
THE HEALING POWER OF WATER: IMỌLÈ FESTIVAL IN ÀKÓKÓ AREA OF OÑDÓ STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Water has been revered for its healing properties across cultures and centuries. People use water for detoxification, rehydration and pain relief. Some Yorùbá Divinities use water to heal their initiates. There are few works on female cults that use water to take care of children in Yorùbá land. There are still more cults that take care of children, pregnant women and barren women that are yet to be researched. This work, therefore, tends to investigate the Imọlè (a female cult in Àkókó land of Oñdó State) festival, to depict how the cult uses water to meet the demands of both the initiates and non-initiates during Imọlè festival. The Interview and participant observer methods are used for the work. Both initiates and non-initiates are interviewed, and the researcher joins the initiates in places where culture allows the non-initiates to be. This enables us to study the festival better. Our findings show that the Imọlè initiates use water from the Imọlè brook to heal various diseases associated with children and to take care of pregnant and barren women. It equally provides possible solutions to such problems that may be identified. In addition, water from the brook is believed to have the prowess of curing epidemics when sprinkled over the land. The paper concludes that the cult of Imọlè can augment the efforts of modern paediatricians and obstetrician-gynaecologists in the area where Imọlè festival is being performed.

Keywords: Imọlè Cult, Imọlè Priest, Imọlè Shrines, Yèyémoḷè, Òtùn.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Yorùbá people always treat with great concern matters about their children going to unbelievable lengths sometimes to have children in life to avoid the cultural disaster of dying without children of their own. Ilésanmí (2013) asserts that:

The love of motherhood is an important factor of existence despite the natural attendant problems of child conception, child delivery, monthly menstruation, miscarriages, the rigour of childcare and the cultural attendant demands such as marriage, family taboos, marital demands, religious injunctions, various legal demands and a host of other obligations attached to motherhood.

He explains further that although men and women are responsible for producing children, women have always taken the lead in caring for the children brought to life. Most Yorùbá

women take their duties towards their children very seriously; they rejoice at experiencing childbirth and desire the joy of motherhood, nursing and nurturing children and watching them develop and prosper.

Many women join different traditional religious groups either in search of children or for the prosperity of their children. Yorùbá's traditional religion is the way Yorùbá ancestors worshipped God before the advent of foreign religions (Christianity and Islam). Yorùbá traditional religion joins all Yorùbá tribes together. A traditional religious group is determined by the divinity associated with the group for instance, Yorùbá divinities include Ògún, Şàngó, Ọbàtálá and Imọlẹ̀. Some of them cut across Yorùbá communities while some do not. There are Yorùbá traditional festivals as many as there are Yorùbá deities (òrìşà) (Ògúndèjì 2012). Each divinity set aside a certain period of the year when the initiates give reverence to their divinity. The period of the year assigned to each divinity is called Ọdún ìbílẹ̀ Yorùbá (Yorùbá traditional festival). Each festival bears the name of the reverent divinity to whom each initiate gives obeisance, hence, we have Ògún festival, Ọbàtálá festival, Şàngó festival and Imọlẹ̀ festival to mention a few. Some are observed at the family level while the community level observes some. According to Awólàlú and Dòpámú (1979), there are annual festivals connected with each divinity or ancestor throughout West Africa. People come out at their best, and the festival is characterised by eating, drinking and general rejoicing. Men and women are brought together in one crowd and there is usually a sort of social re-union. The festival may be in honour of an ancestor, it may be to train the youth to be strong, brave and industrious while others may be to uphold public morality (Awólàlú & Dòpámú, 1979). Ògúndèjì (2012) sees Yorùbá traditional festival as a veritable source of data for the study and understanding of the beliefs, religion, art, performances, history, mythology, philosophy, social-psychology, politics and general ways of life of the Yorùbá at home and the Diaspora. Ògúndèjì (2012) depicts that *ọdún ìbílẹ̀ Yorùbá* (Yorùbá traditional festival) has religious rituals and cultic context.

