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ETUTU, A SYMBOL OF COMMUNICATION FOR SPIRITUAL UNIFICATION AND WELLNESS IN THE PRE-COLONIAL FARMING COMMUNITIES OF ONDO PROVINCE OF SOUTHWESTERN NIGERIA, 1850-1900

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Abstract

Emphasis was laid on the traditional stereotype of inseparable nature of man from his metaphysical environment. There is the common belief that the unseen forces influence the physical environment. The case of old communities of Ondo Province were not different from this general belief in other Yoruba speaking communities of southwestern Nigeria. *Etutu* was a way of appeasing the unseen spirits which were often attached to the traditional deities in connection with Almighty God (Olodumare). The indigenous food crops and related food items which sustained the precolonial Ondo Province have gradually disappeared and the cultural practices of using them to appease the deities have gradually phased out due to modern beliefs. 50 Farmers and food-stuff sellers were interviewed for in-depth knowledge into the influence of the religious beliefs and practices on the general wellness of the people. The study established that there were various traditional beliefs and practices of the farming communities of Ondo Province. It was established that food crops were symbols of communication to the gods and deities for assurance of peace, surplus food production and protection. The study therefore concluded that all functioning aspects of the people's existence were attached to their religious beliefs and practices, including food crop production and consumption.

Keywords: sacrifice, symbol, communication, unification and wellness Ondo Province

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Introduction

The ancient history of the conglomerates known as Yoruba in southwestern Nigeria was traditionally linked through various deities to the supreme God called *Olodumare* (the Almighty). *Olodumare* is known as the providence and creator of all things including races in where they were located till date.[1] Yoruba tradition claimed there were four hundred and one deities from the metaphysical to deliver sacred messages to the physical world. These deities in their specific assignments to the world were the intermediaries between God and man, through *Ifa* divination, which was regarded as the eye of God on earth.[2] *Ifa* divination was ancient and possessed a very complex corpus of multifaceted philosophical knowledge and multifarious wisdoms with symbolic interpretations to guide, direct and proffer solutions to human challenges on earth through its diviners or performers. Human challenges seemed unlimited and the means of ameliorating the challenges were often beyond physical measures and the essence the metaphysical realm is connected for necessary solution.[3] The narratives in the entire Yoruba nation was not different from what obtained in pre-colonial communities of Akure, Ondo, Ekiti, Akoko, Owo, Okitipupa and other smaller towns and villages which were named the Ondo Province under colonial influence.[4] Precolonial communities of Ondo Province operated an indivisible socio-cultural bond on a well solidified economic and political structure, capable of sustaining them against external threats.[5] In this wise, their ways of life were inseparable from their religious beliefs and practices. Signs and symbols were integral part of their kingship system, birth, death, warfare, marriage, cultural festivals, mode of worship as well as food crop production and consumption at a particular season or the other.[6] Hence, this study objectively conceived Semiotic theory to investigate the history and the use of signs and symbols to establish the functionality of precolonial society of Ondo Province in relation to food crop production and general wellbeing of the indigenous people.

Semiotic Theory and Indigenous Food items as Sacrificial Symbols

Religious signs and symbols are understood through Semiotic theoretical analysis of the strong synergy between signs and their meanings.[7] The proponents of this theory typified

1 William B. "Odu Ifa, The Order of the Figures of Ifa" *Buletin de Institut François d' Afrique Noire 23;* 676-85

2 L. Olurode " *Ifa,* The Deity of Wisdom and Importance of Work among the Yoruba People" in *Journal of Enterprising Communities: People and Places in the Global Economy* 1 (2) 2007 135-141

3 A. Afolabi *Ifa: The Ancient Wisdom* New York, Imole Oluwa Institute, 234-42

4 A.E Adebayo, " Harnessing Tourism Potentials for Local Economic Development in Ondo State, Nigeria in D. Laloumis (ed.) *Journal of Tourism and Research*, 4 (1), (1998), pp.130

