

From Ataoja Adenle to Ataoja Larooye II: The Role of the Monarchy in the Preservation of Osun Osogbo Heritage

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Opening Statement/Summary: Tani o mo pe Osun ni n ba Ataoja se'joba Osogbo? Who is ignorant of the fact that it is Osun Goddess that administers Osogbo for the Ataoja?

1. Introduction

1. Three key words of this paper are Osun Goddess, the Ataoja Stool and Osogbo City
2. These three issues are interwoven, intertwined, interconnected and interrelated. In fact, we cannot understand any of them without the other. But we can appreciate each of them with one another
3. Osun is Osogbo, Osogbo is Ataoja and Ataoja is Osun. Osun is the Ataoja that we cannot see while the Ataoja is the Osun that we see. Osogbo is the baby of the two of them. Osun is the Mother, Ataoja is the father and Osogbo is their baby
4. Let me briefly describe the essences of these three inseparable elements. Osun in Yoruba Cosmology is not only the wife of the legendary Alaafin Sango, Goddess of Osun River, or 'fertility goddess, or the African Venus, but she is also a goddess of political, economic, divinatory, maternal, natural, therapeutic powers among many other attributes.

The Ataoja is the natural ruler of Osogbo, the custodian of the history and culture of the people of Osogbo, the physical and visible Osun, the Chief Priest of Osun Worship above the Aworo and Iya Osun, the embodiment of the essences of Osun and universal leader of all Osun devotees.

Osogbo is not just the capital of Osun State or one of Nigeria's biggest and most populous cities, it is a Yoruba city of economic and political importance, it is the cultural capital of Yorubaland (Ile-ife is the spiritual capital while Oyo is the political capital), this is a privilege bestowed on her by the virtues of Osun festival – arguably the most universally acknowledged cultural festival anywhere the Yoruba are found across the world. Osogbo is located at the centre of Yorubaland. It is the Akehinde gbegbon in Osun State just like the Muslims will say that Prophet Muhammed is the akehinde gbegbon of all the prophets because Osogbo is now the cynosure of all the older cities such as Ile-Ife, Ilesa, Ibokun, Ila, Ede and so on.

The ascendancy of Osogbo as a centre of political, economic, administrative, cultural and excellence did not just start in 1991 when it became the state capital but it is dated back to the founding of the town in the 17th century.

The spiritual role of the Osun Goddess, the strategic location of the town in the deciduous forest of central Yorubaland and the emergence of energetic leaders from Lajomo and Ogidan to the first Ataoja Larooye through the other 17 Ataoja up till the present Ataoja are factors of its rise.

2. Osun Goddess, the Ataoja Stool and the City of Osogbo: The Historical Nexus

The ancestors of Osogbo were Lajomo, Ogidan, Olaorooye and Olutimehin. The four of them were Ijesa princes from Ipole, Ibokun where their father, Owate was the ruler. They had challenges of water scarcity and Olutimehin was charged with the duty of finding reliable water sources. He found Osun River and reported back. Larooye led the people and settled there. While clearing the new settlement, a tree fell on the river and the surface turned blue. Osun goddess shouted 'eyin oso igbo, gbogbo ikoko aro mi le ti fo tan because she was an indigo dyer. They began to have flooding problem and they offered sacrifices. In order to show the acceptance of the sacrifices, a godfish – iko was sent and was received by Larooye on his palm. That sacrifice marked the beginning of annual Osun worship and festival.

Upon acceptance, Osun asked them to move to the upper terrace, promised that she will be protective of the town, that the town will prosper, that the town will grow from strength to strength, it will never be overrun, it will be *ilu asala* – a safe haven, but next time they must think very well before they act – *e ro ki ki e too maa se nkan lojo miran*. From this tradition, the name Osogbo – from Oso Igbo, Ataoja from Atewo gba eja, *Ilu Asala* – a safe haven, *Oroki* – a place where you think deeply before acting all have connection with Osun goddess. True to the words and promises of the goddess, from a settlement from the bank of Osun river, it moved to *oke ohuntoto*, to *Ode osogbo* and to the present site, it was never overrun by any war but it halted the Fulani invaders in 1838 (Ibadan or Osun goddess), it became *Ilu asala* as many people from Oyo, Igboho, Saki, Kishi and so on took refuge in the town, it became a commercial nerve centre, it became a railway town during the colonial period, it hosted many European firms and companies in the colonial economy such as BCGA, UAC, John Holt, it became the headquarters of Osun Division in the 1950s, It became regional and provincial headquarters of many government facilities such as Post Office, Telegram Office, Rediffusion, NEPA, NITEL, NPF and so on before coming the capital of Osun State in 1991 – *Osogbo di capital* (Song) and the presentation of giant godfish to President Babangida in 1991.

