

## Gendering agency in spirit possession of Yoruba *eegun* and *imole*

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### Abstract

*In Yorubaland, there exists many ethnic subgroups with different cultural identities and affiliations. In the mist of mosaic affiliations, there are shared religious practices, that are consistent, regardless of disparate cultural affinities. Spirit possession is one of these common traditional practices. Spirit possession is not new in studies on Yoruba ritual. While this has been given scholarly attention by many scholars, it has not been seriously engaged in Akoko, an eastern Yoruba sub-group. Indeed, there are many perspectives to the study of spirit possession; this study focuses on gender. In the study of ori inu (inner head), which is central to the possession, the study argues that its activation and possession are not specific to a gender, rather, it is a collaborative effort where both genders are indispensable. Also, gender category of male priest as deity's wife feminises his gender, further globalising gendering in the possession. Ori is discussed in two prominent institutions of the possession: imole (deity) and eegun (masquerade). These two are discussed as trajectories to gender studies in Akoko religious history. Gendering spirit possession in a Yoruba subgroup that has not been sufficiently researched is germane to scholarship. Historical research methodology is used with the technique of critical analysis of data. The theory of historical feminism is used to emphasize non-gender specificity of spirit possession. Inter-disciplinary approach like ethnography is used to have firm grasp of the practices. In all, gendering history is crucial to knowledge production, especially in understanding the agency and hierarchies that forged Akoko and Yoruba history.*

**Keywords:** Spirit possession; Gender; Yoruba; Ori; Women; Akoko; Masquerade; Imole



## Introduction

Spirit possession in African societies has gained attention of ethnographers and anthropologists, because of its peculiar context, content and essence. Yoruba is one of the African societies with high record of spirit possession. The belief in *Olodumare* (Supreme God) and *orisa* (lesser gods) was (and still) central to Yoruba religious practices. From a foreigner or outsider perspective, it is somewhat difficult to identify this belief system with Western ideologies of monotheism or polytheism, because, it is neither belief in one god nor believe in many gods. It is belief in one God and many other gods, with each having its indispensable role. Jacob Olupona alludes to this that a westerner visiting Yorubaland and is interested in the religious system would easily reckon that the ethnic has a unique religious system.<sup>1</sup> One of the features of this religious pluralism is spirit possession; it is one of the ways gods communicate human. This is rooted in the belief that human has spirit and it can be occupied by gods to pass message to the living. Across Yorubaland, this belief is variously practiced. In an eastern Yoruba subgroup, Akoko, *egun* (masquerade) and *imole* (deity) were some of the means humans were possessed to relay god's message to the living.

One of the central beliefs of *egunis* that it is an ancestral cult through which the dead retains existence by possessing the living, during worship. The possessed wears mask and other cult insignia that resonates the ancestors. During performance, they communicate ancestral message to the people. In turn the people respect and honour the opinion of the ancestors. There are specific families initiated into this practice. In Akoko, only men wear mask and performed as masquerades, but the fortification of the mask and its wearer is not gender-specific. *Imole* as *orisa* worship is unique to eastern Yoruba, including Akoko. J. D. Y Peel attests to this: the word *imole* or *umole* was used to refer to *orisain* eastern Yoruba.<sup>2</sup> In Akoko, "*Imole*" was used to refer to feminine gods or female worship in some communities, while it

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<sup>1</sup>Jacob Olupona, *City of 201 Gods: Ile Ife in Time, Space, and the Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011) 6.

<sup>2</sup>JDY Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press: 2000) 95.

was used to refer to both (masculine and feminine) in others. Some religion scholars argue that it is used to refer to deities or divinities which had relations with earth. This is probably implied or embedded in the word etymology: “*IMOLE*” - it could be literarily applied to mean IMO-ILE that is knowledge of the earth. In Akoko, *Imole* was worship of the earth, including river.<sup>3</sup>The central point of connection between human and these two institutions is *ori inu* (inner head). It is the medium of intercession between the living and the deities.

In order to enhance better understanding, theory is used to foreground the discourse: it helps in untangling knotty areas, such that the study becomes lucid and unique. The theory used in this study is historical feminism. Oyeronke Oyewumi is the main proponent of this theory. She provides elaborate discourse on the theory, in one of the works she edited in 2011: *Gender Epistemologies in Africa: Gendering Traditions, Spaces, Social Institutions, and Identities*. It is defined as the ideology for eradicating female subjugation, by investigating African cultures, where gender was not historically a social category, and using it to reposition women’s history in a society that perceive them as historically subservient. She used Yoruba as an example of society devoid of gender ontology:

Significantly, then, I remain open to the idea that there are many cultures like Yorùbá around the world where historically, gender was not a social category. Consequently, I propose historical feminism as the kind of feminism that is needed to address the problems, I have articulated...Since male dominance has become a fact of life around the world, the need to organize to overcome it cannot be gainsaid. But the type of feminism we abide by is also crucial to understanding the nature of the problem, its scope, and the resources available in local

