

RESEARCH ARTICLE

WOMEN IN RITUAL SPACE AMONG THE ÒGÙ (ÈGUN) PEOPLE OF BADAGRY, LAGOS STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT - This research investigated the role of women in rituals among the Ògù people of Badagry. It also analysed various ritual space women engaged in and their impact on poetries of the selected goddesses. The data for this study was generated from field investigation during visitations to the selected deities' shrines. Interviews were conducted with six selected devotees and physical observation of activities at Thùthúà and Yòhò deity shrines. There were audio/video recordings and a photographic documentation at grooves. The data collected were transcribed and analysed from the lens of hermeneutics of religion. The study authenticated Ògù women as the sustaining forces in the indigenous religious aesthetic practice. Ògù women play leadership roles in indigenous religion, especially as it concerns rituals, in contrary to the opinion of many that women occupy subservient position in the society. It also revealed that Ògù women played the role of prayer warriors, deity feeders, deity eulogizer/singers and dancers during sacrifices. The study concluded that although worship of the selected goddesses has suffered setback in encounters with foreign religious and western education, it is still actively worshipped in Ògù Community. Also, the goddesses and their poetries are repertoire of cultural practices of Ògù people of Badagry.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Women are inevitable important being in every human society. Any society or organisation that lack women are found not interesting and have limited achievements. Women are the Joy-givers, Peace-giver, Organizers, Coordinators, Supporters of child(ren) and spouse, Joy of the family, *Amódèdè-lárinrin*, *alátileyin*, *Ìtùnù-olólufé*, and so on. Women hold a very strong position on child's life, particularly in the well-being of the family and society at large. Society even believes that "behind every successful man there's a good woman". This confirmed how important women are in the life of every human. Women serve as lubrication in the wheel of life of all humans.

When we are talking about women power, we are not referring to the strength needed to dismantle hill or tree, it is mainly spiritual power that matters here. Women may appear weak physically, but they possess orphic, paranormal and spiritual powers than men. Spiritually, sacred women are healers, diviners, care-givers, fertility provider, motherhood, overseeing bodies of water and, also serve as lieutenants to the supreme. Women exhibits their endowed and gifted power by the Supreme being during worship, spiritual festivals/ceremony, sacrifices and other activities at the temple or shrines. The above submission buttresses [9] view where he pointed that, all Yoruba shrines are decorated with female symbols or signs. Also, that women are divinity's wife, priestess, ... *awo àjé* (witch cult), *awo abiyamò* (fertility cult). He added that, the these show how important and relevant women are in traditional religion and in society at large.

Among the Ògù (Ègùn) people of Badagry traditional worships and festival comprise of different activities and stages like other ethnic groups. Thùthúà and Yòhò deities selected for this study are not exempted, and with several activities involved in their worship and spiritual festivals. These deities are goddess and found among the Ògù people in Àjára and Vèthò town in Badagry. According to the devotees Thùthúà was a kind-hearted woman who loves and lives in Àjára with her husband but was not blessed with the fruits of the womb (barren).

It was further revealed that; it is origin that is called Yòhò in Ògù Language. The shrine was created by the first generation of Àjára Vetho town. The oldest woman among the settlers was a very kind and caring woman. She stood in position of care-giver and healer to everyone in the community. After several years of living in peace and harmony with people, this oldest woman died, and her corpse disappeared mysteriously from where she was laying. The settlers deliberated and concluded that would continue to be consulting her spirit at that spot of disappearance for help and turned the spot to a shrine (Àzáin). Moreso, all items they found there were chosen as ritual rites. As the community was expanding, different families decided to create Yòhò shrine in their compounds, that brought about Yòhò temples like Yòhò Agbónigamè, Yòhò Thaomè, Yòhò Síngbomè, Yòhò Sèthò and Yòhò Vèthògbò all in Vetho.

The target of this study was to examine the position Ògù women engaged in during ritual and sacrifices among Ògù people of Badagry. It was also set create awareness about Thùthúà and Yòhò deities, although they have suffered a serious setback in encounters with foreign religious (Islam and Christianity) and western education, it is still much alive and

actively worshipped. This study also presents the position of women in the worship and festival rituals of Thùthúà and Yohò deities among Ògù (Ègùn) people of Badagry, Lagos State, Nigeria.

