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## GENDER EXCLUSION: A STUDY OF ORO CULT AMONG AWORI OF OJO, LAGOS, NIGERIA

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### Abstract

Oro is one of the many systems for ensuring peace and harmony among Yoruba people of the South Western part of Nigeria. Being a mechanism used as an extra-judicial resource among Awori communities, the sacred forest (Igbo Oro) and Oro sanctuary (Ojubo Oro) are not accessible to non-initiates, particularly women. This paper examined the implications of women's exclusion from Oro Cult for socioeconomic equity among the Awori people of Ojo Local Government Area of Lagos, Nigeria. Qualitative data were sourced through 20 in-depth interviews involving the chief priests, the traditional rulers, opinion leaders, community heads, and some Awori people who are resident in Ojo Local Government Area. These were complemented with archival records. Data were content analysed. The findings suggest that women were displeased with the abridgment of their right of freedom of movement for the duration of Oro festival. The study concluded that the threat inherent in the widespread belief that any woman who beholds the Oro cult shall die is not only discriminatory, it is inhibitive of sustainable economic interaction. The study suggests that public policy should enable the Oro cult to focus more on public security and minimize its life threatening trauma to Awori women in particular and Nigerian women in general.

**Keywords:** Oro Cult, Sacred Forest, Oro Sanctuary, Public Security, Awori, Lagos, Nigeria.

### Introduction

Almost all communities of the world have crime challenges in various forms. Therefore, it is not only in Nigeria that the policing system has failed to guarantee public safety. Apart from this manifest global inability of the law enforcement agency, police in the third world are famous for frequently leaving behind some vestiges of new crime issues in addition to the unsolved ones that necessitated their adoption. This regime of solve-little-old-crime and create-little-new-crime pattern causes much motion and no significant movement within the criminal justice systems.

The foregoing must have compelled Skogan (1988) to conclude that these diverse agenda for addressing emerging crime challenges originated as an anticipatory response to crime or as a consequence of local criminal activity. With insecurity becoming a major socio-economic challenge in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, local people appear dissatisfied with the performance of the police and again want to try those structures that helped to stabilise traditional societies. It is in the context of public insecurity and the need to engage informal mechanism of social control to give community people some respite that *Oro* cult has become an irresistible option to the Awori people.

The word *Oro* means fierceness, tempest, or provocation; and *Oro* appears to be personified executive power. It is not a religion but a system for ensuring peace and harmony in the land. *Oro* himself, in a long robe hung with shells and a wooden mask painted white with the lips smeared with blood, parades the town with many followers. In pre-colonial era, the *Oro* Cult members controlled administration of the land. For its significance, the *Oro* festival is a traditional annual Yoruba event that is normally observed in July (Tempo, 1999) among the Awori people and its celebration has lasted more than 56 years (Post Express, 1999). Since the few places where traditions, customs, and native laws regulate the African lives are the rural communities (Okafo, 2006), Awori people acknowledge the *Oro* cult as a potent device of social control in their various communities.

The values of modern civilisation disagree with an unnecessary abridgement of people's right to freedom of movement, under any guise. The *Oro* cult does this, during its festival, with impunity. In spite of this, the growing loss of public confidence in the Nigeria police appears to heighten the endearment of the Awori people to *Oro* cult for the purpose of addressing their security challenges. *Oro* is supposed to haunt the

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forest in the locality and he makes his approach known by a strange, whirring, roaring noise. As soon as this is heard, all women must shut themselves up in their houses, and refrain from looking out for death (Adeleke, 2011). In compliance with cultural practice, the outing of *Oro* is usually heralded by a widely publicised imposition of a cultural curfew.

This allows only the initiates free movement while it restricts the freedom of other non-initiate members of the community to access public space for whatever reason. *Oro ti se'de* or *oro ti gb'ode*, (meaning *Oro* has taken over the land or that it has imposed a curfew over it). In the context of the spoken words, Oduyoye (2001:3) observes that 'African culture is replete with language that enables the community to diminish the humanity of women'. It is a widely accepted everyday message that '*obinrin le se awo egungun; won le mo awo gelede. Sugbon t'obinrin ba foju k'oro, oro a gbee*, (meaning that the cults that tolerate women are those of masquerade and *gelede* because if a female beholds *Oro* by gate-crashing into its affairs, she will instantly be consumed).

The implications of restricting the movement of non initiates during the *Oro* cult festival for socio-economic progress of Awori people are enormous. The gender angle to these effects has not been well investigated among the Awori people, especially through the perception of women. It is against this background that this study examined the influence of the exclusion of non *Oro* cult members, especially women, from accessing public spaces on their livelihoods and wellbeing among traditional Awori people of Lagos, Nigeria. The study therefore provided answers to the following questions: (i). What are the membership criteria that exclude women from *oro* cult? (ii). How does *Oro* Cult influence the economy of the excluded non-initiates of *Oro* cult? (iii). What are the effects of *Oro* Cult on other interests of community residents? (iv). How does the *Oro* Cult punish criminals among the Awori people? (v). How can the *Oro* Cult become a tool for socioeconomic development among the Awori people?

This study used functionalist theory to explain the nexus between *Oro* cult and the exclusion of women from membership and their consequent marginalisation in Lagos public spaces. impact of police use of crime to solve crime on the law obedience of residents in Lagos. Functionalist theory assumes that the duty which a component performs is either functional or dysfunctional to the wellbeing of the society and its members. A performed role is functional if it brings qualitative and quantitative improvement to the society as well as its members. It is dysfunctional if it wreaks havoc on the society and its members.