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<sup>3</sup>Interview with Aina Owolabi, the Bobatolu of Irun, 106c years. No 10. Okeubo, Irun Akoko. 20th December, 2018.

communities to challenge all the interlocking forms of dominance.<sup>4</sup>

It is an ideology to decolonise Yoruba history, and restore the original culture, devoid of male domination, in order to transform social relations. Thus, to Oyewumi, Yoruba women were not victims of gender socio-cultural disparity until the idea of gender inequality was imported by the British colonial rulers. In her ground-breaking publication: *The Invention of Women: Making an African sense of Western Gender Discourses*, she equally notes that gender is not a social category in many cultures.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, like a school of thought, which blames Africa's underdevelopment on colonialism, the theory also engages in the blame game: colonial culture is responsible for the neglect of female in Yoruba history. In other words, gender was totally absent in pre-colonial history, until colonial rule. However, this work does not concur with total colonial importation of gender, it studies the extent to which gender was not ontological in the history.

The theory is important to this work because of its emphasis on investigating African culture to showcase absence of female subjugation. Similarly, this study also examines an African culture (Akoko), where the subjugation was not prominent in spirit possession of *ori-inu*. Historical feminism is therefore used to foreground non-gender specificity in the control of *ori-inu* by the deities. Since *ori-inu* is crucial to the study, it is first examined as precursor to the discourse. After this, symbolisms of gender in spirit possession are discussed in *imole* and *eegun*.

### ***Ori* in Spirit Possession**

In Yoruba cultural studies, *ori*, loosely translates as head transcends physical head. It is mainly categorised as *ori-inu*

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<sup>4</sup>Oyeronke Oyewumi, 'Decolonizing the Intellectual and the Quotidian: Yorùbá Scholars(hip) and Male Dominance', *Gender Epistemologies in Africa: Gendering Traditions, Spaces, Social Institutions, and Identities*, Oyeronke Oyewumi (ed), (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 30-31.

<sup>5</sup>Oyeronke Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women: Making an African sense of Western Gender Discourses*(Minnesota: University of Minnesota, 1997).

(inner head) and *ori-ode* (outer head). It might be difficult to understand head as interior body part, since head is uppermost part of the body and permanently exterior. Yoruba, however, idolises or locates *ori* in a kind of spirituality, with the belief that *ori-inu* is sacred to human existence on earth. The interior controls all thoughts, actions and future deeds of an individual. Henry Drewal adds that the spiritual head houses potential and character of an individual.<sup>6</sup> It may not be physical head like *ori-ode*, it is believed to superintend over all human activities. One of the common prayers of Yoruba through the inner head, “*ori mi maa tako mi*” (may my head not negate me), shows that the it is crucial to successful human endeavours. Oyeronke Oyewumi identifies its usefulness during pregnancy and delivery: “pregnancy is a period during which the *orí* is constantly invoked by family members and well-wishers alike”.<sup>7</sup> Motherhood is invested with great power, partly because the mother’s *ori* is permanently attached to her offspring. At delivery, mother’s *ori* will be activated for safe delivery of her daughter in labour. She concludes: “It is important to note that appeal to *orí* is regarded as the key prayer in time of crisis, superseding entreaties to the other deities.”<sup>8</sup> *Ori* as a superintendent of human actions and thoughts makes it the oasis of human spirituality and trajectory to the gods, through possession. On possession, Drewal notes:

An expression of this belief occurs in possession trance when worshipper assumes the character of deity. Informants specifically state that the spirit of deity mounts *gun* the inner head or *inun* and causes it to swell *wu* as the medium enters possession. To express the altered inner self the possessed person is led away and dressed in the regalia of the deity sometimes including instruments evocative of power and aggression swords cudgels whips or coolness and composure fans. The medium then returns

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<sup>6</sup>Henry John Drewal, ‘Art and the Perception of Women in Yorùbá Culture’, *Cahiers d’études Africaines*, Vol. 17, No. 68, 1977, 546.

<sup>7</sup>Oyeronke Oyewumi, *What Gender is Motherhood?: Changing Yoruba Ideals of Power, Procreation and Identity in the Age of Modernity*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) 64.

<sup>8</sup>Oyeronke Oyewumi, *What Gender is Motherhood?* 63.

to develop the character of the deity via formal dance thus harmonizing inner presence with outer performance.<sup>9</sup>

In Margaret Drewal's account, *ori inu* is located on the top of the physical head: "Further evidence suggests a more direct connection between the projection on the top of the head and spirit possession".<sup>10</sup> In some instances, small wraps or ball of concocted rituals are placed on head top of *adosu orisa* (the one whose head is the bearer of the god's *osu*) to invite the spirit of the god. She further gave an example in a study of Ondo cult of Anago Yoruba. For a priest of the Ondo cult, the projection creates the avenue for the spirit of the god to mount. It becomes a symbol of the place where the living and the spiritual can meet, can unite, marked in time by the act of placing the hat on the head. The headdress provides a point of contact, a crossroads, and denies the mundane function of carrying loads. She further notes that music and dance steps are crucial to connect the initiates with the gods.<sup>11</sup>

*Ori-inu* makes possession possible, as it houses deity's spirit that controls the physical body. The importance of *ori* in Yoruba cosmology cannot be over-emphasised, as success or failure of humans depended on it. Since *ori* is the intercession point between humans and gods, it is the agent that submits the body to overall control of the spirit. In other words, without it, possession and control of the body is not possible. In eastern Yoruba, particularly Akoko, *imole* and *eegun* are major spirits that control *ori inu*. The possession of *ori* by these two shall be discussed with emphasis on gender.