Ògù (Ègùn) people of Badagry are endowed with very rich cultural activities, traditional or ritual festivals, shrines and deities. There are several deities among these people as we have in Yorùbá communities. Several research works have been carried out on many of deity's symbols and poetries, but it was observed that little or none was done on the position of women in worshipping goddesses. However, the impact of women in making sacrifices and worshipping of these deities among the Ògù (Ègùn) people of Badagry, Lagos State, Nigeria needs to be given attention. Therefore, this study sought to research into the efforts, duties and responsibilities of women in successful ritual festivals and worship of these selected goddesses among the Ògù people.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The need to research into the position and activities of women in ritual, particularly female deities has become inevitable. Many scholars have worked on rituals, gods, goddesses, and deities generally, some of these scholar works are reviewed and this stands as background upon which this research work rest on. [14] examined the *Ìjẹgàba Okùnrin lóri Obinrin ninú awo àti Odún ibilẹ Yorùbá* (Dominance of Male Offer Female in Cults and Yorùbá Traditional Festivals). She explained that female contributions are not well recognized or pronounced in Yorùbá traditional festivals, but obvious and relevant and cannot be ignored or erased. [2] in *Òṣun in the Verbal and Visual Metaphors*, reveals the position and impact of Òṣun goddess in Yorùbá society and, also explored on the faith of Òṣun devotees. Òṣun as the personification of Yorùbá womanhood; as a model mother; a pediatrician; ... beauty and the elegance of Òṣun was also examined. [2] propound emphatically on position of women in traditional religion that “there is no Yoruba native cult without women as its backbone” while [4] explained that “Women play key roles in religious ceremonies as priestesses and prophetesses. Some important deities are female...”. These scholars made it clear that women have huge duties in Yoruba traditional religious and festivals.

[10] stressed that female deities are not given power or recognition like the male deities, also female deities act only under the male image of the Supreme Being. The female worshipers are subordinate, and they were given peripheral roles in religious spheres. They stated clearly that, African Traditional Religion players relegates females and female worshipers. This position is clearly different from the practice of the devotees of Thùthúà and Yohò deities selected for this research work. [12] in her research into the role of women in African Traditional Religion, was not in conformity with the submission of [10] when she pointed out that women play the role of mother and caregivers in African religion. Also, that women are described mythologically as “mother of mankind, from whom all people originated. One could deduce from her submission that women are actively relevant and ascribed with different responsibilities both socially and spiritually.

2.1 The Ògù People of Badagry, Lagos State

The history of the Ògù (Ègùn) people of Badagry could not be left out in scholarly research works available. Some of these scholars are [13], [1], [5], [3], [15] to mention but few.

The Ogun popularly mistaken referred to as Ègùn are originally settlers in Dahomey now known as Republic of Benin. Their forefather migrated from Dahomey to Ipokia Local Government in Ogun State while some settled in Badagry in Lagos State. Ògù is a dialect of Gun-be. The Ògù speaking people are descendants of those who migrated from Whidah, Allada, Weme which are now part of the Republic of Benin... [5]. From this author's view, one can deduce that Ògù (Ègùn) of Lagos State moved from Republic of Benin to settle in Ogun where they later moved to Lagos of Nigeria. [15] the Akran of Badagry town speaks on this in an online interview that:

The only link we have with the people of Republic of Benin is that we speak the same language, but we are not from there. We are originally from the present days Ghana, from a place called Aneho and settled in our present abode in the 13th century. That is over 800 years ago. Agbede was the first of our ancestors to settle here. It was from him that the town got its name, Agbadagreme, which the white-man adjusted to Badagry to suit his tongue'...The Kingdom of Badagry starts from Seme border right through to Ajegunle.