5 E. B. Idowu, *African Traditional Religion; A Definition* (London, S.C.M Publishers, 1971), pp 147-9

6 ibid

7 J. Zlatev, *Meaning making from Life to Language: The Semiotic Heirarchy and Phenomenology 11 (1),* (2018) 5-12

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the meanings and interrelationship between signs in a particular group or traditional society. In other words, semiotic refers to the use of signs or symbols to understand the physical existence of man in his cultural environment. [8] Semiotics is the study of nature of signs and symbols in the society. The creation and ways of life of people were believed to have been communicated by God through different signs and objects. Therefore, all endeavours of man, ranging from music, fashion, kingship, farming and feeding were linked to divine directions of *Orunmila* (deity of wisdom and destiny), through the sixteen *ifa capsules.*[9] These capsules known as *Oju Odu* were regarded as the foundational signs of *ifa* divination system. They presented the basic spiritual principles that underpin all human endeavours in the primordial Yoruba societies.[10] All the sixteen capsules were signs and symbols of fortune, usually attracted through sacrificial rites, depending on the purpose or human experience. Semiotic involved three basic aspects which are signs, context and their meanings.[11] Culturally, signs could be in form of objects, sounds or images with meanings, they are sacred elements of guidance in which societal memories and identities are reposited. Meaningful interpretation of the various symbols in a specific context remained the idea of Semiotic theory.[12] In essence, farming, festivals, procreation as well as social security were all embedded in their various religious practices while signs and symbols remained the elements of communication. It was reliably gathered that all economic practices among the people in the past were linked to religious symbols as stated;

> In African life and thought, the religious is not distinguished from the non-religious, the spiritual from the material. In all that the African does, (in cultivating, sowing, harvesting, eating, travelling etc., religion is at work. To be born into African society is to be born into a culture that is extremely religious. This means, and requires, taking part in the religious beliefs and rituals of the community. One cannot detach one`s self from the religion of the community, for to do so would be to isolate oneself from the group and to disrupt one`s sense of communal membership and security and lose much of the meaning of life. Therefore; changing the religion of an African implies changing everything about it including cultural practices and beliefs.[13]

8 N. L. Leech & A. J. Onwuegbuzie, "Qualitative Data Analysis: A Compendium of Techniques and a Framework for Selection for School Psychology Research and Beyond," *School Psychology Quarterly,* 23 (4) 2008, 589-602.

9 E. B. Idowu, *African Traditional Religion; A Definition* (London, S.C.M Publishers, 1971), pp 149

10 ibid

11 P. A. Awolalu and J. O. Dopamu *West African Traditional Religion* (Nigeria, Onibomoje Press, 1979)

12 W. Opadele, *The Supernatural Being and Cultural Beliefs,* Lagos, University Press 1989) pp 67-78

13 D.S Shishima, D. Akpenpuun and G.L Akper, *The Traditional Religion and Culture,* (Nigeria, National Open University 2012), pp 137-153.

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Semiotic theory in the context of economic cum religious beliefs and practices in the Ondo Province inferred that food items served as elements or symbols of sacrifices, through which complex ideas, norms, and societal values were fundamentally communicated to *Olodumare* through sacrifices. *Etutu* performance was significant to the total wellbeing of the Ondo Province prior to colonial influence, it remained a central reason for fortunes in planting and harvesting, *ifa* deity and its sixteen capsules were believed to have given directives through its words of wisdom as encapsulated in the *Odu.* Hence, this study therefore elicited the various traditional cultural practices and the specific symbolic food items in sacrifice to them.[14]

