

# HISTORY AND IDENTITY: AN EXPLORATORY DISCOURSE OF "ERE" FESTIVAL IN OGE, OKEAGBE AKOKO

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## **Abstract**

It is a Eurocentric belief that Africa had no history, culture and civilization until their contact with Euro-American nations and with Muslim Arab world. But the study of African man's sociological history indicates that for long they had evolved civilization and cultural growth from the earliest times. One historic example is the people of Oge, Okeagbe Akoko whose history and identity have been associated with "Ere" festival. The paper will attempt to investigate the origin of the people of Oge; using "Ere" festival, as a case study to trace their origin to Oduduwa descent in Ile-Ife. Thus, the socio-cultural value of "Ere" festival will also engage attention in this paper, and it will conclude that, the festival is very unique in the facilitation of socio-economic growth in Oge, a quarter in Okeagbe Akoko. The paper will be conceptualized on historical method of an explanatory model of indigenous culture that can be traced to Ife civilization (culture).

## **Introduction**

There are indications of confusion and doubt about the history and identity of people in many towns and villages in Yorubaland. Thus, to avoid questions (Akinjogbin, 2002:3, 11-12 and Obayemi, 1978) on the history and identity of the people of Oge in Okeagbe Akoko prompts the writing of this paper. The paper, will therefore, discuss the location and impact of geography on the *Ere* festival, with emphasis on conceptual clarification of origin and migrations of the Oge people from Ile-Ife. This becomes relevant in view of paltry documentary evidence on the mini-states ( Obayemi, 1976:201-209) that are found in northeastern part of Yorubaland by the early writers; particularly dearth of academic researches on history and identity of the people of Oge, as well as the intricacy of celebration associated with *Ere* festival. The paper reveals the persistence of dance of dances, songs and rituals as they are used during the celebration of the festival. These arts are reflection of a syncretism of the traditions of the people. *Ere* festival dominated the cultural tradition of Oge people, the most dominant Ife sub-groups among the four quarters that make up Okeagbe in Akokoland.

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### Conceptual Clarification

Different definitions have been given of history as a subject (Erim, 2004:4-5, Carr, 1980 and Afigbo, 1999:24) and identity in the circumstances of self-determination (Adesina, 2004:3-6). Therefore, the concept 'identity' refers to the sense that someone has of whom he is and, of what is most important about him. Again, 'identity' is related to the social group in which individual belongs and with which he is being identified (Haralmbos, 2004: 792 and Olaniyan, 2003: xv and n.a. 1829: 315-316). Also, festival can be defined as a re-enactment of historical, past and traditional events that serve as factors of interaction, cohesion and mobilization in a particular society (Ogunde, 11). Thus, defining history, identity and festival is not an easy task. Their definitions bring more controversies or debates than those of any other subjects. The problems associated with such description have to do with ambiguity, as well as the triviality that the numerous definitions have brought to bear on the phenomena of evolution and traditions of origin. Sequel to this, history can be defined as the study of the indestructible past events (Ade-Ajayi, 2004: 15-16). The events are the identities of the people in terms of culture and manner of life in a particular society. Hence, the phenomenon of 'identity' has been used to claim political status in our society. However, using *Ere* festival to trace and reveal the history and identity of Oge people cannot be over-emphasized. That will make the paper to understudy the people's past, as it centers on *Ere* festival. Apart from defining concepts, the conceptual framework used is historical. Historical method is used in the paper, because the study of the past is necessary to understanding the present and effectively plan for the future. There can be no meaningful research carries out without references to the past. It is therefore, important to use *Ere* festival as a cultural phenomenon, to map out and show the history and identity of Oge people; among the peoples which make up Okeagbe. It is hard to know one's identity without recourse to culture (festival); as it gives clear insight into our root to guide us through the challenges of life. Based on the foregoing, the people directly connected with *Ere* festival were interviewed.

### *The Origin and Location of Oge*

From the historical point of view, the Oge people are the descendants of *Ige-Omi*, an Ooni descendant (Interview: 2008). Like

other pre-literate society in Yorubaland, not much is known about the exact date when the people of Oge migrated from Ile-Ife. But oral tradition lent credence to the claim that the people migrated from Ile-Ife, not as a result of impact of the Yoruba civil wars in the nineteenth century, but the prevailing reason for migration was the political ambition of *Ige-Omi*, the leader of Oge immigrants from Ile-Ife, to establish his own kingdom (Interview cited). However, this is not to say that, the inhabitants of *Oge*, a sub-group in Akoko did not suffer from the salutary effect of warfare in Yorubaland in the nineteenth century. History records that migration, state formation and the principles that guided relations in the nineteenth century were upturned by internal strife, confusion and anarchy and displacement of the people.