[15] submission above shows that, Ògù (Ègùn) people of Badagry are not from Republic of Benin, that its only local dialect that connects the Ògù (Ègùn) people of Badagry in Lagos State with the ones in Republic of Benin. It is obvious that Ògù (Ègùn) people of Badagry migrated to where they found them in Lagos and Ogun State today. Ògù (Ègùn) people can be found in towns and villages like Badagry, Igbobele, Rópojí, Agbojetho, Kweme, Aivoji, Iweseme, Àjára, Àjára Vetho, Ìkóga and Àjídò under Badagry Local Government of Lagos State, Nigeria. There are several deities among these community as we have in Yoruba communities.

3.0 RESEARCH METHODS

The researcher carefully selected two female deities that is Thùthùà deity in Àjára and Yòhọ deity in Vetho community of Badagry Local Government Area of Lagos State, Nigeria to focused on. The study made use of both primary and secondary sources of data. The primary source comprised in-depth oral interviews with six purposively selected informants; one priestess and two devotees from each of the two selected goddesses in Badagry area of Lagos State, Nigeria. This was complemented with a participant-observation of the proceedings during the worship of the deities. There were also audio and video recordings as well as a photographic documentation of the symbolic elements of the selected deities at their temples. The secondary source included books, journal articles, magazines and the Internet. The data collected were transcribed and analysed within an eclectic framework of Hermeneutic Theories of literature.

4.0 RESEARCH FINDING AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Duties and Responsibilities of Ògù Women in Ritual Space

The results of this study shown that women play an important and a weighty role in the lives of family, religious settings and in the society. Research reveals that there are several roles and action carried out by women during sacrifices and worships of the selected goddesses. Using hermeneutics theory and physical attendance as our tools, we identified the following responsibilities carried out by female devotees:

4.2 Women as the Chief Priestess (*Abọrẹ*)

It is obvious that the chief priestess of the two goddesses (Thùthùà and Yòhọ) are women, and they are called Hùṅò in Ògù language. The oldest woman among the devotees, and in the community is made the chief priestess. She anchors all activities in the shrines. In preparation for Thùthùà worships, the chief priestess (Hùṅò) leaves home very early in the morning of the sacrifices day to fetch well water with sacred clay-pot. The chief priestess put the sacred clay-pot on her head while going to fetch the water. Once she's in this position, she has turned to representative of the goddesses on earth and can only communicate with the goddess spirits so there shouldn't be any communication with an ordinary person till she dropped the sacred pot.



Picture 1. Thùthùà sacred pot

It is a taboo for her to talk to anyone because it is disrespectful to spirits. She must not greet nor answer any greetings to and from the well side. This well water is used as cleanser by sprinkling it on everyone that will enter the temple with *akòko* leaves by the chief priestess. Their belief is that anyone that this water touches is clean from any kind of dirty that he or she might have gotten in touched with on his/her way to the temple. Research also reveals that, Yòhọ chief priestess also sprinkles water with *akòko* leaves on everyone that will enter Yòhọ temple. This serves as cleanser for everyone that will partake in any rites that will take place at the temple. The below pictures are the cleanser water of the two deities in the buckets.



Picture 2. Yòhò Cleanser



Picture 3. Thùthùà Cleanser

All activities at the temples are performed by the chief priestess (*Hùṅṅ*) of each goddess. Their actions indicate the relationship between goddesses (Thùthùà and Yòhò) and the devotees. This shows that there is communication between the past (the origin of the goddess), the present (the devotees) and what is expected by the devotees in the future. This aligns with the assertion of [6] which pointed that, “hermeneutics sees history as a living dialogue between present and future and seeks pertinent to remove obstacle to this endless mutual community communication.” From this scholar’s view, one can use occurrence and the history of the society to have deep knowledge about the responsibilities ascribed to chief priestesses of Thùthùà and Yòhò in the worships and festival rituals of these deities.