Food Items as Symbols of Cultural Beliefs and Religious Practices

Food items were symbols of religious sacrifices for promotion of cultural beliefs in the past, items such as dried maize and beans were cooked with bare salt, *ekuru* made of any kind of indigenous beans, local hen or cock, roasted yam with palm oil and *aadun.* These were food items for appeasing the deities among the indigenous people.[15] Rituals and rites were means of bringing into the limelight the religious experience of the group; they communicated some kinds of religious expression, concretizing one's belief system. They were meant to communicate experiences of the metaphysical world.[16] There were devotees of deities (orisa) who traditionally inherited the practices from their lineages; the point here is that ritual items were provided according to the prescriptions of the object of worship in order to have the desired result. In this connection the Yoruba declare: *e je ka see,* bi *won ti i see,k' o le baa* ri, *bi o se ye ko ri.*(Let us do it, the way it is usually done, to get the results expected from it") [17]

Food crop items were used for sacrifices in the past, for instance, when there were acute famine and drought, sacrifices were made to the god of rain/harvest known as *orisa-oko* among the western Yoruba groups, such food items as dried maize, vegetable leaves, white yam, dove and other non-food items were symbols of communication. Black-smith's spot (oju agbede) was the point of sacrifice, payers were offered for adequate rainfall and abundant food harvest. In some cases, *etutu* was performed to prevent witchcraft attack which could cause poor harvests, such among other items were solid pap (eko elewe),

14 Interview conducted with Alademomi, (Cheif), farmer, oldest of all the farmers interviewed, (93 yrs), Ipogun farming community, Akure, 26/4/2021.

15 Interview conducted with Pa Sunday Irowainu, (traditional Healer and a fisherman), (76) yrs. Also, the farmers and traders, they are vast in the issues relating to the society, religion and economic interplay in the past.

16 D.S Shishima, D. Akpenpuun and G.L Akper, *The Traditional Religion and Culture,* (Nigeria, National Open University 2012), pp179

17 Common chorus of the indigenous population whenever any ritual was under performance, the people interviewed explained tha the performances usually began with the say.

traditional fowl egg (eyin-ibile) and palm oil (epo pupa).[18] Sacrifice symbols were taken to the T-junction or shrine to appease the spirit or power of the deities. In worship of *obatala,* various whitish articles including white yam except salt were used. *Sango* (god of thunder), items such as palm oil, *tete-atetedaye,* were part of items of initiation and purification, *tete-atetedaye, peregun* and *odundun* leaves were bruised together in a bowl of water to purify *sango* thunder-strike victims.[19] *Esu* was appeased with roasted white yam, handful of dried-maize, beans or any desired food crops.[20]

Ceremonies and sacrificial symbols

Ceremonies	Number of households adopted	Percentage of households adopted
White Maize (white)	250	100
Appease of the religious gods	147	
Sacrifice to the spirit of twin children	248	
god of harvest	137	
Familiar spirit (emere)	223	
Indigenous Beans/ vegetables		
Appease of the religious gods	127	
Sacrifice to the spirit of twin children	246	
god of harvest	157	
Familiar spirit (emere)	254	
Indigenous Fish/ termites		
New yam festivals	242	
Other festivals	246	
Naming Ceremony	239	
Igbeyawo	249	
Oku-agba	128	

Source: Interview conducted with the farmers and traders in Ondo Province 2021

This table shows that indigenous yam tubers were more preferred to rice in the celebration of festivals and other ceremonies, new yam festival took the lead in this category. Cocoyam was desired during the annual planting season, when the quantity of white yam tubers had drastically reduced, it was a good supplement of yam and was not common pounding it barely as it was done among the Bendel people in the past, although it could be cooked and eaten with palm oil or *ikete*.

18 See S. Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas*… p.34

19 See S. Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas*… p.35

20 Ibid, p. 28, interview with the farmers also corroborates the claim of S. Johnson as reference was made to the objects of worshipping *esu* which included roasted yam in the past. (Chief Salaja of Maleghe farm, Owo).