The foregoing thought is in line with the positions of classical structural functionalists such as Saint Simon, Comte, Durkheim, Parsons and others who started their sociological investigations using functionalist theory since the mid-1800. Critically examine, *Oro* cult is functional because it helps the community to ward off criminals, witches and wizards, grant children to the childless but dysfunctional because it consumes its non-initiate victims. To meet up the emerging social character of organic solidarity that pervades contemporary society, traditional structures such as the *Oro* cult may not be in synch with modernity. The celebration of any festival which rather than enhancing commerce discourages investment is not in consonant with economic realities of the modern world.

### **Method**

The study was carried out among the Awori people in Ojo Local Government Area of Lagos, Nigeria. Ojo Local Government was created in May 1989 by the Military Government, out of the Old Badagry Local Government Area. Despite the fact that the indigenous inhabitants are the Awori people, Ojo is inhabited by Igbos, Hausas and other Nigerians. Ojo, today, is a natural habitat of the Igbo traders, who deal in Electronics and Electrical materials at the popular *Alaba* International Market which was created in 1973 within the Local Government Area and the Hausa traders who deal in Rams and Cows (Ojo Local Government, Undated).

The Awori people are one of the major Yoruba sub-groups in Nigeria. The name 'Awori' (mud sink plate) is symbolic to the migration and settlement of the Awori people. Ogunnifunnire a brave hunter and one of the princes of Ife town was the Awori progenitor. On the death of his father, Ifa counselled him to migrate to an undisclosed place and that he should float the ritual pot left by his siblings on the death of his father as his only inheritance on the Ogun river, with an instruction to settle down wherever the pot sinks. The pot he floated sank at a place he called Isheri Olofin where he settled and later expanded to many other areas (Ajayi 1998).

The four major concentrations of Awori are first, the coastal or southern and western Awori of modern Lagos state could be found in places like Isheri Olofin, Lagos Mainland, Agege, Ibese, Etete, Irede, Imore, Itire, Ojuwoye, Egbeda, Idimu, Isolo, Ojo, Ejigbo, Ijanikin, Iba, Egbe and villages westward to Badagry; second, the coastal or southern and western constituencies of Aworiland falls into the modern Lagos state; third Eastern the Eastern and central lies within the modern Ogun state and fourth, the central and the eastern settlement of the

Awori people that fall within Ogun state are found in places like Ota, Iboro, Igbesa, Ado-Odo, Iro and other smaller Villages (Faluyi, 1987).

The Awori speaking people of Lagos State constitute the largest single ethnic sub-group in Lagos State, constituting as it were about 75% of the Indigenous population of the state. The Awori people are found in about seventeen (17) Local government areas out of twenty (20) in the state (Lawal 1999). The socio-political life of the Awori people makes the study of the problem which this inquiry addresses very significant because the traditional power to handle environmental security challenges among the Awori people lies with the *Oro* cult. Besides, anecdotal evidences support the claim that the people are very passionate about the efficacy of *Oro* in spiritual domains which the police cannot competently navigate. For these significant reasons, Awori people enjoy the protection offered by *Oro* cult, the putative triumphs of the modern justice system and its overwhelming legal status notwithstanding.

Qualitative methods of in-depth and key informant interviews were used for data gathering. In selecting study participants which included key informants, the study selected traditional rulers, opinion leaders, community leaders and *Oro* priests. The study accessed victims of *Oro* brutality as respondents in the study through snowball sampling. Archival resources and in-depth interview data were content analysed. In all, from the Awori communities in Lagos that were identified for this study, twenty men and women Awori respondents were selected. They were purposively selected from Ojo Local Government Area in Lagos State to participate in the study. Participants were assured that their identities will not be revealed as no information volunteered by them will be linked to their names and or addresses.

Six graduating students of Sociology Department of the Lagos State University, comprising three ladies and three men were engaged as field assistants. These assistants were rigorously trained on the techniques of interviewing people in ways that prevent respondents from holding vital information back. They were trained to identify situations in which follow up questions should creatively be asked. Also, in situations when respondents deliberately dodge answers to certain questions, field assistants should devise expeditious means of asking the same question in another way without hurting the respondents. Pre interview practice sessions were held to avail the field assistants the competence to handle tape recorders and transcribe their contents.

This orientation exercise took five days. In all, twenty in-depth interviews were conducted to elicit qualitative information about the challenges which Awori citizens, particularly women, face in Ojo Local Government Area during the celebration of *Oro* cult festival in Lagos, Nigeria. Participants were selected across diverse socio-economic backgrounds involving educated and individuals without formal education, members of different religions, different sexes and even places of residence within the study site. Consent forms were administered to all the participants before the interview. The researcher safely keeps tapes, consent forms and notes taken during the in-depth interviews.

The data from the in-depth and key informant interviews were transcribed and translated verbatim. Analysis involved developing a system of indexing the data into sets of categories or codes that provided structure to the data based on the research objectives and the topics included in the question guide. Ethnographic summaries were used to intersperse the narrative to produce a seamless account of the events that make *Oro* cult fearsome to the extent of being inhibitive of socioeconomic interests of women. Information from archival records was consciously used to complement interview responses such that produced robust and factual account of the dynamics of the operation of *Oro* cult and its members.