3. The Ataoja Stool in History

Under the leadership of Ataoja, Osogbo has grown from strength to strength true to the words of the goddess. Osogbo had been ruled by many Ataoja since inception up till date. There is no agreement as to the actual number of Ataoja who had reigned in Osogbo because of lack of proper dating and chronology. However, Osogbo's traditions preserve all the names of people who had ruled over the town in the order of their ascension and reigns whether they assumed the title 'Ataoja' or not. Below is a brief prosopography of the Ataoja/rulers of Osogbo from inception till date as gleaned from various recorded versions of Osogbo's traditions:

Lajomo, Ogidan and Olutimehin

1. Ataoja Larooye Gbadewolu (c.1670-c.1760)
- (2) Ataoja Sogbodede (c.1760-c.1780)
- (3) Ataoja Aina Serubu (c.1780-c.1810)
- (4) Abogbe (Regency: Wife of Larooye) 1810 – 1812

- (5) Obode (Female Regency), 1812-1815
- (6) Ataoja Lahanmi Oyipi (1815-1840)
- (7) Ataoja Ojo Adio Okege (1840-1854)
- (8) Ataoja Oladejobi Oladele Matanmi I (1854-1864)
- (9) Ataoja Ogunnaike Durosimi Fabode (1864-1891)
- (10) Ataoja Bamgbola Alao (1891-1893)
- (11) Ataoja Ajayi Olosunde Oyetona Abira (1893-1903)
- (12) Ataoja Atanda Olukeye Olugbeja Matanmi II (1903-1918)
- (13) Ataoja Kofoworola Ajadi Oyeyinka Latona I (1918-1920)
- (14) Ataoja Alabi Kolawole (1920-1933)
- (15) Ataoja Samuel Oyedokun Akano Latona II (1933-1944)
- (16) Ataoja Samuel Adeleye Adenle (1944-1975)
- (17) Ataoja Iyiola Oyewale Matanmi III (1976-2010)
- (18) Ataoja Jimoh Oyetunji Olanipekun Larooye II (2010-Date)

4. The Role of the Ataoja in Osun Worship and Preservation

Preparation and Provision (sixteen days)

- The Ataoja leads the annual worship of the goddess through the Osun Osogbo festival with the assistance of the Iya Osun (Chief Priestess), the Aworo Osun (Chief Male Priest), Arugba Osun (Osun Votary Maid), Balogun Osun, Iyalase, Osi Awo and Otun Awo and so on.
- The Ataoja is central to the celebration of the festival and in fact, the festival does not take place in his absence. The Osun festival is a sixteen-day festival.
- He determines the actual day when the celebration of the festival would begin by summoning the Babalawo (Royal Diviner) to the palace to perform divination
- After the date and sacrificial items have been specified by the oracle, it is the duty of the Ataoja to publicly announce these to the people.
- As the representative of the goddess, the official announcement of the Ataoja marks the beginning of the festival. This official announcement by the Ataoja takes place at the centre of the town located at the Osogbo central market where the Ogun shrine is located.
- It is also the responsibility of the Ataoja to make provision for the items that would form the core of sacrifices to be made to the goddess on the day of the grand finale of the festival.

Sacred and Secular Rituals

- The Ataoja leads both the Osun sacred ritual and its secular ritual drama.
- The opening day of the annual Osun festival is called “Ojo Iwo Popo” meaning “The Day of Path Clearing and it takes place on Monday, twelve days prior to the grand finale of the festival.
- The lighting of the sixteen-point lamp (Atupa Olojumerindinlogun) which Olutimehin, the co-founder of Osogbo, seized from the spirits during the early years of the settlement of Osogbo. The lighting of the lamp takes place in the courtyard of the palace and the Ataoja is central to this event.

