

# Promoting Faith-based Tourism in Nigeria: The Place of Ritual Actors and Activities

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## Abstract

*Travel to engage and/or participate in ritual activities, otherwise known as faith tourism, is gradually becoming a popular phenomenon in Nigeria. The aim is generally to seek religious therapy for various critical or life-threatening issues such as chronic diseases, bareness, unemployment, poverty, emotional trauma etc. The perceived efficacy of spiritual remedy accounts for the proliferation of faith-based activities and religious centres in the country. The indispensable role of ritual actors in the performance of ritual activities has, therefore, become prominent. This paper examines the ritual activities and dramatic personae in Osun Osogbo festival. It uses the ethnographic research method of direct observation and interview to explore the relevance of these persons and activities in sustaining the event and promoting faith tourism in the country.*

**Keywords:** Ritual actors/ persons, Ritual activities, Faith-based tourism, Osun-Osogbo festival, Nigeria

## Introduction

Primarily, ritual is an embodiment of beliefs, the meaning of which can only be deciphered by the participants. It encompasses symbolic actions to exercise mythical power through natural signs and symbols ranging from simple gestures, such as bowing or shaking hands, to elaborate ceremonial dramas (Kyalo, 2015). Because of its dependence on spiritual powers, many consider ritual as a religious act. Thus, ritual acts are seen as spirit-embodied activities directed towards activating spiritual energies for transforming or addressing a particular human affair. This activation of spiritual energies made ritual a performing act, which one engages in through participation.

Participation in ritual entails the human quest for a larger context of meaning, a means by which to understand and respond to the many faces of suffering and uncertainty (LaGamma, 2000). The human world is encumbered by financial bankruptcy, spiritual afflictions, emotional burdens,

psychological trauma, body diseases, insecurity, wars, in fact there seems to be no end to human maladies on earth. Man has over the years sought solution to these issues, through various media, including science and technology etc., but final solutions to them appear not to be in sight. Resorting to religious remedy is typical of Africans, whose lives are deeply religious. Therefore, many religions initiate numerous faith-based activities imbued with ritual enactments to awaken the participants' internal spiritual forces (Liutikas, 2018), and deal with all kinds of issues in human life. This is where the involvement of ritual actors/persons becomes pertinent.

Ritual persons/actors are believed to have been bestowed with divine mandate to oversee faith activities. Therefore, without these persons some rituals may be performed, but with the desired efficacy being somehow in doubt. Examples that illustrate the relevance of such persons in ritual performance proliferate the Holy Bible, Quran and Traditional creeds of African traditional religions. Thus, the importance of these persons cannot be overemphasised.

Given their numerous ritual activities, religious centres compete with one another in the quest to attract faith participants based upon the number of miracles that had been witnessed (Digance, 2014). She further stressed that millions who visit Lourdes, for example, in search of cures for their physical woes, claim to be in search of the miraculous. The believed efficacy of ritual enactments, in Stausberge's (2014) opinion, has made religious sites rank among the most important attractions throughout the world. For instance, Saudi Arabia is renowned as one of the most popular Islamic state on account of the Hajj – Islamic faith activity. Hajj is filled with series of rituals, which provide participants with intense spiritual experience. The efficacy of such experiences, to a large extent, depends on the ritual actors/persons. Since the activities involve the sacred world, the need for precision to actualise effective results becomes invaluable. It is imperative to note that ritual requires the services of certain persons or experts who are accustomed to the series or sequence of actions and inactions involved therein.

Ritual actors communicate with "spirits and gods so as to obtain insight into human predicament. These persons are important intermediaries who help pilgrims achieve spiritual links with God or their deity (Shinde (2012). Mbiti (1971: 150) described them as:

certain men and women who have religious knowledge, and who know how to lead others in religious activities, who serve as the link between their fellow human beings on the one hand, and God, spirits and invisible things on the other...They embody the presence of God among people.

Therefore, as mediators between the sacred and profane, these persons are carriers of spiritual energies. Consequently, through them spiritual energies flow to activate the ritual enactment of faith-based activities. They are not the reason for the event, but can hinder the processes because they are believed to control the release of spiritual energies.

