

The AlémoSóko Festival in Ìdóàní, Ondo State

Omobola Agnes Aladesanmi PhD

Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages, Ekiti State University, Ado Ekiti, Nigeria

Abstract: - This paper investigates the cultural factors that are responsible for the continuity of the AlémoSóko festival among the Iyayu people of Idoani in Ondo State of Nigeria. This study is an attempt to unravel the cultural factors that are responsible for the continuity of the AlémoSóko festival at Iyayu quarter of Idoani in Ondo State despite the dominant presence of foreign religions such as Christianity and Islam which maintain a negative attitude towards traditions. Findings in this paper reveal that, the continuity of the AlémoSóko festival is hinged on the involvement of every family or house hold in the Ìyàyú quarters. The age group of age of 34 and 44 are made to participate fully in the AlémoSóko festival. Findings also show that, there are age differences among those who participate in AlémoSóko festival and those who masquerade in other Yorùbá towns and villages. While previous studies do not specify the ages of those who can masquerade, the present study on AlémoSóko festival stipulates the ages of the people who can masquerade in the Iyayu quarters at Idoani is between 34 and 44 years. For data collection, oral interview was employed by interviewing selected people of Iyayu people of Idoani in Ondo State. A simple percentage statistical method was used to test the data that were collected.

Keywords: AlémoSóko, festival, traditions, religions, cultural factors

I. INTRODUCTION

Ìdóàní, a town in Òsẹ Local Government Area of Oṅdó State, is a conglomeration of several ethnic groups which include Amùsigbó, Ìsùrẹ, Àkò, Ìsẹwà, Ìyàyú and Ọwani. Today, Ìdóàní, which is about forty kilometers from Ọwò on the way to Igarra in Edo State and Kabba in Kogi State, is the administrative headquarters of Irékárí Area Office. The Area Office comprises Áfò, Ìdóàní and Ìdógún (see Ikotun, 1995). Historically, Ìyàyú people were said to have migrated from Sòsan, a Local Government Area of Ondo State, to Ìdóàní about four hundred years ago¹. The Ìsẹwà people were said to have left Benin many years ago and had stayed at least in ten different places before they finally settled at the present site called Ìsẹwà in 1950². Although they would have wished to stay at a place not very far from Ìdóàní, especially for cultural reasons, they decided to move to the present place because of lack of motorable roads to the former place. Ọwani people too claimed to have migrated from Benin, in the old Benin kingdom about three hundred years ago. In 1920, historical evidence claimed that they finally settled at the present Ọwani which is about four kilometers from Ìdóàní³. Ìsùrẹ people were said to have left Ilé - Ifẹ for a place called Ìsùrẹ about two kilometers from Ìdóàní and, on the advice of the then District Officer, Mr. C. Conor, a European, they moved to the present Ìsùrẹ in 1921⁴. Àkò people claimed to have left Ọwàkè Ọkà in Oṅdó State to a village named Àkò which was

very close to the former Ọwani. The Àkò people later moved to the present site which now forms part of Ìdóàní town.

According to an impeccable historical source, what we know today as Ìdóàní came into being in 1921. At some point, the villages that comprised Ìdóàní community agitated for the establishment of a district court. Thereafter, the then District Officer, Mr. O' Conor, advised amalgamation as a pre-requisite for the establishment of the court. That was during the reign of Alani-Chief Atẹwọgboyẹ. Ọwani, Amùsigbó, Àkò, Ìsùrẹ and later Ìsẹwà moved from their various places to a central place now known as Ọjà Igbámò. Alani and some of his people moved from Owani to the agreed central place while the rest of the Owani people decided to remain at the present Owani. The place is also called Ìdó - Ìsàlẹ. The Ìyàyú people, however, did not migrate because the central place was close to them. Unfortunately, Ọba Atẹwọgboyẹ did not live long. He died the following year which was 1921. His death, to some extent, slowed down the merger plan. However, in March 1921, Ọba James Fáladé the first ascended the throne and stayed at the central place in order to implement the terms and conditions of the treaty. Since then, Idoani has been known to comprise the following six quarters namely: Ọwani, Amùsigbó, Ìsùrẹ, Ìyàyú, Àkò and Ìsẹwà. The six quarters are subject to Alani's control. The quarters are merely represented at the centre by the chiefs and Alani is the only constituted authority. In this paper, we are interested in the factors that are responsible for the existence and continuity of the 'AlémoSóko' masquerade festival at Ìdóàní. Linguistically, the Iyayu people have a distinct speech form called Ìyàyú and there is no mutual intelligibility between the Ìyàyú speech form and the Yorùbá language.