Early scholars try to categorise Yorùbá traditional festivals. Although Ògúnbà (1978) agrees that the typology of Yorùbá festivals is problematic, Ògúnbà identifies a category of festivals which he calls hegemonic or royal festivals. These festivals focus on the Ọba (Yorùbá king). The purpose is to consolidate the ọba's authority and ensure the loyalty of his subordinates. Some festivals in honour of òrìşà are peculiar to a town, village or community. In this case, the whole community participates in the festival in one way or the other. Among the community-related festivals are the Òkèèbàdàn festival in Ìbàdàn and Edì festival in Ilé-Ifẹ̀. Some families may have festivals dedicated to the memory of their ancestors or even a special way of celebrating a general òrìşà festival. Ògúndèjì (2012) depicts that there are divinity-related festivals- *ọdún Egúngún* (masquerade festival), *ọdún Ògún* (Ògún festival), Ògún is the Yorùbá god of iron), *ọdún Ifá* (Ifá festival) (Ifá is the Oracle god of Yorùbá), *ọdún Yemoja* (Yemoja festival), Yemoja is the Yorùbá water goddess, *ọdún Ọşun* (Ọşun festival), Ọşun is the Yorùbá water goddess) and others. He explains that most festivals cut across Yorùbá communities and the Diaspora. Adélékè (2012) asserts that the communities do benefit from celebrating Yorùbá traditional festivals in terms of bounty harvest, protection from known and unknown enemies, fertilisation of land and women's wombs for procreation of numerous children (due to the agrarian nature of the Yorùbá community) and peaceful-coexistence of citizens and denizens.

Imọlẹ̀ is a divinity whose initiates do not cut across the Yoruba communities. Adéoyè, (1985) regards Imọlẹ̀ as he who knows the beginning or the background of all creatures. Imọlẹ̀ or Irúnmọlẹ̀ divinity is a set of divinities coming down from heaven to deliver Olódùmarè's message (Àràbà, 1978). They are spirits that are no more than personification of natural forces and phenomena. They are associated with hills, mountains, rivers, rocks, caves, trees, brooks,

lakes or thick forests. They are local heroes because they are identified with objects in nature in the particular location in which they are worshipped. However, they are not confined to the physical objects in which they reside since they have unlimited mobility and can move anywhere (Arówóşęgbé, 2014). The divinities are intermediaries between God and man and are ready at hand. God is frequently worshipped through them and they receive day-to-day sacrifices. They have temples, shrines, priests, priestesses and devotees. People, therefore, regard them as convenient channels through which they can reverence the exaltedness of the Almighty (Arówóşęgbé, 2014). People worship God through them in different forms.

Ilésanmí (2013) depicts Olómitútù, a cult connected with Ọşun, a female deity in Yorùbá land as a traditional paediatrics. Ilésanmí explains further that the cult considers both the visible and the invisible, involving elaborate socialisation and liberal ritualisation. Arówóşęgbé (2014) works on the general role of women in the Imọlẹ traditional religion and concludes that women play a very significant and relevant role in the religious and social life of their people as ritualists, prophetesses, providers of food and drinks, healers and entertainers. Fáşólá (2024) depicts that cold water remains the first thing to be sprayed on the ground in the Ìjùgbẹ (a divinity) shrine before other things are done during the Ọbaresé festival. She explains further that nobody can pray without using cold water during the Ọbaresé festival (a divinity festival in Ilé-Ifẹ). A calabash containing water is always found in the shrine of Ọbaresé deity in Ilé-Ifẹ. The water is used for prayer. Rainwater, seawater and lagoon water are mixed to prepare a pot concoction to heal different ailments in Ilé-Ifẹ and its environs.