### **Findings and Discussion**

#### ***Oro* Cult, Igbo Oro and Membership Structure**

Membership of *Oro* cult is a deeply complex and controversial phenomenon. Studies into idiosyncratic groups which have characteristics that are identical to *Oro* cult by scientists have unfortunately won more scholarly converts for the cult than addition to the existing body of knowledge. This has made the mysteries within *Oro* cult difficult to understand by members of the public. This reality must have compelled Webster (1909) to refer to the Yoruba Ogboni cult as a typical secret society for over fifty years, yet it has never been described in any detail, or analysed in accurate general terms.

The same thing is true of *Oro* cult. Frobenius discovered its controlling importance in Yoruba religious organization in 1910 and promptly became initiated into the Ibadan Ogboni, but only to get information from the priests of other Yoruba cults. He made no attempt to study the beliefs of Ogboni members, whom he dismissed as 'mystery mongering', 'greybeards' (The Voice of Africa, nd: 174). For example, two anthropologists have been initiated into the cult in the course of the last twenty-five years, but have declared themselves bound by its oath of secrecy, and so have published nothing about it (Bascom,nd)

Among the Awori people of Ojo, Lagos, Oro is one important festival. The people hold Oro cult in high esteem and treat it with considerable fearfulness. If this cult means security for the Awori people and helps them to stave off evil forces from their land, why is the membership of Oro cult peculiar to male members of the Awori community? Corroborating this position and reinforcing the pervasiveness of Oro cult among the Yoruba people of Nigeria, British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) (1999) commented:

*Yorubas nowadays may be practising Christians or Muslims, but there are still shrines to the old gods scattered around the countryside, and traditional festivals - like the festival of the Oro cult ... are still celebrated and still taken extremely seriously. As in many west African cults of this kind, women and outsiders are forbidden to look on its masked figures.*

The *Abore* of an Awori community has explanation for this gender lopsidedness:

*Culture hinges the exclusion of women from membership of Oro cult and bars them from presence during Oro festival for a number of reasons which include the presumed inability of women to protect the secrecy of the Oro cult; protection of the sacredness of the cult which their monthly menstrual circle may not allow them to comply with.*

**Male IDI Respondent, Ojo Lagos (May 19, 2013)**

An Oro priest further provided justification for the exclusion of Awori indigenes from Oro cult membership:

*Being a cult, most of Oro activities occur in secret. This explains the cultural choice of the Igbo Oro (Sacred Forest) as a place where the Oro symbolically 'resides' and in which most of its members' covert agenda is hatched with ease. At the centre of Igbo Oro, there is Ojubo Oro (Oro sanctuary) where the chief priest takes absolute charge as the custodian of the Oro sanctuary and its processes. This point is accessible only to members of the cult. In some Yoruba communities where tradition compels believers to embrace the Oro cult, no man is mature until he is initiated into the cult. Members are usually drawn from among the children of current members.*

**Male KII Ojo Lagos (May 16, 2013)**

Supporting the foregoing, Fasure (2008) insisted that Oro is a cult group because it is a secret society. It qualifies as a secret society because its membership is few and not freely available to all members of society. It does not openly proselytise and freely recruit its members. Its objectives are not publicly advertised just as its activities are not open to public observance and scrutiny. However, identifying who an Oro cult member is, for all practical purposes, is a herculean task particularly when the identifier is him/herself not a member. Every non-member of the cult dreads it and evades it like a tax without relief because of the potential danger it portends for living.

In the same vein, a seventy-four year old respondent who is also the *Abore* of another Awori community in Ojo, Lagos, detailed the membership qualification criteria of Oro cult. He said that it is not altogether correct to say that all non-members are forbidden from becoming members, adding:

*It is even not all the children of current members of the Oro cult that are eligible for membership. Any male child below the age of fifteen cannot be a member. Besides, a child must have demonstrated some rare qualities that convince his parent that he can keep the cult's secrets secret and can withstand the rigours of Oro cult activities. The affairs of Oro cult are mostly conducted during night hours. Women must strictly comply with the traditional dusk to dawn curfew that usually characterises the Oro cult festival. Non member males and females are the 'ogberis' (non-initiates) who must avoid the Oro. Members are the 'omo awos' (initiates) who celebrate the festival with lots of fanfare. Finally, women are precluded from taking a look at the Oro. Any norm-breaking woman who therefore defies this traditional expectation usually faces a predictable fatal outcome.*

**Male KII Ojo Lagos (May 18, 2013)**

In the light of the foregoing, it is common among Yoruba apostles of Oro cult that the initiation of new members marks their passages from childhood to adulthood. The initiation opens the secrets of the world of Oro to the new entrant. In spite of all these, while women were allowed to be members of *Ogboni* cult, they were not eligible to be members of Oro cult (Simola, 1999). If someone suspects that another person is an Oro cult member, that suspicion instantly confers a fearsome status on the suspected person who might even relish being what he ordinarily is not. In the study site, it is only the members that recognise themselves.

