

**FOOD AS A RITUAL, MOUTH AS A DEITY:  
THE PLACE OF FEAST IN THE YORUBA CONCEPT OF VITALITY**

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the triangular relationship among the spiritual, the human, and nature and their interaction on the vitality of the cosmos among the Yoruba people of Africa. It examines the place of feasting as a ritual phenomenon. It shows the close interlinks between physical bodily parts and the metaphysical bodily parts for example, physical Orí (Outer head) is seen by the indigenous Yoruba people as being controlled by the metaphysical Orí (Inner head). The paper is focused by the phrase; Òrìsà l'enu ojojúmó ní gb'ebo l'ówó eni: The mouth is a deity, it receives (as a gift) food/sacrifice everyday! I take this aphorism to represent the Yoruba understanding that the Spiritual, the Human, and the Nature are linked through Food which provides vitality to the cosmos.

To an indigenous Yoruba person, the natural elements in food are claimed to have some spiritual existence capable of vitalizing the body cells and organs. So many Yoruba proverbs, pithy sayings, and songs show the vitality and the potential significant of food. It is the reason therefore that African people, especially Yoruba expend their energies to get food by all means. Among the Yoruba, foods and drinks go to the mind as well as the body. This is clearly shown in another Yoruba aphorism which says Oúnje l'òré àwò. Food is a friend of the skin (beauty). That is, food makes the body looks attractive.

On the other hand, the Yoruba conceive of each of the human parts a spiritual element, thus the mouth as it relates to food and feeding is also given a prominent place in ritual observance. Mouth is not just a physiological organ meant for consumption of food or for mere communication it is seen as a deity that commands reference, worship and sacrifice. The attempt here is to examine the indigenous conception of the mouth as exposed in some Yoruba oral literary genres namely Ifa literary corpus, proverbs, and songs. Of a particular concern in this paper also, is the role the mouth plays in ensuring that the vitality of life is not impaired by any means. Unfortunately, there is a scanty material on this topic; this makes its literature review a difficult task. It is therefore hoped that the essay will rely mostly on oral interview and the sayings and songs of the people. I am presenting this paper based on three dimensions. One, as an indigenous person who has lived most part of my life among the people witnessing their ritual

practices and their interpretations; two, as a student of Religion who has undertaken a Master degree in Biblical Hermeneutic and now coming across the ocean with the weapon of translating and interpreting these ritual actions, and three, now as a Graduate student in Harvard Divinity School, I am presently developing a tentative interpretation, based on my understanding of Victor Turner's Ritual Practices. With this information I hope to contribute to scholarship on this important aspect of human ontology.

## **Introduction**

Yoruba believe that, *Bí ounjẹ bá ti kúrò nínú ìṣé, ìṣé búrṣe*; if food is given to the poor man, he forgets his poverty. This implies that if a person is well fed, he thinks less about his poverty. Food is one of the important basic necessities of life. Food is very vital for adequate growth of the body cells and organs. It has also been noted that hunger and thirst are the basis of human quest for food and drink (Soyinka, 2002). It is one of the reasons why human beings expend their energies to get it in everyday life. Food is needed for livingness, work and any kind of physical activities. Thus a person who does not feed well cannot perform optimally in any given assignment. Well balanced food makes the body look attractive and healthy. Good food that is eaten at appropriate time reduces the risk of exposure to sicknesses and diseases. Apart from this, food also plays important role in ritual. Food is used as a means of prolonging one's life especially if it is used in form of sacrifice. Foods are usually offered to placate the angers of deities and human beings. Thus Yoruba will say, *'Ó je epò mi, o je iyò mi kò leè pa mí mó*. He has eaten my palm oil and my salt he cannot kill me anymore. Potency of food to manipulate people is clearly seen in one of the Yoruba proverbs which is usually used in a derogatory terms as *"Òle t'orí àmàlà 'bá won gbé òkú r'Òyó; Ó torí iyán bá won gbódó r'oko*. A lazy man because of yam flour helped them carry the dead to Oyo town; and because of pounded yam helped them carry pounding pestle and mortar to the farm. Food is so important that it could also be used to manipulate and hypnotize people. A lot of men's lives have been messed up by those who were not their wives through the usage of the weapon of food.

## **Food as Ritual**

Whitehead has observed that ritual is the earliest form of religious beliefs. He held that ritual dates back beyond the dawn of history (Whitehead 1926:20). Ritual can also be discerned in animals. It is pointed out that period between 1970 and 1998 have seen the result of a growing awareness of the importance of ritual and the appearance of a large body of theoretical studies in the area (Ògúngbilé 2002:42). The imposing character of ritual and ritual actions in the lives of Yoruba people cannot be overemphasized. Many scholars of religion have attempted the definitions of ritual and some have gone as far as explaining it in clear and lucid terms.