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<sup>9</sup> Henry John Drewal, 'Art and the Perception of Women in Yorùbá Culture', *Cahiers d'études Africaines*, Vol. 17, No. 68, 1977, 546.

<sup>10</sup> Margaret Thompson Drewal, 'Symbols of Possession: A Study of Movement and Regalia in an Anago-Yoruba Ceremony,' *Dance Research Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 2 Spring - Summer, (Congress on Research in Dance, 1975)

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1477821> (Accessed: 22-11-2019), 18.

<sup>11</sup>Margaret Thompson Drewal, 'Symbols of Possession: A Study of Movement and Regalia in an Anago-Yoruba Ceremony,' 18-20.

### Gender and Spirit Possession in *Imole* Festival

Religious festival is a period of communal or family feasting. Oyeronke Olajubu adds that festival preserves the nexus between gods and people. Festival in form of songs, dance and recitations, give meaning and connection to the social and cultural identity needs of the people.<sup>12</sup> Peel emphasizes that possession is “..most dramatic manifestation of a general feature of *orisa* cults which is vital to the understanding of their appeal and spread: the strong identification which existed between the *orisa* and their devotees”.<sup>13</sup> Henry Drewal adds that during spirit possession, worshipper becomes possessed by the being of deity. He further explains the process of possession as thus: “the spirit of deity mounts (gun) the inner head (*ori-inu*) and causes it to swell (wu) as the medium enters possession... The medium then returns to develop the character of the deity via formal dance thus harmonizing inner presence with outer performance”.<sup>14</sup> *Ori inu* is the trajectory of possession by deity, because it is believed that this part controls the outer body for ritual display in possession. In the case of *Egba* festival in Ikakumo (Aworonke) Akoko, spirit possession is central to connect the people to *Egba* deity.

The possession of *Egba* spirit represents initiation into *Egba* cult. However, only males (men and boys) could be initiated into the cult. The spirit does not possess women. In other words, it is an exclusively male affair in *ori* possession.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, some scholars on religion and festival had described spirit possession as exclusive for female. In fact, Hackett avers that spirit possession is common to women than in men. To him, this is due to emotional weakness of crying and fear common to women. Matory concludes that in festival where spirit possession is

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<sup>12</sup>Oyeronke Olajubu, *Women in the Yoruba Religious Spher*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003) 105.

<sup>13</sup>JDY Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, 104.

<sup>14</sup>Henry John Drewal, ‘Art and the Perception of Women in Yorùbá Culture’, 546.

<sup>15</sup>Lawrence Oyewole Arohunmolase, ‘Spirit Possession in the *Egba* Festival’, Toyin Falola and Ann Genova (eds), *Orisa: Yoruba Gods and Spirituality in Africa and the Diaspora*, 106.

absent, the place of woman is compromised.<sup>16</sup> Evidently, Hackett and Matory submissions are not obtainable in the context of Akoko, especially Ikakumo.

Nonetheless, the male centeredness of spirit possession in *Egba* is balanced in worship. *Egbais* worshipped through two gendered stones: female and male. Stored in a pot filled with water, the two stones are kept in the custody of Ayindu family. Prior to the central *Egba* worship, *Egba* initiates would perform ancestral sacrifices; jubilate to the rhythm of *ogidigbo* drum beat as preliminary to *Egba* festival. Also, the worship is regarded as a community cleansing deity in its punishment of evil doers.<sup>17</sup>

Following erection of large fire by young men, *Egba* priest also known as *Aworo* (male) would be possessed by *Egba* spirit, remove a wood from fire and dance round gathered audience for cleansing purpose. Women also dance to the *ogidigbo* drum beats at the occasion.<sup>18</sup> Next, he would bring out female *Egba* stone that represent divinity from the shrine. This he positions close to the fire. Then, a horn of ram would be set on hollow spot of the female stone, all intending male initiates (who must be indigenes of the town) would be in a procession and touch the horn. The touch invited *Egba* spirit into their *ori inu*. Communion of *ori inu* with *Egba* was demonstrated by chanting, dancing, rolling on the fire without getting hurt and conversing in *Egba* language, which is different from Ikakumo dialect. Possession of *Egbais* permanent, it lasts through life-time of initiates. Detaching the ram's horn from the female stone signifies end of the day's performance.<sup>19</sup> This moment could be regarded as period of trance for the initiates.

Dance in *Egba* makes it similar to *Sango* devotee initiation. In the latter, dance comes before spirit possession same as *Egba*.

