

Sexual Reference in Female-participant Traditional Festivals

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Abstract

In Yorùbá culture, no one is permitted to talk explicitly about human genitals. Although poets are licensed to speak on, and address any issue of their choice in their poems, they prefer using euphemistic expressions when it gets to sexual reference. However, Yorùbá traditional festival singers are fond of referring to sexual organs explicitly. Adopting traditional criticism and womanist theory as theoretical orientations, the paper attempts to investigate why these poets do not employ euphemistic expression to refer to sexual organs during performance at some female participant traditional festivals in Ondo North Senatorial District of Ondo State. The paper, among other things, show that reference to genitals connotes pride on the part of the maidens, it is used to satirize maidens that have been deflowered and to give reference to the divinities and their priests. Therefore, sexual reference during female-participant festivals is seen as a language of moral reforms.

Keywords: Virgin, Vagina, Sexual Organs, Female-participant Festivals, Genitals

Introduction

In Yoruba land, people rarely talk about sexual organs; they see them as a “no go area” in discussion, yet people need information on them. Sex is powerful in human life. Sex is the state of being male or female. It also refers to physical activity between two people in which they touch each other’s sexual organs, and which may include sexual intercourse. Sexuality is the feelings and activities connected with a person’s sexual

desire. People do not want to make mention of parts of the body that are connected with sex and sexuality because of cultural orientation; hence they give different euphemistic expressions to male and female sexual organs as we have in the examples below:

‘Dear, with this smartness of yours today, I have to visit your *website* in the evening’

‘This food is too delicious; it must be topped with the *other food* when we get inside’

(Ìgè 2008:78)

In the sentences above, visiting *website* and *other food* connote having sexual intercourse. The value placed on sexual matters and human sexual characteristics as secret affairs dictates Yorùbá choice of language with reference to those things. Among the Yoruba, referring to genitals is considered so sacred that no one is permitted by culture to talk about them explicitly. In most cases, euphemistic expressions are used. It is observed that in some poetry relating to traditional festivals, the rule is rather loose; names for male and female genitals are used freely. There had been much work on sexual references to male and female genitals in Yoruba oral poetry; they all agreed that sexual references are made for amusement. This work, therefore, examines some selected female-participant traditional festivals where sexual references are more pronounced, with a view to determining the importance of making references to genitals therein. Our focus would be on Aringiyà festival in Ìkàré, Ògún Obìnrin festival in Ìyèré Ọ̀wò and Àgwẹ̀ festival in Ùlálẹ̀; all in Òndó North Senatorial District of Òndó State, Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

Theoretical framework was based on traditional criticism and womanist theory. Traditional criticism deals with the culture of the society. Culture has been defined as: "the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of a society or a social group, encompassing, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs" (UNESCO 2002 as cited by Işòlá 2010:28). Culture therefore is the total manner in which a human society responds to an environment. It is dynamic; it grows daily. Literature is culture and no literature can be meaningfully analyzed outside the facts of the culture which produced it. Womanist theory depicts "the totality of female self-expression, self-retrieval and self-assertion in positive cultural ways. It does not deny the biological God-given traits and characteristics, but rejects the manipulation of such traits to hold women down" (Kóláwólé 1997:24, 196). Womanist theory is based on the culture of the people. African woman yearns for a society in which they can assert their innate resourcefulness by rejecting the fetters of tradition and any aspects of socialization that put them at a disadvantage.

Since female-participant festival constitutes part of Yoruba culture and womanist theory deals with woman, it is assumed that the two theories will be useful in analyzing the importance of sex references in female-participant festivals-related poetry.

Traditional Festivals

Ògúnbà (1978:4) describes traditional festival as:

An indigenous cultural institution, a form of art nurtured on the African soil over the centuries and which has therefore, developed distinctive features and whose techniques are sometimes totally different from the borrowed form now practised by many of our contemporary artists.

Awólàlú and Dòpámú (1979:149) reveal that throughout West Africa, there are annual festivals in connection with each divinity or ancestor. People come out in their best, and the festival is characterized 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. Some of the festivals are for the purposes of upholding public morality.