The word *Oge* refers to the people. *Ige-Omi* refers to the first leader of Oge during the *en masse* migration from Ile-Ife. Thus, *Oge* is not the original home of the immigrants, but it was owned by the autochthonous, whose historical origin cannot be traced due to lack of documentation in the pre-literate society. *Oge* is strategically located within the axis of a trans-composite community, named Okeagbe which is situated on northeast Yorubaland. Okeagbe means a town which is protected by hill (Interview cited). In this paper, Okeagbe is applied to a conglomeration of four sub-ethnic groups, which claim direct origin from Ile-Ife. The people still share common affinity in the area of socio-cultural milieu, despite variant dialectal spoken. This blanket identity is a recent feature in Nigerian history. Nonetheless, the paper subsists that the *Oge* people are more distinct in their culture among the other three sub-groups that make up Okeagbe. Specifically, *Ere* festival is an outstanding example which hold the history and identity of Oge people to an eponymous ancestor, (Ooni) of the Oduduwa descent.

### ***Ere Festival in Historical Reflection***

*Ere* festival, is old as the people, because it is an essential part of a manifestation of human history. The *Ere* festival in Oge, is an annual traditional festival show casing 'wealth' of *ade ilekes*, beaded crowns bestowed on them by *Olokun* (Interview cited), a wife to Oduduwa, who was claimed to be very rich (Agbro & Udeze, 2007: 20). In contrast, *Olokun*, the river goddess, is celebrated by riverine people of Yoruba race (Ibid.; 19) but in *Oge*, the people revere *Ade ilekes* and usually honoured *Olokun*, the giver of beaded crowns, the essence of history and

cultural identity of Oge people in Okeagbe. While in Yorubaland, particularly the riverine people attribute their wealth and success in life to the river goddess and thus celebrated it annually. *Ere* is a corrupt word of "rich", "wealth" or "plenty" (Interview cited). Thus, it is a dialectal word attached to the inheritance of crowns when leaving Ile-Ife to the present domain. At Ile-Ife, *Ige-Omi*, their leader, was the fore-most sharer of traditional things of which the beaded crowns were very significant. In the course of sharing, *Ige-Omi* used to keep part of the shared property, especially the beaded crowns, which serve as Oduduwa's signs of estate.

In another version, *Ere* festival is an account and reminiscent of *Oge* people's relationship with the people of Ile-Ife during the pre-colonial times. As a study, which falls within the realm of a micro society, it is necessary to examine *Ere* festival to unravel the past and important aspect of *Oge* history (Obayemi, 2001-2009). It is also an annual socio-cultural celebration ever since migration from Ile-Ife. It is a festival to commemorate *Olokun*, the god of crown. Oral tradition accounts that the beaded crowns; in possession of *Ige-Omi* in the primordial time, were of *Are* (Ogunleye, 2002:3), an ancient crown that was worn by Oduduwa, the progenitor of Yoruba race during his lifetime. The *Oge* people still celebrate the *Ere* festival till today. The mastered secret of the festival was truly unmatched; it is an identity of the origin of the people from divination, sacrifice and public celebration for appreciation, and showing of loyalty to the *Oba*.

The purification rites are within the context of the beliefs of the people, time frame and value system of the people. The festival is an important ceremony where the *Owage*, exhibits his knowledge and command of the traditions. *Owage* is the traditional title of the paramount ruler of Oge. It is the coined name for the re-visit of *Ige-Omi* at the burial of Oduduwa after his death. Thus, it is mandatory for the *Oba* (*the Owage*), the custodian of norms and values of his society to perform the ceremony even at the expenses of other things. Hence, seven days to the commencement of the festival, the *Oba* must be in a retreat. He must preserve himself spiritually during these days. The practice has two purposes; one, it is to uplift *Ige-Omi*'s leadership, and two, to bring blessings to the generality of the people during and after the festival. The practice is to cleanse the *Owage* spirituality for the *Olokun* worship. The

uniqueness of the festival is shown in its time of celebration that is determined by harvest season. The motive behind the chosen period is to have enough agricultural products to care for the invitees. As a matter of fact, it fused into the agricultural cycle of a season of yam harvest, because the celebration is accompanied by feasting and sacrifices, that are of two categories, one, is intended to avert calamities and seek prosperity, while the second type is thanksgiving sacrifices to god of *Olokun*; revered by the people's belief to be the disperser of blessing.