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<sup>16</sup> Hackett and Matory cited in Oyeronke Olajubu, *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere*, 113.

<sup>17</sup> Lawrence Oyewole Arohunmolase, 'Spirit Possession in the *Egba* Festival', Toyin Falola and Ann Genova (eds), *Orisa: Yoruba Gods and Spirituality in Africa and the Diaspora*, 104.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> O. A Aminu, *Itan ati Asa Ilu Kakumo-Akoko* (Ikare: Olorunsola Printing Works, 1971), 28-44.



During dance, the spirit of Sango possesses the priest/priestess and he/she starts to communicate in a strange voice. This is also obtainable in *Egba*. On music and dance in the possession: Margaret Drewal notes that, music and dance are forms of expression and contact that connects human's world with that of gods.<sup>20</sup> Possession starts from the mind, all conscious control is surrendered "...and psychic forces are set free which enable the priest to identify himself so completely with the idea of *Sango*, that he actually becomes a living impersonation of that idea".<sup>21</sup>

In this seeming male exclusive ritual festival, gendering is apparent. While *aworo* and the initiates are male, gendering is still evident. Apart from being senior initiate, *aworo* is regarded as wife of deity. Feminisation of *Aworo* as wife upends or juggles his biological gender. His role as priest of *imole* imbues femininity on his masculinity. *Aworo* is thus, male by birth but feminine by profession. Besides this gendering, one of the central items of initiation, *Egba* stone, was feminine. Although the reason for the choice of female stone for *Egba* possession is not known, the use of female stone depicts gender balance in a festival regarded as masculine. Reading gender to history reveals gendering pattern in the face of sexual exclusivity. Placing of ram's horn (male animal) in hollow female stone exemplifies gender complementality, in spite of the non-female initiation. Although *Egba* spirit possession negates Hackett and Matory submissions of female exclusivity in spirit possession, the involvement of female stone signifies inclusion of femininity in spirit possession.

Another Akoko community with gendered spirit possession is Daja Akoko. *Imole Hunmeh* is used to ward off unpleasant condition like sickness. It is a communal worship as the women

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<sup>20</sup>Margaret Thompson Drewal, 'Symbols of Possession: A Study of Movement and Regalia in an Anago-Yoruba Ceremony' *Dance Research Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Spring - Summer, 1975), (Congress on Research in Dance) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1477821> (Accessed: 22-11-2019) 21.

<sup>21</sup>H. U. Beier, 'The Egungun cult among the Yorubas', *Présence Africaine*, Nouvelle série, No. 18/19 février-mai 1958, (Présence Africaine Editions) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24345513> (Accessed: 22-11-2019) 34.

involved in the ritual rites must report back to the elders and chiefs. Some of the items used in the worship are kola-nut, akara, cock and bitter-cola. The priest must cover their body with white cloth. *Hunmeh* chose its adherents and priests through spirit possession like that of *Egba*. It possesses only women, but the ritual spectacle is seen by all. Once the deity possessed their *ori inu* whilst they dance, they begin to speak in strange language. Conversing in strange language is also central to Beier's Sango possession discussed above. Language of the gods is exclusive to them, only the priest who surrenders the conscious mind for deity's possession understands the communication. Hence, possession is one of the ways priest communicates the message of *imole* to the people. The message of *Hunmeh* after the worship is central to bountiful harvest. The *animoles* or priests are highly esteemed like the *Iyanifa* in Oyo, since they are mouthpiece of the god.<sup>22</sup> The male domination of *Egba* and female domination of *Hunmeh* give a hint of historical fluidity in Akoko. Peel corroborates this fluidity generally, that religion of eastern Yoruba (where Akoko forms a large sub-group) is heterogeneous.<sup>23</sup>

### Spirit Possession and *Egun*

In Akoko, masquerade could be basically divided into two strands: entertainment and ritual. In the first strand, *Ede*, *Owi Yalawu*, *Owi Esise*, *Ire* and *Arunshewa* are examples in Irun Akoko. In *Oge* and *Afa*, *edeis* also entertainment *ooku*. Others are *ako*, *agbe* and *emeho*. *Eekugan-hingan-hin* is the umbrella name for entertainment masquerades in Ikare.<sup>24</sup> However, *Ede* is discussed by Olomola in Ado Ekiti as ritual and powerful *Egun*: "The powerful *Egun* includes categories of *edè*, *àyoro ewà* and *egun're*; they represent the totality of Ado ancestors and guardian spirits, they are the main repositories and agency of

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<sup>22</sup>Interview with Abu Obademi, farmer, 91 years, oldest person in Daja. No. 9 Daja, Ajowa Akoko. 10<sup>th</sup> December, 2018.

<sup>23</sup>JDY Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, 109.

<sup>24</sup>Interview with Dr Stephen Aroge, 68 years Pensioner and indigene of Irun Akoko. No. 7, road 2, Oba Ile Housing Estate. 7<sup>th</sup> December, 2018; Interview with Joanna Ibiwumi Momoh; Interview with Monisola Awotimi; Interview with Alfred Omotoyinbo, 110 years, No. I/42 Ogo, Irun Akoko 14<sup>th</sup> December 2018.