Thus, the fame of faith-based activities striving as a faith tourism product can partly be attributed to the activities of these persons. In other words, apart from the perceived potency of faith-based tourism product, the presence and activities of these persons also contribute to the patronage of the product. In all religions of the world, ritual persons are seen as the gateway towards achieving divine satisfaction. That is why no religion can strive without the activities of these persons. Every religion has actor(s) through whom spiritual energies are transmitted. Their duties differ from one religion to another, but they converge in their assistance in the performance of ritual acts. Shinde (2012 citing Parry, 1994 and Veer, 1988), stated that in Vrindavan, ritual priests, *Pandas* generally assist devotees in pilgrimage rituals in exchange for a fee or donation. Also, Oakes (2010) observed that the ritual events of the *guanjie* ceremonies of Putian, which includes multiple liturgical rites are performed by troupes of ritual specialists. These include the master of the altar association and the elderly generation of spirit mediums, who train the children in chants, invocations, collective dances, and legends of the gods. They also regularly record messages from the gods using spirit writing, called *planchettes* (forked branches that are used to write in sand on an altar). Furthermore, he stated that in Chinese religion of Confucius, Confucian masters of ceremony (*lisheng*, locally called *yanshi*) set the altars and the offerings, and instruct people outside the temple (closed for the training) on how to bow and present offerings, burn incense and spirit money, and pray to the gods. In addition, Rajendra and Temple's (2016) article on cremation ritual illustrated the relevance of the Hindu priest. In their opinion, the auspicious day of cremation ritual procession is ultimately determined by the Hindu priest, since he leads the rituals and is responsible for addressing both good and bad omens through offerings made during a special ceremony.

In African traditional religions, the services of ritual actors are also indispensable in the promotion of faith-based tourism. As Sampson (2014) rightly observed, ritual persons of African traditional religions (priests and or priestesses) are frequently patronized for spiritual guidance in the performance of rituals. Apart from traditional religions, various indigenous industries rooted in traditional religions are also imbued with faith-based activities. One of such industries is the indigenous Blacksmith industry of ancient Awka community, which was wrapped in ritual obscurity (Ezenagu,

2014a). The ritual processes of this industry was said to have emanated from the originator of the industry, a deity (*Akputakpu*), who was believed to be a blacksmith himself, "*onye na-akpu uzu na ndeli ocha*," meaning "he who smiths only at midnight" (Ezenagu, 2014b). Consequently, the blacksmith himself is a ritual actor who is frequently patronized by faith participants during *Akputakpu* festival. The foregoing shows that faith-based tourism activities would be incomplete without the involvement of ritual actors through whom spiritual energies and powers are transformed and exploited.

In Osun Osogbo festival, each ritual enactment requires a ritual actor to mediate between participants and Osun goddess for spiritual or emotional satisfaction. As Liutikas (2015) aptly observed, the emotional experience that pilgrims have in completing each ritual may create a stronger level of attachment to the miraculous place. Faith tourists participate in faith activities with an eye on the spiritual status and involvement of the ritual actors. For instance, faith tourists flood many religious centres in the country on the basis of the spiritual status of the persons in charge. In Osun sacred grove, Iya/Yeye Osun commands respect, as it is believed that Osun speaks through her. Many of the visitors to the sacred grove would not leave without consulting the goddess through her. Apart from Iya Osun, other ritual persons involved in Osun festivals are *Ataoja* of Osogboland, *Arugba*, *Iworos*, and *Aworo*. Through these persons the spiritual energies of the goddess are believed to be transmitted to participants in Osun ritual activities. The perceived potency of their spiritual energies has continued to attract large faith participants to the sacred grove, thereby promoting Osun festival. This work examines Osun Osogbo ritual actors and their value in faith-based tourism promotion in Nigeria.

### **Osun Osogbo Sacred Grove and Associated Festival**

Osogbo town is known for her rich cultural heritage following the existence of Yoruba prominent sacred grove. The grove is a large area of undisturbed primary forest along the banks of Osun River, which covers about 75 hectares of land. It is a typical example of a primary rainforest that is fast disappearing in the West African Sub-region and one of the few vestiges of the rainforests in Nigeria (NCMM, 2004). The grove's relevance to Yoruba culture of South-western Nigeria accounts for its longevity. Osun grove is said to have derived its sacredness from the myth attached to the Osun goddess, believed to reside in Osun River, which flows therein. In addition, it is believed to be the abode of other spiritual Beings or Yoruba pantheon of gods depicted with different sculptural works by Susan Wenger during the New Sacred Art movement of the early 1960s.