What is inferred from the definitions is that traditional festivals are peculiar to Africans. They are celebrated by every member of the society. There are various festivals in Africa especially in Yoruba land, most of which are celebrated annually. These festivals could be grouped into three: male-participant, female-male-participant and female-participant festivals. Male-participant festivals are festivals celebrated by men, female-male-participant festivals are festivals celebrated by both men and women while female-participant festivals are the festivals celebrated by women ranging from infants to those of menopausal age. In this paper, our focus would be on third, namely female-participant festivals. Three different festivals would be examined. The three festivals are divinity-related and are celebrated by maidens in each of the communities where each is being celebrated. There are taboos the initiates must not break. These taboos are to check the maidens' lasciviousness, to empower the parents to control their female children and to give reverence to divinities and their priests. Each of the divinities has its own way of exposing those that violate its rules. In addition to the punishment meted out to the culprits, maidens that lose their virginity before wedding are satirized in the chants and songs relating to each of the festivals (Arówòşęgbé 2013:25).

Literature Review on Sexual References

In Yoruba cultural setting, reference to sexual matters or mere mentioning of the male and female reproductive organs directly are regarded as blunt, indecent and vulgar. Many researchers such as: Ìdòwú (1962), Babalolá (1966), Mbiti (1969), Ọlájùbù (1972), Awólàlú and Dòpámú (1979), Ọlátéjù (1989), Yusuf (1992), Ọdẹajọ (1992), Àlàbá (2004), Ọlátúnjì (2005) and Fákéyẹ (2006) have worked on Yorùbá view of sexual references. Mbiti (1969:146) regards sexual organs as the gates of life as well as the symbol of life. According to him, the genitals and buttocks are the parts of the body most carefully covered; their lack of covering constitutes 'nakedness' in the eyes of traditional Africans. Ọlátéjù (1989:391) ascertains concerning Yoruba cultural view as well as their belief on the subject of sexuality that:

Nínú àṣà Yorùbá, àwọn nṣkan kan wà tó ní bí a ṣe gbòdò pè wọn tàbí sọ wọn. A kò gbòdò la orúkọ tí a mọ nṣkan yẹn sí mọ ọn lórí àfi kí a dà á pè. Èèwò ni láti dárúkọ nṣkan bẹẹ, ẹnì tó bá sì déjàà àwọn ọrọ èèwò bẹẹ, aláìmọkan tàbí onísòkúso ni wọn máa ka ẹnì náà sí... Lára àwọn ọrọ tí a máa n dà pè ni ọrọ tó bá jẹ mọ ibi ipamọ ara ọkùnrin tàbí ara obìnrin.

In Yorùbá culture, there are ways of referring to certain things or names by which certain things should be called. We must not call them the real Yoruba names by which we know them except euphemistic expressions are used. It is a taboo for mentioning such names; whosoever breaks the taboo concerning these words will be regarded as a novice or a vulgarian ... among words that we express in euphemism are the words pertaining to the male and female sexual organs.

Àlàbá (2004:11) confirms that verbal expressions of sexuality come as a rule in euphemism. He explains that the names of the sexual organs are not mentioned directly. For instance, according to him, the female sexual organ is referred to as *ojú ara obìnrin* (lit. 'the eye of a woman's body') while the male sexual organ is *nṣkan ọmọkùnrin* (lit. a man's thing').

However, poets within the society enjoy poetic license; they have freedom to comment on all issues of life. A poet can even render his poem without the employment of euphemism. In his explanation with reference to poets and sexuality, Babalọlá (1966:239) asserts that utterances such as these are not regarded as obscene when they emanate from a minstrel. Ọlájubù (1972:165) believes that reference to sex in Yoruba oral literature occurs under four broad aspects of oral literature, namely, Ìbà (salute to the great powers), oríkì (praise poems of individuals and Yoruba lineage), literary comments aimed at teaching morals or producing laughter and lyrics, recreational activities and ceremony. He explains further that reference to sex as explained above is not found in every day speech but reserved for singers and other verbal artists; it is a sort of poetic license. Fákéyẹ (2006:74) cited the view of Yusuf (1992:120) which confirms that reference to sex is allowed in Yoruba oral poetry when he says that:

It is pertinent to note here that taboo expressions related to sex, sex organs and para sexual organs are freely used in Ìjálá poetry, (the Yorùbá poetry of hunters and warriors) connected with the Yorùbá god of iron, Ògún. This use is peculiar to this poetry and it is one of its characteristic features.

