

PALACE CULTURE IN YORUBALAND: THE EXAMPLE OF OGBOMOSO PALACE 1850-1960

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Abstract

This paper examines the traditional Yoruba palace in Ogbomosho from the period when Ogbomosho was a small town in the metropolitan province of old Oyo Empire before the establishment of colonial rule in South Western Nigeria. Although earlier studies had been carried out on palace culture, yet little or nothing had been documented about the cultural values entrenched in Ogbomosho palace. It is against this background that this study seeks to historically analyse and document the palace culture in Ogbomosho. The methodology employed in this study was derived from oral testimonies received from the Oba, Elders, Priests and Chiefs in the town as well as relevant information from books and journals relating to the study. Our findings reveal that the Yoruba people in Ogbomosho still look up to the Oba as the model of tradition and culture. The palace is seen as a place of succor in the times of conflicts between people in the town so as to maintain peace, orderliness and harmony within the community.

Background of the Study

The fountain of culture in any Yoruba town is the palace. The Oba is the custodian of this culture. Yoruba palaces are of high standard in architectural designs, the architectural structure of the Yoruba palaces lends credence to the fact that the Obas domain is the most important building of the town which are in different architectural forms, shapes and depicting the dexterity of the people's art and culture¹.

Yoruba palaces are sacred sanctuaries typifying the divine nature of the Oba. These are temple, shrine and alters dedicated to the ancestors. Sacrifices are therefore, performed constantly in the palace for the well being and prosperity of the town². This makes the *Soun* to be regarded as the representatives of his ancestors in the town. The Ogbomosho palace which is the focus of this paper is the traditional and royal residence of the *Soun* and the entire people of Ogbomosoland.

Ogbomosho is located in the northern part of Oyo state in Nigeria. The town is bounded in the south by Ilorin, Oyo in the west, and Ejigbo in the East. According to Oyerinde, the town started with four

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district communities³. The first settler in ogbomoso was *Aale*, from Nupe descent, who was a hunter of elephants. His hunting camp became known as *Oke-Elerin* (Elephant hill). Up till today, all the people at *Oke Elerin* quarters claim to be the descendant of the main. The chief of the quarters has become the exclusive right of his descendants. The second settler is *Ohunsile*, who is an Otta prince but came to settle in Ogbomoso. He left Otta because of chieftaincy dispute to settle at Oyo during the time of Alaafin *Ogbolu* of old Oyo Empire. He embarked on a war campaign for the Alaafin and won. Hence the Alaafin ordered for a settlement of him at *Oke-Ijeru* now a quarter in Ogbomoso. The third settler was *Orisatolu*, of Borgu town in present day Kogi state. His first settlement was at *Paku* and as an *Ifa* priest, he named his camp *Fatedo* (Ifa encamps here) oral tradition had it that he later relocated to another camp where he cultivated *Isapa* (*Hibiscus sabdarifa*). This new camp bears *Isapa* till today and its head chief bears the title the *Onisapa* meaning the owner of *Isapa*. The present *Isapa* quarters in Ogbomoso was resettled by his descendants who settled on the land of the first settler *Aale*. The old *Isapa* is now a village outside Ogbomoso. The fourth settler was Soun Ogunlola who was a great hunter and warrior. Oral tradition had it that his defeat of *Elemoso*, a powerful warrior of Oyo made the Alaafin to honour him with title of Soun of Ogbomoso and since then he became the ruler and controller of Ogbomosoland⁴.

The period, 1850-1960 is very important because this was the time Ogbomoso had its traditional political structure on the ground from where the palace emerged as an institution in Ogbomoso history and the end of colonial rule in Nigeria. According to Falola and Oguntomisin⁵, Ogbomoso town was established as a settlement by *Alaafin Abipa* to guard against the incursion of Nupe warriors to old Oyo Empire in the first half of the nineteenth century and this was the period when Ogbomoso palace was found. To begin with, it is necessary to explore the content and concerns of the current historiography on palace culture in Yorubaland. Notable among such historical works relating to palace culture in Yorubaland includes the works of G.J.A Ojo⁶, T. Falola⁷, B. Adediran⁸, O.B Olaoba⁹, B.