From the foregoing, it is depicted that Yorùbá traditional festivals abound in Yorùbá land and that they are not easy to categorise. Some divinity-related festivals use water for healing. Water is always found in their different shrines. It is also observed that much work has not been done on female divinity-related traditional festivals. This paper, therefore, concerns itself with Imọlẹ having rivers as her emblem. She is a female divinity in the communities involved and her worshippers are mainly women. The paper tends to study the Imọlẹ festival to investigate its ritualistic act of healing. There are many worshippers in towns like Ọkà, Ìkàré, Arigidi, Àfìn, Ìrùn, Ọbà, Ọkẹ̀àgbẹ̀, Àkùngbá, Ùgbẹ̀, all in Àkókó Area of Ondó State, South-West, Nigeria.

2. CONCEPT OF IMỌLẸ FESTIVAL

Imọlẹ is generally worshipped the same way in all the aforementioned towns above but each town has a particular name for its own Imọlẹ. For instance, we have Umalẹ Adònamásùn at Ọkà, Umalẹ Aládé at Àfìn, Èrìşà Iyẹ at Arigidi, Umalẹ Àtìbà at Àkùngbá, Umalẹ Oríyeríyẹ at Ìrùn, Imọlẹ Abu (Ọkẹ̀-leyìn-Ùgbẹ̀) at Ùgbẹ̀ (Arówóşęgbé, 2014). We have to state here that in standard Yorùbá under vowel harmony, vowel “u” does not work as vowel-initial “F1” in bi-syllabic words except in Yorùbá dialects (Owólabí, 1989, Adéèboyèjé, 1985) hence, the name Imọlẹ is written in standard Yorùbá while Umalẹ remains the dialectal pronunciation of the various communities where Imọlẹ is being worshipped. Imọlẹ festival comes up once a year. The initiates gather to celebrate Imọlẹ festival, appreciate her for what she has done in the previous year and ask for her protection for the current year. The festival lasts 30 days. At the send-forth ceremony marking the end of the festival in the Ìkàré community, some elderly women in the Imọlẹ cult, ranging between 2 and 6 in number, take the cowries used to remove sickness from their bodies and *imù* used to carry their pots/òtùn, to the boundary between their town and the next town where Imọlẹ festival would be celebrated. They indirectly handed the festival down to that community.

There are various ways of becoming initiates; any child born into the Imọlẹ family can grow up to become an Onímọlẹ (Imọlẹ initiate), a child may be born an initiate without her parents being Imọlẹ initiate. Parents may inquire from Ifá (Yorùbá oracle divinity) if it is noticed that

the child becomes sickly. The child may be said to have come from Imọlẹ divinity therefore, she is an Imọlẹ initiate. Although the parents may not come from an Imọlẹ family if they do not want the child to die, they have to allow her to be an Imọlẹ initiate. This is seen as a method by which Imọlẹ adds initiates to its fold. For instance, the present Ìkàré Yèyémọlẹ is from a Muslim background. It was by inquiry that her father knew that she was an Imọlẹ initiate and she was allowed to live with the then Yèyémọlẹ who brought her up to become an Imọlẹ initiate. Any barren woman may take a vow of making her child (female) to be born, an imole initiate while a male child becomes *àwòrò* (an Imọlẹ priest). For instance, Yèyémọlẹ Arigidi's mother gave birth to born-to-die-children which Yoruba people call *Àbíkú*, severally until the parents came into contact with an Imọlẹ initiate, after making a vow, the child born thereafter, becomes an Imọlẹ initiate. One may like to be an Imọlẹ initiate. Someone who is not an Imọlẹ initiate may be possessed by Imọlẹ spirit who makes her an initiate after Yèyémọlẹ might have performed a rite that will bring the person back to normal. Whichever way one becomes an initiate; it is the duty of Yèyémọlẹ to take care of that person until she grows to maturity in the religion.

Imọlẹ festival is celebrated the same way in all the towns mentioned above, therefore, this paper focuses on Ìkàré, the largest community in Àkókó land.