Similarly, Ọdẹajọ (1992:18) confirms that expressions relating to genitals are relevant in Yorùbá oral literature especially in Ìjálá because they create humour. Àlàbá (2004:11) explains that in certain festival chants and songs and in proverbs or aphorisms what is called obscene language is employed for literary/aesthetic effects. Ọlátúnjí (2005:57) ascertains that Yorùbá usually call a spade a spade in their oral poetry especially when it comes to sexual matters and most Yoruba oral poets make sexual references to amuse their audience. He explains further that Yoruba poets do not just resort to blunt references; there are instances of euphemism in Yoruba oral poetry. Fákéyẹ (2006:71-90) confirms that Ọlátúnbòsún in his poem, uses euphemistic expressions to describe sex and sexuality in such a way that he does not step outside the general system of Yoruba philosophy and cultural belief.

What is deduced from the above is that sexual organs are cherished and are therefore carefully covered among Yorùbá to avoid being naked. Sexual references are prohibited except for poets that have poetic license to discuss any issue of their choice; hence, its use is not found in everyday speech. Oral poets make sexual references to amuse their audience, although, they also use euphemistic expressions in their description. The question now is: do these poets use sexual references for amusement only as depicted by these researchers? This work tends to find answer to the above question in the selected female-participant traditional festivals.

Sexual References to Genitals in Aringíyà, Ògún Obìnrin and Àgwẹ Festivals

In *Aringiya* festival, the virgins in the nude parade through the town, showing themselves as complete maidens. While pointing to their genitals, they sing thus:

Yòbò mi wọ ka hò jẹ	Look at my vagina for your pleasure
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Yòbò mi wọ ka hò jẹ	Look at my vagina for your pleasure
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After the parade, they assembled in front of Ọba's palace where they have Aringiya shrine to receive blessing from their oba as shown in the picture below:



Àringíyà Maidens Receiving Blessing from Ọba Ọwá-Ale

Òbò (vagina) is used freely in the above song. The festival is one of the festivals that depict the pride of virginity. It is a time that girls show that they are still virgins. Maidens show observers that they still carry their virginity by urging people to watch their vagina (since people could only see vagina and not virginity). Those that had been deflowered are not allowed to go near Aringiyà else, they remain barren for the rest of their lives. It is learnt that in the olden days, Aringiyà masquerade beheaded any pregnant girl pretending to be a virgin beside Aringiyà brook. It is therefore obvious that Aringiyà divinity like any other African divinities wants her initiates to live a holy life.

Apart from showing themselves as complete ladies, those ladies also show their natural beauty. It is an opportunity for boys around to make their choice of future partners. Investigation reveals that the belief of the people in Ikare community is that virgins do not feel shy to participate in traditional festivals whether the festival is performed in the nude or not. This is in line with traditional criticism employed that rated virginity very high among Yoruba people. Virginity at wedding is greatly respected in some African society (Yorùbá inclusive). Ìdòwú (1962:157) ascertains that chastity before marriage on the part of woman is essential and that a woman who is not virtuous at marriage is a disgrace both to herself and to her family. The loss of virginity before marriage brings shame to the lady and her family, especially the mother that is expected to have brought the girl up in the right way. Half a keg of palm wine (diluted with water) and charcoal (connoting an act of irresponsibility on the part of the bride) would be sent to the bride's family the day after her wedding. On the other hand, pounded yam with good stew, a full keg of palm wine, chalk and money (virginity money) would be sent to

the father of a lady that was not deflowered before wedding. There will be merry making in both families; the husband's family rejoices for marrying a responsible lady, while the wife's family rejoices for the glory brought to the family by their daughter (Adéoyè, 1979:233, Ládélé, et al, 1986: 127-128). The religious aspect cannot be overemphasized. Loosing virginity before wedding is seen as an act of ungodliness. Every maiden is expected to live a holy life by keeping her virginity till wedding. Taking part in female-participant festivals remain the only way by which ladies could show that they are virgins and that they live holy lives in the communities where female-participant festivals take place. To remain initiates, they conserve themselves till wedding and with that; they continue to live holy lives that the divinity requires. So, the virgins pride themselves on their ability to preserve themselves and serve their gods.

