Philosophical Rumination on *Gelede* : an Ultra-Spectacle Performance

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Abstract. *Gelede* is a typical Yoruba concept which has evolved into a traditional form of musical performance with its influence has transcend its traditional abode in the Yoruba communities of Nigeria and West Africa to Latin Americas, parts of Europe, Australia and the Black world at large. It also evolves beyond mere localized performance in which members of a community gathered in the town squares, market squares or the typical under the tree arrangements to a wider scale in all aspects of the social, and even religiouslives of the people. This paper combines an expository and comparative analysis with its main objective to sensitise scholarly attention to the phenomenon and to provide supplementary concise and critical source for further studies, philosophic analyses and scholarly interpretations.
Keywords: *Gelede*, Gender Studies, *Gon-gon* music, Nigerian performance, Ritual, Yoruba

INTRODUCTION

Gelede is a typical Yoruba ritual and arts performance that has got its influence beyond its traditional abode in the Yoruba communities in Nigeria and West Africa to reach Latin America, parts of Europe, Australia and the Black world at large (Klein, 2007). It expanded form localized street performance in which members of a community gathered in the town squares, market squares or the typical under the big tree arrangement for the purpose of disseminating information, deliberating and ensuring social harmony in the community (Wiredu, 2000: 274-382), evolving in an unusual manner with wider, dipper and stronger influence on performing arts and on culture on the global scene.

As stated by Lawal Babatunde (1996: xiv,) very few works have been carried out specifically on *Gelede*. These include H. Ulli Beier (1958), Frank Speed (1968), and the first notable work carried out by an indigenous scholar, Anthony Asiwaju (1975). In his works Benedict Ibitokun (1987) also made a *Gelede* debut from a literary and linguistic perspective, consequently opening up a genuinely new horizon in the study of the traditional phenomenon. Since then public and scholarly interest has risen appreciably, and there have been analyses of *Gelede* from sociological, purely musical and historical perspectives.

Scholars such as R. F. Thompson (1971) have studied *Gelede* from a philosophical perspective, providing a description of the aesthetic components of *Gelede* costume. Babatunde Lawal (1996) carried out an almost all encompassing groundbreaking work upon which this paper largely depends, without necessarily adopting its analysis or position. Since Lawal, only very little addition has been made to the body of knowledge about this aesthetically rich and epistemologically significant phenomenon with momentous prospects and implications for African metaphysics and future world of arts.

This paper seeks to provoke renewed scholarly attention on *Gelede*, tracing its roots and exploring its contemporary unique influences, in spite of its current status as mere vestige of a dying tradition. To carry out these promises, the paper applies an expository and comparative analysis of *Gelede* placing it side by side other Yoruba arts forms such as *Egungun, Bata* and *Ijala ode*, a male dominated Yoruba performing art, in order to show how it has continued to evolve and influence modern music and theatre.

GELEDE: ITS ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION

There is numerous and sometimes conflicting information regarding the origin of *Gelede*. Historical notes are usually in two forms. Some come from the mytico-religious tradition and others from historical sources. The two traditions nevertheless are not perceived as conflicting in the metaphysics of the Yoruba because it is believed that reality is a combination of complements, hence the saying *tibi tire lada 'le aye* (The world is created good and bad). The mythical origin only explains the ultimate cause and the historical tradition also complements with the instrumental or material cause of the same entity in Aristotelian terms. In

the mythical tradition, *Gelede* is traced to the mythical journey of Orunmila (represented in the poetic narrative as Yewajobi, sometimes called Yemoja (the primordial mother earth) or Yemaya in some Brazilian and Latin American languages to the Haven of *aje* (often translate in English as witch perhaps only as nearest in meaning). In the historical tradition, there are many positions regarding the origin of *Gelede*. Some Identify Ketu, others including Lawal think it came from Ilobi (1996: 46-48). There are those who think it originated from the old Oyo through the instrumentality of a Nupe man nicknamed Gbarada for his mesmerizing performance at music and dance concert in honour of an ancient Ruler of Oyo in one oral tradition, or *Orisa olomowewe* (Deity of little children) in another oral tradition. The good thing however is that it has since spread to all parts of Yoruba land and since the event of slave trade in Africa has spread to numerous parts of the globe and especially the Latin America. Although the spread and popular performance of *Gelede* seems to be plummeting, especially with large population of the people becoming Christian and Moslem converts, the influence of *Gelede* on modern Yoruba music, dance, drama and cultural practices has remained unhindered.