Ajayi¹⁰ and J.A Adeniran¹¹ to mention a few. Of all these scholars, none has ever discussed the activities of Ogbomoso palace, a vacuum which necessitated the contribution to knowledge of Ogbomoso palace culture.

Origin of Ogbomoso Palace

The exact date of the establishment of the Ogbomoso palace in Yoruba land is unknown to scholars. The probable date of its establishment is traceable to the nineteenth century. The spur of building Ogbomoso palace was informed by the social environment in Yoruba land during the first half of the 19th century. This was the period every Yoruba town was ensuring some legitimacy for kingship. In describing the socio-political environment of the Yoruba people in the nineteenth century, Ajayi and Akintoye maintain that:

By 1800, for particularly, all Yoruba, the monarchy was the sanctified order of society and even until the end of the 19th century; there were many Yoruba who still regarded communities without kings as bastards.¹²

The above statement shows that the building of the Ogbomoso palace evolved in the second half of the of the nineteenth century. The main reason for the establishment of the palace was to maintain law and order and provide adequate security and protection for the inhabitants of the town. However, it is on record that Ogbomoso was one of the new settlements in Yoruba land that suppresses the excesses of the Fulani jihadist on the attack of Yorubaland.¹³

The palace of Ogbomoso was a residential building of a powerful military warlord called Soun who turned the building to Ogbomoso palace to cater for the socio-political exigencies of the 19th century Yoruba welfare. The architectural designs of the Ogbomoso palace and the palace organization were modified along the pattern of new Oyo.¹⁴ This point suggests that old Oyo tradition and indeed that of the new Oyo empire had great influence over the palace culture of Ogbomoso. Although several other palaces exist in Ogbomoso but the main focus of this study is the Soun's palace in the city

Structure of the Ogbomoso Palace

The Ogbomoso palace is located in the heart of the city. The palace is the largest unit of the building in the area of the town. The palace is bounded to the north with building estates of the town chiefs, *Oja-jagun* market in the west, *Oja-Igbo* market in the east and the sacred *Ajagbon* tree in the south before the twentieth century, the palace building structures occupied about eleven acres of land mass with several large compounds and numerous apartment. The Ogbomoso palace is the most important building in the town and the building is quite distinctive in outlook and structural pattern. The palace accommodates wide range of personalities, which include visitors' warriors royal wives, princes and princess. Ojo however described the palace as a place of residence of the Oba's family and entertainment during traditional festivals in the town.¹⁵ Thus, Ogbomoso palace is significantly a public property.

At this point, it is important to mention that Ogbomoso town has numerous Oba's and palaces with distinctive architectural patterns and designs. Notable among the *Olugbon* and *Aresa* palace in the town. The structure of this two palace is largely different from popular Soun's palace in the city. The Ogbomoso palace has fourteen courtyards and earmarked for different categories of purposes. The largest courtyard is nearest to the main entrance known as *Ojude-Oba*. It serves as the assembly grounds for people during festivals and ceremonies.¹⁶ During the festival of *Ogunojalu* festival, the people in the town troop out en-masse at *Ojude-Oba* to rejoice with the *Soun* of the town that they have not been wiped out by warfare.¹⁷ A large section of the palace is marked out as the apartment of the royal wives known as *Iyewu Ayaba*.¹⁸ Also, a section of the palace is earmarked for the palace chiefs as waiting rooms while in the palace. There are other sections in the palace which accommodated fire arms and ammunitions while the rooms were used by the servants (*eru*) of the palace, the prince and princess of the palace as well as the *Ile-Igbejo* where civil and criminal offences are handled. There is also a particular section of the palace known as *Iledi* where religious and spiritual meetings are held. Temples and shrines are also in the palace where the *Soun* consult the oracle to receive advice and solution to a

problem. The name of the shrine is known as *Ojubo Orisapopo*, while the shrine of *Ogun* is referred to as *Ojubo Ogun*.¹⁹

