did not exclude the graveyard; the use of floor tiles not only beautifies the place but also reduces the effort of the women at cleaning the graveyard of their husband kings. The renovation, therefore, allows the royal wives to demonstrate their agency freely, without having any negative consequences on the outcome of the traditional festival.

Furthermore, the change equally extends to *Òwúro Ìbòrùn* day. On that particular day in the ancient times, kings and all men present for the ritual used “*àrán*” that is, velvet to cover their shoulders after wearing their regular dresses. In 2013, although the king sustained this unique tradition by using “*àrán*” to cover his shoulders, some men present at the ritual used different kinds of fabrics while most of them did not even bother to cover their shoulders. It is unfortunate that even the Chief Priest of *Òsé*, who doubles as the Chief Priest of *Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì*, who is expected to be a custodian of the tradition, used “*sányán*”, a type of *aso-oke*, which is called *baba-aso*, that is, father of fabrics, in the 2012 and 2013 *Òsé* festival.

On the fourth day of the celebration, when the incumbent King identifies with the *Obalare* compound in particular and the community in general, all kinds of food are prepared, ranging from jollof rice to fried rice, and from semovita to pounded yam, among others. To satisfy guests further, different sorts of drinks and bottled water are used at the occasion. The entertainment aligns with the reality of our contemporary age, unlike in the distant past when pounded yams with bush meat and palm wine might be the best that could be served on such an important occasion. Meanwhile, the king, during an unstructured interview in 2013, asserts that the entertainment part of the *Òsé* is his own innovation. On this occasion, the *Aya-Owas* are treated as queens and not allowed to participate in either the cooking or serving. They are allowed to wear any clothing of their choice other than the uniform used for the three-day festival.

## 5. Conclusion

From the discussion so far, this study has explored the uniqueness of the *Òsé* festival as a new yam festival anchored by women. The *Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì* people, especially the royal households in the community, should continue to do all in their power to keep alive the rites and rituals that constitute the celebration of the *Òsé* festival. The elderly amongst the *Aya-Owá* should continue passing the cultural values and behavioural patterns of the royal lineages to the younger ones as a means of preserving the traditional practices of the households. This is because, through traditional festivals such as *Òsé*, we can retain various traditions and cultures of the people.

The royal graveyard should be opened up to become a tourist attraction, as in the case of the *Èpé* festival in Lagos State, *Ikeji* festival of the *Arondizuogu*, *Lisàbi* festival of the *Ègbá*, amongst others, so that it can also generate income for the community and *Èkìtì* State in general. Likewise, the office of the traditional ruler should organise suitable enlightenment programmes that will educate people on various traditional festivals celebrated in *Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì*. The *Èkìtì* State Ministry of Culture and Tourism should promote and enlighten the populace about the culture of their forbears.

This research has shown that the *Òsé* festival of *Òkèmèsí-Èkìtì* is a living cultural tradition, which depends greatly on the actions of women. The *Aya-Owá* acts not only as the bearers of ritual knowledge, but also adapts these rituals to fit today’s world. The Shortened

length of the festival, different clothing styles, remodelling of the palace, and different kinds of entertainment are all aspects that help sustain this tradition and preserve its connection with the ancient heritage. In a nutshell, this study highlights the fact that the Òsé festival exemplifies an important place of women in today's Yoruba culture.

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