

Rituals of Ilé-Ifè, Nigeria

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Narratives and Performances of Archetypes

By

Morufu B. Omigbule

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This book is dedicated to the Almighty Olódùmarè, all who trace their origin to Ilé-Ifè, and to three successive remarkable traditional rulers of the ancient city of Ilé-Ifè:

His Imperial Majesties

Ọ̀ni Adesoji Tadenikawo Aderemi (Osinkola II) – 1930 – 1980,

Ọ̀ni Okunade Sijuwade (Olubuse 11), – 1980 – 2015 and

Ọ̀ni Babatunde Adeyeye Eniitan Ogunwusi (Ojaja II) – 2015 to date

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Prof. Segun Adekoya who had earlier supervised my master's thesis readily comes to mind since the basic idea of this book derived from my Ph.D thesis which I defended in 2014 in which my interest in ritual studies at the Master of Arts level in Obafemi Awolowo University is profoundly furthered. Certainly, I have tapped immensely from his thorough academic supervision. With exceptional eagle eyes which I still strive to have, Adekoya would see the 'Ts' improperly crossed and the 'Is' with blurry dots. I appreciate his meticulous reading of my manuscripts in general and injection of invaluable ideas. In addition, I appreciate his liberal mentorship which gave me the latitude to think and conduct my research with true independence that empowers. For making me see the path of self-discovery, I thank him immensely.

The late Professor Wole Ogundele was also an inspiring figure. I adore him even after demise. His academic methods stimulated my interest in traditional Yoruba customs and practices, perhaps after the glorious but sudden demise of Professor Oyin Ogunba. I particularly derived inspiration from Ogundele's skillful handling of intersections in the expansive and expanding field of cultural studies. I particularly wish to note points of convergence which Ogundele would clearly indicate

between oral literary forms and popular cultural forms. I am constrained to make a pleasant conjecture that my critical intelligence must have been sharpened tremendously by his tact as a cultural scientist with bias for Yoruba culture. His exceedingly appealing pedagogy which he consistently displayed with remarkable ease while discussing oral literary forms of Africa and/or the connections of the forms with contemporary popular cultural forms really fascinated me in my formative years.

The place of ‘oral tradition bearers’ cannot be underrated in a work such as this, which borders on ethnography. To this end, I should recognize the exceptional friendship I had enjoyed with the late Eredúmi of Ilé-Ifè,¹ Retired Captain Olú Akínyemí, when I was on my study of Olójó festival in Ilé-Ifè at the Masters level. This must have emboldened me to be rest assured that approaching other Ifè tradition bearers would not be too difficult and would be eventually rewarding. Therefore, my appreciation goes to the following Ifè tradition bearers some of whom are now late: the late Obalásè, Abraham Oṣisàyínká; the late Onísòròòjùgbè, Tiámíyú Oyèwólé; the late Obalésùn, the late Lóogun Oṣànrẹ̀, Olóyè Sunday Tòwóbọ̀lá Oṣàkúlùjọ; the incumbent Obalésùn, Obaìsòrò Dàda Obatàlá; the Akirè, Obaìsòrò Bádírù Oḽáwuni; the Akisin, Afọlábí Oḽásojì; the Oṣúnbatọ-Akirè, Pa Múrítàlá Adéwólé; and the Olúfọ̀n-Obatàlá, Olóyè Ísímáílà Fálọ̀pẹ̀. The following important informants are also appreciated: Mámá Àíbátù Ayédùn whom I encountered and whose cooperation I enjoyed at a very ripe age of roughly a hundred; Olóyè Ráábíù Agboọ̀lá Ayédùn (Àíbátù’s only son); and Olóyè Egbèdoyin Oḽáoyè. Finally, in this regard, I recognize and appreciate the father-son relation that attended my first encounter with the Olúfọ̀n of Ifọ̀n in Oṣòlú Local Government of Oṣun State, Oba Al-Maruf Mágbaḡbẹ̀ọ̀la (now late). I appreciate the Olúfọ̀n’s chiefs who were enthusiastic to provide me necessary traditional appearances which validated some of the assumptions that propelled this study, and for their touching prayers. With me at the Olúfọ̀n’s palace were two favorite students of mine: Fúnmi Oḽádẹ̀jọ and Dọ̀lápọ̀ Adéwọ̀yin. I remember Fúnmi’s little boy, Nelson, who lighted the moment of interview at the Olúfọ̀n’s palace with his childish mien. My gratitude to them all!

¹ Throughout this book, the reader should note the use of ‘Ilé-Ifè’ and ‘Ifè’. The two words denote the same place, and this applies particularly when ‘Ilé-Ifè’ or ‘Ifè’ is used as nominal adjective. The tone-marked version of the word ‘Ilé-Ifè’ or the shortened form ‘Ifè’ will be frequently encountered. The non-tone-marked version ‘Ile-Ife’ is used as found in sources cited.

I must acknowledge too important interventions: the African Humanities Fellowship of the American Council of Learned Societies under the aegis of Carnegie Corporation of the USA and a joint fund from the duo of Professor (Barrister) Abíólá Sánní and Àkànjí Adémólá Awófirányè. The funding afforded me through the AHP/ACLS dissertation completion fellowship and the opportunity of a visiting fellow of the AHP/ACLS in University of Dar es Salam, Tanzania, in 2014 came at a critical moment and went a long way in assisting to complete my Ph.D thesis. Such would always be necessary for tedious and expensive research such as the one that produced this book. The funding through the AHP fellowship award cushioned the harsh effect of my overdrawing on my lean bank account and stimulated my interest when I was certainly reaching a breaking point. Much later, precisely in 2018, when the final step to get the manuscript for this book pushed to a crucial point, Prof. Sánní and Mr. Awófirányè suddenly pulled together and urgently intervened. That the manuscript for this book reached a remarkable stage before the end of 2018 owes a lot to their generous intervention which I find very unusual. The support of the duo was weightier in kind than cash, for their intervention imposed a burden of responsibility on me as a conscientious beneficiary of their kind gesture. While appreciating them, I must acknowledge Prof. L.O. Salami who facilitated my virtual interaction with Prof. Sanni in the first place.