The cultural significance of the grove is rooted in the performance of the annual sacrifice – Osun Osogbo festival within which the historical origin of the Yoruba of Osogbo is embedded. The grove became a symbol of Yoruba identity, and to protect this identity it was declared a National monument in 1965 by NCMM and in 2005, UNESCO listed it as a world Heritage Site. The historical account of Osun Osogbo festival will lose its essence outside the mythical tales of Yoruba pantheon of divinities (*Orisa*). According to Mr Adesiyun (pers.comm, 2016), the land of Osogbo before human occupation was a dense forest inhabited by spirit beings, of which the Osun goddess, the water body that flows across the thickly forested area, predominated. These spirit beings, according to Yoruba theology, are known as *orisa* – divinities brought forth by Olodumare – the Supreme Being (Idowu, 1996). The Yoruba believe in *Orisa* is so eminent that they see themselves as having descended from these divinities. This accounts for the existence of *Orisa* in every Yoruba city, whose mythical history, ritual, and symbols are intricately linked to both ancient and modern-day core values, as well as to the political and cultural lives of the people of that particular city (Olupona, 2001).

The perceived potency of Osun goddess is evident even in the Yoruba mythology of creation. She was said to be one of the original seventeen (17) *Orisa*, and the only female among them sent to the earth by Olodumare to create humans. This task was accomplished, with Osun goddess supplying water during the creation process. To the Yoruba, the creation of humanity would have been impossible without the waters of Osun goddess. Therefore, Osun is a River deity associated with fertility, femininity, motherhood, sexuality, wealth, wisdom, knowledge, healing, beauty, art, and power. In fact, Osun has different identities, resulting from the various conditions under which people have encountered her (Probst, 2015). Given her multiple identities, Tate (2006) described her as a multifaceted goddess, known variously as *Yeye kari*, or mother of sweetness, *Iyalode*, mother of fishes, and mother of birds. In portraying her potency in making the barren fruitful, her physical image is most times depicted as a woman with many hands carrying children or whose body is full of children. Thus, barren women call her *Olomoyoyo* – giver of children. The healing powers of Osun River, according to Jones (1997), extend from the African diaspora through Haiti, where she is known as *Erzulie or Freda* or *Dahomey*, to Puerto Rico and Cuba, where she is *Ochun* and to Brazil where Osun lives as *Oxum*. Hence, despite the fact that Osun goddess is seen as a Spirit being of the Yoruba pantheon of gods, she is also known across the globe.

Osogbo ancestors were said to have migrated from Ipole Omu in Ilesa area of Osun State to the present Osogbo sacred grove as a result of drought. The discovery of Osun River by Olutimehin, led to the migration

and settlement of the Ipole omu people of Ilesa in Osun River bank in Osogbo. The settlement being too close to the river, was prone to perennial flooding. However, when a farmer accidentally fell a log of wood into Osun River, a voice called out from the river, saying "*Laro, Timehin, gbogbo ikoko aro mi ni e ti fo tan,*" literally meaning, "... you have broken all my dyeing pots." The outburst of the voice brought fear, which was further intensified by the echo of numerous voices saying, "*Oso-igbo, pele o, Oso-igbo rora o*" (*Oso-igbo* – wizard of the forest, we commiserate with you). The numerous voices were said to be those of other spirits inhabiting the grove who knew the powers of the goddess and so pleaded that she showed compassion and not destroy the humans. Later, the name of the place was called Osogbo, coined from *Oso-Igbo*, the name other spirit beings used in appealing to Osun.

They consulted an *Ifa* priest, who revealed to them that the area they occupied was the abode of Osun goddess. The *Ifa* priest told them that three things were required of them if they must continue to dwell in that area. First, they should abandon that side of the river where they were staying and move upland far from the river because humans and spirits do not cohabit. Secondly, the goddess ordered that the first palace of the king should not be demolished, but reserved as a temple for her worship now called *Ojubo Osun*. Finally, the goddess requested that an annual offering be brought to her at the river bank temple by a virgin girl (*Arugba*) from the ruling royal family. In adhering to the above conditions, the people pleaded for her protection and other numerous blessings especially the gift of fertility and healing.

