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RESEARCH ARTICLE

IMPACT OF TEXTILE FRILLS ON THE EQUESTRIAN THRILLS AT OJUDE OBA FESTIVAL.

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Abstract

Equestrian figures are an integral part of Ojude – Oba festival which is celebrated annually in Ijebu – Ode, Southwestern Nigeria, in commemoration of the introduction of Islam into the town. The horses which are colourfully decorated with textile materials to the level of art lend excitement to the festival, as the riders display their equestrian prowess in a parade to the delight of onlookers at the festival. While many are enthralled by the kaleidoscope of colours and the entertaining display, the impact of textiles in bringing this to the fore is downplayed, and lost to the onlookers and as a result has up to now not been given a scholastic study. This study, a descriptive appraisal of Ojude - Oba festival, through personal participatory observation, consultation of few available literature materials, oral interviews and pictorial imagery, brings to the fore the role of textiles in the colourful display of equestrian figures at Ojude – Oba.

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Introduction:-

Ojude – Oba festival is celebrated annually in Ijebu – Ode in Southwestern Nigeria two days after the muslim Eid el - Kabir. This festival which attracts thousands of sons and daughters of the town within Nigeria, the diaspora, their friends and well wishers, spans over a hundred years. Though many accounts abound about the origin of the festival, there is a general consensus that it has its root in the introduction of Islam into the town.

In one of the account, the origin of the festival is linked with "efetule", which literally means "charging or scattering the ground with humour" In this account in order to create fun, a warlord, Balogun Kuku, accompanied by multitude comprising of family members and friends, rode a well decorated horse to visit the king of Ijebu land Awujale in his palace, in order to thank him for releasing a parcel of land for the observation of the Eid – el – Kabir prayer.(Ijebu News Extra, 2013). This mock war dance and display is what is reenacted by the *Elesin*, horse riders, at every annual Ojude – Oba.

Horses and horse riders have therefore become an inseparable part of Ojude – oba festival. Warlords and their family members entertain participants at this festival with their equestrian prowess. The glitz and glamour of Ojude – Oba is evidenced in the opulence display of textiles worn by the gorgeously dressed individuals and associations and the different age grades known as Regbe – regbe.(Areo, 2016). The parade at Ojude – Oba is however incomplete without the beautifully adorned horses and their riders which has also become a permanent feature of the festival. These horses become an aesthetically moving object of art as they are decked in textile materials just as their human counterparts.

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A few literature materials exist on the Ijebu people in connection with other Yoruba people (Johnson, 1921), on the history, politics and economy of Ijebu as a society (Ayandele, 1992;), and about the history of the people (Oduwobi, 2006; Botu, 1937). Others such as Fahm, 2015; Oladiti, 2009; Sote, 2003) have also written about Ojude – Oba festival. However, none of these literatures is specifically on the decorated horses at Ojude – Oba, which are historically, socially and aesthetically a significant aspect of the festival which hitherto has been overlooked probably because it has to do with animals.

The origin of introduction of horses into Ijebu of the land is not known just as the origin of the Ijebu people is hazy and shrouded in multifarious oral accounts. In a particular account by Oduwobi, 2006) however, the Ijebu are said to have migrated to their present settlement from Owodaiye, Sudan, in Kingdom of Ethiopia. This kingdom brought to an end by Arab supremacy in the Middle East and the Sudan. The name Owodaiye was later to be corrupted to Waddai.

This Sudan migration story probably accounts for the presence of horses in the cultural display of the long standing festival of Ojude – oba. This is because horses, according to Lawal (1972) were not indigenous to Africa but a general consensus is that they must have been introduced in their domesticated form into the continent. He further added that horses were known in Egypt and north Africa as early as second millennium B.C, but it was not until the first millennium B.C that Al – Muhalabi recorded the presence of horses in the ancient West African kingdom of Kanem. Also two Arab writers, Al Bakri (11th Century A.D) and Ibn Battuta (14th Century A.D) recorded the presence of horses as scarce and of diminutive size in Ghana and Mali respectively.