3. THE PERFORMANCE OF THE IMỌLẸ FESTIVAL AT ÌKÀRÉ

A vigil in the house of Yèyé Onímọlẹ (Yèyémọlẹ) precedes the festival that lasts 30 days. The Yèyémọlẹ provides food for everybody during the period. The drummers are from the masquerade group (another Yoruba religious group). In all the towns, the two religious bodies (Imọlẹ and Egúngún 'masquerade') work hand-in-hand. Yèyémọlẹ (female priest) performs rituals at Imọlẹ shrine situated at Òṣèlè market (the biggest market in Ìkàré town). The ritual is to ask Imọlẹ for a peaceful celebration of the festival and to ask for their needs for the current year. After this, Yèyé Imọlẹ prays for herself, her children (the initiates), her family, and the entire members of the community. The initiates prepare food of their choice that would be taken to the Imọlẹ shrine situated in Ebèrè Òdò (name of a place) where *arontén* brook (Imọlẹ brook) is found individually. On getting there, the male priest performs a ritual and kills a ram. After prayer, everybody eats whatever food she brings to the brook. Yèyémọlẹ kneels and offers hen, snail, water, palm oil and kola nut to Imọlẹ one after the other, thanking Imọlẹ for the goodness received so far and asking for another thing. One after the other, Yèyémọlẹ collects whatever the initiates bring to redeem their pledge as she prays for them before returning home for the day.

The following morning, they visit the brook to fetch water using *òtùn/pot*. The initiates carry the *òtùn* on their heads putting *Imù* (a type of grass) in between their heads and the *òtùn*. They should not talk while going to the brook or when coming. They pray or meditate within themselves for the successful celebration as they go. The fetching of water lasts for the period the festival lasts. (*Òtùn* is like a pot, it can be made of clay or wood, and they can also use bottles). Nowadays, rubber is woven around the *òtùn* to decorate it. (*Òtùn* is of different shapes; some may have birdlike heads. Some may be like crowns while others may resemble animal heads or that of human beings).

The water must be fetched every day to prove the holiness in the Yorùbá traditional religion (Mustapha et.al. 2008). They believe the Imole divinity will never use water fetched a day before the day it should be used for healing. It is again learnt that fetching water every day like this is to give reference to their deity. Everybody who needs such water for healing collects a small amount to be taken home for drinking or bathing.

Apart from fetching water, the initiates have no work to do during the festive period. Every initiate carries *òtùn* to fetch water except the Yèyémoḷè and Àwòrò (male Priest). People carrying *òtùn* in a day may be between 60 and 100 in number. They make their way to and fro Imole Brook in a single file. These initiates must wake up early to fetch the water before any other person in the community; the community fetches water from the same brook. It is learnt that the community does not use the water for healing as the Imoḷè initiates do. According to information, the water fetched by the community is ordinary while that of the initiates is Imoḷè water despite fetching from the same source. The Imoḷè initiates believe Imole sanctifies the water during their festive period. The pots with water inside are brought to Yèyémoḷè's residence. The pot remains there until the content is emptied. The following morning, the leftovers will be replaced with fresh water. On the 9th day, all Imoḷè initiates move to Òṣèlè market in a single file to offer sacrifice at Imoḷè shrine located inside Òṣèlè market to grant them a hitch-free celebration. This type of sacrifice is performed every 9th day for three consecutive times starting from the first day the water is fetched. After each sacrifice, they drum agogo (bell) on their way back home to inform the community of the commencement of the Imoḷè festival. All initiates reside in Yèyémoḷè's house for the period the festival lasts. This makes it easy for them to move out at the same time while going to fetch water. Apart from fetching water, there is no other work to do except eating and dancing. It is Yèyémoḷè that feeds the people for the period.

