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## **AJE-OLOKUN AS A DEITY FOR SWEARING AMONG THE YORUBA NATIVES**

**Abstract:** Using historical approach and qualitative methods, the paper examines the power of Aje-Olokun as a deity for swearing among the Yoruba natives. The article identified and explained three different methods through which invocation of Aje-Olokun can be done during swearing in order to solve controversial issues with regard to lying and stealing. The consequences of swearing falsely were also discussed. The paper also proposes cultural documentation of the traditional administration of Justice through deities for the preservation of knowledge for future generations. The administration of the traditional swearing methods through deities was advocated to be incorporated in the modern Criminal Justice System. The research investigation of other deities and their relevancies in administration of justice was also recommended.

**Keywords:** Aje-Olokun; Deities; Yoruba Natives; Swearing; Criminal Justice System

### **Introduction**

Yoruba natives believe strongly in the existence of deities. These deities play significant roles in their lives in all ramifications. They seek help for abundance and prosperity from some of these deities and run to them when misfortunes dodged their ways. These people equally looked up to these deities for protection and guidance when important decisions have to be made. The deities also featured in their traditional Criminal Justice System in area of punishment of the offenders and oath taking to settle a controversial issue among them.

Ogun and Sango are prominent gods that can be involved to punish offenders and to take oath when a controversial issue has to be settled (Okunola and Ojo 2012). However, apart from these deities (Ogun and Sango) other deities can also be invoked to settle controversial issues among the Yoruba natives, through oath taking. One of these deities is Aje-Olokun which is acclaimed to be the deity of the ocean. This work, therefore, re-examined Aje-Olo-

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kun as a deity for oath taking among the Yoruba people. The experience and observation show that the invocation of this deity in oath taking is fast dying out among the Yoruba people and therefore, a need to re-examine Aje-Olokun as a deity for oath taking is imperative.

### **Review of the literature**

Aje-Olokun is a deity of the sea and ocean. The deity dwells in an immense palace under the sea (Baudin 1885). Ogundiran (2002) argued that there are indications that Olokun was a deity of the ocean/sea especially among the coastal Yoruba fishing communities before the advent of the Atlantic economy. The cultural attributes and biography of both Okun and Olokun increased with the advent of Atlantic commerce. In summary, the sea beneath the sky is the dwelling place of Olokun which is the deity of wealth and money and which controls all the activities going on beneath the oceans and on the oceans (Akinmade 2005).

The Bini's Origin of Olokun can be traced to Osanobua (the arch-divinity) and Anume, his wife who had three children called (in order of birth): Obiemwen, Olokun, and Ogiuwu. Bini customs establishing 'male seniority' over female promote Olokun to a position of authority over his elder sister Obiemwen. One day Osanobua sent his three children, empowered with his authority, to create the world. At that time the world was an endless expanse of water. When they reached the centre of the watery world, Obiemwen turned over the snail shell and an endless stream of sand poured out. After the earth had been carefully walked on by the chameleon and found firm enough to support life, Osanobua divided the world between his children. Obiemwen was given control over childbirth and agriculture. She was a protector of pregnancy and childbirth. And because of her association with food and fertility, people also appeal to her in times of famine and pestilence. Olokun received power to bestow wealth, and Ogiuwu became the dispenser of death. Osanobua then sent Olokun to the world to become Oba/King of the sea (Mason 1996).

According to Mason (1996), Yoruba legends tell us that Obatala and his wife Odua had two children, Yemoja and Aganju, who married and had a son called Orunga (lofty sky). Orunga raped his mother. In fleeing from his further advances, she fell down and her body began to swell up. Two streams of water gushed from Yemoja's breasts, and her womb burst open. From her womb the following deities were born: Dada, Soponna, Sango, Ogun, Oya, Oba, Orun, Osupa, Olosa and Olokun. Yemoja is the mother of Olokun. Obatala and Odua are Olokun's grandparents: either Aganju or Oranmiyan is credited with being Olokun's father.

Another legend, argued by Dadebo (2003), was that according to Ife oral tradition, Osara and Olokun were bosom friends. Olokun had married Oduduwa for several years without a child. Olokun was acknowledged to be extremely beautiful and wealthy as a result of bead making and trade in beads. She persuaded Osara to marry her husband (Oduduwa). Probably through her, Oduduwa might have children. The marriage between Osara and Oduduwa was blessed with a male child named "Okanbi". As a result, Oduduwa loved Osara dearly to the extent that she accompanied him wherever he went to the annoyance of Olokun. Soon after the birth of Okanbi, jealousy ensued between Osara and Olokun. This annoyed Olokun greatly and she swore never to have anything to do with Osara in life. But Osara promised to follow her wherever she went. According to the oral tradition, Olokun in annoyance, left Ife but Osara followed her as promised, from Ife to Ilesha, from Ilesha to Abeokuta and from Abeokuta to Lagos where Olokun fell down and turned into "Okun" an ocean (see figure 1) and Osara also fell and she turned into "Osa" a lagoon (see figure 2). Olokun, owing to her earlier vow, was still annoyed that she would not have anything to do with Osara.