4.3 Women as Prayer Warriors

As we have discussed earlier that the Chief Priestess (*Hùṅṅ*) is the one in charge of all activities in the shrine. Research reveals that, prayers is one of the major activities that will take place on sacrifice day. The Chief Priestess also the covenant woman stands as spirit and pray directly to god on behalf of her family, the devotees and the community at large. She offered prayer request on good health, security of life and property, good sales, peaceful environment and so on with eatable deposited on the shrine. Devotees responded to prayers with *Nishe* (amen) as it is done generally in African and particularly among the Yorùbá community. Example of prayers offered at Thùthùà shrine is as follows:

Thuthua Poetry (Prayers at Thuthua)

	Ògù (Ègùn) Language	Translation
Chief Priestess	<i>Thùthùà, di ke e, jijo ho ni jete do hangbo me. Osin ni fa, egele ni fa</i>	Thùthùà, let there be peace in our compound May our house be free from troubles, may our way be clear.
Other devotees	<i>Nishe</i>	Amen.
Chief Priestess	<i>Araje kon ni mi wa, Oṣun, Iyemoja, alọ kon mide oo miwa mon, ... Esa fun yonu tho wa a ni hun onu nya hun oho nde gbe eton moo</i>	Way-paver (<i>Olùlànà</i>) we are here, Oṣun diety, Mamy-water (<i>Iyemoja</i>), we are here to appeals you... Mamy-water (<i>Iyemoja</i>) arise as we have come to you, The owner of today (<i>Olójó èni</i>), arise and open way of fortune to her
Other devotees	<i>Nishe</i>	Amen
Chief Priestess	<i>Mi biyo na jijoho</i>	We pray for good health
Other devotees	<i>Nishe</i>	Amen
Chief Priestess	<i>Wase wase ylankan ni go jono</i>	May we never receive bad news
Other devotees	<i>Nishe</i>	Amen
Chief Priestess	<i>Mi mà ná thin kúé gbọ, àkúé màná yin kentọ ná mi</i>	May we will not lack money in our lifes, wealth will not be our enemy

The above are prayers that chief priestess used to appease to Thùthùà deity after she presented the devotees to Thùthùà deity. She requested prayed for sound health, protection and guidance from evil doers, blessing for their heart desires. It was shown that men are also among the devotees, but they are not permitted to offer prayers, they only join other women to say amen (*Nishe*) to prayers.

Yòhò devotees on the other hand also work together for successful prayer session, sacrifices and ceremony. Ògù women devotees shoulder all activities at the temple, prayed together, responded to prayers where necessary and, also eat left over of ritual rites. They held deity in high esteem and requested for what they lack during prayers, sacrifices and ritual festivals.

The position and interaction of Ògù women devotees with deity is in conformity with the assertion of [6] that pointed out that, “hermeneutics sees history as a living dialogue between present and future and seeks patiently to remove obstacle to this endless mutual communication”. Researcher physical presence at Yòhò shrine makes her to see the barriers that are likely to affect total control of the shrine by Ògù women and smooth communication between past, present and future of Yòhò devotees has been reduced to minimum occurrence. Going by this scholar’s view, it is obvious that Yòhò devotees’ actions were guided by the history their past generation passed onto them. This shows that devotees followed the steps of their past generations and teaching their children what they need to know about Yòhò deity.

4.4 Women as Deity Feeders

Presenting ritual rites to the deities is one of the main responsibilities that devotees or the priestess takes very seriously. Yorùbá believes in a proverb that says “*ikú kì í jeun èni kó tún pani*” meaning death cannot insist on taking one’s life, after eating one’s meal. They also believe in another proverb that says “*bi ènu bá jẹ, ojú a tí*” meaning one becomes harmless after accepting gift. These two proverbs are part of what encouraged Yorùbá to continue given ritual rites to deities even when their requests are yet to receive positive responses. Ògù people of Badagry, Lagos, Nigeria share the same view with the Yorùbá.

In most cases, the custodian of the deities is the one to give deity food. This decision may be as a result of trying to do things orderly, to prevent given deity wrong food or the divinity chooses who to give him/her food (present sacrifices). In the case of Thùthùà and Yòhò, only the chief priestess (*Hìnò*) presented the ritual rites to the deity, other women assisted and responded to prayers/poetry accordingly. Some of the items use as ritual rites for the two deities are: **Thùthùà** - kolanut, alligator pepper, biter kola, honey, dry gin (ògógóró), Shinarp, soft drink (7up or sprit), clean water, palm-oil, snail, banana and shea butter; **Yòhò** - Shinarp, palm-oil, soft drink (7up, soda water, limca, schweppes or sprit), corn powder (*athan*), kolanut (*aláwé méréin*), biter kola, water, alligator pepper, goat or pig. Below pictures show how ritual rites are been offered to the deities.