Ado philosophy and religion”.<sup>25</sup> This sharp distinction shows that Irun Akoko may be immediate neighbour of Ekiti, their *Eegun* cultures are not synonymous in function.

However, none of these entertainment or ceremonial masquerades is prohibited from female spectacle. They are heavily involved as ceremonial Yeye *Eegun/EEKU*, who accompanied the masquerade during parade. H. U Beier adds that women participated by dancing during *Eegun* performance.<sup>26</sup> However, this category is not included in the spirit possession dialectics, rather, the fierce and powerful *EEKU* is the focus of this research, as they are the cults that possess *ori* and controls human activities.

In the strand of ritual and powerful *Eegun*; Ikare classifies them as *Sheeru*. *Sheeru* is from the etymology of the Yoruba word – “*eru*”, which means “fear”. *Sheeru* thus, means “to frighten”. This partly explains the reason, they are regarded as powerful. In fact, some are doubly regarded as *Imole (Orisa)* like *Gidigbe/Gudugbe* in Ikare, Irun and Ogbagi. *Olosoru* and *Elebita* were also powerful masquerades in Irun. The fierce masquerade is called *Ooku-Igbede* or simply *Igbede* in Oge and Afa. *Ighu Fifi* is the name for powerful masquerade in Isua and Sosan.<sup>27</sup> The paper proceeds by discussing some of these powerful masquerades, with the objective of straightening out how it controls human spirit through *ori* and the gender symbolism therein.

As noted above, *gidigbe/gudugbe* is powerful *eegun* that doubled as *imole* in Ikare, Ogbagi and Irun. “*Gidigbe*” is the pronunciation unique to Ikare, while “*gudugbe*” is exclusive to Ogbagi and Irun (Ikare neighbours). Besides, the process of the ritual festival is virtually same. C. O Akomolafe notes that the period of *Gidigbe* worship is a solemn dedication season for the populace, where

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<sup>25</sup>Ishola, Olomola. “Contradictions in Yoruba Folk Beliefs Concerning Post-Life Existence: The Ado Example,” *Journal des Africanistes*. 113.

<sup>26</sup> H. U. Beier, ‘The Egungun cult among the Yorubas,’ *Présence Africaine, Nouvelle série, No. 18/19 (février-mai 1958)*

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/24345513> Accessed: 22-11-2019, 35.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Dr Stephen Aroge.

no drumming or public jubilation is permitted.<sup>28</sup> The history of the deity is feminine. It is traced to a stranded woman, who was shown hospitality by a man known as Okeledo. Her *oriki* (cognomen) further confirms her gender: “Yeye yokoyoko atori eni i sunwon se, oke leyin Ikare...”. “Wonderful mother that changes the fortune of ill-fated one, the rock or pillar of Ikare...”.<sup>29</sup> During annual worship, a special bean cake called *Akara epa* (made with groundnuts) was used to invite *gidigbe* into the wearer’s *ori* for nine days. Apart from the fact that the wearer of *gidigbe* costume must be a member of Okeledo family, he must have been initiated through some ritual processes to connect his *ori* with *gidigbe* spirit. The regalia or costume, which is long-breasted (feminine dress), is the spirit oasis, as it transmits the masquerade spirit to the wearer and possesses him to re-invent herself as *yeyeyokoyoko*. Thus, the wearer may be man, *gidigbe* possession of his *ori* makes him *yeye* (mother) with masculine body. Besides, the severity and density of the power makes his biological gender of less concern.

Worshipped in the night, *gidigbe* detests reflection of light, rather prefers darkness as it re-energizes ritual power. The *eegun* communicates in scary voice with the power of disappearing and re-appearing concurrently.<sup>30</sup> *Gidigbe* is consulted whenever any evil befell Ikare. Also, during the night rituals, women and men could make supplications through prayers. Women stay indoor to make request and must drop a gift outside prior to his arrival. The current queen (Olori) of Olukare confirms this:

I have requested something from him before. I dropped schnapp (gin) at my doorstep prior to his arrival. When he approached, I quickly told him my request and added that my pledge was dropped outside and he should take it. He granted my request.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>C. O. Akomolafe, “Akoko under British Rule, 1900-1935”, An M.Phil. Thesis submitted to the Department of History, The University of Ife, Ile-Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University), 1976, 177

<sup>29</sup>Interview with Joanna Ibiwumi Momoh.

<sup>30</sup>Interview with Joanna Ibiwumi Momoh.

<sup>31</sup>Interview with Joanna Ibiwumi Momoh.

Although the masquerade must not be seen by women, women could communicate and supplicate to the deity. *Gidigbe* could be compared with the popular *gelede* masquerade in western Yoruba. In the two masquerades, performers are males, the masks are costumed as feminine to stress the physical attributes of women.<sup>32</sup> *Ososomu*, a variant of *gelede* also forbids women spectacle. However, reasons for prohibition vary in the two. *Ososomu* dislikes menstrual blood, while *gidigbe* forbids female sighting.