On the 30th day of the festival, every initiate except Yèyémoḷè and àwòrò (male priest) carries *òtùn* (without water inside) from Yèyémoḷè's house to the marketplace to dance. That day is regarded as their festive day. Other Imoḷè initiates in the neighbouring towns are eligible to join them to celebrate Imoḷè festival. Each of them brings her *òtùn*. Ìkàré initiates also do the same when other communities celebrate theirs. The following day, everybody either carrying *òtùn* or not, goes to oḃa's palace to dance. Oḃa sits on his throne in front of his palace watching Imoḷè initiate dancing. Oḃa in return, gives them money and soft drinks. After the palace performance, they converge in front of Yèyémoḷè's house to dance (*pùwà* in Ìkàré dialect meaning coming together). The spectators gather around them while they dance. This type of dance is staged three times before the end of the festival. The following day, Imoḷè initiates carry their *Òtùn* and dance to each initiate's house as a sign of love and oneness before going back to Yèyémoḷè's house where another round of dance takes place for that day. This marks the second round of dance in Yèyémoḷè's house. The following day, the initiates dance to the houses of the initiates they have not visited before going back to Yeyemole's house. After this, they converge for the third time in front of Yeyemole's house for their last performance.

4. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WATER TO HUMAN BEINGS

Water has been revered for its healing properties across cultures and centuries. People use water for detoxification, rehydration and pain relief (Meta AI with Llama 3.2). Water has been in use from the beginning. According to the Bible, God created the heaven and the earth and the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters (Gen 1:2, 6-10, 20-23). With the evidence from the passages, it is clear that God created the heavens and the earth and everything in it commanding the water to gather in a certain jurisdiction, giving it a boundary. He then created water creatures for the benefit of mankind. As said earlier, water is life and effective in the creation story and for the healing of various diseases. Explicit from the above record, God created man from the dust of the ground using clay which supposedly contains water (Gen. 2:7). Even though water is not directly mentioned in the passage, it is believed that water must have been added to the dust before the dust can turn into clay/matter.

Science has proved that man's body composition is made up of 60% water. However, this changes slightly with age, sex, body type and hydration levels. Meanwhile, the percentage does vary between 45 to 75%. Babies have a higher percentage of water composition. Water is essential for the body to function such as temperature regulation, cellular functioning and waste removal. Given the above facts, it is inevitable that various difficult situations have been resolved through water in Biblical history to perform a miracle. For instance, the water of Mara was made whole by God through the ministry of Moses when he threw the tree that Yahweh instructed him to throw into the water. Water is a blessing and curse, fearful and comforting, provision and judgement. Many had suffered due to lack of it during the biblical era of Israel. These instances of water effectiveness in the Old Testament include a sacrificial system in Exodus (30:18-21), Leviticus (16: 4, 24) and Leviticus (17:15). It also serves as a symbol of cleansing and ceremonial washings. In the story of Naaman, the captain of the king of Syria, Naaman, recovered from his leprosy through the healing power of the water of Jordan when Elisha instructed him to go and bathe there (2 Kings 5: 1-14).

From the ongoing, water is revered for its symbolic and spiritual significance. It is often associated with purification, healing, and spiritual growth. Water is thought to cleanse the body of impurities and negative energies, to treat various physical ailments such as skin conditions, wounds and digestive issues. It is believed to have a calming effect on the mind and body, reducing stress and anxiety.

5. THE HEALING POWER OF IMỌLÈ WATER

The water fetched is given to three categories; sick infants and children, barren women and pregnant women. It is also to be sprinkled on land.

5.1 Sick Infants and Children

Sick infants are brought to Yèyémọlè's house to drink Imọlè water. Yèyémọlè or any experience initiate baths the infants and children. The water is believed to cleanse and purify the body and soul. If the initiate finds out from Imọlè divinity that any of the sick children or infants is from Imọlè divinity, the child or infant is initiated regardless of the religion of the parents as explained above. From that day, the child becomes strong and healthy.

5.2 The Barren Woman: Imọlè water is given to this set of people to drink. They are made to make vows either to release the child to be born to Imọlè or promise to bring a gift to show appreciation the following year which they must redeem. They also take some of the water home to bathe. It is observed that the vow they make is made within them; nobody is expected to know of it except the divinity that they believe knows everything. Whatever they promise is between them and the Imọlè divinity.