Confirming this gender exclusion, a thirty two year old female graduate admitted:



*Those of us who are female Awori children know that we are precluded from becoming members of Oro cult in Awori land. This is lopsided though, that has been settled right from our childhood. We were socialised to accept that seemingly skewed equation and we have no problem with our supposed exclusion by the Oro cult. We accepted from childhood not to contest or even negotiate the status quo. As adults, we have nothing to envy in the membership of Oro cult. Our exclusion, as it were, does not affect our perception about life. If our mothers coped with the exclusion that sustained the unfair status of women vis-à-vis Oro cult membership even when opposing thoughts were not entertained, we have no problem with our survival now that nongovernmental organisations are everywhere championing the cause of the marginalised interests in most communities of the world. The Oro cult members are our fathers, brothers, husbands and boyfriends, they cannot deliberately wipe us out of existence because of our non membership of their cult.*

**Female IDI Ojo Lagos (May 15, 2013)**

In his own part, another Oro priest respondent sounded rather philosophical as he reinforced the membership argument of Oro cult with a proverb:

*'Ogu to ba tele wa losi igbo oro, toba de, ti won ba bere lowo re pe kilo ri loun, a dahun wipe, ko si isoro kokan nibe afi kilokilo' meaning a Badagry man that accompanies a cult member to the Sacred Forest, on his return, if he is asked what he saw, he usually says there is not much there but a frequency of warning pieces of advice. This underscores the fact that everything about the Oro cult is intensely undisclosed.*

**Male IDI Respondent, Ojo Lagos (May 19, 2013)**

Also, an eighty seven year old Oro cult patron observed:

*For membership, western education is not a requirement at all because the speaking of foreign languages is not tolerated either in the Igbo Oro (Sacred Forest) or Ojubo Oro (Oro sanctuary) because the only language that the Oro cult understands is the Yoruba language.*

**Male IDI Respondent, Ojo Lagos (May 20, 2013)**

There is no hiding the fact that women are never members of Oro cult. In spite of the vociferousness of women against gender exclusive and unfriendly attitude of Oro cult and its members, foreclosing the inclusion of women in Oro cult membership, a fifty eight year old Awori woman who is also a wife to an Oro cult priest explained:

*Women exclusively own the Aje cult (witchcraft). Though culture, in contemporary times, is more dynamic than it ever had been with the presence of globalisation and all its applauded triumphs, she does not, going by her experiences as a full housewife to an Oro cult priest, see the Awori culture bending over backwards to accommodate women membership of the Oro cult, now or in the foreseeable future. The membership criteria are cast in iron. They are firmly fixed. Women can never become members of Oro cult. And this does not worry me an inch.*

**Female IDI Respondent, Ojo Lagos (May 20, 2013)**

Women's exclusion is culturally constructed. It is not only in terms of membership of Oro that women are disadvantaged. African culture is also replete with language that enables the community to diminish the humanity of women (Oduyoye, 2001) While Akintunde (1999:74) believes that African culture has been a long tale of discrimination and injustice to women as there has not been equity in the opportunity, dignity and power between men and women, Her reason is that there are various aspects of African culture which restrict them from attaining equal status with men. In furtherance of the rights of women, Ojo (2004: 238) disagrees that women are inferior to men as she highlights various roles played by them both in the home and society. According to her "Yoruba women are very intelligent, lively, expressive, courageous, devoted to family, enterprising and versatile."

However, Oro cult is noted to recognise the need to exercise occasional discretion. For instance, when a member's kin inadvertently trespasses and therefore becomes Oro victim, members have a way of granting exemption as revealed by the saying '*Ipá ta ma pa omo awo, a ko gbudo pogberi bee*' meaning that the application of their penal code to members has a human face but to non members, a beastly alternative. Moreover, *a kii fi omo ore bore* meaning that you do not appease the gods with its descendants. While offending members' kin goes home free, perhaps with some caution, the corpse of offending non-member is never seen afterwards because *a ki i ri ajeku oro* meaning that it is a taboo, to find the leftover of Oro victim in public.

### ***Influence of Oro Cult on the Economy of the Excluded Non-Initiates***

Recognised as one of the most powerful of the West African secret societies even outside the shores of Nigeria is the *Oro* cult of Lagos which the Awori people have come to recognise as an active cultural defence force against witches and wizards. Therefore, one functional responsibility of religion in Africa involves purification and cleansing of evils or abominable deeds. In many parts of Africa, there are deeds of men, animals or birds which are regarded as evil and abominable (Awolalu, 1976). Such evils and abominations can only be removed from individuals and communities through religious rituals. The removal, in the context of Awori people, is performed by the *Oro* cult. *Oro* cult members have the power to exorcise individuals that possess evil spirits or bad luck. It may be at the community level too (Daramola and Jeje, 1975).

The process of cleansing involves rituals and sacrifices which must be paid for by the individuals or the communities as applicable. Those propitiatory sacrifices or rituals are employed to remove sin or pollution from the individuals and the communities. According to Awolalu (1976), purification can also be performed to clean and remove evils. It involves an outward act which is consequently believed to have a spiritual inner cleansing.

Looked at from this background, *Oro* cult exerts tremendous influence on all residents in Awori communities of Ojo, particularly the non-initiates. The classical thought that stimulated the emergence of the *Oro* cult as a cultural practice among the Yoruba people is the protection of community dwellers. This remains the justification for its presence among the *Awori* people of Lagos. It is in the light of the foregoing thought that *Oro* cult is looked at as a cultural activity that performs very significant political, judicial and religious functions among the *Awori* people. It is used for social purposes, and to preserve order in private and community life (Internet Sacred Text Archive, 2011). It is however a paradox that a cult which cares for the people also discriminates against members of the community.

Recounting the positive influence of *Oro* cult on the Awori people, an eighty five year *Awori* woman said:

*Some Awori women who have reproductive challenges offer prayers to the Oro cult during Oro festival to bless them with the fruits of the womb regardless of the fact that it limits their socio-economic opportunities. Besides, it also sanctifies the Awori land and cleanses it of spiritual impurities such as wizards and witches. These functions make an average traditional Awori woman believe that the Oro cult is functional for her existence and safety.*

#### **Female IDI Respondent, Ojo Lagos (May 20, 2013)**

Strengthening the foregoing submission, Adams (2011) observed that the celebration of deities in Yorubaland is meant to drive away evils and bring development to the society because in any society there must be a method used by the people to remove bad deeds or bad people. Therefore, the enforcement of social justice in relation to banishment or communal ejection of grave criminals by *Oro* cult has been commended and highly appreciated, most especially in the society where law and enforcement agents are lacking. *Oro* is among cults explicitly opposed to witches in south-western Yorubaland (Beier, 1958).