### **Osun Osogbo Ritual Actors**

The following are the ritual persons involved in Osun Osogbo festival: *Iworo* – Osun priests and priestesses, *Aworo* - Osun Chief Priest, *Ataoja* - the King of Osogboland, *Iya Osun* - Osun Chief Priestess, and *Arugba*, the sacrifice bearer.

### **Arugba**

The Sacrifice bearer (*Arugba*), one of the indispensable ritual persons in Osun festival, is usually a young virgin of between 11 and 14 years who, through *Ifa* divination is chosen to take the annual sacrifice to the river. The duty of an *Arugba* is not only crucial, but also one of the outstanding rituals that attract large faith participants to Osun Osogbo festival. In Yoruba traditional religion, the performance of any sacrifice cannot be complete without an *Arugba* – one who carries the offering to the divinity. Thus, there will be no festival without this act. Sometimes, the person who bears the offering is believed to determine the acceptability or otherwise of the sacrifice. This young girl continues to serve the goddess until she is ripe for

marriage. After appointment into office, the Osun palace shrine becomes her new home, where she is initiated into the worship of the goddess under the tutelage of *Iya Osun* and *Iworos*. Her duty as the sacrifice bearer is spectacular as many faith participants eagerly await this spiritual performance, which has over the years promoted Osun festival as a prominent faith tourism product.

### ***Iya or Yeye Osun***

*Iya* or *Yeye Osun* is the Chief Priestess of Osun goddess, and another important ritual actor in Osun festival. She takes charge of the worship of the goddess on regular worship days and at the annual festival. *Yeye Osun* participates in virtually all rituals associated with the Osun festival. Her presence during ritual enactment enhances the authenticity of the act. As a ritual actor, she has the power to invoke and speak with the goddess. Given the sensitive nature of this position, only devotees from the royal family became the *Iya Osun* at a time. However, the position is currently open to other devotees, chosen through *Ifa* divination from a particular lineage. The *Iya Osun* does not work alone, but in collaboration with Osun chief priest - *Aworo*.

### ***Ataoja***

The king of Osogboland is popular with the title *Ataoja*. He is one of the ritual persons involved in Osun festival. The title *Ataoja* was said to have been derived from the interaction between the first king of Osogboland and the River goddess. During the people's first sacrifice to the goddess to appease her for inadvertently destroying her dyeing pots, the goddess was said to have sent her messenger, *Iko* (a fish-deity), as a sign that their offerings had been accepted. The king stretched forth his arms to welcome the fish-deity, a gesture which translates to *Ataoja* (one who spreads forth hands to welcome fish – *a tewo gbeja*) (Olupona, 2001). Henceforth, the traditional ruler of Osogboland became known by the title *Ataoja*. Anyone who wears the crown of the *Ataoja* must by custom participate in the Osun Osogbo festival. The king's role in the ritual activities of the event cannot be overemphasized, for without his communion with the goddess, the sacrifice would be incomplete.

### ***Aworo Osun***

*Aworo* is the male Chief priest of Osun goddess. As a ritual person, he consults the deity on behalf of both devotees and interested visitors. Diagnosis of major issues associated with the spiritual world is one of the major rituals that attract faith participants to Osun festival. This office was

created by the king, Ataoja to separate religious duties from his political obligations. The *Aworo* assists the *Iya Osun* in discharging her duties although they perform virtually the same function. The position of the *Aworo* cannot be attained by devotees of all climes, as it is restricted to the *Isale Osun* lineage, who rotated it amongst the seven constituent families. However, three out of the seven families have embraced other religions, leaving four families (Iwinjobi, Ileaworo, Ilefetuata, and Ileajegbobi) still devoted to Osun to take charge. The *Ifa* is usually consulted at the demise of any *Aworo* to select the rightful replacement.

### ***Iworo***

*Iworos* are Osun priests and priestesses who through their piety were elevated to the position. In the course of their worship and service to the goddess, they have acquired a vast knowledge of the goddess. Thus, they assist in the performance of ritual activities and educate visitors on the dos and don'ts of the goddess. In addition, they support the *Arugba* in performing her ritual enactment. The female *Iworos* are consulted by those seeking spiritual answers to issues of life. The perceived efficacy of their various recommendations made them one of the significant and commonly embraced spiritual attractions in Osun festival that lure participants.