I should recall the special love and support of the following persons too: Late Dr. Charles Ayòlá Adésanmí, Dr. Ísíákà Àrànsí (now Professor) and my longstanding friend, `Kúnlé Olápòjù. I appreciate others who I may not be able to mention one by one.

My family has been my greatest support. I appreciate my wife, Tèmítáyò Èniólá Omígbulé nee Oriádé, and my very wodefrul children, Qazim Opéyemí Omígbulé, Abdul-Basit Olúwásíjibòmí Omígbulé, Ibrahim Olúsilé Omígbulé, Nymah Ìdèra-Olúwa Omígbulé, and our latest addition to the family whose birth we recently had in Wurzburg, Germany, Fadhilah `Bowale Omigbule.

FOREWORD

I am very pleased to write a foreword for this fascinating work on Ile-Ife ritual space and time. The work brings back old memories of my ethnographic research that I conducted over three decades ago in Ile-Ife, and that resulted in the book *The City of 201 Gods: Ile-Ife in Time, Space, and Imagination*.

Dr Omigbule's book, which begins with references to his years of childhood in Ile-Ife, through his life experiences as an adult, and to his pursuits of literature in Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife, provides an insightful study not only about ritual performances, including festivals, music and dance but also deals with the intersection of the sacred and the profane and regular spaces in the city. It is a study of how the ordinary life of the Ife people revolves around the precinct of the deities and spirits who also occupy the same space. While spaces are often separated between the sacred cosmos and the spaces for the living, through architectural structures, and enforcement of taboos and other prohibitions, it is often the case that the young, such as the author, traverse this precinct, not because of their ignorance, but because of the interactive nature of the spirit world and the human environment that makes up their communities.

As I also argued in many other places, given the number of deities that inhabit the Ile-Ife pantheon, be it 201 or 401 deities, depending on who you are talking to, the key religious reference confirms, simply, that some innumerable spirits and deities inhabit the Ile-Ife universe. Scholars, such as the author, will continue to dig out of this very complex Orisa spatial realm, newfound deities and already studied older ones that will require more study. As I pointed out, the Ooni of Ife, His Imperial Majesty, Oba Adeyeye Enitan Ogunwusi has embarked on something that amounts to a quiet revolution of excavating the old gods and goddesses, for not only acknowledging their spiritual presence and labor in the ancient past but also positioning them for the much talked about spiritual pilgrimage to the ancient Ife.

There are many reasons why the author's book represents a major addition to the existing scholarship on Ile-Ife religious beliefs and practices. This work raises important theoretical and methodological issues that will

certainly lead to significant debates among scholars across the disciplines of Humanities and Social Sciences. For example, the relationship between ethnography and literature, the importance of deep hermeneutics; the usefulness of western theoretical ideas, such as the archetypal structures that he regularly cited; the debate between the etic and emic; and even the reference to what I coined in my *City of 201 Gods* as 'Indigenous Hermeneutics' and which the author made use of in this book. Dr Omigbule's work also lays credence to the importance of native researchers joining outsiders to study indigenous traditions and cultures in such an important city state as Ile-Ife. However, he must not bestow, by any means, certain exclusionary privileges to natives, otherwise the monumental work of scholars such as William Bascom on Ifa divination tradition in Ile-Ife, or Pierre Verger, the Brazilian professor who was a researcher at Ile-Ife University, Ile-Ife would not have been created with such significant importance in Yoruba studies. This would have therefore deprived Ile-Ife of its worldwide fame as well as access to research opportunities and resources. I highly recommend this work. It represents an important book of interdisciplinary method in African studies.

Jacob K. Olupona
Harvard University

CHAPTER ONE

NATIVITY AND RESIDENCY AS ETHNOGRAPHIC ADVANTAGE

Introduction

The experience which prompted me to write this book shows that to have been born into a native culture and reared within it can turn out to be a crucial ethnographic advantage. These are the peculiar circumstances that generated the initial impetus in the form of an initial working title for this book, *Archetypes on Stage: Myth and Ritual in Ilé-Ifè*, before it finally evolved into *Rituals of Ilé-Ifè, Nigeria: Narratives and Performances of Archetypes*. Perhaps my fascination for the rituals of Ilé-Ifè began right from the late seventies when concrete memories of very early childhood were just in the making, but I cannot say for certain. For sure, I remember that from the late seventies, when my mother's re-marriage after the death of my father and her successful fight against being passed over as a wife to a relation of my father (*sísú-lópó*) necessitated our relocation to Ìlàrẹ Quarters in Ilé-Ifè, my innocent but curious eyes had started opening up to the rituals and myths of Ilé-Ifè. Our location was specifically within Aṣẹdà Compound in Ìlàrẹ Quarters. Being the adjoining compound¹ to Olódò Compound (the compound of the immediate past Oòni—traditional ruler of the ancient town of Ilé-Ifè—Oòni Okunade Ṣijuwade Olubuṣe II), the rituals performed in both compounds as well as the myths connected to them were part of the informal traditional education readily available to my generation. The *Òrigí Ilé-Aṣẹdà* (a short and stout monolith often found at the center of the frontages of halls of compounds in Ilé-Ifè) was a constant spot for offering of sacrifices. About six houses away was the Compound Hall of the Olódò lineage in Ilé-Ifè with an ante-chamber for the deity called *Lájàmìnsán*. We were barred from entering the *Lájàmìnsán* ante-chamber. Yet some greenhorns like me remained curious