Furthermore, we are reliably informed by Oke (1972) and Ikotun (1995) that the Ìyàyú speech form is a variation of Bini/Akoko Edo language in Edo State. Generally, the Yorùbá language serves as the *Lingua Franca* among the different ethnic groups in Ìdóàní town. So, while the Yorùbá language is used in inter - group interactions, the speech forms of the different ethnic groups are used in intra group interactions. Therefore, the word Ìyàyú may connote ethnic group called Ìyàyú, the area occupied by the people and the speech form spoken by the people. In this study, we are interested in the *AlémoSóko* festival in Ìyàyú quarters of Ìdóàní. *AlémoSóko* otherwise known as Igwezan festival has not been traced to any particular timeframe in the history of Ìdóàní 'Ìyayu' to be specific. While some claim that it was started for purely recreational purposes, others are of the opinion that it was started for the purpose of entertaining the village folk at the

beginning of the harmattan period. Others claimed that it was to serve as a panacea to severe a smallpox epidemic that occurred in Idoani at that time. This group believed that the festival had been in existence before the solution was discovered. They believed that while the festival was going on, it was discovered the sick in houses whose walls were beaten with the canes of the masquerades were miraculously healed. The more logical origin of the *Alémṣókó* festival is the claim that it started simply as a means of ancestral veneration and also as a means of bringing a form of excitement and fun to the sleepy town of Idoani like most of the other festivals.

The *Alémṣókó* festival is a yearly festival which attracts the indigenes of *Ìdòàní* both at home and in the diaspora. It is important to mention that the celebration of *Alémṣókó* festival in *Ìdòàní* does not in any manner affect the co – existence of Christianity and Islam in the community as the three major religions, Christianity, Islam and traditional religions are embraced by the Iyayu people. Although, *Alémṣókó* festival which can be said to be condemned by the imported religions as pagan, the festival still continues. At present, Christianity, Islam and *Alémṣókó* festival exist side by side in the community. The question that arises is: what are the cultural factors that are responsible for the continuity of the *Alémṣókó* festival even when Christianity and Islam frown at the festival? This question will be addressed in this paper.

II. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESIS

In an attempt to identify the cultural factors that are responsible for the *Alémṣókó* festival, the following are the research questions:

1. Which of the family in the community is involved in *Alémṣókó* festival?
2. Which period of the year is *Alémṣókó* festival celebrated?
3. How many days or weeks do *Alémṣókó* festival last in a year?
4. Is *Alémṣókó* a performing masquerade or for the purpose of entertainment?
5. What are the ages of the people that participate in the festival?
6. Are there cultural reasons or factors that influence the *Alémṣókó* festival?

In relation to these research questions we have this null hypothesis:

There is no significant difference between the *Alémṣókó* festival of Idoani and the masquerades that perform in any of the Yorùbá communities. This hypothesis is premised on the fact that the factors that are usually responsible for the celebration of masquerades in the Yorùbá speaking areas of Nigeria are the same as Idoani where *Alémṣókó* festival is performed.

III. SOME RELATED WORKS

In most of the Yorùbá speaking areas of Nigeria, masquerades are a common sight. They are believed to be ancestral spirits which are observed annually. The works of Ogunbowale (1962), Olajubu (1972), Ogunniran (1972) and Adeoye (1989) on masquerades in the Yorùbá speaking areas will serve as the conceptual framework for our present study of *Alémṣókó* festival of Idoani in Ondo State of Nigeria. Ogunbowale (1962:67) argues that a masquerade can be performed any time of the year. He also claims that a masquerade must be directed by at least a person when it is out for performance. But we can also argue that it is not every masquerade that has to be directed by at least a person. For instance, a masquerade called “Eegun Edinmo” of Erinmo in Oriade Local Government Area of Osun State does not require a person as its director while performing. Olajubu (1972:1-5) claims that masquerades can be grouped into four different categories. The first category comprises masquerades that perform magic from town to town and from village to village for the pecuniary purpose. The second group is made of masquerades that do not perform for the purpose of collecting money from the audience but who are interested in barbaric and animalistic behaviour such as flogging and victimizing those that may have offended them in one way or the other, while the third group creates fear for children to make them behave well at home. The fourth group creates fear even for the grown-up ones by wearing torn cloth (see *Olájubù* 1972: 1- 5)