- The third day of the lighting of the sixteen-point lamp is set aside for the Ataoja to organize elaborate feasts for his people. This day is referred to as ‘Ojo Ajo Oba’ meaning Ataoja’s committee day.
- On the second day of the committee’s day, the Ataoja offers special sacrifices to the beaded crowns and symbolic heads of the past Ataoja of Osogbo - ‘Ojo Ibo Ade’.
- On the eve of the grand finale of the festival, the Ataoja equally offers sacrifice to the past Olori (wives of his predecessors) in preparation for the grand finale of the festival.
- On the day of the grand finale of the Osun festival, the Ataoja is also at the centre stage of the event at the Osun grove which is located at the outskirts of the town, about one mile from the palace. Early in the morning of this day, the Ataoja, the Iya Osun, the Aworo Osun, the Arugba and other priestesses and priests converge inside the Osun shrine at the palace where they offer prayers to Osun goddess. Afterwards, the Arugba accompanied by other Osun devotees will pay traditional homage to the Ataoja carrying the calabash containing the sacrificial items such as cowries, brass mortar, segi beads, iyun beads, brass sword, pots (concoction pots). The Ataoja, in turn, gives her a royal blessing for a successful walk to and from the grove. The Arugba leads the Ataoja and other devotees of the Osun goddess to the Osun grove where the major events of the festival take place.
- On reaching the Osun grove, the Arugba along with the Iya Osun, Aworo Osun and other devotees enter the sanctuary and offer certain sacred rituals. After giving his royal message and receiving traditional homages, the Ataoja joins them in the sanctuary to carry out his own parts of the sacred rituals.
- When the sacred rituals are completed, the Arugba, the Iya Osun and the Aworo Osun carry the sacrifice to a special location on the banks of the Osun River where the Ataoja sits on the stone of authority and communes with his ancestors. After the Ataoja has thanked the goddess for her protection of the town in the out gone year and sought her continued support and protection in the succeeding year, he will then feed the goddess of the river with the assistance of the Iya Osun and Aworo Osun. Among the famous items with which the goddess is fed by the Ataoja are eko (corn meal), akara (bean cakes), yam, (pounded yam), efo yanrin (a kind of vegetable), goats, fowls etc.
- The acceptance of the offering by the goddess confirms that the waters of the river are blessed and people shout “Ore Yeye Osun”. People begin to draw the water into containers, bathe their faces in it, taste its cool sweetness and so on. It is believed by the people that the blessed waters of Osun have curative powers for all diseases such as barrenness, chronic headache, hypertension and so on. Also, people who have got children through the goddess return to the river and perform special rituals with the Iya Osun.

Modern Celebrations

- What follows the sacred and secular rituals at the grove were drumming, dancing, singing and other forms of entertainment. The Ataoja and other important guests return to the palace where the festive mood continues. The return of the Arugba to the palace and her reception by the Ataoja mark the official end of the events of Osun festival but the celebration of the festival continues through all forms of entertainment in the palace and throughout the town