¹ A compound in Ilé-Ifè is a unit of the town populated by members of the lineage or people of close filial connection.

because the ante-chamber was perpetually closed, nay, perfectly locked. How? The only lock was the simple but strongly held belief about the ante-chamber as a “no go area” within the Compound Hall. However, the hall was itself a constant arena for conviviality and merrymaking during the *Ìpàdè-òmọ'lé* (lineage meeting). It was the venue for minor and major meetings which usually involved descendants of the lineages that form the compound and women married to male members of these lineages. We hardly waited until the end of each meeting before turning the spaces around the hall into a football ground. This took place sometimes after taking our portions of the culinary supplies. When our little plastic or rubber balls would fall into the ante-chamber through the unsealed rooftop of the hall, perhaps at some points we had to break into the ante-chamber in a moment of over-excitement to retrieve the balls, I no longer can say. But enduring memories of childhood afford me a little recollection of the image of the interior of the ante-chamber. Among other things, it housed some whips which were rested against its inner walls. Myth has it that the whips were *Lájàminsán's* potent weapon of vengeance and justice. As innocent kids, *Lájàminsán* must have only emboldened our audacity and blessed our paths. Even the angry warnings of the elders and occasional whipping for transgressions were marked by prayerful scolding and playful curses such as: “*Èhin òmọ olóriire hin in!*” (You these blessed children!) and “*N nà a já'tí rin in*” (May your earlobes be severed).

Constantly, on my way to my primary school—St. John's Primary School, *Ìlàrẹ, Ilé-Ifẹ*—the sight of the *Òmọ* tree at *Ìdí-Òmọ* Junction along *Ìlàrẹ* Road in *Ilé-Ifẹ* just by the Anglican Cathedral that birthed the school reminded me of the witches that were believed to be meeting in the dead of the night on top of the *Òmọ* tree. Its magnificent stature and wide branches had some arresting effect on my youthful existence and combined to lend a certain credence to the awful speculations about it. Yet, as one branched off and went down *Òrun-Ọba-Adò* Street, less than ten houses away were the shrines dedicated to the royal ancestors of the Benin people of Edo State, Nigeria. Not too far away from these was the *Omi-Ọgbòkú* (*Ọgbòkú* stream) which reminded the average well bred native of the myth of the *Yẹyẹgbòkú*, the goddess of the stream who is reputed to have many breasts dangling all over her body. Also within a short distance was the *Olúéré*, a well with a mystical reputation which reminded one of the goddess, *Olúéré*. It would be interesting to remark on the beliefs of the folks about the well. It is said to be non-life-threatening for one who mistakenly falls into it. A victim of such a fall would be safely delivered by the goddess through other wells connected to it such as

Lálùà in Lálùà Compound or the Yèyémòólú (the sacred well of the Qòni) inside the Qòni's palace, where the victim would be safely pulled out.

My stepfather, the then Baásàà from Asèdá Compound, the late Olóyè Samson Elugbade, was a prominent Ifè traditional chief. Part of his traditional roles was the patronship of an *Irò* and sponsorship of the yearly *Irò* performance. The *Irò*, as a ritual festival performance in Ilé-Ifè, is a combination of conviviality, making of sacrifices, observance of rites, and elaborate singing and dancing round the town. As a step-son of the Baásàà and the only little lad he could call his, I had the privilege of running important errands in connection with the ceremony. Needless to say that I was witness to some of the processes involved, apart from “the making of the *Irò*”. I was indeed part of the procession from Asèdá Area of Ìlàré Quarters in Ilé-Ifè through various locations along Ènuwá, the city center, where the palace of the Qòni is. As the procession went on, we would all sing as the *Irò* danced skillfully and gracefully to the admiration of all:

Olùdàrin: *Íro iròò*
Elégbè: *iròò ọba*
Olùdàrin: Ọbaláayèèè
Elégbè: *irò rẹ...*

Translation:
 Lead-Singer: All hail the *irò*
 Chorus: The king's *irò*
 Lead-Singer: The Ọbaláayèèè
 Chorus: We hail your *irò*...

At various spots the *Irò* would stop and dance to the delight of all. Either before each dance or after, it would holler thus:

Írò ó ó ó ó
Írò ó ó ó ó
 É é ééégiri oooo!

The palace grounds, particularly the expansive approach, were the dancing rendezvous for about five or six *Iròs*. Each *Irò* bore the traditional title of its patron by which it was identified. Among the patrons were the Baásàà, the Fegun, and the Ọbaláayè who held the offices of Baásàà, Fegun, and Ọbaláayè respectively. The *Iròs* were therefore referred to as *Irò-Fegun*, *Irò-Baásàà*, *Irò-Ọbaláayè* and so on.

My childhood in the Ìlàrẹ̀ area of Ilé-Ifẹ̀ also afforded me the rare opportunity of being a passive witness to a procession along Ìlàrẹ̀ Street in Ilé-Ifẹ̀, which is involved in the Ọ̀wàlàrẹ̀ festival. This festival is treated in detail in this book and, so, it may not be necessary to provide its details in this introductory chapter. Nevertheless, I should mention that the procession to the Ọ̀wàlàrẹ̀ Shrine did not afford any entertainment. Before the research experience which produced this book, my childhood memory of the festival performance—which lately has been revisited—was wrapped in a sacred aura (or was it fear?), until my recent re-examination and direct involvement as a researcher. The procession from the Ọ̀wàlàrẹ̀ Shrine which is participatory and devoid of dreadful restrictions however created a lasting impression on my memory and came in handy while writing this book. As far as my early understanding of Ifẹ̀ traditions and customs in Ìlàrẹ̀ Quarters of Ilé-Ifẹ̀ is concerned, I would want to mention the *Ọ̀fọ̀nràn* festival—a city-wide ritual ceremony—during which I first witnessed the placing of a burning stick in front of houses. This was a rite I recently got to know more about as a symbolic demonstration of the victory tactics which the legendary Mọ̀rẹ̀mi learnt out of “self-givingness” and freely afforded the Ifẹ̀ at a great cost to her bio-social wellbeing.