At Ogbagi and Irun, *gudugbe* worship is not entirely different. In Ogbagi, apart from the regular annual worship, it is worshipped whenever there is any major crisis in the town. Also, if any principal Chief dies, the cult must perform some rituals and everyone in the Odeyole clan is entitled to be involved in the rite, except females.<sup>33</sup> However, the “Olori-Obinrin” (ritual female head) in Ogbagi, affirms that, all masquerades, including *gudugbe* had *yeye eegun*, which is a female attached to the masquerade.<sup>34</sup> The female is already an initiate who must have passed through many traditional rites to fortify her from the taboo. She must also be an old woman in her post-menopausal age. The Olori-Obinrin also participated in fortification of *eegun* in the grove.<sup>35</sup> It is noon and night worship and the gazing taboo against women in Ikare are same in Ogbagi.<sup>36</sup> Meanwhile, the Ikare feminine costume is not obtainable, because historical developments that metamorphosed into the masquerade festival, are not totally similar.

In Irun, *gudugbe* is worshipped at Ifinmi quarter. In the same way it is used in funeral in Ogbagi, it is also used in commencing funeral rite of any aged indigene. As part of the funeral rite, some cultural displays are also involved as a form of power exhibition.

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<sup>32</sup> Henry John Drewal, ‘Gelede Masquerade: Imagery and Motif’ *African Arts*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Summer, 1974), pp. 8- (UCLA James S. Coleman African Studies Center) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3334883> Accessed: 22-11-2019. 10.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Juliana Adenola Rotifa, farmer, 75 years. A/20 Ada quarter, Ogbagi Akoko. 11<sup>th</sup> December 2018.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Ariojuowatile Bolatia, head, *Olobinrin*, Ogbagi.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Ariojuowatile Bolatia, head, *Olobinrin*, Ogbagi.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Juliana Adenola Rotifa

For instance, they used *apaja*, sky-like rainbow, to commence rites; thin thread would be used to suspend *Odu*, a big pot for cloth dyeing in the sky; stem of plantain bunch would be buried in the ground and it would germinate and produce bunches of plantain immediately. Also, they could bury a tiny stick in the ground, invite giant youths to uproot it, but would be impossible.<sup>37</sup> All these were used to exemplify the deity's power possessed by the initiates.

In the three communities, men and women could communicate with *gidigbe/gudugbe* in requesting from the deity. Women cook the feasting meal of *gidigbe/gudugbe* initiates in the communities, although, they must not eat from it, else, they would die after few days. Therefore, compensation for cooking is shown, by giving the women food items like yam, pig, goat and others.<sup>38</sup> This cooking, demystifies the claim of female non-participation. The relationship of the possessed as deity's bride also alters the gender exclusivity in the worship. They are regarded as wives of the deity because of the power relations between them.

Some researchers on Akoko submit that women had no place in *Eegun* worship. For example, C.O Akomolafe's claim that women had no place in the worship of *Eegun* in Akoko is not sustainable because of the efforts of *yeye* at fortification of *ori*. Akomolafe attests to the revered status of *gidigbe*, but the place of woman in the possession is not included in his work.<sup>39</sup> Although, spirit possession and female agency in *eegunare* not the objectives of Akomolafe's research, the sweeping submission: "...women had no place in the worship of *egungunor* other traditional gods...",<sup>40</sup> is too total in the purview of Akoko history – an heterogeneous subgroup. Besides, Akomolafe did not proceed to

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<sup>37</sup> Interview with Alfred Omotoyinbo.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Chief Aina Owolabi, the Bobatolu of Irun; Interview with Joanna Ibiwumi Momoh.

<sup>39</sup> C. O. Akomolafe, 'Akoko under British Rule, 1900-1935', An M.Phil. Thesis submitted to the Department of History, The University of Ife, Ile-Ife now Obafemi Awolowo University 1976, 177.

<sup>40</sup> C. O. Akomolafe, 'Akoko under British Rule, 1900-1935', An M.Phil. Thesis submitted to the Department of History,, 179.

demonstrate any understanding of the cult institution to substantiate his assertion.

Imposition of male dominance is compromising in scholarship. It is not unlikely that he advances this submission based on modern cultural leanings, but it is a historical to generalise suppositions without empirical evidence. Besides, Akoko is far too divers and fluid to be watertight in its gender history. Also, *Ifa*, the primordial divination oracle of Yoruba, emphasizes the place of women in *Odu* (Chapter) corpus. *Osun* has conclusive power over sacrifice, as *Odu Oseetura* centred on *Osun's* importance must be recited to complete incantations (to guarantee success).<sup>41</sup> Besides, females were deified as goddess, apart from feminised entities like water, mountain and totems.