A critical historical explanation considered Olokun as a man or male within the legends of Bini people while the Yoruba legends considered Olokun as a woman or a female. However, we are not concerned with the gender of the deity but the explanation of the deity as the ruler of the oceans and seas, and deity for swearing.

Olokun is a deity of wealth and riches as explained earlier on. The wealth of the deity came from the manufacturing of beads and trading in beads. Ogundiran (2002) argued that archaeological evidence for the local manufacture of beads at Ile-Ife comes mainly from Olokun grove located about two and half kilometers north of the centre of the ancient city where artifacts such as ceramic crucibles fused with glass and beads in rich variety of blue, green, red, olive-brown, and turquoise colours, and pieces of tuyeres, furnaces pottery, and terracotta sculptures have been found. Ogundiran (2002) argued further, that other evidences of bead manufactured from the grove consist of grooved or dimpled stones that were used for grinding and polishing beads.

Among the Yoruba natives, beads are valuable and precious jewelry used by the rich, chiefs and the kings throughout Yoruba society. Beads (see figures 3,4, and 5) are attributed to Olokun deity which is considered to be the deity in charge of riches, wealth and valuables of life. Olokun is considered to be the god/goddess of wealth, keeper of the rich storehouse of beads, giver of children, owner of a palace of cowries (riches) (see figure 6) beneath the ocean, and the patron-deity of the traders (Ogundiran 2002).

Olokun is given a prominent position among the Yoruba natives. In order to demonstrate the prominence of this deity, gigantic Ori-Olokun cultural edifice, the head of the goddess of the sea, mother of fertility and prosperity, was

commissioned at Mayfair Round about, Ife central local Government in Osun State, Nigeria (Adeshina 2013) and Olokun festival was equally held at Sultan Beach, Badagry, on October 28, 2011. (Adeniyi 2011). Olokun is considered a deity which can bestow Ire Aje (blessing of abundance) on the individual Yoruba natives who consult the deity (Fatumibi n.d).

Finally Olokun is consulted when important but controversial matter is to be clarified. This can be done through swearing using Olokun as a deity. Olokun hates lying and would not tolerate liars. Baudin (1885) argued that Olokun, in a moment of anger, attempted to destroy mankind because of their propensity to lie. He had almost exterminated them when Obatala interfered and forced him back to the sea where he remained chained in his palace forever. From time to time, his effort to break his chains creates the storms on the ocean.

It is from the hatred that this deity has against the liars that makes him to be a strong deity to reckon with when it comes to swearing among the Yoruba people. This was exactly what this article re-examined.

## **Methodology**

Historical approach was used in this research work. Historical approach is being increasingly used by social scientists today in Sociology, Anthropology, Political Science, and Economics, likewise the Historians (Schutt 2004). History entails looking at the past in an effort to learn what happened. Sociology as a social science looks at historical happenings within their social contexts to discover the reasons why things happened and very significantly, to assess what their social significance was and is (Tischler 2002).

The underneath idea on historical approach is that our present forms of social life, our customs or ways of living, have their roots entrenched in the past and that they can be explained by tracing them back to their source (Inkeles 1987).

Qualitative method was equally used to compliment this historical approach. Soft data in the forms of photos were employed as sources of information and data for this study (Adler and Clark 1999). Content analysis was used in the process of analyzing the data.

## **Swearing through Aje-Olokun Deity**

Invocation of deities for punishment and oath swearing/taking is a popular phenomenon among the Yoruba people. This invocation may require some rituals to be performed by the priests of the deities concerned. For instance, invocation of Ayelala does involve some rituals (Larry 2013). However, some invocations of other deities may not involve the intervention of the priests or

elaborate rituals. Aje-Olokun's invocation does not usually involve the elaborate rituals or priest or priestess's involvement.

There are three principal ways through which Aje-Olokun can be invoked during swearing

- (1) By putting some coins in a calabash which contains water.
- (2) By biting a coin with teeth.
- (3) By biting a right hand little finger.

These three methods shall be examined in this study with photographic illustrations. However, it is very important to mention here that lying (especially lying that has to do with the dispute on money) and stealing are the principal things which may lead to the invocation of Aje-Olokun among the Yoruba people.