GELEDE: MASK AND PERFORMANCE

For an appreciable understanding of the *Gelede* phenomenon among Yoruba, background knowledge of the people called Yoruba is needed. Yoruba is the dominant culture in the south west of Nigeria and at the same time one of the largest tribes of Africa. Yoruba people are naturally fun loving people who often never miss an opportunity to create fun from almost every event including street fights and domestic chores, and by so doing appear to outsiders as sometimes trivializing even life threatening issues. Arguably they do so in order to douse the physical and psychological tension that could have arisen from such events and experiences. They perfectly match the description of Kimmerle (2009: 43-54) that for African peoples south of the Sahara, art is not autonomous area of its own, but something that inseparably permeates all areas of their life (Koenane, 2010).

Before embarking on the above mentioned mythical journey of Orunmila, He was said advised, upon consulting the oracle, to disguise himself putting on a wooden mask, a baby sash and metal anklets, to

avoid being harmed by the "powerful mothers." Since then, *Gelede* has become a ritual for anyone seeking protection from the *aje* and as a form of appeal and thanksgiving to Yemoja by all those who seek children from the goddess and it has since become a regular ritual practice in parts of Yoruba land. The practice has since evolved and a number of things are symbolically significant in the celebration today.

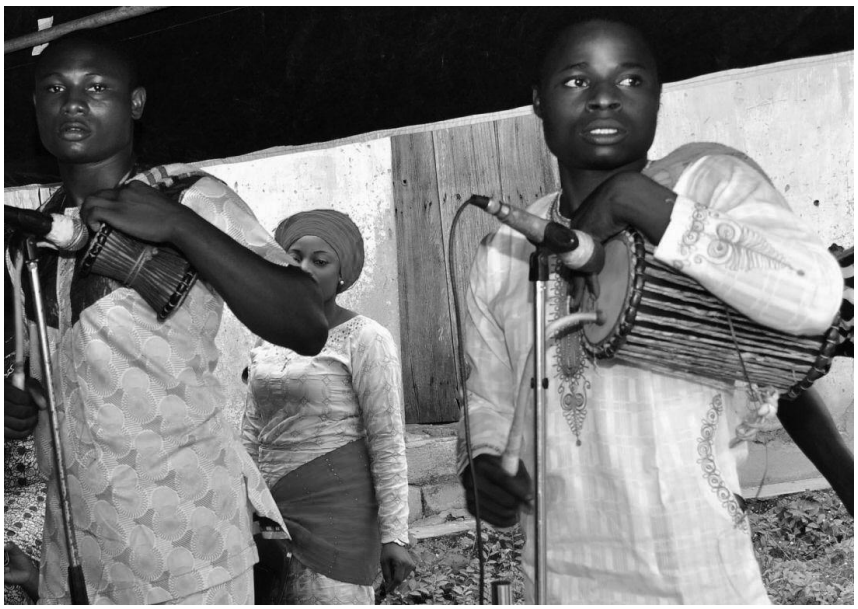
These include love, honour and respect for women and children, care for the barren, night concert (*efe* meaning fun or joke), daytime dance, togetherness, celebration, subtlety or diplomacy (as oppose to tactlessness) for which Yoruba people are originally known prior to the modern social and economic systems that forces women to hustle for survival as much as their male counterparts. Space and time does not permit to make any detailed description or analysis of all the features identified. However of special interest are the night concert and the daytime dance to this paper as they are often ignored in many of the previous available scarce literature relating to *Gelede*.