Apart from *gidigbe*, *ijalamo* and *ajalamo* are also *eegun* in Irun and Ogbagi respectively that are rich in spirit possession. *Ijalamo* is a special masquerade that come out during communal crisis. It comes out in the night and must not be seen by women.<sup>42</sup> *Yeye* is also involved in inviting the deity into mask wearer at the grove, although this is not a feat she could boast of publicly.<sup>43</sup> It is a top state secret as her identity must not be known, just as the identity of *eegun* is also hidden in his masking attire, which shows that keeping secret is not gender-specific, grove activities must also be kept secret by all cult initiates.

Consequently, the popular Yoruba adage noted by Jackson and Mosadomi, "B'obinrin wawo ko gbodo wi", "If a woman knows about the cult/sees the cult, she must never say",<sup>44</sup> is not exclusive to female. Indeed, *eegun* is *awo* (secret), because *eegun* is supposed to be the spirit of ancestors, who had come to visit offspring, hence the bearer of *eegun's* attire must not also boast of his human identity during or after procession. Thus, female and male must not divulge *awo's* secret. In fact, Henry Drewal

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<sup>41</sup>Oyeronke Oyewumi, *What Gender is Motherhood?: Changing Yoruba Ideals of Power, Procreation and Identity in the Age of Modernity*, 32.

<sup>42</sup>Interview with Chief Aina Owolabi, the Bobatolu of Irun.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Alfred Omotoyinbo.

<sup>44</sup>Joyce Marie Jackson and Fehintola Mosadomi, 'Cultural Continuities: Masking Traditions of the Black Mardi Gras Indians and the Yoruba Eeguns', Toyin Falola and Ann Genova. 156.



adds that ability to keep secret is congenital in female than male, while "... men usually open our secret to anybody and women have many secrets they will never tell...".<sup>45</sup> He further gives example of a male king in *Ifa* divination of *ogbe wori* who could not keep secrets and died afterwards.<sup>46</sup> Further research is needed to convincingly establish this.

In Irun, it is upheld that female presence in *eegun* grove is seriously forbidden, especially in *ajalamo's* grove. Any woman sighted is beheaded. However, *Agbajo*, a female title for most powerful *yeye eegun* could join the returning procession of *ajalamo* back to the grove. Centrally, the entire *eegun* cult in which she is allowed membership are those whose groves are in Igbo Arera Ijan.<sup>47</sup> Also, *Agbajo* must be in post-menopausal age, otherwise her participation in the cult would prevent her from menstruating, hence no procreation. This implies that the cult interacted or impacted on female reproduction. However, it remains to be seen, whether, the procreation sanction is punishment for coming in contact with *ajalamo's* powers or it detested menstrual blood. Menstrual prohibition seems to provide insight to non-total involvement of women.

Will Rea in a paper titled "Making History: The Modernity of Masquerade in Ikole Ekiti", examines a history of *ajalamo* in Ekiti. Rea notes, *ajalamo* was introduced from Isinbode Ekiti to Ikole Ekiti in early twentieth century. *Ajalamo* was not known earlier in any parts of Ekiti region before Isinbode.<sup>48</sup> However, it is not known whether *Ajalamo* was also introduced to Ogbagi from Isinbode or Ikole at the same period, but fierce features of the masquerade discussed, match the identity of Ogbagi's *ajalamo*. In other words, Ekiti's *ajalamo* and Akoko's *ajalamo* share some

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<sup>45</sup>Henry John Drewal, 'Art and the Perception of Women in Yorùbá Culture', *Cahiers d'études Africaines*, Vol. 17, No. 68, 1977, doi: <https://doi.org/10.3406/cea.1977.2430> 547.

<sup>46</sup>Henry John Drewal, 'Art and the Perception of Women in Yorùbá Culture', 547.

<sup>47</sup>Interview with Chief Aina Owolabi, the Bobatolu of Irun.

<sup>48</sup>Will Rea, 'Making History: The Modernity of Masquerade in Ikole Ekiti', *African Arts*, Vol. 41, No. 4 Winter, 2008, (UCLA James S. Coleman African Studies Center) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20447914> (Accessed: 22-11-2019), 18-19.



characteristics, which suggest correlations in the communities' practice. This may be probably true, owing to proximity of Ogbagi to Ekiti and dialectal affinities. Nonetheless, Rea did not discuss exception of any woman seeing the *Eegun*, like the case of Ogbagi. This removes female participation of any kind in Ekiti's *ajalamo*.

Rea's reference of *ajalamo's* powers reminisce spirit performance and its overwhelming power on *ori*:

The mask is said to be so powerful that it has beyond its appearance in performance. It is said that it talks or grunts while sitting in the rafters of the house it is stored in. Its power is such that while in performance it can overwhelm wearer, forcing the performer to fall to the ground and enter the earth. For this reason, the person doing the masquerade spend an intensive time before the biannual festival preparing himself with various medicines as protection from the mask. During the appearance of *Ajalamo*, at the biannual *Oro Egigun*, strangers are prohibited from leaving their houses. moves around the town men are said to throw eggs to "lighten its load." The mask is also said to attract flies and bees as it moves around the town, which, if they sting onlookers cause a sometimes fatal red rash to develop on the body.<sup>49</sup>

Rea's account depicts the overwhelming power of *ajalamo* on *ori*. Unlike this Ekiti version, female initiates are part of *ori* fortification in *igbale* (masquerade grove). In most cases, post-menopausal women are chosen as initiates, because it is believed that post-menstrual stage carries more power than menstrual. Drewal discusses post-menopausal women by noting that "purity and cleanliness" are attached to post-menopausal women in *gelede eegun*.<sup>50</sup> As noted earlier, menstruation is regarded as

<sup>49</sup>Will Rea, 'Making History: The Modernity of Masquerade in Ikole Ekiti', 18.

