

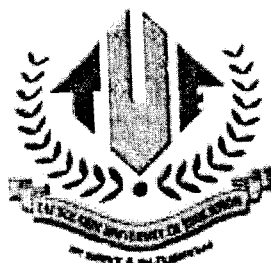


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## ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

1. **Adedina, Nkemdirim Olubunmi** is a drama Lecturer in the Department of Theatre Arts, Adeniran Ogunsanya College of Education, Otto/Ijanikin, Lagos, Nigeria. She is a creative writer, director and versatile actor.
2. **Adepoju, Adewale** is a Lecturer in the Department of History and Diplomatic Studies, College of Humanities, Tai Solarin University of Education, Ijagun, Ijebu-Ode, Nigeria
3. **Adepoju, Razaq Idowu** is a Lecturer in Department of Religious Studies, Tai Solarin University of Education, Ijagun, Ijebu Ode. He specializes in Islamic Education System.
4. **Ajetumobi, Rasheed O.** is a Lecturer in Department of History and Diplomatic Studies, Tai Solarin University of Education, Ijagun, Ogun State.
5. **Bamgbose, Gabriel Sunday** is a Graduate Trainee at the Department of English, College of Humanities, Tai Solarin University of Education, Ijagun, Ijebu-Ode, Nigeria.
6. **Elesin 'Abdulwahab Muhammed Jamiu PhD**, Department of Religious Studies (Islamic Studies Unit) Faculty of Arts, Nasarawa State University, Keffi, Nigeria.
7. **Emi, Rod Ph.D** is a reader in the Department of Creative Arts, College of Humanities, Tai Solarin University of Education, College of Humanities, Ijagun, Ijebu-Ode, Nigeria
8. **Garba, M.** is a Lecturer in the Department of European Languages, University of Lagos, Nigeria
9. **Idowu Sylvester**, is a Lecturer in the Department of English Language, Lagos State University, Ojo, Lagos.
10. **Lewu Mary Alaba Yetunde** is a Lecturer in the Department of History and International Studies, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria
11. **Ogunkoya, Niyi** is a Post Graduate trainee in the Department of History and Diplomatic Studies, College of Humanities, Tai Solarin University of Education, Ijagun, Ijebu-Ode, Nigeria.
12. **Ojo, Abiodun** is a Lecturer in the Department of Educational Management, Tai Solarin University of Education, Ijagun, Ijebu- Ode.

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## THE HISTORY AND THEATRICALITY OF ARUTA SPIRIT POSSESSION AMONG OWE PEOPLE IN KABBA, KOGI STATE NIGERIA

Lewu Mary Alaba Yetunde

&

Shuaib, Shadiat Olapeju

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### Abstract

*This paper focuses on the 'Aruta' spirit possession that is prevalent among the Owe people of Kabba in the North-Eastern Yorubaland. An Aruta is a woman believed to be possessed by the spirit of the dead titled men and powerful women in the society hence, 'he' assumes the powerful fatherly role of the deceased when possessed. To this end, this paper examines the historical antecedent of the aforementioned spirit possession as well as the theatrical content of its ritualistic manifestations. It therefore concludes that although the influence of Christianity and Western education has reduced the frequency and importance of Aruta, its invaluable relevance and cultural significance have not been totally eroded among the participant communities till date.*

### Introduction

One of the saddest misgivings is the impression that Science can explain everything and whatever it cannot explain and verify is unreal. Many psychiatrists and psychologists regard spirit possession as abnormal and a demonstration of sick mental state. Sometimes, the possessed is taken to be suffering from a state of acute schizophrenics<sup>1</sup>. This presumptuous belief has limited any serious academic research into some baffling phenomena in the African experiences as they are dismissed as black magic. This neglect leaves many areas of African worldview shrouded in secrecy, thereby, encouraging ignorance and superstition<sup>2</sup>. Against this background, this paper explores the historical and the theatrical perspectives of Aruta spirit possession among the Owe Yoruba in the North-eastern Yorubaland, Nigeria based on primary and secondary sources of information.