Ogunniran (1972) is in tandem with Olajubu’s (1972). It claimed that masquerades perform magic from town to town and from village to village for monetary purpose. We can therefore refer to these masquerades as professionals who earn their living by entertaining spectators. We are of the opinion that both Olajubu (1972) and Ogunniran’s (1972) studies are not comprehensive enough, the studies do not for instance, address a masquerade called “Eégún Adoko” of Ado Ekiti which does not perform magic but which goes from town to town, from village to village praying and collecting money. Furthermore, the studies conducted by Olajubu (1972) and Ogunniran (1972) fail to indicate the age bracket of the people behind the masquerade. Adeoye (1989:132) claims that a masquerade is a deity. According to him, masquerade is the celebration of the ancestral spirits. While we accept Adeoye’s (1989:132) claim about masquerade as a belief in immortality of the souls of the dead, we want to point out that sacrifices and the festival of worship of Oya, Osun, Ogun and Sango to mention a few are some other ways through which the dead are also remembered. However, the factors that can be deduced from the studies conducted by Ogunbowale (1962), Ogunniran (1972), Olajubu (1972), and Adeoye (1989), are money, observance of tradition, entertainment and deference to the ancestral spirits. According to researchers, these are the factors which are responsible for the continued existence of masquerades in the Yorùbá speaking areas of Nigeria. The present study which examines the cultural factors

that are responsible for ‘Alémṣóko’ festival at Idoani will accept the information provided by Ogunbowale (1962), Olajubu (1972), Ogunniran (1972) and Adeoye (1989) as its background.

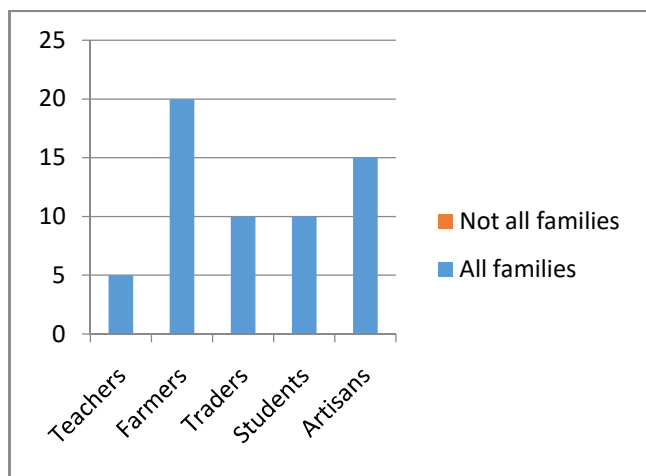
IV. DATA COLLECTION

This is a historical research work. The data that were used for this research were collected through the formal method. The formal method that was used included elicitation of information through a questionnaire. The respondents were sixty and they were randomly selected from the Iyayu quarters. All the sixty questionnaire forms that were distributed to the respondents were returned. Apart from the fact that the questionnaire was the multiple choice type, the researcher's intimate knowledge of the quarters was also a contributing factor to the one hundred percent return of the questionnaire forms. The researcher also assisted the uneducated respondents to tick their response in the questionnaire that was read to them.

V. DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

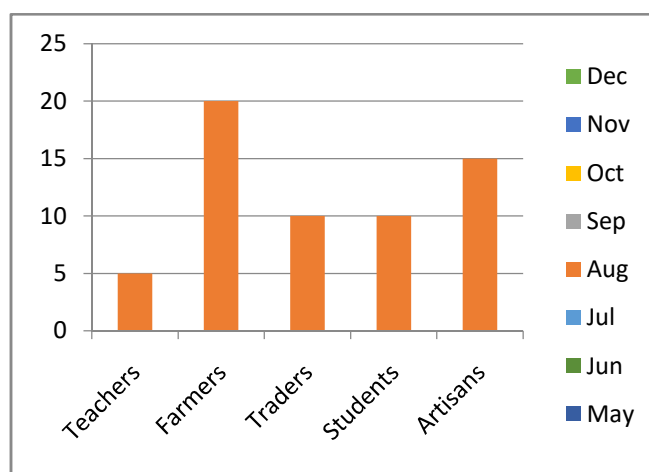
In this section, we report and analyze the responses of the subjects in relation to our research questions. For ease of analysis, the subjects’ responses are categorized into given tables. The information in table one shows the percentage distribution of respondents on the involvement of families. Table two contains information on the period of the year when the festival is celebrated. The percentage distribution of respondents on the number of days that the festival lasts is shown in table three. Furthermore, while the information in table five will tell us the percentage distribution of respondents on the factor that are responsible for the *Alémṣóko* festival the information in table four will show the percentage distribution of respondents on ages of the participants. Our null hypothesis is that there is no significant difference between the *Alémṣóko* festival of Idoani and the masquerades that perform in any of the Yorùbá communities. The distribution of the responses is shown in Tables 1 – 5.