An in-depth interview respondent who also is a traditional ruler of an Awori community deepens the positive influence of *Oro* cult on members of Awori people:

*The Oro cult drives evil forces; eliminates residents who intend to hatch evil plots by revealing their plots and cautioning them not to implement their hurtful agenda; protects members even if he is from another community that is further from the Awori land; finally and most importantly, Oro cult protects the entire Awori society which includes its female members from armed robbery attacks. In summary, Oro cult prevents, apprehends and punishes deviant criminal members of the society from disrupting social balance that normally characterizes well ordered public life in civilised communities.*

#### **Female IDI Respondent, Ojo Lagos (May 18, 2013)**

Today, in the face of formal policing, corruption has grown firm root in most African societies. Whereas, in traditional African societies, kings or men of high title wielded considerable authority and influence, yet tyranny was forestalled by the active involvement of the people in the social and political administration of the land (Elechi, 2006). In this context, *Oro* cult exercised a check on the excessiveness of any king in Yoruba land. Within the Ogboni was the *Oro*, a secret ancestral organization which was actually vested with the power to exercise the civil and political administration (Simola, 1999). Hence, *Oro* served some political purposes, to preserve order in the community at large (Internet Sacred Text Archive, 2011). Considered a cult having no

biases and instant in effect, criminal minded public figures and private individuals made frantic efforts never to face the anger of *Oro* cult.

For other festivals, community people usually flood the streets selling their wares to make money. Followers, members and even spectators normally form the bulk of sellers' customers at such instances, taking advantage of such festivals. For *Oro* cult, the situation is tragically different. It is a festival that has been likened to snakes that never move in group. Nobody, not even non-initiate males dare to be in excessive movement during the *Oro* festival. This must have provoked the anger of non-initiates generally to raise doubts about the functionality of *Oro* cult.

They have anchored their objection to the cult on the broad socioeconomic deprivation it subjects community members. They now liken their situation to *Ebora t'ò ngba eran agbo lowo odomokunrin tiko niyawo, nse yeye awon apon ni* meaning a bizarre creature that demands a sheep from an unmarried young man derides bachelorhood. On the whole, *oro* festival has considerable impact on the commercial lives of community people because the truth that cannot be disproved is that businesses suffer each time *Oro* cult festival is celebrated in the community.

A market women leader victim who also is a respondent lamented that:

*Any time the Oro cult festival is on, it is not the exclusion of women from public space alone that challenges the joy of womanhood. Our livelihoods are completely threatened and compromised. Feeding ourselves, especially those of us who are widows, becomes a herculean task. While other festivals accorded us the unique opportunity to market our wares, Oro festival renders traders completely helpless by keeping us behind closed doors, both in the day and at night.*

**Female IDI Respondent, Ojo Lagos (May 20, 2013)**

Showing that the commercial disadvantages arising from the disablement caused by *Oro* cult is not exclusively aimed at women, a 38 year old carpenter observed with concern that:

*When the Oro cult festival commences, business activities significantly wither not only for women but the entire traders in Awori communities where the festival takes place. Nobody engages in business activities as all economic enterprises are paralysed. It is only cultists that usually go about having fun on their festive days.*

**Male IDI Respondent, Ojo Lagos (May 18, 2013)**

Not very bothered by the commercial implication of the *Oro* festival affair, A 24 year old female undergraduate looked at how the restriction of movement impact on her fundamental human right and queried:

*Her inability to catch her normal fun with her friends because of the fear of being harassed by the euphoric Oro cult members causes her misery. Is this the idea of freedom which democracy promised to offer the citizenry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Nigeria?*

**Female IDI Respondent, Ojo Lagos (May 17, 2013)**

Also indifferent to the economic implications of *Oro* cult for commercial health of community people, a 54 year old participant who is a clergyman hitched his wagon towards spiritual obstruction when he noted that:

*The inability of my members to attend scheduled weekly and even daily religious services was due to their being scared by the Oro cultists' threat to their lives which the imposed curfew that is always imposed meant. This is a kind of spiritual stumbling block to the Christian faith. It is an unfortunate violation of freedom to belong to a religious association and hold peaceful assembly.*

**Male IDI Respondent, Ojo Lagos (May 20, 2013)**

Taking an intellectual look at the *Oro* cult vis-à-vis the interests of community people, a female university lecturer respondent examined the influence of *Oro* cult on non-initiate indigenes and non-indigenes resident in Awori community from a pure psychological perspective. She said:

*The psychological feeling of incarceration of non-initiate community dwellers whose freedom of movement was unduly abridged by Oro curfew to enable cult members celebrate their festival is a reckless violation of other citizens' fundamental human rights. This is wrong. The people who have no option to express their objection to this social rape may implode, thereby predisposing them to different kinds of psychic challenges. This is unhealthy for community solidarity and members' wellbeing.*

**Female IDI Respondent, Ojo Lagos (May 18, 2013)**

Informal limitations subjecting the movements of people living in a civilised setting as Lagos to anachronistic restrictions is not a good omen for development. This is even more condemnable in an era when

every humane community is rapidly democratising the values that govern their collective living. Thus, a 35 year old female civil rights crusader noted:

*In the twenty first century Nigeria, it is incredible that citizens still languish under the control of civil rights by primordial interests. Imagine, the Oro cult now heightens the feeling of gender inequity among community residents, imposes curfew that everyone must obey and any woman who is unfortunate to behold the Oro cult while their curfew lasts will lose her life. This is disgusting! How can we create wealth when we are restricted to stay at home? Therefore, regardless of all the much acclaimed protective and preventive functions of the Oro cult as usually advertised by its adherents, contemporary experiences have highlighted some equally significant inadequacies of the cult.*

**Female IDI Respondent, Ojo Lagos (May 18, 2013)**

In the light of the foregoing, these unwholesome exclusionary practices have dire implications for productive enterprises in modern times. Therefore, by issuing a stay at home order and punishing violators, Oro cult members have challenged the locus of state authority and the basis of obedience in society, thereby placing innocent citizens under dual and conflicting authorities (Fasure, 2008). This is a serious issue that should be addressed if social protection is to be sustainable in the communities of Lagos.

#### ***Effects of Oro Cult on Other Interests of Community Residents***

The negative influence of Oro on other interests of community residents in Awori land appears to outweigh whatever positive effects it is claimed to have had. Prior to this study, it was believed that the Oro cult deliberately excluded Awori women. The study however found that contrary to this assumption, it is not just that Awori women were excluded, the truth on ground goes beyond that. Both female Awori and non-initiate male Awori indigenes are culturally excluded from the activities of Oro cult, prohibited from accessing public spaces during Oro festival and also from beholding the Oro.

An in-depth interview respondent who also is a traditional ruler of an Awori community did not dispute the agony which some community residents experience during Oro festival and noted that:

*Non Oro cult members of the Awori communities, male or female, may have some really rough time with the Oro cult during their festivals especially if he/she violates their culturally authorized curfews.*

**Male IDI Respondent, Ojo Lagos (May 17, 2013)**

A 42 year old career woman who sounded much like a female Marxist argued in the direction of class domination which patriarchy perpetuates in the community when she said:

*The influence of Oro cult on women is intense and negative. It propagates the subservience of women to men by further causing most women to remain tied to the apron strings of their male Awori counterparts in terms of safety in the community. This is really regrettable.*

**Female IDI Respondent, Ojo Lagos (May 20, 2013)**

Going into the deeper issues that sustain gender inequality in the community, another 35 year old female photographer provided information about some ulterior motives for victimisation by Oro cult:

*Cult members whose advances have been rebuffed by women may seize the opportunity of Oro cult festival to unleash terror on the women. During the Oro festival, women are not well protected against the venom of such capricious cult member. Being an indigene, I have seen such an instance before. It can still happen. The effect of Oro cult activities during the festival is unfavourable to Awori women. Government should do something about undue exposure of women to Oro cult motivated harm.*

**Female IDI Respondent, Ojo Lagos (May 16, 2013)**

Probably dissatisfied with the experiences of women in the community, a 48 year old matron who is a respondent also complained bitterly that:

*The level of fright induced challenges which Awori women face each time the Oro cult is celebrating its festival is enough to cause life threatening blood pressure. Oro cult promotes panic and sense of insecurity among women in Awori communities in Lagos. This is incredible! Throughout the festival, movement is often restricted. Our customers don't go out. It is when they go out that they could remember us. When we are forgotten, our comfort collapses.*

**Female IDI Respondent, Ojo Lagos (May 18, 2013)**



It is not completely correct that the criminal justice system does not consider the interests of women. Any citizen who conducts him or herself in a way that imperils the safety of another citizen runs the risk of having the law to contend with, be he a cult member or not. For instance, BBC News, (2006) noted the judgment of Benedict Shitta-Bey, a High Court Judge, who found seven members of a Nigerian cult guilty for the murder of Sheikh Sofwan Akodo and sentenced them to death by hanging shows that the lives of Nigerians are significant and well protected by the law.

Not convinced that women are sufficiently protected in the communities of Lagos, a 62 year old woman community leader argued:

*To the effect that there is no special law that protects women from men's molestation during the Oro cult festival, the cult is manifestly anti women. The law making procedure too could be said to be anti women. These points are enough to convince Awori women that most laws in Nigeria are essentially in favour of men and in furtherance of male interests. At least, this manifests in the monopoly which Oro enjoys over who goes out or stays indoors during its festival. The laws ensuring social protection should be engendered so as not to be endangered.*

**Female IDI Respondent, Ojo Lagos (May 17, 2013)**

Though Oro cult members have no identity cards with which their nefarious activities could be traced, exposed, apprehended and punished, they somehow appear to enjoy some level of impunity in the community. If the case of late Akodo is used as an example, his assailants were exposed, apprehended and punished even without identity cards to trace them. The arms of the law are long enough to reach any criminal no matter how long or far they hide. Nevertheless, Fasehun (1999) said that for as long as Oro festival lasts, no woman of any nationality should behold the Oro with her naked eyes. Be such woman an Italian, English, American, South African or Yoruba. The penalty for such violation is death, no matter who the woman is.