### **Ritual Enactments, Ritual Actors and Tourism Promotion**

Osun Osogbo is a unique festival packaged with two long weeks of traditional events that have never ceased to attract people from across the globe. The activities commence with ***Iwode Osun***, two weeks before the Osun Osogbo festival. The activity heralds the on-coming Osun festival, and it involves the participation of all ritual persons, except the Ataoja. According to *Iworo Osunkolabi*:

*Two weeks before Osun festival begins we, Osun devotees move around Osogbo town announcing the coming of Osun. In doing this, we move in procession with the Osun drummers leading the rest of us with singing, dancing and jingling Osun sacred bell as we visit various places like the market, houses of chiefs, royal households and devotees of other deities (pers.comm, 2016).*

Next is the ritual washing of all the paraphernalia of Osun, known as ***Ikunle Osun***, performed by *Iworos* (priests). Another devotee said that (pers.comm, 2016): *the washing also includes the paraphernalia of worship of other deities whose altars are inside Osun palace shrine such as Obatala, Ogun etc. We use sacred leaves (ewe orisa) for the purpose. After this sacred exercise all the*

paraphernalia are displayed in the Osun palace shrine for devotees and visitors to appreciate with praises and gifts.

Hence, with objects ready for the numerous rituals ahead, the event is officially declared open on a Monday with **Ìwópópó** activity. This ritual, according to Ayomide (an Osun drummer), *involves public procession of Ataoja, his wives, all royal officials, Iya Osun, devotees and visitors to a street where he welcomes all to another Osun festival* (pers.comm, 2016). Though all ritual persons are often in attendance, this ritual is solely the responsibility of the Ataoja.

Once the event has been declared open, the next is the ritual dance of the entire Osogbo community around the sixteen-point lamp (**atupa Olojumerindinlogun**). The performance of this ritual involves all ritual persons, and is led by the Ataoja. *Atupa Olojumerindinlogun* is the legendary magical lamp, which one of the founding ancestors (Olutimehin) of Osogboland was said to have seized from some spirit beings. As Osunkolabi narrated:

*Olutimehin, a great hunter while on an expedition on a certain night saw some spirit beings, ewi dancing round a lamp with 16 light burners. Because of the mystical nature of the lamp, he went into their mist and ceased the lamp. They allowed him to carry it after much struggle, but on the condition that the lamp be lit from 7pm till dawn nine days before the day Arugba would carry an offering to the goddess. The king and his entire people must dance round the fire three times* (pers.comm, 2016).

Following the ritual dance is the **Ojo ajo – Oba-** Ataoja committee's day. According to Mr. Odeyemi (Osun devotee): *this day is reserved for royal entertainment...* (pers.comm, 2016).

The next ritual activity is **Ibori iboade**. As Osunkolabi (pers.comm, 2016) said: *it is a form of sacrifice performed for the destiny of the ruling Ataoja using the crowns and other royal paraphernalia of deceased Ataojas of Osogboland*. This ritual is performed by *Iya Osun* in honour of all the deceased Ataojas. Prayers and incantations are made through all the assembled crowns of the departed souls of Osogbo rulers by *Iya Osun* beseeching and soliciting their spiritual support for the on-coming Osun festival.

After appeasing the deceased Ataojas for the success of event, the next activity is the ceremony in appreciation of the Arugba (sacrifice bearers) for their services on a day called **Ijo arugba** (Arugba's berth). Explaining the above activity, Ayomide (Osun drummer) said: *the Osun festival we inherited from our ancestors appreciate the arugbas, but do not celebrate them because they are working for the goddess who alone rewards them. So Ijo Arugba was introduced into*

the event by the *Ataoja* as a medium to publicly appreciate all the living *arugbas* for their efforts in serving our community (pers.comm, 2016).