However, cavalry warfare and horse riding was reported to have been widespread in Sudan and the horse was significant in the social, political, and historical life of Sudan. This significance was aided by the Savannah nature of the climate which allowed easy movement of cavalry and the absence of two strain of tse –tse fly (Glossina Palpalis and Glossina Longipalpis), whose bite was the cause of fatality to the horse in forest regions. Horses therefore could have been brought into the land during their migration from Sudan.

Also, Oranmiyan, (a militant son of Oduduwa, the acclaimed progenitor of the Yoruba race) is credited to have founded Old Oyo and the Benin kingdoms and to have introduced horses to these kingdoms. This is also a probable source of introduction of horses into Ijebu land as Old Oyo, the most northerly of the Yoruba kingdom actively participated in the trans-Saharan trade, This assumption stands to reason because Lawal (1972) further posits that by 15th century, horses were transported through Trans Saharan trade from North Africa and Egypt. The history of the horse in Egypt is longstanding as Herodotus in 5th Century B.C is recorded to have described the Garamantes of Fezzan area of Egypt as sedentary farmers who used horse drawn chariots in warfare. Credence was given to his account in the 20th century by the discovery of rock paintings depicting this in the mountains of Western Fezzan near the Egyptian border. This source is also a likely source of entrance of the horse into Ijebu land as the Ijebu are shrewd and astute traders who travelled far and near to trade(Areo, 2016).

Whatever may be the origin of the horse into the land, the horse has remained one of the most valued animals among the Yoruba race. It is valued for its ability to increase man's movement and military power, and so has become symbolic of political power. The ruler and the culture hero are synonymous with the equestrian figure.

The horse is a symbol of power and prestige. The equestrian figure is therefore a common feature in Yoruba art and representations. The gods are depicted as horse riders to show their importance, dynamism, and supra – human attributes of speed and omnipresence. The ruler is also characterized as horse rider because of his position as *igbakeji orisa*, that is, deputy to the orisa, because of his spiritual position in the society. Also deified ancestors and other ancestors are represented as horse riders because of their believed new proximity to the gods in this culture where belief in life in the beyond is vibrant.

The horse is also used in many verbal expressions of the Yoruba. For instance, in the cognomen of Sango, the god of lightening, his praise includes “o gun ina bi esin” that is, ‘he rides on fire as if on a horse’, a praise phrase which has now been adopted for the Almighty God by Yoruba Christian worshippers. Statements such as “o lagbara bi esin”, as powerful as the horse, signifies the power attributed to the horse. Horses are also attributes of wealth. A popular Ifa priest and herbalist in the 1950s was nicknamed as “a g’esin j’awe Ifa”, he who rides on a horse to collect Ifa medicinal herbs from the bush. This not only shows his power as a herbalist, but is symbolic of his wealth and

affluence he had attained from the herbal practice.. Also, to be praised as “omo ol’oku esin”, meaning ‘one with the rein of the horse’ symbolises wealth and being in control of power; usually political power.

Equestrian figure in Yoruba sculpture according to Lawal (1972), probably originated with the death and deification of Oranmiyan and undoubtedly from the Savannah kingdom of Old Oyo from where it spread to other parts of Yorubaland

Finally, next to human being, a horse was the highest gift that could be given in appreciation of another. This is seen in the praise song to Iya Mapo, the goddess in charge of all women crafts;

*“IyaMapo atiba, iba re o, ki aro oja
Oloyo, Iya Mapo, ohun to ’se, gbesin*

IyaMapo, of Atiba, I reverence you, may the dye produce well.

The owner of Oyo. Iya Mapo, this is an activity that earned you the gift of a big horse.

The annual celebration of Ojude – Oba revolves round the traditional ruler, *Awujale*. The name Ojude- Oba is a coinage of two words meaning “the king’s courtyard or frontage” and it is an avenue for expressing loyalty to the king by different groups in the town. One of the striking aspects of the festival is that the Awujale sits on his throne all through the festival while all the groups pay him homage one after the other in a parade form. He, on his part pours on them his royal blessings.