Besides, it is a taboo for the king to see the inner part of the crown, except Chief *Asalu* who would put it on his head. If such traditional belief is contravened, death penalty is the punishment. As part of the preparation for the festival, Chief *Asalu* and other chiefs who are connected with the *Olokun* will be in the inner room, where the crowns are spread for seven days. More so, nobody should eat snake meat in *Oge* because of *Ere* festival. There is a eulogy to support such a claim: *Omo Ologe lari je ejo, Omo Ologe lari je egedi ori*. Meaning that; a royal offspring that is forbidden to eat snakes, a royal offspring that is forbidden to eat solid pap (Interview: 2008). Committance attracts the destruction holding by him and this usually puts shame on the contravener. It is a socio-cultural festival that marks a historical event in the evolution and expansion of *Oge*. Fanfare follows the celebration for seven days. The *Oba* and his people use to dance to the central market on the sixth day and around the town, paying homage to the past rulers amid saying of *Oriki* and the *Oba* would wear three different beaded crowns as he dances to the market to pay homage to his ancestors. People with palm fronts are also in procession and rally round the *Oba* while dancing. After three times, the king would move to his palace and rested for the year.

The lead, Chief *Asalu* and his priest perform sacrifices to the spirit of *Olokun*. Chief *Asalu* is chosen from either of these families; *Ephe-oga* (now *Odo-Owa*), *Koko-ephe* and *Igiruma* in *Oge* quarter (Interview: 2008). Chief *Asalu* is the one that nourishes *ade*, the crown, and as a custodian of the crown, he is often called upon for make-up and function of *Olokun* spirit to guide and lead the people in major decisions regarding the *Ere* celebration in the community. The role of Chief *Asalu* is very obvious in the act of worship. He is revered and also feared; as a result, the function of performing the make-up of *Ere* festival is not



given just to anyone (Ibid.). Based on this, members from the above-mentioned families are entitled to it and, therefore designated to lead in preserving the *Oge* heritage which took its root from Ile-Ife and translated into *Ere* festival. The selected members of the families are taught the secret knowledge about the reverence and the nature of *Olokun*, the god of beaded crowns which proceeds *Ere* festival in Oge quarter, Okeagbe.

### ***The Relevance of Ere Festival***

It is worthy to note that the importance of *Ere* festival in history and identity of the people cannot be neglected. Thus, the celebration of *Ere* festival reveals social and historical aspects of the life of Oge people. Again, it gives or serves as a source of valuable data on the historical past of Oge people and the ability to trace the historical root and cultural affinity of the people of Oge to Ile-Ife. It is through this that the memory of Oduduwa as the progenitor of Oge people continues to be celebrated. *Ere* festival, is a week long celebration that is very unique in the culture and societal values of the people of Oge, and thus needs to be celebrated? As *Ere* festival has its own traditional history to explain how and where the people of Oge evolved from, the festival is used to be presided over by *Owage*, the *Oba* of Oge and *Asalu*, the Chief in charge.

In addition to the above, *Ere* festival promotes spiritual and ritual beliefs of Oge people. With the ability to influence the socio-cultural setting of the community, came social growth and advancement of large society which spread across Okeagbe. To Oge people, *Ere* festival has become the key to history, identity, and it usually observed as such. Realizing the relevance of the festival to the history and identity of Oge people, the festival (culture) is not in oblivion. Thus, the *laissez-faire* attitude of some worshipers towards the observation of the festival in recent years was not an indication of the decline in the zeal and degree of commitments on the part of the general public to the performance of *Ere* festival. In essence, history and identity of Oge people cannot be known in the absence of *Ere* festival, cultural ideas and rituals that are followed as proven incentive. The younger men and women never lack the formal pride and exclusiveness in the art of remembering their heritage.

### ***Conclusion***

*Ere* festival is very essential in the life and thought of the people of Oge. This makes it more clearer that the inhabitants of Oge and Yoruba

in general are deeply rooted in culture and beliefs and, this negates the myopic conclusion of Trevor Roper (Trevor-Roper, 1974: 8), who hastily concluded that "Africans had no history". On this note, the paper has been able to show that the history and identity of Oge people are embedded in their cultural heritage and in the annals of Yoruba history. Indeed, with the use of historical method, the paper has shown much on Oge identity which is based more on its traditional culture of communal relations than the western individualistic and accumulative capitalist society, which now pervades our cultural heritage. One of the important roles of the knowledge of our past is to make us know where we have come from so that we know who we are, and to guide us in anticipating the future. Where we have come from is no longer shrouded in obscurity; we know who we are. This however, buttresses the fact that we should be conscious of our roots in order to know our source and destination (Olaniyan, 1990: 3).

There are confusions on history and identity among the four sub-ethnic group which make up Okeagbe in Akokoland. The problems of history and identity were created as a result of autochthon – migrant dichotomy that generally characterized Yoruba race in Nigeria. Apart from oral interviews conducted, we may observe complex in identity as shown in referenced books. The study of micro – societies had been observed to be imperative for understanding the mini settlement since local societies form the important units of the larger society. As a matter of fact, evolution, as aspect of Oge history should be an area of interest; since its pre-colonial events are undiluted of societal values that can be studied to understand the people's cultural values.

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