Lying is considered an attempt to deceive by speaking what is not true. It is not allowed in the traditional religion, and perpetration of it is a crime not only against human beings but also against the supernatural beings. Traditional Africans invoke curses on liars, while the divinities too condemn them. Lying is a corporate offence. Liars actually know the truth but refused to say the truth. The Odu-Aji-Oghe oracle has this to say about liars and lying:

Those who call efuru efuru, all right, our father will be looking at them from heaven. Those who call efuru efuru, all right father will be looking at them from heaven. All right those who call sour what is sweet, all right our father will be looking at them from heaven. All right, thus declares the oracle to liars and deceiver (Adewale 1994).

The offence of lying and deception is a great crime among the Yoruba people. Therefore, invocation of gods/goddesses may be required to authenticate the sayings and the dealings among these people through oath taking. Lying is an important offence that Aje-Olokun punishes.

Stealing is another crime or offence in which case Aje-Olokun can be called upon to intervene. Stealing among the traditional Africans is a shameful offence. It is a crime to steal anything in the community and a thief is a disgrace to his relations. Traditional Africans perform rituals to detect thieves and commit robbers to the gods for punishment, while in some instances the thieves are revealed publicly by the gods or made to confess publicly or return the stolen property to a place where it can be seen. Stealing tarnishes the reputation and integrity of the family of the thief, and traditional Africans strive very much to protect the good name and image of the family (Adewale 1994).

The Odu-Ogbe – Ale Oracle warns against stealing:

If the earthly king does not see you, the heavenly king (God) is looking at you. Thus declares the oracle to the one who steals under the cover of darkness, who says that the earthly king does not see him (Adewale 1994).

Stealing, therefore, is another serious offence among the African Yoruba natives, in which oath taking through Aje-Olokun may be invoked when goods or articles have been stolen, especially when suspects can be made to take Aje-Olokun oath.

As explained earlier on Aje-Olokun can be invoked through:

(1) Putting or soaking coins in a calabash of water: This involves pouring some water into a calabash and putting coins in the water (see figure 7). After this, an invocation of Aje-Olokun will be done to empower the water with the coins soaked inside it. The suspect (s) would then be asked to swear to claim his/her innocence on the matter that is to be determined by such swearing and to pronounce evils on him/her if he/she has sworn falsely. The suspects would then be asked to drink such water.

(2) By biting a coin with teeth: Another method of invoking Aje-Olokun during swearing is by biting a coin with teeth. This method involved a suspect swearing on a coin when the power of Aje-Olokun had been invoked on such a coin. The suspect would be asked to pronounce evils on himself/herself if he/she has sworn falsely over the matter that has been brought under swearing. The suspect would then be asked to bite the coin with his/her upper and lower teeth (see figure 8)

(3) Finally, biting of the little finger are associated with Aje-Olokun (in some individuals little flesh outgrow on their little fingers as symbol of Aje (see figure 9 for an example). Such individuals are believed to have good supernatural power that would make retailer of goods and wares sell their goods and wares quickly if such individuals were the first to buy from such retailers of goods and wares. Therefore, little fingers are the symbols of Aje-Olokun.

The process of invoking swearing under this method involves the suspect pronouncing curses of swearing on himself/ herself if he/she has dealt falsely with the matter under swearing. Having done this, the suspect would be requested to bite the little finger on the right hand with both the upper teeth and lower teeth (see figure 10 for example). However, the potency of these methods of swearing with Aje Olokun has been eroded by western culture.

### **Consequences of swearing falsely with Aje-Olokun**

The three methods explained earlier on may look simple and inefficient before some people. However, it is neither the simplicity of the materials involved in the swearing that matters nor the processes of invocation, but the power conjured during the processes of invocation and swearing which empowered the whole process.

Any suspect who swears falsely with Aje-Olokun is bound to face the consequences. The evils he/she has pronounced through the swearing would automa-

tically come upon him or her. Apart from this, poverty and total destruction are the important punishments that are usually meted out to those who swear falsely under Aje-Olokun swearing. The deity is the owner of wealth and prosperity. The deity punishes the guilty person by withholding riches and prosperity from the person. In most of the occasion, such guilty person may go bankrupt. Hence, people would not go against the Aje-Olokun so as not to incur its wrath.