By 1983, my mother had relocated us to my maternal grandfather’s compound, Akogun-Ìjìòkẹ̀ Compound in Ìrẹ̀mọ̀ Quarters of Ilé-Ifẹ̀, popularly known as Alágbààà Compound. There I had a higher level of opportunity to witness and even participate actively to a considerable extent in rituals. Members of the lineages within the compound were by tradition required to play active roles in the *Edì* ritual festival. Specifically, the *Ferekete* aspect of *Edì* was exceptionally stimulating. The highlight of this rite in the *Edì* festival was the mock fight in symbolic representation of victory over the enemies. A roasted lap of duiker was presented the victorious side in the mock fight. The delicacy was torn into pieces and shared by all who reveled in the victory. All over the area, the song rendered in antiphonal mode filled the air:

Olùdàrin: *Ferekete kete!*
Elégbè: *Ààyè!*
Olùdàrin: *A jagun a kó wọn!*
Elégbè: *Ààyè!*
Olùdàrin: *A gba ’tan eetu kan!*
Elégbè: *Ààyè!*
Olùdàrin: *A fi serun mọnyan!*
Elégbè: *Ààyè!*
Olùdàrin: *A fi serun mọnyan!*
Elégbè: *Ọ̀rúntọ̀ tètè...*

Translation:

Lead-Singer: *Ferekete kete!*

Chorus: *Ààyè!*

Lead: We warred and captured them

Chorus: *Ààyè*

Lead: We took a prize of a lap of duiker

Chorus: *Ààyè*

Lead: We made the mouth descend on it

Chorus: *Ààyè*

Lead: We made the mouth rage at it...

Chorus: *Ààyè*

All: Let the *Òrúntó* speed up...

Added to this second level of my experience were four other ritual performances. The *Ìjáko* rite done by the wives of the male members of *Iredùmi* lineage was one of the four. It was a rite during which women possessed by the gods were watched with surprise and fear until relief came their way through a special tendering by the non-possessed among the women. The procession from *Enuwá Square*—the city center—to the *Mòrèmi* grove located about two kilometers away was a spectacle to behold. The rather erotic singing remains memorable:

Olùdàrin: À mé pòn lariyè!

Chorus: *Okó n jóná o ibòòs!*

Olùdàrin obìnrin: Jìwò jìwò jìwò jìwò epòn!

Olùdàrin òkùnrin: Jàwà jawa jàwà jawa òbò!

Translation:

Lead: We apprehended the scrotum!

Chorus: The penis is burning let all be alarmed!

Female Singers: Sagging dirty scrotum!

Male Singers: Flabby dirty vagina!

There were also fierce *Eégún Gbándú* which dominated both *Ìrèmo* and *Òkèrèwè* Quarters and *Eégún Alápánsánpá* which dominated *Modákéké* during *Egúngún* festival in *Ilé-Ifè*.

As in the *Ìlàré* experience, my youthful experience in *Akoḡun-Ìjìòkè* Compound afforded me an awareness of some sacred spots together with myths associated with them. The *Bábásigidi* Shrine, the *Olúfón* Shrine, and the *Lálùà* Well were some such sacred spots littering the *Iredùmi-Òkeján-Ìrèmo* axis of the town. Suffice to say that I grew up within an environment decked out in myths and rituals. In this regard, I must mention a crucial time of disinclination towards myth and ritual in *Ilé-Ifè*.

In Ìlàrẹ̀, Badru Elugbade and Laisi Elugbade (who is now no longer with us) were my play mates. They had started attending an Arabic/Islamic School (*Ilée-kéú*) where both Islamic doctrines and the Arabic language were taught. Peer group influence led me to Arabic education which afforded me insights into the religion of my birth. That Arabic-Islamic educational background together with the Western-Christian one at St. John's Anglican Primary School was to later have a tremendous influence on my early personality development. I remain grateful for the combination of doctrinal influences in my early education. Not until my second and fourth years at university was I able to regain my inclination towards the customs and traditions of Ifẹ̀, both by accidental choice and as a matter of career requirement. Introduction to Oral Literature (LIT 201) and Studies in Oral Literature (LIT 413) at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ilé-Ifẹ̀, exposed me to the rudiments of understanding literary studies as cultural studies. The pedagogical experiences were stimulating. My interest in myth and ritual studies soared when I worked on Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (a play based on the ritual of Elesin Oba for which the ancient town of Oyo in Nigeria is well known) as my undergraduate project in 1999. The project, entitled "The Concept of Tragedy in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*" was the foundation of an academic interest which I sustained throughout my postgraduate studies and which resulted in my successful defense of an MA and a PhD theses, entitled "Dramatisation of Yoruba Cosmology in Ọ̀lójọ̀ and Ọ̀ṣun Ọ̀ṣogbo Festivals" and "A Poetics of Selected Ritual festivals in Ilé-Ifẹ̀" respectively. *Rituals of Ilé-Ifẹ̀, Nigeria: Narratives and Performances of Archetypes* is a culmination of that ever-growing scholarly interest.