Probably more convinced that women are more vulnerable to Oro cult induced victimization, a fifty two year old Awori widow lamented the number of women who must have died unreported since the tradition of Oro started among the Awori people:

*Though both non initiate men and women are proscribed from beholding the Oro, the singling out of women for death on beholding the Oro is discriminatory as well as contemptuous. How many women do you know must have fallen victim of this capricious anarchy? Many necessary lives that would have helped in salvaging the socio-economic paralysis that grips our affluent Nigerian society must have been recklessly wasted by these capricious cultists. Why can the government not prevent these cultists from their wanton destruction of lives and property? It is probably safer that community dwellers recognise government's limitation and keep off the roads for the duration of Oro cult festival.*

**Female IDI Respondent, Ojo Lagos (May 20, 2013)**

Though, the Oro is also sometimes cautioned by its members without it listening to such warning messages: "*ti a ba so wipe ki oro ma so'ko,*" (Oro, please, don't hurl the stone!). It sometimes exercises inexplicable intransigence as it is known to say *nko ni so omiran sugbon eleyi to wa lowo mi yi, emi yio so o* (it only accepts on the condition that it will first hurl the one in its hand, after which it may process any plea to the contrary). Granted that there are various aspects of African culture which restrict women from attaining equal status with men (Akintunde, 1999), the foregoing are collections of wisdom of people and they carry authority in respect of social relationship (Olabode, 2009) which have left women in the state of seeming eternal dependency in the study site.

**Punishment of Criminals by the Oro Cult, among the Awori People**

There are common forms of punishments in African Societies (Dalgleish, 2005). Adams (2011) observed that the celebration of deities in Yorubaland is meant to drive away evils and bring development to the society because in any society there must be a method used by the people to remove bad deeds or bad people. Therefore, the enforcement of social justice in relation to banishment or communal ejection of grave criminals by Oro cult has been commended and highly appreciated, most especially in the society where law and enforcement agents are lacking.

Thus, erring citizens may be exiled by Oro cult. Wicked and evil people may be excommunicated by them (Daramola & Jeje, 1975), especially the wizards (evil magicians) and the witches. Oro cult explicitly opposed witches. The stereotypes held about witches by Yoruba natives are similar to those in many other parts of Africa: they are believed to be active at night and to have an insatiable performance for evil deeds (CSAC, 2012) and like Tigari cult of Ghana, Oro cult acts as anti-witchcraft among the Yoruba natives of Nigeria.

While some punishments are judicial some are cultural. *Oro* cult exercises cultural power to administer its punishments. In some cases, members of the cult arrogate to themselves the power to investigate civil and even criminal cases. Individuals found to be guilty become criminals. On treatment by the *Oro*, they are never seen again. In such a case, *Oro* is said to have devoured the bodies. Sometimes, however, the headless corpses of the criminals were discovered in the forest on the outskirts of the town, but nobody was allowed to bury them (Internet Sacred Text Archive, 2011).

Whereas no non-initiate is allowed to behold the *Oro* cult, female members of the community were precluded from casting any form of glance, substantial or slight, on the *Oro*. Any woman that violates this expectation pays dearly for it. This study found that this gender exclusion does not go down well with female members of the Awori community. Explaining why it is a taboo for women to behold the *Oro* cult, an *Abore* in an Awori community stressed that:

*Any woman who therefore, in spite of all warnings about the imposition of a cultural curfew pries into the affairs of Oro cult will have herself to blame. It is for this that a minimum of three weeks' notice is given to members of every Awori community in which the Oro cult festival is to be celebrated to inform community residents of the day that the Oro cult festival will commence. The Oro cult festival usually starts 1:00am; any woman who is still outside up to that time and looking for the secret behind the Oro cult will absorb whatever her curiosity leads her eyes to experience.*

**Male IDI Respondent, Ojo Lagos (May 16, 2013)**

An Awori traditional ruler who also is a participant bore his mind on the exclusionary treatment meted to female members of the Awori community thus:

*Even the Bible said Jesus implored Christians to give unto God what is God's and unto Caesar what is Caesar's. Since "jakumo kin rinde osan, eni abiire kii rinru" (meaning, anyone who has been well culturally socialised has no business outside after midnight.) a well culturally bred woman has no business outside at dark. Subjecting female members of Awori communities who defy the Oro cult curfew to extra judicial death penalty may seem ridiculous and barbaric, that remains our cultural way of exercising social control in our neighbourhood. Hitherto, there is nothing anybody can do about that!*

**Male IDI Respondent, Ojo Lagos (May 18, 2013)**

Supporting the foregoing without necessarily appreciating the other side of the coin, a 45 year old male community leader respondent said:

*He was not too pleased with the way the government ignores informal structures of social control in the Yoruba part of Nigeria. What is not good is bad. If we pay the police to secure us and some badly socialised deviants come from somewhere to maim members of our family and you want to blame us for maintaining social control with our own legitimate customary resources in a way that redeems us from undue army of occupation, then something has gone wrong with the parameter we use to measure rationality. If the Oro has been formally recognised, all our politicians who steal our common wealth and turn us, women inclusive, to paupers in our communities would have adjusted to African cultural honest ways of sitting in judgment over the affairs of others.*

**Male IDI Respondent, Ojo Lagos (May 20, 2013)**

Visibly angry with the way her co-women have accepted the lopsidedness involved in *Oro* cult affair, a fifty five year old woman respondent aggressively reacted against that seeming normal rhythm of women's responses:

*If women have been well culturally and equally socialised, they will obey rules that guide society. A woman who finds it difficult to obey simple cultural instruction cannot successfully raise children that will continue to make our society and culture endure. Don't come out for just a specified period of time is to reinforce our security. It is not restrictive in anyway. We cannot secure ourselves. The police are even helpless. If the Oro cult becomes the only potent tool of public security available in our community, we are ready to comply with its curfews and injunction not to behold the Oro cult.*