<sup>50</sup>Henry Drewal and Margaret Drewal, *Gelede: Art and Female Power among the Yoruba*, (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1983), 79.

contamination which *gelede* like *ososomu* hates, hence, women who have passed menstrual age are regarded as clean and useful for *eegun* rituals. *Ososomu* detests menstruation because, the blood contains *ase* (authority) that could dissolve or disturb her powers.<sup>51</sup> Hence, the power of menstrual blood makes it unclean. He further notes a ritual praise for women without the blood, "honor the one with the vagina that turns upside down without pouring blood (*iba obo to do ri ko do ti ko se eje*)".<sup>52</sup> Absence of blood (menstruation) in the vagina accrues power to post-menopausal women, which is needed for fortifying mask wearers. Thus, they are actively involved in invoking the masquerade spirit into the performer's *ori*. The fortification is called *iwe-eegun* (literarily meaning bathing of masquerade) in many parts of Akoko. Masquerade spirit may not possess women, but they are indispensable in the process that leads up to the possession. In *eegun*, the possessed mask wearer has no exclusivity to the process or activation of his *ori inu*, collaborative effort of *yeye* and other initiates make it successful.

Above shows spirit possession is not gender specific. Gender in spirits scholarship is not novel in Yoruba studies. Oyewumi notes that spirits are not gendered, though it is sometimes masculinised. She argues against Toyin Falola's position that spirits are not gendered:

Toyin Falola has argued unconvincingly that the Yoruba market was supremely women's space. The reduction of the most public and the most inclusive space in the society to a gender-specific, exclusive "women's space" constitutes a gross misrepresentation...it was also believed that spirits dwelled in the marketplace and that *orisa* (gods), like *Esu* and other supernatural and invisible beings, were present in this arena. Could Falola tell us the "gender identity" of these invisible beings...it was understood that by midnight, the marketplace had to be vacated

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<sup>51</sup>Henry Drewal and Margaret Drewal, *Gelede: Art and Female Power among the Yoruba*, 79.

<sup>52</sup>Henry John Drewal, 'Art and the Perception of Women in Yorùbá Culture', *Cahiers d'études Africaines*, Vol. 17, No. 68, 1977, 550.

by humans and turned over to the spirits. Why, then, would Falola privilege those who occupied the market during the day over those who were present from midnight on?<sup>53</sup>

Thus, masculinity is not always appropriate to homogenise history. The specialty of women in the fortification of *ori* and possession of their *ori* by *imole* make it inadequate to assign gender-specificity to spirit possession.

### Conclusion

Spirit possession is popular in Yoruba studies. While some scholars like Matory and Hackett affirm female prominence in the practice, others uphold male domination. Apart from the fact that this study alleviates the dearth scholarship on Akoko, it shows indispensability of both sexes to the practise. Central to spirit possession is *ori-inu*: it is the unseen body part that connects with god's spirit. Across Yorubaland, *ori inu* is central to spirit possession. Everyone is believed to have *ori inu*, because human is spirit. It is not exclusive to any gender. It makes possession possible. It is the purveyor of power that submits the body to overall control of the spirit. In other words, without it, possession and control of the body would not be possible. Its activation makes gendering evident; woman and man have roles in the process that leads up to *ori* fortification. In eastern Yoruba, particularly Akoko, *imole* and *eegun* are major spirits that control *ori-inu*.

Ethnographic approach makes it possible for the researcher to have first-hand understanding of the major practices. Although strangers are not allowed to sight major rituals, some ritual items were used to discuss spirit fortification and female's role in it. *Imole* and *eegun* offer trajectories to study spirit possession. The fact that all deity priests are regarded as bride make their gender identity fluid. *Egba* deity possessed only men, but the festival is gendered because of the social hierarchy of husband/wife

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<sup>53</sup>Oyeronke Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western GenderDiscourses*, (Minnesota: University of Minnesota, 2010) 67 - 68.

relationship between the priest and the deity. Also, the feminine stone used in activating the deity's power and subsequent possession depict gendering. *Hunmeh* is opposite of *Egba*, it possesses only women, but has no gender-specific audience. Women are not masked as masquerades, but in a process called *iwe-eegun*, they are indispensable in invoking *eegun* spirit in the *ori* of mask wearers. Some of the masquerades like *gidigbe* has feminine history. In sum, in spirit possession, agency is gendered and interesting, which shows that gendering is rewarding to scholarship, because it un-mutes social hierarchies and categories that have hitherto been consigned to nothingness.

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