Spirit possession is not a new or recent phenomenon in the human society, it has been acknowledged since Biblical times as a common and an important

- feature of most religions in both primitive and sophisticated societies all over the world. Spirit possession is when a spirit is able to either temporarily or permanently take over the thinking and/or body functions of a living person<sup>3</sup> leading to abnormal behaviours and utterances. These behaviours and utterances are displayed with super-human strength, often accompanied by fits and convulsions, having knowledge of the future and other secret information<sup>4</sup>. Many works have been written on the subject by scholars such as Ari Kiev, Jane Bell Salisbury and Osterreich. Like the ancient culture of the Romans, Greeks, Indians and Chinese, African women expressed themselves through female cults where they could free themselves from the cultural sanctions within their society.<sup>5</sup>

Spirit possession is a culture bound phenomenon as it is closely related to the beliefs, customs and attitudes of the particular cultural groups in which it occurs.<sup>6</sup> It is generally believed that spirit possession is a form of hysteria and a group phenomenon that involves several members of a particular group of people in a particular setting.<sup>7</sup> It is important to point out that spirit possession may often be confused with demonic possessions. However, the difference in the two lies in the fact that, in demonic possession, a person is taken over by evil spirit for harm, while spirit possession is a culturally sanctioned displacement of personality<sup>8</sup>.

### **African Concept of Spirit Possession**

Most Africans believe in the concept of the unity of life and time. The important aspect of this African worldview is the belief that there is continuous communication between the living and the dead. Therefore, most African cultures believe that the strength and influence of every clan is anchored by the spirits of its deceased heroes. These heroes are viewed as omnipotent and indestructible, their importance is comparable to that of the Catholic Saints. To Africans, spirits and deities are ever present in human affairs as guardians of the established order. Therefore, spirit possession is an important aspect of cultural development in Africa which had been used in many ways to the advantage of individuals, groups and societal interests.<sup>9</sup> This explains why spirit possession is widely used as therapy across Africa. 'Zar', is the name by which spirit possession is known in Egypt, Somalia, Sudan and Burkina Faso' and 'Holi' in

Niger.<sup>10</sup> The 'Zar' cult in the Sudan and some East African cultures is an ethno-medical healing ceremony involving possession typical of Muslim women. In Africa generally, spirit possession is a form of socialisation between women when they can express their emotions freely without having to take responsibility for their actions.<sup>11</sup> In Nigeria, 'Bori' in Hausaland and 'Aruta' in Oweland (Kabba) Ogun in Oyo town and Sango in Iseyin in Oyo State refer to spirit possession.

### **Spirit possession in Nigeria**

Spirit possession is a common practice in many societies in Nigeria, among which are 'Bori' in Hausaland and 'Aruta' of Owe community in Kabba that are discussed in this paper. 'Bori' is the traditional animist religion of the Hausa people of Nigeria which involves spirit possession. The spiritual force is believed to reside in physical things therefore, possessing spirits are usually either spirits of animals or surrounding land and water said to have lived there always. This belief differs from Christianity and Islam which believe in one Supreme God.<sup>12</sup>

Spirit possession is not a prominent feature of Yoruba religion, the practice is limited to certain traditions and when possession occurs, it is seen as the deity taking absolute control of all the faculties of the individual possessed. The process is described as 'gun' like 'riding a horse'.<sup>13</sup> However for Africans in general and the Yoruba in particular, it would be a gross oversimplification and out of context to regard spirit possession as mental or psychological disorder. The significance of spirit possession is properly put in perspective by the fact that religious specialists such as prophets, diviners, seers, and so on, are all given to its experiences in one form or the other.

Within the Yoruba context, belief in the spirit possession presupposes the existence of divinities (Orisas) or ancestral spirits who inhabit the timeless realm, and who want and are able to communicate with human kind<sup>14</sup>. To substantiate this point, Lewis posits that three preconditions must exist before spirit possession can take root in a culture,<sup>15</sup> these are applicable to the Yoruba. The first is that the Yoruba people believe that there are higher spirits (Orisas) who want to communicate with humans. Secondly, these gods (orisas) are capable of bridging the chasm between the finite and the infinite by taking control of the



sense, speech and actions of individuals. Thirdly, a person who is possessed conforms to a known pattern<sup>16</sup>. However, 'Aruta' spirit possession is indigenous and peculiar to Kabba people in the whole of Yorubaland.