I recall that at the point of conceiving the idea of my PhD thesis, which is here being turned into a book, I still retained the interest which propelled my Master of Arts thesis submitted to the Postgraduate College of the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ilé-Ifẹ̀. But that interest was not going to be sustained, at least in the short term, as I temporarily veered into the study of Daniel Olorunfemi Fagunwa—a pioneer novelist in Yoruba, the indigenous African language. Providence, however, directed my gaze towards my initial research interest. Hence, with lots of zeal I completed the writing of the PhD thesis and successfully defended it in 2014. How this memorable success was recorded shall be captured in this introductory part of the book.

Conducting the fieldwork that produced this book would have been extremely difficult if not impossible without the cooperation of my important informants, who were authorities in their own right as far as knowledge of custom and traditions of the Ifè are concerned. Before I detail their important contributions to this book, I must first mention what endeared me to them and our firmly established relationship which took certain factors into consideration. Four factors stand out: being very interested in the ritual festivals I wanted to study; being appreciably familiar with them; being willing to reward sincerity, rigor, and a rare level of effort; and, more importantly, being an indigene with uncommon interest in “self-study”. All these combined to pave the way for my ethnographic assignment on the one hand. On the other hand, my ethnographic study got an instant promise of success because of my knowledge of locations of importance in Ilé-Ifè, my ability to track down informants with dual or multiple residences, my perseverance when paying attention to the kind of details being sought, and my being focused on clearly set goals amidst a wide array of distractions in the study of the life, history, beliefs and teachings represented through ritual and mythic symbolism. Considering all of these, I have come to realize the rare benefit which being a native with experience and commitment can inject into the kind of ethnographic study this book will hopefully be. My experience turned out to be a confirmation of the validity of the proposition that ethnographic studies can be “a series of dialogues” (active and passive) with the possibility of them spanning different periods from early childhood through to adulthood (when self-awareness is gained and/or when the skills of critical observation, questioning, analysis, inferences and conclusions have been acquired).

1. Ethnography and Literary Studies

Attention should be drawn to the intellectually fecund association into which literary association and ethnography have been drawn. Literary studies has become an expansive field of study in a sense similar to that which makes ethnographic studies appear an expansive field for interdisciplinary exchanges. Indeed, literary studies continues to give itself up for different kinds of productive intercourse between it and the allied disciplines across the humanities and the social sciences. As a literary practitioner, I have observed that increasingly, literary studies as one of the allied disciplines is merging with cultural studies in such an incredible manner that one might wonder what the basis was for the chasm that hitherto existed between ethnography and literary studies. In the first

instance, ethnographic studies might not be too different from literature because of its interpretive orientation. As an interpretive enterprise it bears a semblance of the creative paradigm of literary studies, and even, a bit of the latter's critical paradigm; that is, both ethnographic studies and literary studies buy into each other since both investigate life and society. Benjamin C. Ray has also tried to make the point that ethnography and literary studies can never be strange bed fellows: "Ethnography is an interpretive enterprise, one that is intimately bound up with the perspective of the investigator and the circumstances in which the fieldwork is carried out."² Ray's drawing upon Clifford Geertz's observation elsewhere is another useful insight: "[...] ethnography must be recognised as a work of the *imagination* because of the ethnographer's way of selecting, perceiving, and representing his or her subject matter" (emphasis mine).

The literary practitioner reconstructs society, regardless of the two paradigms of the art he/she chooses. Whether as a writer or a critic, life and/or society is observed from a preferred perspective of the literary practitioner and subsequently reconstructed as such. Even when the literary critic is primarily engaged with the imposition of meanings on recreated life circumstances, what emerges out of her/his investigation, comparison, analysis, inferences, dialectics, assumptions and conclusions, among other things, is life in a different image—a self-imaging that is ultimately traceable to introspection. Hence, what the literary practitioner does can be conveniently married with what the ethnographer does in the sense that both disciplines reveal what they set out to achieve.³ Though Ray rigorously makes the distinction to set the ethnographer apart by pointing out that the ethnographer "interrogates their sources" and is "self-critical",⁴ these parameters are insufficient for making a distinction between literary studies and ethnography as they are for drawing similarities between both disciplines. Therefore, the incredible merging of both literary studies and ethnography will continue and remain a productive association with lots of benefits for knowledge production across the allied disciplines. It is my hope that this book will sufficiently prove this.

² Benjamin C. Ray. *Myth, Ritual, and Kingship in Buganda* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 3 (henceforth: Benjamin, *Myth...*).

³ Mircea Eliade. *Yoga*. Translated by Willard R. Trask (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. xiii.

⁴ Ray, *Myth...*, p .8.

2. Misconceptions about myth and ritual

Those who proclaim the positive values of myth and ritual might not be as influential as those who project these cultural forms negatively. In Nigeria, for example, there is a growing trend in the mass media to cast myth and ritual in a bad light. Myth is often treated or assumed as being of no value while ritual is simply criminalized. In Nigerian mass media today, it is commonplace to find cases of culpable homicide and some other heinous crimes being reported to have emanated from or directed towards particular ritual ends. How such criminal acts amount to rituals or acts of ritualizing is difficult to understand, at least from the rather sensational and simplistic viewpoints adopted when reporting on them. Suppose the basis for such criminalizing of ritual is even provided, whosoever understands ritual's important contributions to the foundations of society and its life-sustaining essence would hold a different viewpoint. This is the point to note in Tom F. Driver's contention that without ritual our ultimate human quality would vanish.⁵