Victor Turner for example was quoted to have said:

I like to think of ritual essentially as performance, enactment, not primarily as rules or rubrics. The rules "frame" the ritual process, but the ritual process transcends its frame. A river needs banks or it will be a dangerous flood, but banks without a river epitomize aridity. (ibid. 44)

Through the inspiration received from the writing of Victor Turner, Meyerhof defined ritual as "an act or conscious actions intentionally conducted by a group of people employing one or more symbols in a repetitive, formal, precise, highly stylized fashion"(ibid.45).

A ritual is also defined as a set of actions, performed mainly for their symbolic value, which is prescribed by a religion or by the traditions of a community. A ritual may be performed at regular intervals, or on specific occasions, or at the discretion of individuals or communities. It may be performed by a single individual, by a group, or by the entire community; in arbitrary places, or in places especially reserved for it; either in public, in private, or before specific people. A ritual may be restricted to a certain subset of the community, and may enable or underscore the passage between religious or social states.

The purposes of rituals are varied; they include compliance with religious obligations or ideals, satisfaction of spiritual or emotional needs of the practitioners, strengthening of social bonds, demonstration of respect or submission, stating one's affiliation, obtaining social acceptance or approval for some event or, sometimes, just for the pleasure of the ritual itself (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ritual>)

These definitions show that regular performance of activities come under ritual, thus one is left with no doubt that food is a ritual action which is performed on day-to-day basis. It is an action which cannot be done away with in man's scheme of things. The range of food from three meals prescription in most African countries especially in Nigeria to regular but smaller meals in the Western World enter into the category of ritualized feeding. Because of the centrality of food in the lives of human beings, it becomes a perfect vehicle for ritual. Food is more important than any other essential things man needs in life namely: sex, clothing, shelter, and air.<sup>1</sup>

Robin Fox also alluded to this fact when he says that; "We have to eat; eating makes us feel good; it is more important than sex. To ensure genetic survival the sex urge need to be satisfied a few times in a lifetime; the hunger urge must be satisfied every day". (Fox, [http://www.sirc.org/publik/food\\_and\\_eating\\_11.html](http://www.sirc.org/publik/food_and_eating_11.html)) Again while sex is a private and an action between two consenting people, food is a social thing because it is a group event.

Man becomes incapacitated if there is no food in the body to keep going on. Thus Yoruba will say Ebi kii wo'nú, kii òrò míi óo'wòò. If hunger comes into the stomach, no other thing can enter. This could be interpreted to mean; Hunger and reasoning are not bedfellows. Food has been used on many occasions to placate humans and gods in Yoruba cosmic world. It has been shown clearly that this habit is not restricted to Yoruba world alone it is also found in other cultures of the world. Food ritual is central to most religions and can take various forms and modes from one denomination to another. It has been shown in Yoruba land that whenever gods or ancestors are angry, sacrifice can be used to placate the god or gods in question. Wándé Abimbólá declares that "Through Òrúnmilà, the mouthpiece of the gods and the ancestors, it is always possible to find out when and for what reason the supernatural powers are angry. When they are angry, they can always be appeased with a (food) sacrifice". (Abimbólá, 1976:151). This aspect will be dealt with more in the latter part of this essay. Some deities have misbehaved in the absence of food during pang of hunger. In one of the Yoruba mythologies, Òrìsà oko (agricultural god) was said to have misbehaved by setting a whole yam plantation on fire because of hunger or think about Ògún who because of his implacable thirst killed all the people who had just finished drinking palm wine but refused to lay the gourd side way. Lack of food can make a man to misbehave and do what is contrary to his moral belief as clearly manifested in one Yoruba proverb; Ebi kò pa imàlè óní òun ò kii j'ááyá, ebi pa Súlè ó j'òbo. When a Muslim was

not hungry he detested monkey but when Sule's (a Muslim) hunger became unbearable he ate gorilla.