The night concert usually involve a masked jester or humourist employing satire to create a lot of fun, mimicking the any immoral actions and utterances made by some members of the community during the period under review and employing and reciting poems (*oriki, ogede* and *ewi*) warning against the consequences of such actions especially on the individual, society, women and future generations in a tactful manner that does not incite violence: a blend of ritual and artistic spectacle, while at the same time honouring women.

The musical instruments used in *Gelede* spectacle differs from place to place, however, many of them include percussions such as *agogo, sekere* and drums. Among these the *gon-gon* is of special interest. The musical instrument called *gon gon* often referred to as the talking drum in English language. According to Oluga and Babalola (2012: 47).

The basic similarity between the Yoruba talking drums and other drums is that they are melody producing ... their difference lies in the fact that the talking drums are also instruments of information dissemination or media for transmission of vital messages. Among the local people, *gon-gon* could be employed to render a narrative that would be as clearly understood as any literary text would. Usually it employs *ewi* (poem), *ogede* (incantation), *oriki* (praise poetry) and *owe* (proverb) with which the target audience are familiar with. The audience easily decodes the message and provides oral feedbacks via the same media in their verbal/oral forms.

Most Yoruba music and celebrations are incomplete without the musical instrument called *gon-gon*, and *Gelede* cannot be an exemption in this regard.



Music Artists Entertaining with *gon-gon Photo by* Yemite Photos

Although *Gelede* does not have any special musical instrument, the type of instruments used depends on the community or the style in vogue in any environment. That notwithstanding, during the *Gelede* performance, the show would still be incomplete without the *gon-gon.* The use of *Gon-gon* is a common phenomenon and component of music in Nigeria even in modern times including the reggae and the Hip-hop music. Alongside the verbal music and message, the *gon-gon* continues to either merely complement the rhythm and the lyrics or even communicate other separate messages harmoniously beneath the melody. This explains why it is said in Yoruba that *oju to ti ri Gelede ti ri opin iran* meaning the eye that has watched the *Gelede* show has seen the peak of performance.

This medium of communication is made possible because the Yoruba language is largely a tone language (Orie, 2006: 121-128). If the argument of Rajewsky (2005: 43-64) that arts are genuinely intermedia because arts do not exist completely separate and independent of another, could be true of arts in other places, it would certainly be truer of Arts in most parts of Africa where a festival tells a history without any verbal narration; the name tells the autobiography and lineage history of the bearer, the mask (masquerade) is itself an expression of cultural history.

THE INFLUENCES OF *GELEDE*

Gelede performance is a rare event in many parts of Yoruba in recent time, at least not as it once used to be, except perhaps in Egbado, Yewa and part of the modern day Benin republic. However, the influence of *Gelede* as a ritual and as spectacle on the culture, social systems including music, dance and artistic performances in Yoruba land is very enormous and inestimable.

It is a popular belief among Yoruba that *Gelede* is associated with the feminine and as a result is has to do with effortlessness and easiness. Some even give the etymology of the concept creatively to mean a combination of *ge* (to pet, adorn or care), ele (carefulness, or as a Creole adaptation of the French *elle* which became part of urban language in many Yoruba cities till today) and *de* (to relax), such that the combination will be something like "adorn carefully to appease her or adore the lady carefully to mollify her". Judging from the main objective of the festival as medium to celebrate women and motherhood and to honor the power andauthority of females, coupled with the fact that during the performance, the *Gelede* dance, according to Henry J. Drewal (1979: 225) is characterized by highly stylized and regulated body movement in a predetermined sequence and within the framework of careful jumping and stamping, and the fact the fact also that the festival is usually celebrated at the beginning of a new agricultural season when the usual function of women in the farm is very close, then the etymology of *Gelede* as given above may not be easily dismissed with a wave of hand. The fact also that *Bolojo*, a type of dance which is characterizedby simultaneouslytwisting and swaying the torso very slowly and takingshort forward and backward steps giving distinct impressionof a gracefully moving corpulent body, the effect which the name *bo-lo-jo* attempts to capture onomatopoeically has been traced to *Gelede* aesthetical choreography (Ayayi-Soyinka: 1989; 1-8), gives credence to it.