Unfortunately, misconceptions about ritual have become so widespread in Nigeria that extra courage would likely be needed to sustain interest in the study of rituals of different cultures in Nigeria. From personal experience, a scholar of ritual stands the risk of being labelled a "ritualist"—a derogatory term to suggest a promoter if not a perpetrator of heinous crimes such as murder, cannibalism, trading in human parts, and kidnapping, among others—if he/she should highlight the great uses of ritual in human history and endeavor to correct its misrepresentation within circles of fellow academics in Nigeria. How that trend within academia in Nigeria (though I suspect this is not peculiar to Nigeria alone) came to be is a whole subject that needs separate interrogation and space. However, as I insist, Africans in general can only assent to the erasure of their foundational myths and rituals at a great cost to their distinctive humanity. Knowing about the myths and rituals on which African cultures are established and continue to operate is needed for a necessary departure from a Eurocentric sensibility that only serves in perpetuating Western hegemonies in this era of globalization: "Western hegemonic tendencies [are] now being bandied as universal values [for which] we owe ourselves and our children a proper reading or writing of our history".⁶ The reader of

⁵ Tom F. Driver, *Magic of Ritual: Our Need for Liberating Rites that Transform Our Lives and Communities* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), p. 16.

⁶ Rev. Mathew Hassan Kukah, *Religion, Culture and the Politics of Development* (Lagos: Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilisation, 2007), p. 7.

this book should therefore be prepared for an appreciation of the artistic, historical, spiritual, political, educational, and strategic connection of myth and ritual to the economic life of a mythic and ritualizing historically prominent Yorùbá community called Ilé-Ifẹ̀. In spite of the fact that its doors are open wide to modernity, the city of Ilé-Ifẹ̀ continues to retain its myths and rituals, which are more or less codifications of the history of the Yorùbá and schema for articulating the Yorùbá identity.

It should be reiterated: misconceptions about rituals and disdain for myths that correspond to them notwithstanding, rituals abound in the Yorùbá ethnic enclave as well as other major ethnic enclaves in Nigeria. They remain a significant factor in the socio-political re-engineering of the country of Nigeria. To hold this position is to align with Grimes' report on the global prevalence of rituals which pointed out a surge of interest in rituals across several cultures around the world.⁷ Grimes' report underscores the attitude of the Yorùbá to their rituals. For instance, a number of notable Yorùbá rituals have been chosen for intensive promotion by one of the most prominent ethnic nationalist movements in Nigeria, Oodua People's Congress (OPC). The activities of the OPC in recent times have instigated a lot of rescue interventions for Yorùbá rituals which are a repository of rich art forms of the Yorùbá that have survived for ages. Out of all the Yorùbá rituals, those of Ilé-Ifẹ̀ belong in a separate class as they constitute dense encodings of the "mythic past of Yorùbá ancestors."⁸

In wrapping up this introductory segment, I would like to reproduce at length my remarks made elsewhere which I consider fit enough for inclusion in this book because of their capacity to further illuminate the subject of Yoruba rituals in general and Ife rituals in particular:

The Yoruba art heritage [of which rituals are a key component] of Ife which compares well with those of Asia in terms of its imaginative depth and intensity of effect which has been endangered for long. [Thanks to Providence] all is not lost after all. Should the ritual heritage of Ife be missing, a huge gap would be created in the history of the artistic heritage of the Yoruba people in addition to that of the religious heritage as pointed out by Olupona. We may now talk of the renaissance of this art form,

⁷ Ronald L. Grimes, *Deeply into the Bones: Re-inventing Rites of Passage* (London: University of California Press, 2000), p. 3.

⁸ Morufu Bukola Omigbule, "Travails and Prospects of Ife Ritual Performances: A Tribute to Ooni Okunade Sijuwade Olubuse II's Reign" in *Reflections on the Life and Times of Oba Okunade Sijuwade, Olunuse II*. Edited by Muibi O. Opeyoye & Jare Oladosu, 18-42 (Ile-Ife: Obafemi Awolowo University Press, 2017), p. 19.

particularly as championed by the incumbent Ooni Adeyeye Ogunwusi. However, the act of providence that their survival echoes so much would have been missed if it had been lost in the postcolonial storms. For the sake of the art this time, we might reiterate the same wish as Olupona: ‘God forbid that Yoruba religious tradition becomes snuffed off the face of the earth [...]’ This is so significant a wish because ‘culture is a tool kit of identities for our survival [...]’. Since the artistic dimension of the Yoruba religious tradition has the subject of ritual centrally placed, the ethical obligation of the present writer as a professional with literary bias comes frontally. Hence the interface of the sacred and the profane in Ife rituals might [need to be restated in] a more recent version: ‘The Yoruba experience a world in which the sacred and the profane are symmetrical counterparts.’ Ife rituals demonstrate this intertwining very deeply. Therefore, the discourse of the ritual of Ife is a discourse of the Yoruba (when and where the past is a factor that counts) at the confluence of various departments of their life. The highest value of the ritual art form of Ife is in its ambitiousness to inform about so distant a past of the people as it encompasses so much and seeks to harmonise magnificent complexities of the universe in spite of [people] themselves.⁹

3. The Cultural Geography of Ilé-Ifè

Rituals are a major part of the cultural geography of Ilé-Ifè. The present generation of the Yorùbá should be appreciated for the tremendous efforts they are making to resuscitate rituals—a sort of cultural renaissance that promises great spiritual rebirth. There seems to be a clear articulation of an apposite cultural renaissance framework that is paving the way for the dawn of a promising spiritual mooring for Ilé-Ifè, the natural/spiritual capital of the Yorùbá. The highly revered palace of the Ọ̀ni of Ifè has been vigorously supporting this cultural renaissance project. This is shown in the unwavering commitment of the incumbent monarch of the ancient town, Ọ̀ni Babatunde Adeyeye Ogunwusi, Ojaja II, to the resuscitation and promotion of numerous rituals in it.