At the time of preparation, particular attention is paid to each category of food to be prepared. Since it is both mythical and ritual actions, it must imitate the primordial practice as Mircea Eliade has rightly observed in his book "The Myth of Eternal Return" (Eliade Mircea, 1971 & 2005; 34). "Some foods are prescribed by the primordial deities as their preferred choice and in other not to invite the wraths of these deities; there is a need to be conscientious about their preparations. For instance, it has been generally noted that; Ògún (the god of iron or war) does not eat any other food apart from roasted yam, palm oil and palm wine. Dog is the special meat of Ògún; Specially made bean cake, special vegetable, beans and pounded yam are for Òsun, snail is for Obàtálá, kolanut, chicken and goat are for Ifa, Some Òrisàs have their special food taboos; Èsù does not eat palm kernel oil; Sango does not eat kolanut, it is bitter kola that he eats. Specially delegated people are chosen among the iyàwó òrisà (wives of Òrisà) to do the preparations of these foods because they are sacred foods that need sacred hands. According to the information I gathered<sup>2</sup>; five days intervals the priestess of Òsun, fetches crystal clean water to take care of Òsun's children. When the priestess of Òsun gets to specified water dam, she would pluck the Òmù a special leave that makes water clean and drop it inside the water and then wait until the water is crystal clean. She would then fetch the Òsun water; it is after this that other people could fetch their own water. But before the water could be made clear, the priestess of the Òsun, would be chanting praise poetry in honour of Òsun, before she gets the water through a small calabash into the pot. The Òmù could now be removed thereafter. The water should not be boiled but must retain its coolness. Every five day the children who were gotten from Òsun and their parents must come with acceptable different kinds of food and drinks. These foods are meant for both the adherents and the poor people who could not afford to feed themselves. It is usually a time of big celebration. At this time singing and dancing especially choreography would commence with the Lúkorìgi drum. Thus apart from the ritual action that this connote it is also a period of socialization for all and sundries. It is a time when all families of the adherents are invited to come and have some fun and to enjoy themselves. Every kind of food served at this time of ritual promises all the participants their balanced diets. The pounded yam, the mashed beans, and the chicken, the vegetables and the goats are all present to satisfy the hunger of all participants. Another example will suffice here, the first day of the Yoruba four-day of the week is devoted to Ifá by the Ifá priests to worship Ifá. The day is known as ojò awo (the day of Ifá divination). On this day, Ifá priests assemble at the house of their local chief priest; there they eat, drink and make sacrifices to Ifá. Chanting of excerpts from Ifá literary corpus is very common at such gathering (Abimbólá 1976:15). This type of ritual action can be noticed in other deities in the Yoruba cosmic milieu. Ògún Obàtálá, Oya, Sàngó, and others have their own special days of ritual sacrifices.

### **Food as important Vehicle for Communication**

When Arnold van Gennep started his research on Ritual actions he noticed that there are different levels of passages in the life of a man. Right from his birth, man continues to experience this phenomenon till his death. This passage from one level of existence into the other is what van Gennep calls "Rites of Passage" (van Gennep, 1961). These passages of life are: birth, teenage, marriage, and death. Although in some communities, the fifth level of passage has been included; the elderhood level among the Oñdó Yoruba sub ethnic group in the southwestern

part of Nigeria. Each level of development still has three stages namely; separation, transitional and incorporation stages (ibid, pp10-11). It is usually at the incorporation stage that ritual performance is done. Although, it is not uncommon, to feed people, at the transitional stage in some Yoruba community. On the seventh or eighth day of child naming ceremony, foods are prepared for the people who in turn will come with gifts, and rejoice with the family of the new baby. But before the eating and the drinking start, there are usually symbolic food elements that are made ready by the parents of the new baby, which are kola nut, bitter kola, palm oil, water, alligator pepper, sugar cane and salt.<sup>3</sup> All these symbolize and epitomize something. They are taken one by one by the presiding priest who will use each object to say powerful prayers for the new baby. In this way the child's vitality is being reinforced as a matter of principle. It is believed by the Yoruba that there are vital elements and forces in each food material present which is capable of reinforcing the child throughout life. The ritual action has implication for both the parents and the child and the larger community where the child is born. Thus Yoruba will say; E jé ká se b'áà tí seé, kó bà leè rí bíí tíí rí; meaning "let us do it the way it has usually been done so that it will be exactly the way it should be". Some family goes to the extent of doing more serious rituals at the midnight. The ritual involves only the initiate (the new baby) and the family members who are performing a formal initiation rite to incorporate the child into the larger family. The Aláàpíni family which is one of the chieftaincy families in the Oyo kingdom (Oyo State) does this both at Oyo town and in the Diasporas.<sup>4</sup> As long as you belong to the Aláàpíni family, you are bound to do this ritual before you could be regarded as their own. There are usually special kinds of food which range from roasted beans, roasted corn, and palm kernel oil, to palm wine which must be present. The ritual in this family serves two important purposes; apart from serving as a vitalizing force, it also serves as a return to primordial origin of cyclical renewal of cosmogonic time for all the initiates. It is participation with the family god in ritual meal. According to Mircea Eliade;