Next is **Ayaba Isale** ceremony. This ritual, according to *iworo* Osunkolabi, *takes the pattern of ibori iboade, but in this ceremony we appease the deceased wives of past Ataojas, using the land as a medium. Iya Osun invokes the spirit of all the late wives from the land beseeching them to assist in the on-coming event* (pers.comm, 2016). With the completion of this ritual, the next activity is the spiritual fortification of *Arugba* for the task ahead, known as **Idafa Arugba**. This activity, according to Ayomide, *is highly spiritual, and as a result only few Iworos, Ifa priest and Iya Osun take part in the ritual. It takes place on the eve of the final sacrifice and performed by Ifa priest and Iya Osun, using incantation and objects* (pers.comm, 2016). He concluded that the success of this exercise is fundamental to the success of the sacrifice to the goddess.

The next day is the grand finale of Osun festival, **Ojo Oddo/ Ojo Osun**. On this day, the *Arugba* carries the offering to Osun goddess at *Ojubo*, an Osun shrine in the sacred grove. The ritual procession commences in the morning led by Osun drummers, *Iworos*, *Iya Osun*, and *Ataoja*, accompanied by devotees and visitors. The *Arugba* is dressed in traditional regalia, her head covered with a cloth decorated with cowries (*aso ofi*) to conceal both the *igba* (calabash) Osun and her face. Two lobes of bitter kola nut were stuck into her mouth to prevent her from talking. As the people proceed to the sacred grove, prayers were offered at designated sacred spaces on the way. During such prayers, the people snapped their fingers and made circular signs above their heads so as to reject and avert evil omens.

Once in the sacred grove, the *igba* Osun is taken into the shrine. The *Ataoja* wears a veiled crown and proceeds to commune with Osun to consummate this ritual. Thereafter, *Iya Osun* gathers all the food gift items in a bowl and carries them to the river bank, where the *Iworo* eulogises Osun deity with words of gratitude and pours the sacrificial items into the river. An Osun priestess said: *water taken from the river henceforth is no longer ordinary, but filled with the healing powers of the goddess* (pers.comm, 2016). Watching the sacrificial items float gently down the river, people remove their caps, head gears and shoes so as to use the water to wash themselves and pray.

Osun festival officially ends with the entire participants assembling again at the sacred grove to appreciate the goddess on **ikoenserodo day**. This concluding ritual, according to Ayomide (pers.comm, 2016), *takes place five days after the sacrifice to Osun goddess at the River bank in a procession led by Osun drummers, Arugba, Iya Osun, and priestesses of other deities. Osun devotees and visitors also join to appreciate the goddess for her numerous blessings.*

## Discussion of Findings

All the ritual activities associated with Osun Osogbo festival cannot take place without the designated ritual actors. Each enactment is overseen by a ritual person otherwise; it is of no spiritual relevance. Many participants claimed that participation in ritual activities under the directive of ritual persons guarantees unique spiritual experience. These unique spiritual experiences have become an attraction and motivation to many tourists who want to relax and recharge their spirituality (Choe and O'Regan, 2015). In the final sacrifice to Osun goddess usually performed by the Arugba, for instance, many participate in the ritual procession because of the belief that she will take their prayers to the goddess.

Therefore, the Arugba is very vital in the completion of the festival. She carries the *igba* Osun to the sacred grove, and many devotees and visitors pray through her to the goddess. Although she sits still, neither speaking nor responding to their prayers, yet the people believe that she is in communion with the goddess who listens to their petition. This point corroborates the view of Stausberge (2014) that the believed efficacy of ritual enactments has made religious sites to rank among the most important attractions throughout the world. In other words, without the Arugba carrying the sacrifice, there is likely to be no festival.

Furthermore, it was observed that many of the participants who desire spiritual fulfilment get actively involved in many of the rituals because of the presence of ritual actors who assure them that the desired spiritual remedy to their issues will be attained. Many of them consult *Iya* Osun concerning life threatening issues. To these spiritually-thirsty faith tourists, she gives counsel through the goddess, while sprinkling Osun water on them. In addition, many Osun priests and priestesses sit at River Osun bank to attend to the spiritual needs of visitors and devotees who approach them for such purpose. Thus, many participate in Osun festival because of the opportunity to seek spiritual counsel from these ritual actors. A participant who patronised one of the priestesses said:

Whatever these women tell you is surely the truth. They look at your hand and answer any question you may ask them concerning your destiny. It is our mother, Osun goddess that reveals things about your life to them. You can consult any one of them for a trial (pers.comm 2016).