It has been said repeatedly that the ancient culture of Ilé-Ifè had an awesome appeal before its collapse under the weight of colonialism. It is on record that it grew into a civilization that spread beyond the borders of the territory occupied by those known as the Yorùbá of Nigeria today. Extant literatures on Ilé-Ifè across such broad disciplines as historical studies, religious studies, anthropology and sociology, among others, provide ample evidence of this. However, since nothing remains static in

⁹ Ibid, pp. 38-39.

life, the ancient Ifè civilization was susceptible to change. Incidentally, the transformation of Ifè culture and traditions—the bedrock of that civilization—was a consequence of the massive cultural re-orientation of not only the Yorùbá side of the colonial space of Africa but the whole of colonial Africa. Therefore, Ilé-Ifè is today a modern city, one of many that Africa can boast today. Yet the town is in a different class as it exudes a cultural output which signifies its rich heritage of ritual traditions of monumental standing.

To an enthusiastic scholar of culture whose bias is for folk traditions known as orature, Ifè rituals may ignite curiosity as to the kind of knowledge resource they approximate. Upon a close observation of Ifè's cultural geography, an informed cultural practitioner would most likely ask: Why is the town so rich in sacred spots and arenas? In light of the dire need to safeguard various forms of African indigenous knowledge systems that are now hugely endangered, to revamp several others that have been rendered comatose under the weight of modernity, and to reinvent yet many others which are now extinct, a purposeful appreciation of the presence of the past in the present of Ilé-Ifè would make one declare: "This present" ought to look into "its past" if it is to articulate a "definitive future".

4. Ritual as Total Theatre

The ritual festivals of the Ifè people present interesting instances of the African tradition of "total theatre". They are confluences of different artistic forms that are shared and known across the Yorùbá culture. These composite artistic undertakings are constituted of music, dance, artefacts, legends, movements, dialogue, idioms, spectacles, and costumes, among other things, through which the ritual practices of the Ifè in general constitute a cultural site of interdisciplinary interest for religious, anthropological, sociological, historical, philosophical and literary discourses.

The ritual festivals being studied exemplify what may be referred to as Wagner's unknown theatrical model, which, as he contends, was the spectacle of the theatrical traditions of the Europe of his generation. Based on his deep interest in this form of theatre, he enunciates the concept of

“*Gesamtkunstwerk*.”¹⁰ His theorizing is of interest given the way it celebrates a theatrical practice in European history that compares well with the type into which the ritual performances being studied can be classified. Wagner’s description of this theatrical model involves such epithets as “collected”, “united”, “whole”, or “total artwork”. For him, it is a kind of theatre that renders the “arts” in general intersectional in a manner by which theatre becomes “a place of convergence of the arts as sensory modalities” and “a theatre of information through integrated effect rather than of narrative as such.”¹¹ How else can we grapple, then, with the image of theatre Wagner paints with so much zest because of the intrinsic values monumentally absent in the theatrical practices of Europe of his generation? In Kirby’s synopsis of the various critical engagements of the idea of total theatre by scholars such as Richard Wagner, George R. Kernodle, Clark M. Rogers, Edward Gordon Craig, Charles R. Lyons, Nikolai A. Gorchakov, and Michael Kirby among others, we are afforded deeper illumination on this theatrical model:

We most often find this totality indicated by a list of components such as music, movement, voice, scenery, lightning, etc. More important, however, is the understanding that there must be an effective interplay among the various elements or a significant synthesis of them. Totality may, in this sense, be more or less extensive, including a greater or lesser number of aspects, but it must always be intensive, effecting an integration of components. While totality as an ideal is extensive and all-inclusive, it is this relationship between elements, rather than an accumulation of means, which actually distinguishes the form.

There is further illumination on this theatrical model that is worth noting in the “substitute and synonym” used in explaining the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* by Wagner: the “theatre of the future.” Total theatre, as another segment of Kirby’s explanation on the theatrical model reveals, has two key aspects: “that it has not yet been realised and that its realisation is to be a result of history, of a cultural evolutionary process.”¹² In this sense, Kirby’s overview of the idea of total theatre lends the present study a premise for the contention that the ritual performances being

¹⁰ G. R. Kernodle, “Wagner, Appia and the Idea of the Musical Design.” *Total Theatre*, ed. E. T. Kirby (New York: Dutton, 1969), 9-19. The reference will be subsequently shortened as follows: Kirby, “Wagner”.

¹¹ E. T. Kirby, “Introduction.” *Total Theatre*, ed. E. T. Kirby (New York: Dutton, 1969), xiii & xxi. Apart from the page number, the reference will henceforth be Kirby, “Introduction”.

¹² Kirby, “Introduction.”, xiii.

studied are comparable to acts of total theatre. This is to say that to realize them fully as dramas (if necessary) can only be done through a continuous process because of what Drewal identifies as an important characteristic that defines Yorùbá rituals as an art form: the “transformational capacity” inherent in the repetition that characterizes their performance¹³ and the fact that they adjust to the imperatives of contemporary history. Certainly, Kirby only re-states Wagner’s philosophy of the “total artwork” which, as Wagner contends, must be “set in a context of history and of metaphysics and projected toward realisation as the theatre of the future.”¹⁴