Picture 4. Thùthùà Chief Priestess offering ritual rites



Picture 5. Yòhò Chief Priestess offering ritual rites

The chief priestess offered these items one after the other and give the rest of the items to devotees to share among themselves. It was revealed that sharing and eating of the ritual rites’ leftover symbolizes cooperation and unity among the devotees. It also indicates that they have covenant and they must not betray each other. If women could carry out all these activities at the Thùthùà and Yòhò shrine without taking any instruction or guide from any man, one can say Ògù women of Badagry held an important spiritual space in worship of female deities.

4.5 Women as Deity Eulogizer/Singers and Dancers

Society of today sees songs and dance as just a form of exercise and entertainment but it goes beyond this. Song and dance are a way of communicating with the deities. They are kind of activities that connect body, mind and souls with spiritual realms. Women are the major sacred singers and dancers and the activities are very common with female deities. These shows that impact of women singing and dancing during ritual and traditional festivals are very germane. Dance is one of many human ways of expressing art. Sometimes it is very cultural and has spiritual significant embedded in its moves. In African, dance is one of many ways of worship, performed as offerings to the gods of the land... [11]. Position of this scholar indicated that dance at the shrine or during sacrifices is an important part of ritual rites.

Traditional Yorùbá society values songs and hardly will you see any aspect in their life that does not have songs. Yorùbá people generally and Ògù people of Badagry, Lagos State use different songs, clapping and dancing during rituals. It was revealed that everything existing in the Thùthùà and Yòhò shrines are with human being. This is line with assertion of hermeneutics theorist that says, everything existing in the world is not independent of human being. It is no doubt that Thùthùà and Yòhò deities falls into the category of traditional worship where sacred songs and dance are the integral part of the religious ritual and ceremonial expression. The devotees offer dance and songs as a supplication to Thùthùà and Yòhò. Below are examples of songs and pictures of devotees dancing during Thùthùà and Yòhò worship:

Thùthùà Deity Poetry (song)

	Ògù (Ègùn) Language	Translation
Priest	Wala wala na tholo agbanji na mi ni sanu	Thùthùà involve in my market, and let me sell it fast
Others	Wala wala	Very fast
Priest	Ná tholo àgbànjí ná mi ni sànú ee	Place your hands on my market, let me sell fast
Others	Wala wala na tholo àgbànjí ná mi ni sànú wala wala	Please come and place your hands on my market fast.

Yòhò Deity Poetry (song)

	Ògù (Ègùn) Language	Translation
Priestess	Tayin mázinnú thóàgbò nàmin	Great mother, massage our back to enable us dance very well
Others	Mázinnú thó gragragbà ji	Do this for us fast
Everyone	Misèkírí gbómà thogbo Yèdò ye ma dothogbo Ìdò vèthòpo wè ye ná ma wè	Allow us to dance very well, Any favor you are given out, let Vetho compound have large share. Let the compound have expansion
Priestess	Hénú oo mòrònyàn	People from the same source are not to betray each other...



Picture 6. Thùthùà Priestess



Picture 7. Yòhò priestess, researcher & devotee

It was revealed that dancing and singing during ritual rites go a long way in making deities accept their sacrifices and answer their prayers. The deity songs and dance have spiritual impact on the dancers, devotees and the deities. This also brings joy, happiness and promotes unity among the women. Every activity carried out by women at the shrine confirmed [1] position on hermeneutic theory that says, “the issue of religion has to do with human being in the society and religion cannot exist without the adherents”.

4.6 Women as Peace Maker

Women has always been active advocates of peace and harmony in the community. They often understand the important of been in harmony with each other and aware of the distress and problem that follows crisis, dispute or war. The devotees (women) of the two deities are not left out in this peace keeping mission. The chief priestesses and other devotees are mindful of quarrels and dispute among members because they are aware of what this can lead.