### **'Aruta' in Kabba.**

The Owe people inhabit Kabba town and some fifteen villages in the extreme North-eastern part of Yorubaland just South-west of the rivers Niger and Benue confluence.<sup>17</sup> Kabba, the town and 'Owe the people are used interchangeably in this paper. Kabba town became an important administrative centre first for the Nupe overlords between the 1820s and the 1860s, and subsequently for the British colonial administration.<sup>18</sup> The Owe people and their neighbours, Abinu, Ijumu and Yagba constitute the Okun Yoruba people formerly, in Northern Nigeria before the creation of states in 1967<sup>19</sup>. In 1991, they were excised from Kwara State to form Kogi State with the Ebira, Igala, Ogori and other minority groups.

Spirit possession is a cross-cultural phenomenon which is not generally limited to any gender, though, only women are possessed as 'Aruta' in Kabba. Upon the death of an 'Orota', a two-titled chief or an 'Ololu', a three-titled chief or their mothers and powerful women in the traditional hierarchy of Kabba political system; a spontaneous spirit possession of their wives or female relations takes place. The wives must be indigenes of Kabba, probably to safeguard the secret of the cult. Those possessed may not be physically present for possession to occur, one of the 'Arutas', of Oba Ologbonyo Arokoyo, Kabba traditional ruler, who died in 1957, was possessed in far away Lagos, (some 300 kilometres away). She travelled to Kabba without prior knowledge of her father's demise.<sup>20</sup>

'Aruta' spirit possession and its origin are shrouded in mystery hence, few literature is available on why a person is possessed or who determines those to be possessed. Most data are obtained from oral sources which are given in hush voices. However, according to Akadi and Agbaetan, spirit possession was first noticed during the reign of Oba Obarofun Obaoloko Oparaja in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They further opined that the process of becoming titled men could be a pointer to how those to be possessed are pre-determined. Akadi and Agbaetan assumed

that while the prospective 'Orotas' and 'Ololus' were in seclusion for at least three days, they performed certain rituals that set out who their 'Arutas' would be upon their death. The secrecy already mentioned makes this only a presumption.<sup>21</sup> Aruta spirit possession is very much prevalent among the Kabba people though the frequency is far in between.

According to Aiyewumi, the minimum number of 'Aruta' the deceased can have is three (3) while the maximum is twenty one (21). The wife is mostly the first to be possessed, and is referred to as the 'Olori', 'head' who becomes the spokesperson for the others. She is also referred to as 'baba', symbolising the deceased who would speak through 'him' as the 'olobese' or messenger. The 'Aruta' -in the middle is referred to as 'awe opon' or 'gbarufu'; while the last is called carrier 'arugba', bearer of the calabash who runs errands for the others as well as carries their luggage. The last Aruta, 'Arugba' also holds the rod that has been passed down from the first to the second and subsequently to the last one.<sup>22</sup> The possession of 'Aruta' usually occurs during the popular 'Ogun' dance.

### **The Connection between Ritual and Theatre in Aruta Spirit Possession**

Beyond rhetoric, in the African world-view, most especially the Yoruba philosophical ideology, the inter-relatedness of ritual and theatre cannot be underemphasized as a result of their "religio-genetic" root.<sup>23</sup> For instance, if ritual on the one hand is perceived as a religious or secular event that employs theatrical arts in articulating the beliefs of a people,<sup>24</sup> and drama and theatre on the other, according to Ogundèjì like ritual articulate the spiritual, social, economic, political and psychological needs and fears of a people through performance.<sup>25</sup> It follows therefore that ritual and theatre are related in content and context in Yoruba traditional performances such as initiation, festivals, masquerade display, ritual enactment, story telling session e.t.c.

This is because, ritual beside its unique socio-religious functions can be considered as a kind of performative arts just like theatre, where presentational arts such as music, dance, poetry, dialogue, chant, story-telling, role playing, acrobatics, costuming, make-up, masking, spectacle and so on<sup>26</sup> are employed and harnessed in a dynamic manner for didactic, entertainment and aesthetic

purposes. In view of the stated observation, the theatrical content of Aruta spirit possession ritual shall be viewed under two sub-headings namely – Ogun Dance Ritual Performance and Aruta spirit performance.