Ordinarily these persons are not usually disposed to attend to persons, but Osun festival creates a window of opportunity for many seeking spiritual advice to participate. The interview reports and direct observation revealed that certain symbolic performances by any of these ritual persons

upon Osun River are required, otherwise the prayers appear inefficacious. For instance, water taken from it is adjudged ordinary until the symbolic sacrifices of appeasement and supplication are offered. Even though, both the visitors and locals strongly believe that the water has medicinal and curative powers, it is said to be activated by ritual persons (*Iya Osun, Aworo and Iworo*). According to Ayomide (Osun drummer):

... the potency of the water can only be activated with prayers offered by the priests to the goddess. But during Osun festival, the river is spiritually charged with sacrificial items poured therein. Afterwards water taken out of the river is medicinal (pers.comm 2016).

Therefore, faith-based activities associated with the faith actors intensify the spiritual essence of the ritual, which is one of the pull factors that motivate religious tourists to participate in Osun Osogbo.

Arguably, the sacred grove is the focus of the festival, and therefore, determines and sustains it. From the historical account of the festival, the sacred grove is a meeting point between the Osogbo people and the goddess. A complete worship of the goddess, therefore, takes place in it and, is thus hedged with sanctions of which the ritual actors are the custodians. *Iya Osun*, the intermediary between the goddess and the people, must maintain the sanctity of the grove by keeping pace with the Osun festival and other activities. Her ability to carry out her religious obligations sustains the goddess' presence in the grove. Daily, she attends to the needs of those seeking to consult the goddess. There are countless testimonies by people about their spiritual encounters with the goddess through *Iya Osun*.

*Aworo Osun*, the male chief priest also conducts Osun worship in the grove. He participates in many rituals especially those that concern the king (*Ataoja* of Osogbo). This was because his office was created to take over the ritual duties of the king within the Osun cult, leaving the king mainly with representative functions (Probst, 2004). The creation of the office of *Aworo* was to ensure that no aspect of Osun ritual was neglected by the king. The *Iworos* (priests and priestesses) as earlier stated, are vastly experienced in the worship process. They, therefore, regulate the usage of the Osun River and, it cannot be fetched in their absence, particularly if *Iya Osun* is unavailable. A notable *Iworo* is Susan Wenger, an Austrian, also known as *Adunni Orisa*, who devoted her live to the deity and revived the spiritual sculptures in the sacred grove. In maintaining the spiritual ethos of Osun, the *Arugba* plays a vital role. Usually, sacrifice in Yorubaland is incomplete without a sacrifice bearer ... (Olupona, 2001). Throughout her service years, she is expected to abide by certain rules especially maintaining her virginity.

The Ataoja of Osogbo represents his people before the goddess. He must by history and custom, participate in the Osun festival even if he is a devotee of another religion (Olupona, 2001). For her continued protection over the land, the king must annually commune with her. Osogbo people believe that the attendant peace in the community and, the state at large, is all because of the cordial relationship between them and the goddess. As long they kept their part of the covenant, the goddess keeps hers.

## Conclusion

Osun Osogbo festival is believed to have originated from a covenant enacted between the Osogbo people and Osun goddess. The festival and sacred grove have continuously flourished in Osogboland and Osun State, at large at large, as a result of efforts made in maintaining the authenticity of the event. The originality of the festival is embedded in the numerous rituals inherent in the event, but anchored by designated persons. This brings to the fore, the indispensable role of ritual persons in Osun festival. These persons are responsible for the continuity of the event, and none is more relevant than the other as all the activities combine to make the festival eventful. The commitment of these persons to their chosen tasks helps to maintain cultural and spiritual balance between the goddess, the people (her children) and faith participants from across the globe. The ritual actors always strive to maintain the sanctity of the grove to ensure sustainability. As an Osun devotee said, *if we fail to fulfil our obligations to the goddess, this river would disappear and the goddess will relocate to another abode* (pers.comm, 2016). Therefore, the striving fame of faith-based activities of African Traditional religions, specifically the Osun Osogbo festival of south-western Nigeria can be attributed to the commitment of her ritual actors. Although the aesthetics of the festival would always attract any category of tourists, the spiritual essence imbued in ritual constitute the main pull factor and its authenticity and sustenance are dependent on the concerted roles of the ritual actors.

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