There is a prayer among Yoruba natives to justify its power of wealth distribution as thus:

*Aje-Olokun Ogunguniso. Jowo je ki n ni o lowo ni o; ma je ki n ni o lorun Meaning: Aje-Olokun Ogunguniso. Let me have you in my hand as wealth; not on my neck as debt. Again there is a saying: Eni to bani ti oro Aje ko to pon; jeyin jeyin lo n yolenu. Meaning: He who says Aje's matter is not important; is actually suffering from tooth ache. These two important sayings among the Yoruba natives show the importance of Aje-Olokun as a deity among these people.*

### Conclusion and Recommendations

Yoruba natives are known to fear and respect their indigenous gods and goddesses, especially before westernization. These gods/goddesses took prominent positions among these people. They were consulted for guidance, protection, prosperity, intervention during natural disaster and during the administration of justice in the society.

Aje-Olokun is a deity that can be invoked during administration of justice through its potent swearing. This had been known to be effective and powerful in the determination of matters on justice. The methods have been discussed, of the ways to invoke this deity in swearing. However, the act of swearing with Aje-Olokun is dying out speedily among the Yoruba natives. This is due to westernization and the acceptance of foreign religions among these natives. Hence, the young people and the children are no longer familiar with the administration of justice through Aje-olokun or any other gods or goddesses in Yoruba land again.

As for recommendation, therefore, we advocate for the documentation of this invocation of Aje-Olokun and the other deities in area of administration of justice for the preservation of this important aspect of Yoruba life. This would ensure that this is passed from generation to generation.

Secondly, we advocate the incorporation of Aje-Olokun swearing under the modern criminal justice system. Swearing with Aje-Olokun in courts of law and other official swearing are recommended to curb the frivolous swearing during court trials and official public swearing of public officials.

Finally, we recommend research investigation into other deities and their relevance in criminal justice system of the traditional Yoruba natives before

the coming of the white men and see ways through which they can be beneficial to the present day criminal justice system.

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Figure 1. The Ocean at Lagos State Nigeria. This is the Body of Water that Olokun Turned to When She Fell Down. Source: Researcher's Survey 2013.



Figure 2. The Lagoon at Lagos State, Nigeria. The Body of Water Which Oloso Turned Into When She Fell Down. Source: Researcher's Survey, 2013.



Figure 3. Traditional Beads of Various Kinds.Olokun Manufactured and Traded in These Kinds of Beads. Source: Researcher's Survey, 2013.



Figure 4. Traditional Beads of Various Kinds.Olokun Manufactured and Traded in These Kinds of Beads. Source: Researcher's Survey,2013.



Figure 5. Traditional Beads of Various Kinds. Olokun Manufactured and Traded in These Kinds of Beads. Source: Researcher's Survey, 2013.



Figure 6. Cowries: The Money Being Spent in the Ancient Days. Aje-Olokun is the Custodian of These Cowries of Wealth and Give People at Will. Source: Researcher's Survey, 2013.



Figure 7. Calabash, Which Contains Water and Coins. These Are Materials for the Invocation and Swearing With Aje- Olokun Deity. Source: Researcher's Survey, 2013.



Figure 8. A Girl Biting A Coin With Her Teeth as a Way of Swearing With Aje- Olokun. Source: Researcher's Survey, 2013.



Figure 9. Arrows Showing Both Little Fingers With Aje Flesh. People With this Flesh on Their Little Fingers Have the Fortune to Make Sellers Sell All their Goods Quickly. Little Fingers Are Attributed With Aje Deity. Source: Researcher's Survey, 2013.



Figure 10. A Girl Biting Her Right Hand Little Finger as a Way of Swearing With Aje-Olokun. Source: Researcher's Survey, 2013

Primljeno: 09.07.2013.

Prihvaćeno: 20.01.2014.

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**AÐE OLOKUN KAO BOG ZAKLINJANJA KOD JORUBA  
NATIVNOG STANOVNIŠTVA**

Koristeći se istorijskim pristupom i kvalitativnim metodom, ovaj rad istražuje moć Ađe Olokuna kao božanstva zaklinjanja među Joruba nativnim stanovništvom. U radu su identifikovana i objašnjena tri različita načina na koje prizivanje Ađe Olokuna može biti izvršeno tokom zaklinjanja koje treba da služi da razreši kontroverze u vezi sa laganjem i krađom. Posledice lažnog zaklinjanja su takođe uzete u obzir. Članak takođe preporučuje dokumentovanje tradicionalnih praksi deljenja pravde kroz božanstva kako bi ova kulturna znanja bila sačuvana za buduće generacije. Preporučeno je da primena tradicionalnih metoda zaklinjanja božanstvima bude inkorporirana u moderni pravni sistem, kao i istraživanje drugih božanstava i njihove relevancije za sprovođenje pravde.

**Ključne reči:** Ađe-Olokun, bižanstva, Joruba nativno stanovništvo, zaklinjanje, pravni sistem.