**Female IDI Respondent, Ojo Lagos (May 16, 2013)**

A female undergraduate in-depth respondent who is apparently younger than the preceding respondent disagreed with her position:

*For God's sake what manner of public security are the Oro cult stuff maintaining by preventing us from attending tutorials and even having fun simply because they are celebrating one self-seeking cult festival? The police should brace up, do their work so as not to provide grounds for justification of all these fetish people from executing their evil extra judicial death penalties on innocent men and women in our community.*

**Female IDI Respondent, Ojo Lagos (May 18, 2013)**

Many inquisitive citizens have challenged the capacity of the Oro cult to demonstrate rationality that takes cognisance of the need to ensure that suspects are undoubtedly guilty before pronouncing them blameworthy and then go on to mete punishment on them. In this connection, a forty eight year old male respondent admitted that:

*Errors sometimes occur, just as it sometimes is in the criminal justice system, in the infliction of punishment on suspected criminals. Acknowledging that the operators of the system are humans, errors are, however, not frequent. And the laws of the society are there to protect anyone who feels his/her rights have been unduly abridged.*

**Male IDI Respondent, Ojo Lagos (May 20, 2013)**

Almost faulting the position of the above respondent, Fasure (2008) laments that the state as the guarantor of constitutionalism from whence flowed the principles of freedoms of movement, association and conscience codified as fundamental human rights is at conflict with a non-state group usurping its authority.

#### **Making Oro Cult Become Women and Development Friendlier among the Awori People**

The Oro cult is an important aspect in the traditional administration of social justice and the enforcement of judgments in the society. For this reason, it is also believed that Oro could make a barren woman become reproductive, farmers, traders and artisans prosperous. Moreover, it is believed that both indigenes and non-indigenes enjoy the benefits of the festival which generally include peace, stability and progress in the land (Adeyeri, & Sanni, 2013). The fact that some other Awori deities accommodate women and give them significant roles to play, the Oro cult is left for men to maintain their exclusive control of the entire community in some respect is a manifestation of the patriarchal inclination of the cult.

However, both the police and Oro cult members are stakeholders in the community's security. It is on this basis that the need for the promotion of synergy between Oro cult and the police for a safer community life has become indispensable. In this regard, a sixty five year old male in-depth interview respondent emphatically said:

*It is complex, if it is ever imaginable. How for instance will a Hausa female police, who can never, on the account of her sex be a cult member, be brought into Awori land during Oro cult festival cope with the Oro cultists whose language and incantation she is not socialised in to maintain the peace? She will just be consumed the way any other ordinary woman who beholds Oro cult would be, her uniform notwithstanding.*

**Male IDI Respondent, Ojo Lagos (May 18, 2013)**

Proposing what seemed a panacea, a traditional ruler respondent advised:

*Government should organise workshops and seminars as forums for public enlightenment about the need for the Oro priests to be more humane and members of the public to respect the customary demands for temporary and occasional curfew to enable them practice their own beliefs.*

**Male IDI Respondent, Ojo Lagos (May 16, 2013)**

From experience, another sixty two year old female opinion leader respondent probably in an attempt to douse the rising suspicion between the police and members of Oro cult, advised:

*Government should pay stipends to these Oro priests because what they do in some ways is functional for the society. Political office holders should pay some token from security votes to enable these people listen to clarion calls for their cults to be gender sensitive.*

**Female IDI Respondent, Ojo Lagos (May 20, 2013)**

Almost maintaining a position which seems diametrically opposed to the above, a 44 year old female civil rights crusader observed that:

*Policy makers should compel cult members to recognise the rights of movement of women as one of their fundamental civil liberties. There is more gender equity if the saying that any woman who beholds Oro cult would be consumed is changed to any person who beholds Oro cult would be consumed. It is as if the Oro is deliberately poised to destroy women and erase them from the surface of Awori land.*

### Female IDI Respondent, Ojo Lagos (May 16, 2013)

Finally, the oldest female respondent who is an 86 year old community women leader advised:  
*Government should recognise Oro cult as an informal policing structure whose activities could be monitored by government on recognition.*

### Female IDI Respondent, Ojo Lagos (May 18, 2013)

If democracy truly remains a culture governed by the values of tolerance, participation and solidarity (Moghadam, 2013), there is much reciprocal benefits in partnership of Awori members and non members of Oro cult to make community life safer and more economically productive in Awori land.

### Conclusion

Oro cult performs deep-seated political, judicial and religious functions among *Awori* natives. With the invasion of contemporary societies by global norms, cultural values that are inconsistent with civilization have come under intense challenge of globalization in all the nooks and crannies of the world. It is in the light of this that the cultural encroachment on the productive time of community dwellers by *Oro* cult festivals has been examined. Except the subsisting hostile relationship between the *Oro* cult and the appearance of *Awori* people in public space to conduct their legitimate businesses is addressed, their undue socio-cultural exclusion that has been championed by *Oro* cult may gain expression in economic exclusion which has the capacity to impair *Awori* people's economy and undermine their contribution to the overall economic wellbeing of Nigeria.

Finally, the study recommends that government should recognize the *Oro* cult as an informal policing structure; pay stipends to its custodians; organize periodic workshops and seminars to enable members of the public to become acquainted with the culture of the community and *Oro* cult members also to take due cognizance of other public space users. If government focuses the attention of *Oro* cult to public security, engage it in swearing members into public offices in ways that make punishment for renegeing on promised gains of democracy to distraught electorates, more *Awori* men and women may make modest positive contribution to the economy of Lagos in particular and Nigeria in general.

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