Yatiò Hungbo one of the Thùthùà devotees informed us that, the chief priest constitute delegate that will visit members that has issues with each other for settling before sacrifice day. These delegates will dig into the causes of the crisis and resolve accordingly before festival day. It was also revealed that the devotees have no option than to let go and whoever refuses will be banned from joining the congregations. They understand that if this type of person(s) join them in worship, their prayers will not be answered so they don't joke with it at all. Doing this regularly on yearly bases has made their society to be peaceful.

Research revealed that Thùthùà and Yòhò women devotees are agents in the peace process, and an important agents and actors in peace keeping process within Ògù community and larger society. The chief priestess of Thùthùà and Yòhò always include request for peace and harmony among the devotees and for the society in the prayers during festivals and sacrifices. They believed that their prayers at the shrine goes directly to God (gods). Therefore, they don't allow disputes, misunderstanding or dirtiness debars their prayers.

We identify the ritual items used in praying for peace and harmony are as thus: In Thùthùà shrine, they used snail, snail water, water and palm-oil; while in Yòhò shrine corn powder, water, palm-oil and soft drink are used. The below pictures showed how these items are being offered to the deities:



Picture 8. Palm-oil on Thùthùà Shrine



Picture 9. Snail-water on Thùthùà Shrine



Picture 10. Corn-Flour with water on Yòhò Shrine



Picture 11. Palm-oil with water on Yòhò Shrine

They appease the deities with prayers as they offer the ritual rites. Prayers is another important weapon that women believe in and they used it in keeping peaceful community. They prays with ritual rites the way Yorùbá and other Africa people does during ritual festival or worships. All activities carried out at the shrines are in accordance with the culture and norms of the community. We found it necessary to get details information about the deities because the hermeneutic literary chosen for this research stated clearly that, a critic must research deeply and comprehensively into all aspect of his/her work. He added that, it will be difficult to give details information about events without making enquiries [7].

4.7 Women as a Cook During Ritual Festival

Women play multitasking roles wherever they found themselves. Deities shrines and ritual festivals of Thùthùà and Yohò among the Ògù people of Badagry, Lagos State are not exempted. Aside from the spiritual activities' women carried out at Thùthùà and Yohò shrine, they cooked what everyone that was in attendance ate.

It was revealed that what devotees and participants eat after worship are remains of what they offered to deities during worship. Yatiò Hungbo informed the researcher that after removing snails' water on Thùthùà shrine the snails used will be added to other ones and handover to younger devotees (women) who will cook it with shea butter for everyone to eat with solid pap (èkò). Tose Fransisco, the Yohò priestess on the other hand explained to us that, the pig or hen that they bought for the ritual festival will be cooked by women devotees. She added that the male devotees are the ones that will kill the live animal, clean it up, cut into pieces and then give to young devotees (women) to cook and dish to all participants to eat with *túwó* (solid made from corn flour). She revealed that it is mandatory for male devotees to off their tops before entering the shrine and they are not allowed to perform any major function at shrine, they just assist.

5.0 CONCLUSION

This research work on Women in Ritual Space among the Ògù (Ègùn) People of Badagry, Lagos State, Nigeria. Yoruba traditional religion and worships generally and Ògù people of Badagry ascribed important roles to women. Aside from the duties of women devotees mentioned in this work, women also served as an antidote to powerful wicked men, serve as child's healers and, also in charge of spiritual possessions (*ègùn òrìṣà*).

The use of hermeneutics theory gave us opportunity to use our understanding of Ògù (Ègùn) culture and community to interpret the all activities both verbal and non-verbal at Thùthùà and Yohò shrines and grooves. Also, we are able buttress the theory view that says everything existing in the world is not independent of human being. Every aspect of the deity's worship, sacrifice and festival has one thing or the other with women which are one part of human being in the society. This shows that the activities of these deities cannot exist without human being. Therefore, hermeneutics theory that was used to analyze the impact and importance of women is appropriate and worthy of use in research related to religion and human existence like this work.

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7.0 CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflict of interest and no funding for this research work.

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