Table 1 Percentage Distribution of Respondents on the Involvement of Families



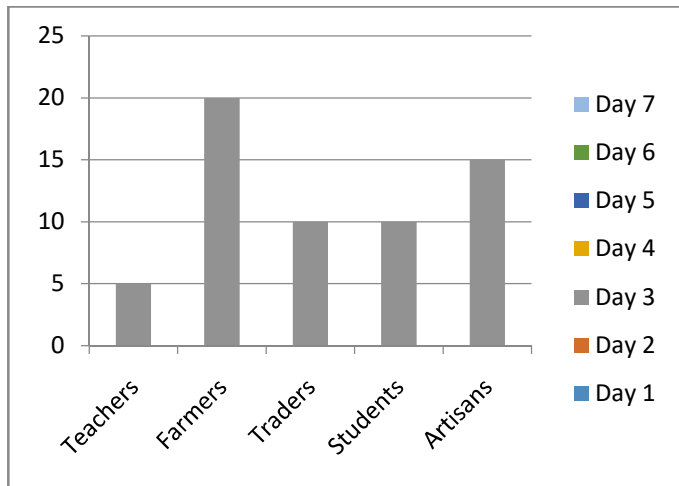
From the Table 1 above, it was discovered that all the families in the Iyayu quarter were involved in the *Alémṣóko* festival. This finding is different from what the case is in any other Yorùbá town or village. For instance in Yorùbá towns and villages where masquerades are performed, a particular household or family is usually saddled with the festival activities. However, few individuals especially youths may serve as spectators when the festival is on. So, names like “Òjètólá”, “Òjérindé”, “Òjẹwùmí” usually distinguish the families which participate in masquerades from families that do not participate in masquerades in Yorùbá towns and villages. Table 2 below shows the distribution of responses on the period of the year when distribution of responses on the period of the year when *Alémṣóko* festival is performed.

Table 2 Percentage Distribution of Respondents on the Period of the Year



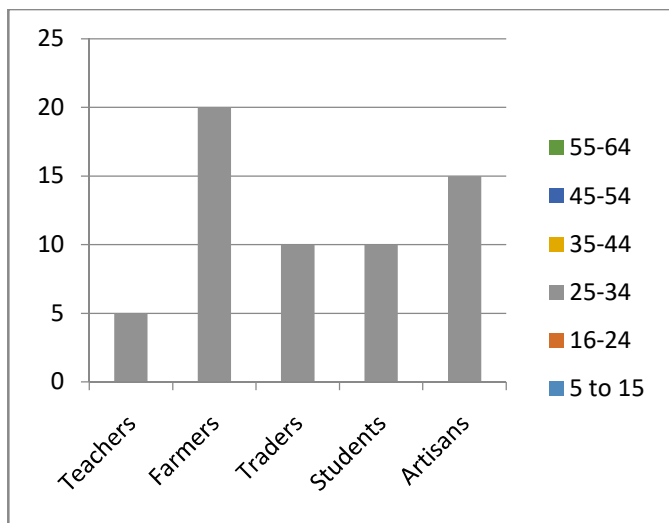
The information in Table 2 above shows that *Alémṣóko* festival usually takes place in August of every year. This conclusion is based on the views of our respondents who unanimously claimed that *Alémṣóko* festival was usually celebrated in August of every year. The consistency of the period when *Alémṣóko* festival is celebrated can be said to be at variance with the period of the year when masquerades are celebrated in most Yorùbá communities. For instance, while individual families who masquerade decide when to celebrate in a year in Yorùbá communities every August has been slated for the celebration of *Alémṣóko* festival. Our informants in the Iyayu quarter argued that the fixing of August as the month of celebration was historical, this is because none of the people that were interviewed could tell the genesis of *Alémṣóko* festival. Similarly, there is no written record that talks about the genesis of the *Alémṣóko* festival. Furthermore, one question which is important is: How do we determine the number of days that the *Alémṣóko* festival lasts. The answer to this question has been provided by our respondents and it is shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3 Percentage Distribution of Respondents on the Number of Days