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Ceremonies	Number of households adopted	Percentage of households adopted
White yam tubers	250	100
New yam festivals	247	
Other festivals	236	
Iwuye ceremony	242	
Igbeyawo	246	
Indigenous Rice	Alternative to Yam	
New yam festivals	141	
Other festivals	167	
Iwuye ceremony	154	
Igbeyawo	143	
Cocoyams	Supplement of Yam	
New yam festivals	221	
Other festivals	202	
Iwuye ceremony	245	
Igbeyawo	206	
Oku-agba	242	

Source: Interview with the farmers and traders 2015.

Consumption of indigenous rice was not as high as yam and cocoyam tubers during ceremonies. Rice was eaten as occasional food at the time there was high demand for it, it was mainly for feeding the children at the occasions while the elders could not have it as substitute for *iyan.* The old males often retorted; *ounje eye ni iresi,* and several of the people interviewed chorused; that their parents tagged rice *ein-olobo* (eggs of female cricket). Thus, despite the fact that rice was grown and consumed by the people, *iyan* remained their preferred staple food. The more the varieties of yam planted, the wealthier the farmers and their households.[21]

Sacrifices to the Twin Deity

Birth of set of twins attracted celebrations and sacrifices in the past. From the eighth day of their birth, it was believed by the people that the god of the twins (orisa ibeji) should be appeased to guarantee long life and prosperity for them. Food items such as *ekuru* (food from indigenous beans), *ogede-ibile* (indigenous banana) *agbado sise* (cooked indigenous maize-grains), *aadun* (powdered food from baked maize), *ewa sise* (cooked indigenous beans) without any ingredients except salt was prepared and made available for the sacrifice. The set of twins and other children within their age-grades were gathered to celebrate by singing and dancing songs in Yoruba language; *epo n be, ewa n be o (2ce) aya mi o ja, o o e aya mi o ja lati bi'be eji o, epo n be, ewa n be o.* (there is oil there

21 Farmers interviewed offered popular claims to substantiate the above.

is beans (2ce) I'm not panicked, (I'm not panicked, to give birth to twins; there is oil, there is beans.)[22]

Sacrifice to the Familiar Spirits (Emere)

Any individual, either young or old, more often experienced were the female folks who were believed of possessing familiar spirit (emere) called for sacrifice, indigenous food items such as *ewa sise wooro* (cooked white beans), *agbado sise wooro* (cooked white maize), *aadun* or *elegute* (baked-maize flour), *ireke* (sugar-cane), *ekuru* (steamed white bean paste), *iresi* (indigenous rice), *moinmoin* (spiced bean paste), *akara* (bean-cake) and clothing materials, depending on the contextual meanings and understanding of the signs. These items were taken by the person under the guidance of the chief priest to places such as t-juncture or where indigenous banana were planted to perform the sacrifice popularly called "separation with unseen peers."[23] The main motive behind this ritual performance was to ensure long life for such individuals.

Funeral Food Symbols and Sacrifices

Food rituals at funerals was popular in the past, immediately an old person died, the first rite was to slay an indigenous fowl known as *adie irana* "the fare fowl" was meant to make the road easy for the deceased.[24] Food in form of roasted-yam prepared for the deceased was done, in this traditional system, when the corpse was laid in state, portion of the yam prepared was placed at the foot of the deceased. This rite involved performances for the categories of people such as; king (*Oba),* albino, leper, hunched back, pregnant women and someone who died by ganging himself. Traditional marriages also involved preparation of food items which were not different from the items under discussion.[25]

Traditional Festivals Food Symbols Sacrifices

Traditional festivals were significantly observed during the annual harvest of food crops, virtually all festivals celebrated in the Province were observed at the time of food surplus, that is; when there were sufficient food items to feed the population and their visitors

22 Interview conducted with Wosilat, Boje, (Mrs), seller of *eko-elewe*, Oba market Ado-Ekiti, 16/2/2005. The woman gave birth to set of twin-chidern twice. The first set of twins died presumably the rites attached to the birth of twin children were not optimally performed, the woman lost Taye (male) to death at age 2 while the Kehinde is the only existing of her four childen (aged 37 yrs now). This study used her experience and other related ones reliably gathered from among the people to explain this aspect of the study.