Reality is acquired solely through participation; everything that lacks exemplary model is "meaningless", i.e., it lacks reality. Men would thus have tendency to become archetypal and paradigmatic. This tendency may appear well paradoxical, in the sense that the man of a traditional culture sees himself as real only to the extent that he ceases to be himself (for a modern observer) and is satisfied with imitating and repeating the gestures of another... (Eliade, 1965 & 1971; p. 34)

This practice might be different in other families who have different traditions from this one. But the aim is basically the same whichever it is done in these various families, to reinvigorate and to revitalize. The purpose is also to incorporate and to renew their allegiance to the family god (gods). This ritual is also present in the Christian religion especially with reference to the ritual performance of the Eucharist (Holy Communion); Holy Communion incorporates new members and reinvigorates the allegiance of the devotees to the Lord Jesus Christ who instituted the ceremony of Holy Communion. Thus for a Christian to be well incorporated into the family of Christ, he must as a necessity partake in the Lord's Table. It goes without saying that this practice is common to all religious traditions of the World. It is the core of every religious tradition, and no religion can be meaningful outside its food ritual performance. Food ritual or ritual food binds the adherents more to the gods or deities. At least for the most part this is the immediate that warrants urgent attention at every feast before the remote is tackled. It communicates a message that goes beyond sense data-from the divine to the humans.

Food ritual taboo can also serve as identity marker of ethnic divide. Imposition of a taboo of not eating a giant rat by Ondo sub Yoruba ethnic group is an important example that readily comes to mind here. It was said that this animal has shown benevolence to the fore bears of the Ondo people. This comes under Freudian's theory of Totem and Taboo (Freud, *ibid*). Freud noticed among the primitive people that the purpose of imposing ban on totemic animal was as a result of the guilt suffered by the children for killing their father. In order to come out of this guilt, a totemic animal must be chosen to represent the father that was killed and such animal must not be killed except once in a year when it would be killed and eaten in the ceremonial ritual of remembering their father. Freud saw this as a "Sacred meal" (Freud, 1912). Apart from this, we also see other kinds of "food ritual as means of communication. The various festival feasts as religious feasts like Christmas, Easter, Ed-il kabir, Ifa annual festival, Osun, Ogun, Sango and the rest of them are trying to communicate important information to the people- the adherents and the novice. The time frame of these festivals marks them off from other times in the cyclical calendrical events. The New Yam festival among some sub ethnic groups in Yoruba land communicates a signification of the repetition of cosmogonic time (Eliade, *ibid*: 51 &60). For example nobody is expected to eat yam in Ile-Ife until the king has eaten first.<sup>5</sup>

Another important communication we notice with the food ritual especially during naming, wedding or burial ceremonies is how much a person or group of persons can display affluence. The people doing the ceremony are not just killing two, three, four or more cows for the fun of it but they are trying to communicate to the guests how much they could cater for their gustatory quests. In Yoruba land in particular the more a person or group of people's display their wealth at any ceremony especially burial ceremony would tell how much of blessings they are going to get from the dead. Thus an aphorism; A child is not reliable a dead buried by his child (ren) is the only one who has procreated.

### **Mouth as a Deity**

Mouth is an anatomical organ which is bothered by two muscular flaps usually regarded as upper and lower lips. Inside the mouth there is the tongue and the well layout bony substances called teeth. The mouth is bothered internally by superior palate and inferiorly by the lower palate. Actually it is in between the upper and lower palate that we have our tongue (Basmajian, 1980; 51). Mouth is the first passage of food substances into the body. It then becomes a very important organ in the anatomical make up of the bodily structure. Apart from serving as an organ for eating, it is also a very important organ for doing such voluntary and involuntary reflex actions as speech, yawning, biting, crying, and laughing and of breathing. Mouth plays important role in ensuring the adequate growth of the body and contribute immensely to the spiritual and physical vitality of the body. Important thing to note about the Mouth is that it is located in the most important part of the body – the head that houses the brain which controls every activity of the body. The head also carries such important organs as eyes, nose and ears. All these combine together define what a man looks like and what identity he carries. Thus Yoruba will say *Bí orí bá kúrò l'órùn ara bùsè*; meaning, Body is useless when the head is off. But the emphasis of this thesis is on the importance of the mouth and the specific role it plays in ensuring human vitality apart from food passage through it.