### The Ogun Dance Ritual Performance

This is the first phase of Aruta spirit possession ritual that forms part of the rituals which define and add value and meaning to the traditional burial rites of the titled men of Oweland. This worship dance is usually characterized by vigorous dance movements which announce the beginning of the burial ceremonies of an 'Orota' or 'Ololu' in Oweland. This particular Ogun dance is an energetic hooplike – back and forth dance steps by men and women of the community around the town while holding upright the Ogun leaf known as "Odan" in their right hand to symbolize the totem and consciousness of Ogun; a Yoruba premodial god(of war, iron and hunt) in the Yoruba cosmological belief among them.<sup>27</sup>

To this end, the beauty and essence of this dance is normally orchestrated and reinforced by panegyric chants and songs from Ogun chanters and drummers from the community in order to invoke the chakras of Ogun into mainstream of the events with the following songs:

Oloko ku o o	The hyena is dead
Agutan i s'ayo	The sheep is rejoicing
Ejehi je n'sayo aka o o	Let it go on rejoicing
Omo re i l'uhó	The puppy is still alive in the hole

From the foregoing, the hyena is used as a metaphor for the leader; that is the deceased while the puppy depicts his heir. It is worthy of attention to mention at this juncture that although the female relations of the deceased are usually adorned in their day to day attires in this dance performance just like other members of the audience. Their roles are clearly established as the chief mourners (main performers) because of their centrality to the actualization of the burial rites; hence they are the centre of attention of the occasion. Their mimetic-

dances and rhythmic movement are tenaciously under close watch by the crowd to ascertain when the actual possessions will occur.<sup>28</sup>

The possession process in Ogun dance, apart from the aforementioned theatrical components of Ogun worship, is the major high point of the spirit possession ritual, which is a moment of higher degree of role-play. At that point in the performance, the performers reach a state of spiritual ecstasy where they could not control their actions or speech, the character being impersonated is believed to have taken over the acting. This point heralds the visitation of the spirit of Aruta on his familiar lineage.

In Dewali's opinion, it is the musical rhythm played for the mediums that heightened the possession process<sup>29</sup>. When the Ogun dance is going on accompanied by ecstatic tempo of drumming and singing, many female relations of Aruta lineage (numbering between 3 and 21) as earlier highlighted enter into trance and do things they would not do in their conscious state of awareness. The process of possession is called "gbamu" meaning capture them. Thereafter they go under the total influence of the deceased and practically imitate the dead man's actions: mannerisms, habits such as smoking, limping and even preference for food.<sup>30</sup>

### **Aruta Spirit Performance**

Once the Aruta spirit mounts his female relatives the ritual procession is directed back to the dead man's house from the spot where the possession takes place. On getting to the dead man's house the Arutas (the possessed) perform another mimetic movements by running three times at a very fast pace to and fro, from the dead man's Ogun shrine which is usually located some distance from the frontage of his building to his corridor, while drumming and singing are going on around them. After this ritualistic performance, the Arutas as mentioned earlier who are usually females are then transformed into males and regarded as baba meaning "father". At this point they will have assumed the roles or characteristics of the dead man oblivion of their previous life's experiences and become respected above other women. They are given the usual respect accorded to the deceased while he was alive.<sup>31</sup>

The 'Arutas' are fed and catered for in the deceased man's compound throughout the duration of possession. Their shaved heads and bodies are painted with camwood, a reddish substance obtained from the bark of certain trees. The head Aruta is usually dressed in white flowing robe with wrapper called "Oko" with red woven wool cloth known as "Oja" securely tied on her waist, while her completely shaved head is covered with "abietiaja" cap and in her hand she holds horse whisk called "Irukere" and a staff or rod "Opa Oye" as her symbols of authority<sup>32</sup>. Apart from her, other Aruta members put on smaller flowing gowns refer to as "Danshiki" and hold in their hands carved wood; "Opa Oye" while their heads are covered with different types of the dead man's caps, except for the Arugba who is the least in the hierarchical order whose costume is conceived in white wrapper tied with red cloth around her waist. Arutas are characterized by stiff necks, mood swing, peculiar behaviour, those not familiar with the culture may look at it as 'madness'<sup>33</sup>. While in the dead man's house, they sing different songs and chants to entertain themselves on daily bases.