5. Significance of Osun Festival to the Ataoja and the People of Osogbo

- Osun goddess is everything to the people of Osogbo. She is the real founder, mother, protector, guard and the nurturer of the town
- The Ataoja celebrates the Osun festival in remembrance of his ancestors and in fulfillment of the covenant between the goddess and his ancestors. The Yoruba proverb that says “Odo kii san ko gbagbe orisun” meaning “A river does not flow so far that it forgets its source” captures the essence of the importance of Osun festival to the people of Osogbo in this regard.
- The secular rituals of the Osun festival are a re-enactment of the events of the founding and settlement of Osogbo.
- Also, the excitement expressed by the people of Osogbo during the lighting of the sixteen-point lamp, is likened to the excitement of the Ipole migrants when they first discovered and settled on the flood plain of the river.
- Furthermore, the Ataoja and the people of Osogbo attach a great importance to the Osun festival because it enables them to invoke the spirits of the goddess to continue giving divine protection to the town. It is believed by the people that the goddess has played a prominent role in the protection and security of the town right from its inception. The fact that the Fulani Jihadists were defeated by the Ibadan warriors at the battle of Osogbo in 1940 is attributed to the of the town offered by the Osun goddess.
- Ilu Asala: In the same vein, the emergence of Osogbo as a safe haven for refugees of wars during the 19th century Yoruba inter-state wars which earned the town the name “Ilu Asala” meaning “Town of Safety” was also attributed to the divine protection and security provided by the goddess.
- Moreover, the Osun festival is a veritable avenue for the Ataoja and the Osogbo people to showcase the rich cultural heritage and endowments of the town. During the annual festival, people come from various parts of the world to witness the worship of Osogbo goddess. The Osun festival has made Osogbo to become a centre of tourist attraction in Nigeria and it is visited by tourists from the United States, Great Britain, France and the Latin American and Caribbean states like Brazil, Cuba, Jamaica, Haiti, Trinidad and Tobago and a host of others.
- The case of Susan Wenger, an Austrian woman popularly known as Adunni Olorisha who has made Osogbo her permanent abode and established several places of tourist attraction at the Osun grove deserves mention here.
- Indeed, th Osun grove in Osogbo has been listed as one of the world heritage sites by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Also, the Federal Ministry of Culture and the National Commission for Museums and Monuments have established a National Museum in Osogbo for preserving and promoting Yoruba cultural heritage through the Osun Oso festival.
- Osun festival has become an international event and recognition of Osogbo as a major centre of Yoruba cultural heritage. is not unconnected with the Osun festival.
- In addition, the celebration of the annual Osun Osogbo festival also has economic value for the people of Osogbo. During the festival, the town plays host to a huge number of visitors and tourists and this has a great impact on the economic activities in the town as traders, hoteliers, transporters and other businessmen experience a boost in their respective ventures. Not only this, the sponsorship of the annual Osun festival is now being undertaken by Corporate Bodies and

Business Organizations like Coca Cola Bottling Company, Goldberg, MTN, Global Bank and a host of others. As a matter of fact, the annual Osun festival celebration is now a responsibility of the Ataoja of Osogbo in conjunction with the Osun State Government, Federal Government, UNESCO, etc.

- In sum, the Osun festival has historical, political, economic and cultural significance to the Ataoja and the entire people of Osogbo. Osun Osogbo festival has remained, in spite of the influence of Christianity and Islam, the most important traditional festival in Osogbo and arguably one of the most important in Yorubaland and among the Yoruba Diaspora. Due to this, the Ataoja of Osogbo, irrespective of religious affiliation, leads the annual celebration of Osun festival, not only as the birthday of the town but also in renewing the pact between him and his ancestors.

6. Conclusion

Osun is everything to Osogbo and everything about Osogbo is Osun. Even though it is said that the river Osun has its source in Igede Ekiti, it is here in Osogbo that goddess of Osun lives and the world. When you hear Osun anywhere in the world, what comes to mind is Osogbo and when you hear Osogbo, you hail the Ataoja. So, Osun, Osogbo and the Ataoja are one and the same like the Christian trinity. Ataoja is Olorun Baba, Osogbo is Olorun Omo and Osun is the Olorun Emi Mimo. In Osogbo, the best period of the year is the period of annual Osun festival. It is a time for all Osogbo indigenes to come home from far and near. Even people who did not come home for Ileya or Christmas will come for Osun festival. Osun does not know any religion in Osogbo. It is the people's history, culture and heritage. And as the custodian of the people's history and culture, the Ataoja leads all Osogbo indigenes and lovers to celebrate the mother, benefactor, protector, and sustainer of the town.

So, let me end this paper by the same statement with which I started the paper: Tani o mo pe Osun ni n ba Ataoja se'joba Osogbo? Who is ignorant of the fact that it is Osun Goddess that administers Osogbo for the Ataoja? I conclude by reechoing that Osun is the unseen Ataoja while the Ataoja is the physical Osun and Osogbo is their common patrimony. In fact, OSOGBO TRADITIONAL ANTHEM CONFIRMS THIS: OSOGBO ILU ARO...

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