I wish to identify another space within Kirby’s introduction—an introduction to what may be described as a compendium of critical discourse on the idea of total theatre (entitled *Total Theatre: A Critical Anthology*)—as an attempt to properly indicate the kind of art form which the ritual performances being studied are, i.e., a form of total theatre within which “music, dance-like movement, accentuated costumes, and spectacular stage machinery” among other things are integrated.¹⁵ Through an insightful survey provided by Craig, in which the essence of the Asiatic and African worldviews are highlighted and lauded, the idea of the so-called “ancient drama” as proclaimed by Kirby is explained. A detailed reproduction of Craig’s explanation cannot be superfluous, since through the insights it offers, ancient theatrical practices such as those that bear semblance with the ones being studied may be appreciated for being a valuable form of heritage:

In Asia, too, the forgotten masters of the temples and all that those temples contained, have permeated every thought, every mark in their work with this sense of calm motion resembling death [...] glorifying and greeting it. *In Africa (which some of us think we are but now to civilize) this spirit dwelt, [...]* the essence of the perfect civilization. There too dwelt the great masters, not individuals obsessed with the idea of each asserting his personality as if it was a valuable and mighty thing, but content because of a kind of holy patience to move their brains and their fingers only in that direction permitted by the law – in the service of the simple truth¹⁶ (Emphasis mine).

¹³ Margret T. Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Plays, Agency* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana Univ. Press, 1992), xv. This will, henceforth, be: Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual*.

¹⁴ Kirby, “Introduction”, xiv- xviii.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

I shall quote an extended part of Craig's appreciation of the splendor of "ancient drama" which we grasp in a paradoxical sense as he prays for the restoration of the glory of the old theatrical practice. Here is Craig's lamentation as he fervently prays:

I pray earnestly for the return of the image [...] the *Übermarionette*, to the theatre; and when he comes again and is but seen, he will be loved so well that once more will it be possible for the people to return to *their ancient joy in ceremonies* [...] Once more will Creation be celebrated [...] homage rendered to existence [...] and divine happy intercession made to death¹⁷ (Emphasis mine).

Craig's insightful and inspiring discourse of the "ancient drama" may not be possible without briefly evaluating his intellectual background and his psychological challenges that combined to generate the foregoing pronouncements. Craig, according to Lyons, became dissatisfied with the aesthetics of the modern theatre and discontinued his "eight-year apprenticeship with Henry Irving in 1898 before he became an aesthetic critic."¹⁸ I am not concerned with his controversial position to which critics of theatre have turned their attention, but I dare not ignore his leaning towards a metaphysical conception of the theatre through which the metaphysical essence of the ritual festivals being studied may be cross-culturally explained and, of course, appreciated. The reality of the Western theatre which Craig disapproves of is not metaphysical but exclusively imitative. This is the reason he advocates the invention of what he terms the *Übermarionette* for want of a better concept. His explanation of the concept reveals an intention to replace the modern actor with a device to be named the *Übermarionette*. He proposes this because of the "actuality" of the modern actor that undercuts the "symbolism" of metaphysical theatre. Craig then traces the history of the puppet drama from its origin in ritual as the first actor to what he describes as its modern "prostitution in the grotesque Punch [...]." The various directions of his discourse may be seen to be converging in his self-expressed position that "[t]he art of the theatre is neither acting nor the play. It is not scene or dance, but it consists of all the elements of which these things are composed: action, which is the very spirit of acting; words, which are the body of the play;

¹⁷ E. G. Craig, "*Übermarionette*." *Total Theatre*, ed. E. T. Kirby (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1969), 53-57.

¹⁸ C. R. Lyons, "Gordon Craig's Concept of the Actor." *Total Theatre*, ed. E. T. Kirby (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1969), 58.

line and color, which are the very heart of the scene; rhythm, which is the very essence of dance.”¹⁹

If Wagner’s and Craig’s conceptualizations of total theatre are considered individual efforts towards articulating the idea of total theatre, the Renaissance English masque and the French ballet are representative theatrical traditions which sought to recover the total theatre of the bygone ages, albeit with deliberate modifications. In the masque, noticeable similarities with the ritual festivals being studied exist in terms of the “costuming [of the principal performers with] symbolic insignia and properties to be interpreted by the audience [and of course well understood by the audience], hieroglyphic signs [specifically with regard to *Òrìṣàlásẹ̀*, *Òrìṣàjùgbẹ̀* and *Òrìṣàkìrẹ̀*], social dancing [and] mixing audience and performers”, the last of which is interpreted as the “allegorization of the audience” in Orgel’s view.

On the strength of the insights provided so far, we may presume that the artistic qualities of age-long ritual practices such as the ones the present book discusses have been appreciably shown. Yet we may need to ask a most pertinent question provoked by Kirby’s curiosity over the need to involve in “a dualism between reason and the senses.” As Kirby informs us, “sense perception, feelings, and emotions” were consistently devalued in comparison with rational and objective modes by such philosophical critics as Spinoza who saw “sense perceptions and passions” as nothing more than “confused acts of thought”, and Kant who asked: “How can the sensuous and the ideal world be reconciled?” and “How can a pleasurable feeling partake of the character of reason?”. Informed by Schopenhauer’s philosophical conception of duality—“a function of a consciousness that was dependent upon two distinct and opposed types of knowing, a knowledge of oneself (which he associated with the will) and a visual knowledge of the surrounding world”—Wagner’s explanation on the concept of total theatre deconstructs both Spinoza’s and Kant’s positions on feeling and reason. By using poetry and music as equivalents of reason and feeling respectively in addition to an interposition of “tone”, the equation he formulates produces a further challenge of the intellect: “a return to origins, to a tone speech from which through a subsuming in feeling [is produced] an emotionalizing of the intellect [to be equated with] a prerational expression of reason as it was manifest on the level of “mythos”.” This philosophical enunciation by Wagner vis-à-vis the idea of

¹⁹ Craig, *Übermarionette*, 59- 66.