Palace Functionaries

The palace was built through communal efforts and initiatives for the Oba and other members of the community. Ojo considers the palace as a house which the people built but in which the Oba live.²⁰ In the same vein, Lucas considers the Oba as incarnation of the soul of the people and representation of the people kinship.²¹ The responsibility of maintenance of the palace is the exclusive duty of the palace chiefs. They are the *Areomole*, *Ogaala*, and the *Alapo*. They are saddled with the responsibility of maintaining the spiritual and physical structure of the palace. The civil chiefs were pre-occupied with the legislative, executive and judicial matters of the town. They are known as *Ilu*. The *Areomole* is the head of all the princes and princesses in the palace. The security of the royal paraphernalia is reposed to him when the *Oba* joins his ancestors.²² The *Ogaala* is the chief priest of the palace, he assisted the *Soun* to perform rituals to the *Orisa* deities to maintain peace and order in the town. The *Alapo* was the personal aide to the *Soun*. He is in charge of the *Soun's* arms and ammunition and was responsible for the maintenance of cleanliness of the palace through the servants.²³

The role of women in Ogbomoso was very significant to mention. The duty of the *Ayaba* (king's wife) were essentially to educate the princes and princesses in the palace. The *Ayaba* are of two classifications, each with defined hierarchical roles. The *Agba Ayaba* form the *Soun's* senior wife, most of them were bequeathed to him. This is however in line with the Yoruba social theory known as *Ijogun* (inheritance). On the other hand, the junior wives are referred to as *Ayaba*. They usually take instructions from the *Ayaba Agba* in the knowledge of palace traditions.²⁴

Other palace officials who made useful contribution to the smooth running of palace activities include palace messengers and musicians. The palace messengers in pre-colonial Ogbomoso society consist mainly of the *Eru* (slave). Most of them were captives of Yoruba civil wars captured into slavery and integrated to the service

of Ogbomoso palace. The palace messengers conveyed important information from the Soun to the town's people. They also attend to personal chores in the palace as directed by the Ayaba and *Oloye-Afin* (chiefs of the palace). The palace messengers acted as the state police. They were often sent to arrest offenders. Some of them usually worked on royal farms while a percentage of them formed the royal body guards to the Soun.²⁵

Functions of the Palace

The Ogbomoso palace is the symbol of power and authority in the town. The Soun is the spiritual and political head of the town. He is regarded as the representative of the gods and ancestors of the community. The palace is a very important place for socio-cultural activity of the people.²⁶ The Egungun and Orisapopo festivals are periods of joy and happiness in the life of the town. It is a great feast of celebration. The event usually entails dancing and singing which is considered by the people to be a period of re-enactment of the past and shedding more light on their survival as a people.²⁷

As mentioned earlier, the palace is the supreme court of the people. Hence, an apartment was embarked for that purpose in Ogbomoso, the palace court is referred to as *Igbejo*. The Soun is the chief judge of the court while his chiefs were his advisers. During judicial proceeding in the palace, the Soun seats on the Apeere (the sacred royal stool) he treats all cases with strict impartiality. In the presentation of criminal cases oaths were sworn in the name of the Soun to ascertain truth. Also, in ascertaining the truth, litigants were made to cross over the sacred chains present in the palace. The people believe that the interlocking chain has the power of making the deceptive litigant say the truth and any form of false representation is detected because the offender may be inflicted with the punishment of lying under false claims. Also, the palace is well known for settling marital disputes among husbands and wives in the town. Oral tradition had it that no matter what the degree of the woman's misbehavior, if such a woman is chased to the palace and she touches the *Ilaja*, the husband ought to settle and reconcile with her immediately, in order to avert the wrath of the gods on him.²⁸

The palace is a sacred institution in the community used for religious purposes, for instance, certain places are earmarked in the palace to make covenant and confession by the people of the town. Field investigation reveals that the palace is the abode of gods and ancestors of the community. The people of Ogbomoso have described the palace as a place for safety and protection against aggressive and oppressive people in the society. J.K Olupona describes the palace as a sanctuary for the persecuted.²⁹ It is however a taboo in Yoruba society to assault anyone who ran to the palace for safety.