23 Interview conducted with Wole Jayeoba, (Chief), a native of Igbara-Odo Ekiti, he is chiefly into farming profession and partly a building contractor who inherited the Traditional methods of healing and remedy from his father, (82 years), No 21, Iralepo Layout, Isinkan Quarters, Akure

24 Interview with farmers and food-stuff sellers

25 Ibid, see E.B Idowu, *African Traditional Religion; A Definition* (London, S.C.M Publishers, 1971), pp 144-173

who came to celebrate with them.[26] A typical instance was the annual new yam festival celebrated across the whole of Yoruba communities in the past. The chief celebrant was the *oba* and members of his royal cabinet followed by great farmers and every other farmer in each of the localities.[27] *Ajagbo* festival in Ogbagi, *arigiya* in Ikare, fostered unity and intra-community relations were developed among the people.[28] In Akoko area generally, season of new planting served as a forum for age groups between twenty and fifty years to come together and share views on the problems encountered during the harvest season. Indeed, agricultural practice, customs and observance relating to crops, as well as ethics connecting to food plants were mutually discussed.[29] Evidently, goodwill messages were expressed during the performance of *imana* and *itegbe* social festivals in Akunnu and in Isua, *imole* festival, (veneration of rivers) were common to all in Akokoland.[30]

Fishing, food and sacrifices

Fishing was significant to the people's cultural beliefs, variety of fishes especially *osan* and *abori* were items presented during traditional wedding ceremonies, they were presented by the family of the husband-to-be to the bride's family. Fishes were objects of prayers for the couple as it was imperatively made available at naming ceremonies, the fish was held by the *Mogaji* (family head) of the family and expressed well wishes for the baby with the common saying; *ori l'eja fi n l'abu, ori re a gbe o o,* (the fish makes way for itself in the water by its head, your head will bring you fortunes) he broke the dry-fish into smaller pieces and every one present had a bite of the fish. The performances were not complete when fishes were not presented, no matter the extent of preparations by the celebrants.[31] Along the same vein, fishes were common soup ingredients and food items in the communities located to the riverine areas, of Ilaje, Arogbo, Ayetoro, Igbekebo as well as landed people in Okitipupa.[32] These people exchanged fishes with food crops from Ondo, Akure, Oke-Igbo areas at periodical markets. The ways of life of these people were strictly connected to their indigenous occupations of fish-hunting, canoe-making and post-colonial boat-construction.[33] The various communities were connected through water-

26 Interview conducted with Irowainu Sunday…

27 E.B Idowu, *Olodumare;* God in Yoruba Belief, (London, Longman, 1962), p.130.

28 J.O Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites* (London, Longman, 1981), Ondo State Ministry of Tourism and Development, 1985 and A.E Adebayo, " Harnessing Tourism Potentials for Local Economic Development in Ondo State, Nigeria in D. Laloumis (ed.) *Journal of Tourism and Research*, 4 (1), (1998), pp.134

29 J.O Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Ritesp…* 56

30 C.f A.E Adebayo, " Harnessing Tourism Potentials for Local Economic Development in Ondo Satae, Nigeria… p.135

31 Interview conducted with the farmers and food-stuff sellers, they shared their past personal experiences with the researcher