Gelede as a ritual mask and artistic performance is a blend of social communication. During the show, all those who have behaved or spoken in immoral ways or have committed public scandals are humorously mimicked and mocked while creating a lot of fun. This attitude persists in the lyrics of Yoruba musicians such as Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, King Sunny-Ade, Orlando Owoh, Ayinde Barrister and

the drama performances of Moses Olaiya (Baba Sala). The mask wearing music performance of *Lagbaja* is a glaring evidence of the influence of *Gelede* mask in modern Yoruba art performances.

Gelede, like most other Yoruba art show involves a blend of rituals, signs and arts including images, objects, features, musical sounds, movements, verbal and non-verbal expressions, and the complex associations of all of these, semiotically combined as one. Aside the place and nature of arts and arts performance, this attitude explains three important and notable features and components of *Gelede* mask performance.

First, regardless of the representation of Africa and Yoruba people in the literature, especially by feminist scholars, many of who are writing from the social and epistemological background of Western canon regarding the place of women in Africa, Yoruba African people do not treat women as second class humans or even as next in ranking to man. They do not attempt to create any comparisons. Rather, women are seen as equal and special complements to their male counterparts. The differences between the role of women and those of men either in private homes or in community does not in any way imply the inferiority of any sex. Feminism must therefore re-channel its objectives and interests. Rather than attempting to discredit a culture such as Yoruba in order to justify its mission and project, it should rather look elsewhere or carve for itself other more credible social and epistemological objectives. The state of theoretical feminism notwithstanding, Yoruba people have from the ancient time regarded the female sex as special, adorable, titillating, scintillating and equal, to be respected for what it is and to be titivated and admired by all. That perhaps, why the concept *iyawo* (wife) in Yoruba has been etymologized in some quarters as *in* (addressees, most likely passerby), *ya* (stop over) (*ki in*) *woo* (to behold her, or even as *aya* (also meaning wife), as *a* (we, or we will) *ya* (stopped over, definitely to behold her). Regardless of whether these etymologies are accurate or not, in an interview with Pa Robert Agunbiade (A.K.A. Baba rere) a literate elder in a Yoruba related community of Akokoland admits that many Yoruba people see the modern capitalist economic system which expects women to toil and struggle with their naturally well-built and more brawny male counterparts as being too harsh, exploitative and unfair to females, as it denies them the care and admiration that nature in its wisdom has bequeathed them as their legitimate right.

Secondly, outsiders often have the impression that every festival of this fun loving society called Africa or such a sub-society like Yoruba is done purely for religious reasons alone. This misleading assumption results from the fact that almost all of the numerous feasts and festivities involve rituals and invocation of deities and ancestral spirits, consultation of oracle and pouring of libation or sacrifice. On the contrary however, *Gelede* is usually celebrated at the beginning of the new agricultural season. This suggests why the women whose function it would soon become to remove the weeds and provide mulching around the crops need to be appeased and eulogized. Secondly, *Gelede* offers a unique opportunity to empathize with women who were yet to have children of their own in the community and to give then some sense of belonging, while the whole community joins in providing some hope. In fact in some communities, there are festivals for different age groups until it is crowned with Oro, men's cult celebration after the harvest season when men could have the opportunity to rest. In many cases, the feast for young girls is the grandest and lasts several days.

CONCLUSION

Gelede as a ritual and as an art as has been concisely described in the paper serves diverse socio-cultural purposes. It serves not only as a source of entertainment, a mode of communication, but also as a mode of worship, physiological body training, a sociological means of ensuring good behavior in society, method of ensuring peace, social order and supply of labour, as well as an elaborate and unconcealed acknowledgement of the power and social influence of women. All this array of components semiotically blends into what makes the Yoruba sub-society of Africa a semiologically and artistically significant environment of theoretically rich significance, but which has yet attracted the scholarly attentions it requires, and which this article serves to initiate and stimulate.

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