They are also well fed with freshly prepared smoked fish sauce and pounded yam (yam dough) while they reside in the dead man's house for up to 3 months after the burial ceremonies. Thereafter, the 'Arutas' return to their homes and families after certain rituals and animal sacrifices are performed to de-possess them. However, whenever the deceased has a message for the family, the 'Aruta', especially, the 'baba' is repossessed and 'comes home' to relay the messages which could be to warn the family or community leaders of an impending danger to which sacrifices are prescribed to avert. On the death of elderly relatives of the deceased or a serious and sensitive family feud, the 'Aruta' also 'comes home' to sympathize and mediate and 'his' decisions are final. If the family needs to retrieve certain items hidden by the dead man, the 'Aruta' 'comes home' and locates such items.<sup>34</sup> An 'Aruta' remains one for life with occasional possession whenever necessary. No institution is perfect, the 'Aruta' cult is not an exception. Therefore, it has some good and not so good impact on the society.

### **The Positive Effects of 'Aruta' Cult on Kabba Society**

1. The cult immortalizes the dead ancestors.



2. It provides a link with the ancestors by promoting and entrenching the interconnections between the mundane and spiritual spheres.
3. It unites the families as well as the community by providing a rallying point for all.
4. It accords more prestige and respect to the women that are possessed, thereby making them more relevant in traditional state affairs.
5. It perpetrates the culture and identity of Kabba people.
6. People are entertained while watching the ceremonies.
7. It gives meaning to human existence and daily engagements.
8. It uses the possessed to provide present and past secret as well as for telling the future.
9. It uses the medium to provide counsel, advice, warnings and rebukes.

#### **The Adverse Effects of the 'Aruta' Cult on Kabba Society**

1. During the process of possession, much resource is expended in the upkeep of the 'Arutas' who are also not productive while in seclusion. The high financial implication could be a drain in the economic resources of the society.
2. An 'Aruta' remains one for life even after she has been de-possessed or not. Despite the rituals and sacrifices, 'Arutas' may become more forgetful, experience more frequent headaches and unexplained general ill health.
3. Some men may prefer not to marry ladies who had been possessed by the 'Aruta' spirit.
4. Christians and Muslims see the 'Aruta' cult as fetish and satanic.
5. The cult discriminates against women even in death because those who distinguish themselves in Owe society do not have 'Arutas' when they die while titled men with lesser achievements have 'Aruta' after their death.

### Prospects of 'Aruta' Cult in Kabba

The prospects for 'Aruta' cult are bleak. Christianity and Western education have impacted negatively on the cult because fewer girls are available for possession as 'Arutas'. In addition, the men who acquire the 'Orota' and 'Ololu' titles now omit the fetish rituals that make them possess their relatives after their death, probably out of religious conviction or the huge financial involvement. However, those already possessed continue to be relevant in the socio-cultural activities of the Owe people as agents of peace and cultural continuity in their capacity as intermediaries between the living and the dead<sup>35</sup>.

### Conclusion

We have examined the functions of spirit possession and how it brings people together in times of need and helps them cope with difficult situations in life. This paper has brought to the fore the importance of spirit possession among African women particularly the Arutas in Oweland as an avenue to express their suppressed feelings as well as being relevant in traditional religious and social activities of their communities through its theatrical constituents. The fact that spirit possession has co-existed with Christianity and Islam and still remains relevant in the societies studied is acknowledged. It could then be safely concluded that despite the advantages and disadvantages the Aruta remains relevant in the socio-cultural practices of the Owe people in Kabba as a medium of communication between the living and their ancestors.

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31. Madam Memudu Olojo, 90 years was a little girl when her mother was an 'Aruta' to her late uncle.
32. Aiyewunmi, Aina, op. cit.
33. Balasire E., 62 years old is a Medical Doctor in private practice in Kabba whose mother was an 'Aruta'.
34. Lewu, Solomon, 80 years old is a community leader whose father had many 'Arutas'
35. Madam Aworo Janet, 85 years old and community leader catered for her late fathers 'Arutas.