Traditional criticism employed supports the opinion that virginity should be kept till wedding. Although, womanism upholds the people's culture yet, it condemns the act of celebrating in the nude; it believes that the natural biological God-given traits should not be used to hold women down neither should it be used to mock them all in the name of culture. Exposing maidens like this can eventually lead to rape because men, while watching the female genitals, may become sexually aroused. In addition, the act of making maidens celebrate festivals in the nude in this world of globalization is seen as barbaric and primitive. It is also seen as part of the constraints that culture has imposed on women. The peaceful-coexistence in the community has nothing to do with the nudity of any sex. It is therefore suggested that any lady that fails to take part in any of the female-participant festivals being celebrated in the nude should not be seen as someone that has been deflowered.

In *Ògún Obìnrin* festival in Iyèrè Ọ̀wò, a lead singer while satirizing a pregnant maiden that could not take part in the festival makes reference to male sex organ when she sings thus:

<i>Okó múdan gwú</i>	Penis makes virgin overweight
<i>Òpòsùn ó yùn kẹ̀rẹ̀</i>	Married woman remains <i>ùkẹ̀rẹ̀</i>
<i>Okó múdan gwú</i>	Penis makes virgin overweight
<i>Òpòsùn ó yùn kẹ̀rẹ̀</i>	Married woman remains <i>ùkẹ̀rẹ̀</i>

It is depicted in the song above that penis has made the maiden to be overweight. Overweight here is used euphemistically to connote pregnancy. The increase in stature connotes the pregnancy carried by the 'girl'. Here, it is said that the penis brings about the increase in the girl's stature. The penis does not make the girl to be overweight per se, but it brings about the sexual intercourse that results in pregnancy which brings about the increase in stature. Penis is used to tell the audience what brought about the pregnancy. Any pregnant woman brings joy to her family and no one dare make jest of her because she must have taken the normal protocol which is wedding before pregnancy. People cherish a married woman and likened her to undiluted palm wine

(*ùkèrẹ*) that people cherish and admire most in that area. The lady in question is hereby satirized because she is not yet married. Unmarried ladies are not expected to be pregnant hence; any pregnant teenager would become an object of ridicule during female-participant festivals. This is in line with traditionalist criticism and womanism that condemn pre-marital sex or pregnancy. Among Yoruba people, promiscuity is abhorred; sexual relationship is to be tolerated culturally only after wedding. The arrival at puberty or at sexual maturity is not a license to having sex. Àlàbá (2004:11) confirms this when he says that illicit sexual intercourse is not encouraged at all by Yoruba culture: moderation, sexual discipline (continence) is the rule for a cultured Yoruba person.

Another singer in the same Ògún Obìnrin festival referring to blood of virginity that comes out when a maiden is deflowered sings thus:

Udanròwò fùdí bẹrèké	An Ùròwò maiden hurts herself with sugar cane
É ẹ yàà, é ẹ yòò	It pours, it pours
Ó bọ dú gẹgẹ òbò ya	The vagina nearly cuts
É ẹ ẹàà, é ẹ ẹòò	It pours, it pours