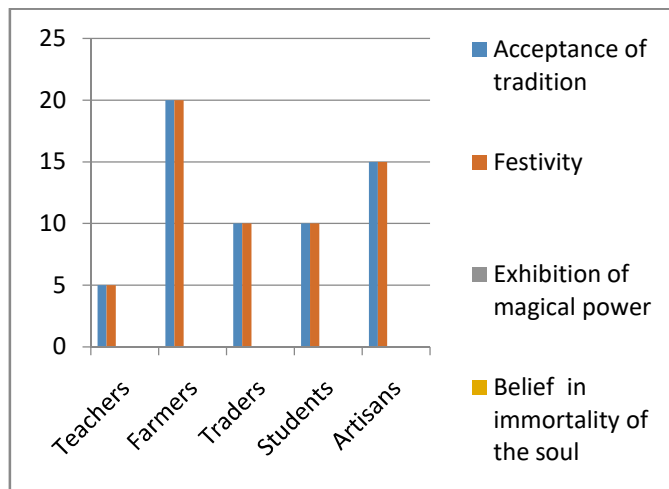
The responses of our informants which appeared in Table 3 above showed that the number of days for the celebration of the *Alémosóko* festivals was three days. Unanimity of responses was also observed because there was no disparity in the opinions or responses expressed by our informants. In addition, the information in Table 4 below contains the reactions of our respondents on the ages of those who masquerade when the *Alémosóko* festival is being performed. The pieces of information are shown as follows.

Table 4 Percentage Distribution of Respondents on Ages of the Participants.



Although the table shows six age groups, the respondents endorsed the age group of 34 – 44 as the ages of the people who masquerade when the festival is being performed. It would be recalled that those who belong to the age group of 34 and 44 are of the prime age because they are capable of doing so many aggressive things like running, flogging, boxing among others. An observation can be made from the information that is provided by Table 4, every male person who is within the age group of 34 – 44 is expected to put on the approved mask as evidence of participation in the festival at the Iyayu quarters. This is not the case in other

Yorùbá towns and villages where only those who masquerade belong to specific families, families such as “Olólòlù of Ìbàdàn” in Oyo State and “Àjàngilá of Ìrágberì in Osun State” to mention a few. Another question which our respondents were asked to respond to was whether *Alémosóko* festival was for the purpose of entertainment, acceptance of traditional festivity, money, profession, belief in immortality of souls or magical performance. The responses of our informants are shown in Table 5 below.



From Table 5 above, our respondents showed that factors such as acceptance of tradition, festivity and entertainment were responsible for the continuity of the *Alémosóko* festival among the Iyayu people of Idoani. It would be recalled that the purpose of this chapter was to analyze the findings of the research that was conducted on *Alémosóko* festival of Iyayu at Idoani. The data that were collected from our respondents were analyzed in their various groups. It was discovered that different factors influenced the continuity of *Alémosóko* festival at Idoani, and these factors were responsible for the validity of our hypothesis that was previously postulated.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the cultural factors that are responsible for the continuity of the *Alémosóko* festival among the Iyayu people of Idoani. The study showed that four cultural factors are responsible for the continuity of the festival despite the existence of foreign religions such as Christianity and Islam which maintain a negative attitude towards traditions. The continuity of the *Alémosóko* festival is hinged on the involvement of every family or house hold in the Iyáyú quarters, this is because those who belong to the age group of age of 34 and 44 are made to participate fully in the *Alémosóko* festival. This finding is additional to the findings of the research conducted by Ogunniran (1972), Olajubu (1972) and Adeoye (1989) which claim that particular families participate in masquerades. Similarly, there is a difference between the ages of those who participate in *Alémosóko* festival and those who masquerade in other Yorùbá towns and villages. While previous studies by Ogunbowale

(1962), Ogunniran (1972), Olajubu (1972) and Adeoye (1989) do not specify the ages of those who can masquerade the present study on *Alémósóko* festival stipulates the ages of the people who can masquerade in the Iyayu quarters at Idoani to between 34 and 44 years.

REFERENCES

- [1] Adeoye, C. L. (1979). *Àṣà àti Íṣe Yorùbá*. Ibadan: Oxford University Press.
- [2] Adeoye, C. L. (1989) *Ìgbàgbò àti Èsìn Yorùbá*. Ibadan: Evans Brothers Ltd.
- [3] Alabi, Alfred E. (2003) *Ìdóàní: My Historical Jottings*. Lagos: CSS Bookshop
- [4] Ìdówú, B.E. (1995) *God in Yorùbá Beliefs*. New York: Plainview Publications
- [5] Ikotun, R. O. (1995) *Code Choice in Idoani Community in Ondo State*. Unpublished M. A. Thesis. Obafemi Awolowo University. Ile-Ife.
- [6] Ogunbowale, P. O. (1962) *Àwọn Irinmalẹ̀ Ilẹ̀ Yorùbá*.
- [7] Ogunniran, L. (1972) *Eégún Aláré*. Ibadan: Macmillan Nigeria Publishers Ltd.
- [8] Oke, D. O. (1972) "Language Choice in the Yorùbá – Edo Border Area". *ODU New Series* No 7.
- [9] Olajubu, O (1972) *Àṣà Ìbílẹ̀ Yorùbá*. Ibadan: Oxford University Press.