32 W.A Bassey, *Nigeria's Indigenous Technology, (*Ibadan, University Press 1992), p.42

33 ibid

transport with the use of canoe and flying-boat across the sea. For instance, from Igbokoda (the terminus of road-transport), to Mahin-Ayetoro, Arogboland, linking Deltaland, the means of transportation was by water.[34] Hardly could they eat any kind of food without traces of fish in it. Fish pepper soup was part of their staple food; mere soaking garri was always along with fish which also served as gift item to people paying visits to them.[35] There were some kinds of fish regularly consumed for body nourishment, especially when prepared as special delicacies by roasting, called *hihon* among the fishing communities, by preparing it as pepper-soup known as *ugbagba* which was a regular delicacy among the people. Palm oil soup known as *kereghe,* bitter-leaf soup known as *obe-orugbo,* were prepared with the indigenous species of fish. These fishes were shiny-nose, bonga-fish (efolo), mullet (itoko), African bonny tongue (agbadarigi), mormiroid, and tilapa (epiya).[36] However, only the Ilaje group engaged in fishing occupation while the entire indigenous population of Ondo Province consumed fish as a regular delicacy. In essence, supply of indigenous fishes to the landed population by the riverine people continued unabated consequent upon regular sacrifices to the water deities for abundant harvest.[37] In places with little or no trace of fishing, sacrifices were also made to appease water deities. In Ondo town for instance, there was scarcity of rivers for fish hunting, sacrifices were made to *Lisaluwa* river even though it was a taboo to hunt or eat fish from it[38] This belief and practice was testified to that; "during the next day, we walked slower, and passed the Oluwa River but as they are worshipped no one is allowed to kill fish. The Ondos say anyone that kills fish die themselves soon after."[39] This assertion testified to the belief that all sorts of food items consumed in the past were symbolic of people's cultural beliefs and practices for the promotion of social relations and economic integration in the society.

Conclusion

However, cultural beliefs among the people were strongly tied to the cultivation of indigenous food crops in the pre-colonial times. The infiltration of the two foreign religions threatened the significance of indigenous food items and traditional beliefs and practices. For instance, the Christian Missionaries led by Reverend Philips in January 1877

34 The researcher's visit to the area revealed the location of the neighbouring communities, 17/5/2015. Also interview conducted with Olatunji, Adebayo, a historian, with masters and P.hD in view on issues relating to communities and conflict Studies. He is familiar with the environment and water-way travels. In addition, the researcher had interacttion with the fishing population on land and on water.

35 A group of fish sellers were interviewed and were able to disclose the varieties of indigenous fishes consumed in the past.

36 A group of fish sellers were interviewed and were able to disclose the varieties of indigenous fishes consumed in the past.

37I Ajayi "The Economy of Ondo Kingdom in Historical Perspective", in S. I Ajayi (ed), *The Evolution of Ondo Kingdom over 500 years (1510-2010)*... p.102

38 ibid

39 Ibid p.103

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suspended a traditional Ondo convert from selling his dove for sacrifice in the worship of a god (orisa).[40] The two religions preached against all Yoruba traditional practices by referring to them as injustice to human existence and barbarism. It could be aptly projected that the disappearance of the traditional beliefs and practices attached to food crop production and consumption was as a result of proliferation of foreign religious beliefs which have immensely changed the socio-cultural practices of food sacrifices to the metaphysical things. Various churches under different denominations and Islamic crusades filtered into the socio-cultural and religious settings of Ondo Province in the late 19th Century.[41] Nonetheless, the two religions significantly influenced the indigenous principle of food crop production and harvest that dove-tailed into becoming Christian and Islamic religious ethical practices, fully incorporated into their doctrines by observing church and mosque's 'annual harvest', harvest chair-person (s) (people with bumper food crop harvests) since the beginning of twentieth Century. Food crops were annually brought by the farmers to church and mosque in appreciation to the God of provision and harvests.

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40 C.f I Ajayi "The Economy of Ondo Kingdom in Historical Perspective" (ed), in S. I Ajayi *The Evolution of Ondo Kingdom over 500 years (1510-2010)*. (Ibadan, Spectrum Books Limited 2013) p 96

41 I Ajayi "The Economy of Ondo Kingdom in Historical Perspective", in S. I Ajayi (ed), *The Evolution of Ondo Kingdom over 500 years (1510-2010)*. (Ibadan, Spectrum Books Limited 2013) p 101.

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