5.3 Pregnant women: The same water is given to pregnant women to drink. They also make promises like the barren women. They meditate within themselves that if they deliver the baby safely, they will show appreciation which they must fulfil: the appreciation may be allowing the child to join the group (if she is not an initiate) or bringing a present to Imọlè the following year. They are also given water to take home. The non-initiates willing to have the water are given; they also give testimonies.

One observes that the water given to the women may not be enough for them. They add ordinary water when they are about to have a bath which they must do the same day. The water is rationed because they do not have enough water to go around those who need it. Òtùn cannot hold much water that can go around the patients in large quantity, hence, they have to ration the water. Secondly, they cannot tell the number of people that will come for healing each day; they have to ration the little they have so that the water will go round

whatever may be their number for that day. The following morning while going to the brook, the leftover water inside the ọ̀tùn is thrown away. The initiates believe that Imọ̀lẹ̀ divinity will not use water fetched the previous day.

5.4 Infant Epidemic: The water from the brook is sprinkled on the land to drive away infant epidemics like flu and measles. The water is sprinkled on the land to sanctify the land when no epidemic is noticed. It is learnt that cleansing like this will save the land from any infant or children's sicknesses, at least for that year.

6. THE ADVANTAGES OF THE HEALING WATER TO THE COMMUNITY

It is learnt that barren women either initiate or non-initiate become pregnant and later have their babies. A barren Yorùbá woman lives in misery and looks wretched because she might have spent all she has looking for a fruit of the womb and looks sorrowful. She is regarded as an unfortunate woman. She therefore becomes delighted for having a child that can be called her own. Sick infants and children recover from their illnesses while pregnant women deliver bouncing babies without any complications when it is time to deliver. Children are the glory of a nation. The land is also free from seen and unseen calamities at least for a year before another festival is performed. It is learnt that herbalists and native doctors charge exorbitant prices and collect materials from people for this type of work. At times, people are not able to pay for charges. On the part of the Imọ̀lẹ̀ initiates, they collect nothing from the people except the vow or whatever is willingly given them.

7. CONCLUSION

It has been depicted that the Imọ̀lẹ̀ festival is celebrated in the Àkókó Area of Òndó State, West Africa, Nigeria. The paper reveals that the water fetched once a day from Imọ̀lẹ̀ shrine situated in the bush for the festive period is used for healing various diseases associated with children, pregnant women and barren women. Non-members can equally benefit from such a healing act. In addition, water from the shrine is believed to have the prowess of curing epidemics when sprinkled over the land. The Yoruba ritualised paediatrics, with all the things connected with it is a major contribution of the women folk to health care in Yoruba land. It is a system founded by Imọ̀lẹ̀, a female Yorùbá divinity. The Imọ̀lẹ̀ festival in the Akoko Area of Òndó state, Nigeria, showcases the importance of water in healing and providing significant spiritual practices. Its therapeutic properties are believed to purify, help, and calm the body and soul. The paper thus concludes that the cult of Imọ̀lẹ̀ can augment the efforts of modern paediatricians and obstetrician-gynaecologists in the Àkókó Area of Òndó State where the Imọ̀lẹ̀ festival is being performed. This is an additional fact to corroborate the existing claim that Imọ̀lẹ̀ cults use water to heal infants and children from different ailments, pregnant women are delivered safely, barren women can have babies and the land is free from epidemics of any kind.

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Meta AI with Liama 3.2

Oral References

Mrs. Òşátúyì Janet –	An initiate
Chief Ale Gabriel –	Chief (an elderly person)
Mrs Àjàyí Àlásàn –	Yeyemole
Chief (Mrs) Fátímò –	Imole Priestess
Chief (Mrs) Yémisí Olúsojí –	Yeyemole