The so called 'sugar cane' that hurts Ùròwò maiden in the first line above does not refer to ordinary sugar cane; it is used euphemistically to connote male sex organ. It connotes both the enjoyment and pain derived from the sexual activity. Sugar is sweet; this is likened to the enjoyment sexual intercourse produces. Cane flogs one and inflicts pain. The use of cane connotes the pain the teenager had while having sex. The use of sugar cane put together connotes the enjoyment derived from the sexual activity but at the end of the day the enjoyment turns to pain because of the age of the teenager. The second line talks about the blood of virginity. It is an exaggeration that òbò (vagina) nearly cuts as depicted in the third line. For a female having penis-in-vagina sex for the first time, the hymen stretches a little, sometimes, the stretching can cause small tears which may lead to a release of very small amount of blood or few spots of blood. The song connotes the pain a lady experiences when she has sex for the first time and the blood of virginity coming out thereby giving the idea that the vagina nearly cuts. In another sense, the song ridicules an under-age maiden that is deflowered; she is hurt by the big size of the male genital. This may not be true but it is put that way to ridicule her. This rebuke is in line with the two theories employed in this work. Traditional criticism condemns promiscuity while womanism will never condone lasciviousness on the part of any teenager as earlier said.

A reference to female sexual organs is also made in another song in Àgwẹ festival in Ùlálẹ where a lead singer sings thus:

Olórífofo	An unfortunate person
Şòpòsò tán ulí dòkéfà	She is in the sixth matrimonial home after marriage,

Èbálí inẹẹ jáun	Who deflowered you?
Èbálí dẹ í jò lórífofo	Does the blood of virginity leak, an unfortunate girl?
Tòun mà jònò o	Hers leaks
Èbálí dẹ í jò olórífofo	Does the blood of virginity leak, an unfortunate girl?
Tòun ó jò àjànà	Hers leaks
Jóò mórí şudan móbbò şòpòsò	Her head is virgin's head, her vagina is woman's vagina
Jóò mórí şudan móbbò şòpòsò	Her head is virgin's head, her vagina is woman's vagina

The lady in the above song who has been deflowered is seen by her mates as a good-for-nothing person in the first line. She is not trustworthy, even after her marriage, she moves from one matrimonial home to another since she is not satisfied with one husband (second line) (although, this may not be true since she has never been into any matrimonial home). The idea is in conformity with Yoruba culture that believes in using an abusive word that is not compatible with somebody's way of life on him/her; just to ridicule and correct such a person. On the other hand, it is believed that any lascivious lady may not be contented with a man; hence, she moves from one matrimonial home to another. The singer even wants to know the man that had sex with her (third line). The singer goes further to ask whether virginity does leak; why is it that her own leaks? (fourth to seventh lines). This is a rhetorical question since the culprit is not around to answer the question; of course the singer doesn't need any answer. The last two lines depict that the girl's head looks like that of a virgin while her *òbò* (vagina) is like that of a married woman who has given birth. A girl without virginity is not known through physical appearance. Again, *òbò*(vagina) is used to refer to the actual place where the lady loses her virginity, where the difference between a virgin and a married woman can be detected; virginity is inside the vagina.

It is revealed that after the festival, nobody is allowed to refer to sex organs explicitly as explained above any longer for there would be no way by which anybody could know who loses her virginity or not. Whatever language used during this festive mood is mainly to ridicule the deviants so as to make them repent of their lascivious acts and remind others to keep rules of living a holy life as laid down by their divinity thereby evoking laughter and creating humour; so amusement is secondary.

Conclusion

It is established that traditional festival singers make mention of male and female genitals explicitly as depicted in the female-participant festivals examined. It is also established that the names are mentioned to satirize maidens that violate the laid down rules of the divinity by involving in promiscuous acts before wedding; to condemn their sexual abuse

so as to serve as deterrent to others. The maidens that break taboos by loosing their virginity before wedding are ridiculed to give reverence to divinities and their priests to show importance of holiness in traditional religion. The maidens take pride in being virgins; they therefore show this by showing their *òbò* (vagina) to the audience with much enthusiasm. Sexual references are not seen as vulgar or blunt at this time rather, they are seen as the language of moral reforms. However, celebrating festivals in the nude should be discouraged. It is high time women fought for their rights. Society should move with time especially now that we have modernization, education and foreign religions that are vigorously competing with Yoruba culture. In order to control children's lasciviousness, the suggestion made by Ilesanmi (2013:155-156) below can be absorbed instead of insisting on maidens celebrating in the nude:

It is the duty of parents to teach the children that sexual desire and intercourse are normal human acts at a particular stage of their lives within stipulated regulations. And this should be done before they get exposed to other cultures so that they can avoid some confusions.

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