Socially, the palace is used as the beginning and terminal point of Ogbomoso festivals. The Egungun and the Orisapopo festivals were the most popular ceremony in the palace celebrated by the people and the Soun in the town. During the festivals, uplifting music was provided by the royal drummers together with charters and singers such as *Akewi* (poet), *Akejala* (Ijala chanters) and *Asunrara* (Rara chanters). The music is followed by a unique dancing style and pattern in the palace. All the people gathered in the palace to celebrate the town's festival with the *Soun*.³⁰

According to oral tradition, the *Orisapopo* is the official deity of the Ogbomoso religion in Yoruba society.³¹ The celebration of this royal divinity attracted the home coming of indigenes of the town living abroad. The divinity had its shrine in the palace where necessary rituals were held annually. The people in the town believed that the deity is fertility god. During the festival, barren women were asked to pray at the shrine of the deity. The major sacrificial object to the Orisapopo deity was a female goat. However, it should be noted that the sacrificial use of female goats portends fertility. The divinity was, however, not celebrated with drinking of palm wine because the god abhorred it. The essence of the worship was to glorify the monarchy.

Social Change in Ogbomoso Palace

The acceptance of Islam and Christianity in the palace of Ogbomoso was a very significant development in the history of ogbomoso. B.A Agiri mentioned that Islam came to Ogbomoso through Ikoyi-ile in the early nineteenth century.³² The *Soun* of the town perhaps accepted and allowed the Islamic religion to thrive in

the town because of his belief that Muslim marabouts would assist the town in providing charms to defeat other Yoruba communities attacking Ogbomosoland during the civil war in the nineteenth century. As many people began to embrace Islamic religion in Ogbomoso, there was a decline in traditional cult and deities in the palace. However, Christianity on the other hand was introduced to Ogbomoso palace by T.J Bowen of the southern Baptist mission in 1855.³³ Bowen's new religion was embraced by the palace because of the news that he could defend the community against external aggression. The kind that was demonstrated in Abeokuta during the Dahomey invasion. The relevance of these two foreign religions was to assist the community politically against external aggression. To an extent, the acceptance of Islam by the Soun could be a factor responsible for sparing Ogbomoso from destruction during the Afonja revolt of 1824.³⁴ However, it is important to mention that the two foreign religions were unable to defend the sovereignty of Ogbomoso at the beginning of the British rule in 1893.³⁵

The advent of colonialism and the establishment of British rule in Ogbomosoland is also a remarkable development in the palace organization. Under the colonial rule, the Soun was used in the colonial administration of the town. The colonial masters recognized the role of the Soun as the symbol of authority and control of the community. The colonial government influenced the palace administration by the introduction of taxes to run government expenses in the colony.³⁶ In 1925, the *Soun* of Ogbomoso land was appointed the head of Ogbomoso district council. This appointment confirmed Soun as the head of all the subordinate towns in Ogbomoso environs. O. Ikime, described the native authorities' treasuries for the colonial masters as one of the cornerstone of indirect rule system in Yoruba communities.³⁷ From the second half of the 19th century and with the decline of old Oyo empire, Ogbomoso had become one of the frontier towns between Ilorin and subordinate Yoruba towns. This strategic position encouraged the levy of tolls to commodity traders of neighboring Yoruba towns en-route north via Ilorin. B.A Agiri

contends that the accrued tolls provided a good source of revenue for the colonial government.³⁸

The relevance of the collection of the poll tax was that the appointment of *Soun* as a poll collector and his subordinate chiefs dislocated palace activities during this period as their duties in the palace were neglected for colonial offices. The responsibility of collecting poll tax for colonial government replaced the old tradition of attending to civil matters in the palace.³⁹ The physical transformation of the structure of the palace was also a significant phenomenon in Ogbomoso history. In 1931, the Ogbomoso palace took a new outlook. The architectural design of the palace took a new form. The walls of the old building were plastered with cement, the thatches roofs were replaced with corrugated iron sheets. Thus, the palace became distinctive modern edifice in the model which the British officials initiated.⁴⁰

Conclusion

It has been shown in this study that the palace in Ogbomoso community is an index of culture in which the Soun of Ogbomoso is the symbol of authority. The Soun is responsible for the maintenance of law and order to enhance peace and social harmony throughout the period covered in the study. He was described as a link between the living generation and the ancestors.

The palace in Ogbomoso was described as the residence of the rulers of the town and the whole community. It is the largest single public building of the town where everybody comes to celebrate with the ruler during festive occasions and a place to settle disputes among people through dialogue. The palace had several departments and functionaries responsible for the day to day running of the activities of the palace throughout the period of the study. The advent of Islam, Christianity, and colonialism had brought important and significant changes in the palace in the sense that it affects the traditional ritual practices of the palace in Ogbomoso history.

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