Balogun and Elesin:-

The Baloguns are descendants of great Ijebu warlords in the community, while the Eleshin are the horse riders. These two groups of people follow on the heels of the parade of the *regbereghes* the age grades.

The Balogun families are about twenty in number. Notable ones among them are; Kuku, Keregbetu, Josin, Omitogun, Alatishe, Adesoye, Osobe, Odejayi, Oreagba, Sarumi, Otubu, Alausa, Shote and the current Balogun, balogun Odunuga of Ile-Oshi (Adebowale, 2015).

Each of the Balogun rides on a horse, joined with many other horse riders from his family, a large group of drummers, men carrying dane guns and some carrying the family banners. The men carrying the dane guns intermittently accompany the drumming and singing with the booming of gun shots from their dane guns.

A striking feature of the Balogun and Eleshin parade is that the horses are decorated colourfully in a kaleidoscope of colours as to the level of an artwork, decorated horses. All the Baloguns parade in ascending order to pay homage to the *Awujale* with the current Balogun taking the rear and being the last to pay homage to the *Awujale*.

The parade of the Baloguns brings colour and excitement into the Ojude Oba, through their dressing and display of equestrian display and mock war dance drama. Each family tries to outdo the other in their display of their equestrian prowess as awards are given annually for the equestrian performance.

The materials of decorating the horses comprise of brightly coloured textile materials, glittering crystals, sequins, glass beads and textile materials woven with metallic thread.

Banneretts, Banners and Emblems:-

Bannerettes, banners and emblems apart from lending colours to the festival, also constitute a major means by which textile material is used in identifying the different groups, families and associations at Ojude Oba. Apart from adding to the colour, glamour and glitz of this annual festival, the highly decorated horses have become moving art works portraying their historic, social, political and economic significance in the life of the Ijebu people and the festival annually. Their colours and adornment is also an enhancement of the aesthetic beauty of the Ojude - Oba festival.



Figure 1:- Close up of a decorated horse before a mammoth crowd at the festival.



Figure 2:- Bannerette of a warlord family as they move through the streets to the festival venue.



Figure 3:- The banner of Balogun Alatishe Family enroute the festival venue.

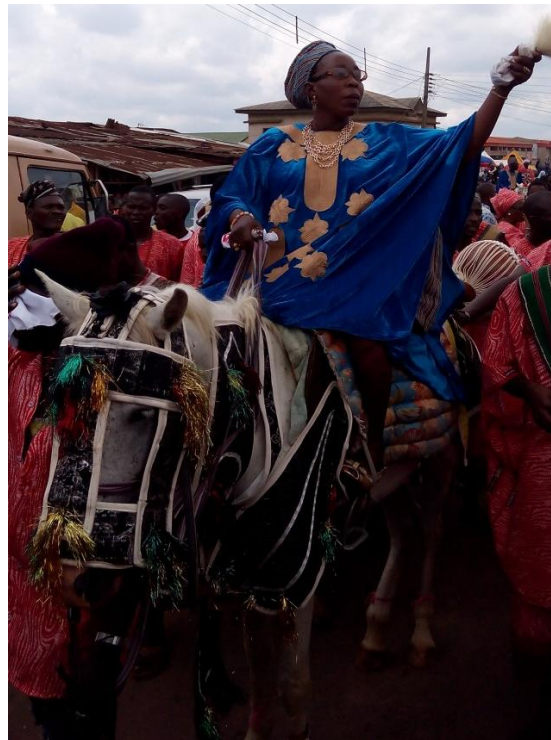


Figure 4:- A female horse rider on a well decorated horse.



Figure 5:- Balogun Odunuga family displays the N100,000 prize cheque for being the 2nd runner- up equestrian competition



Figure 6:- A horse owned by the Balogun Odunuga dressed in bright colours of red, white and gold.



Figure 7:- An equestrian display during the Ojude – Oba festival.



Figure 8:- A well decorated horse being ridden by a warlord

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