To the Yoruba, mouth is not just seen as mere anatomical organ, but the belief that a person becomes what he wants to become in life through the agency of his mouth is here argued. There are various proverbs that point to this fact. Such proverbs as:

1. Èbìtì ò p' eèrà, ká se pèlèpèlé enu aráyé l'ebo. Trap (usually set for animals) cannot kill an ant, but the mouth of humans are very dangerous, so they must be placated.
2. Enu àgbà l'obì tíí gbó. It is in the mouth of the elders that we know whether kola nut is ripe or not.
3. Enu eni laa fi ko m'eje. It is with one's mouth that one rejects what one does not like. This saying is common in Ile-Ife.
4. Ìwòfà lenu, ibi olówóo rẹ́ bá rán an níí lo. Mouth is like a slave it goes to wherever it is sent.
5. Òrìsà lenu, ojojúmó níí gb'ebo lówó eni. Mouth is a deity; it gets sacrifice on daily basis. These and others are ways Yoruba used proverbs to describe mouth.
6. Enu ni Ìfàá wà. Favour or fortune is in mouth.
7. Enu òrófó níí p'òrófó ó bí omo kan soso óní ilé òun ti kún fófófó. An African sparrow kills itself by its mouth; it gives birth to only one child and start to proclaim that it has plenty of children.

Another way is through phraseology, Ó ró enu. He pacifies the mouth. This is usually done when a person has put himself or herself under a curse because of an unfavourable condition, to avert the consequence, they would tell him or her to go and placate his or her mouth. This is usually done by the offer of special sacrifice of prescribed materials.

Ó f'enu ko. He has misused his mouth. This is usually said when a man has apparently offended a powerful person through his careless talk.

I try to go into this detail to show how efficacious mouth is in effecting vitality of the whole human body and to show that the importance of mouth to Yoruba transcends mere eating and mere speech. It is a store house of making and unmaking of a Yoruba person.

It is not out of place, to say that many things or duties that a typical Yoruba man could not have done or carried out ordinarily were done because of the fear of what would people say. This happens as a result of the society one finds himself or herself. Yoruba people are community of well bonded people. They are closely knit together and they are not as individualistic as the Western society who cares less about what happens to his or her neighbour. Yoruba people are always poking their noses to other people's matter to a fault. This could range from mere buying of cloth to wearing it, from looking for a wife to how she should be married and so on and so forth. Yoruba people are incurably meddlers in other people's matters. Yoruba believe that "I am because others are". But there is a sense in which this bondedness has helped a lot. It has helped Yoruba people to be as cohesive as clayey soil. Mouth plays important role in maintaining this cohesion. In Africa divinatory system, mouth is the most important organ needed especially with reference to Yoruba Ifa divinatory system. (Abimbola 1976:34). A client must muster some words to the Ibo (this is the cowries shell and apiece of bone) as soon as he or she gets to the Babaláwo (the Ifa priest), who will afterward consult Ifa on his or her behalf. After the divination has been carried out, it is now left for the priest to prescribe the type of sacrifice the client will do. It can range from a very powerful ritual sacrifice to as small as buying food materials to give to the less privilege. The important thing about sacrifice in Yoruba land is that Esu's portion should not be forgotten so as to make one's prayer to be answered (Abimbola *ibid*). The importance of mouth is clearly manifested in one of the stories told about a farmer who went to

Ifa priest to ask for the help of Ifa so that his farm could produce bountifully. Ifa prescribed for him after the divination that he would need to sacrifice to his head, the earth, Eégún (ancestor god) and Òòsánlá (creation god). He did all the sacrifices but to know avail. He went back to the Ifa priest and ask why his sacrifices have not brought for him the fortunes he was asking for. The Ifa priest then asked him whether he made sacrifice to Olubobotiribo, Baba ebo, (Olubobotiribo, the father of sacrifice), he said no. He asked what Olubobotiribo meant. The Ifa priest told him that mouth of people is so called. Then the Ifa priest started to say:

Agbongbon, awo won l'ode Iloree;  
Agbongbon, their Ifa priest at Ilore  
Agbayangidi, awo ode Ijesa;  
Agbayangidi, the Ifa priest of Ijesa  
Okunrin yangidi yangidi  
The hefty man  
Ni won-on di ni atipa  
Who was always tied hands and feet.  
A dia fun Oloyimefun  
Ifas divination was performed for Oloyimefun  
Yoo bu'le Olowu rook  
When he would take the land of Olowu to farm upon  
Won ni o bogun ile  
He was asked to make sacrifice to the Egungun of his household.  
O boogun ile  
He made sacrifice to the Egungun of his household.  
Eboo re o fin  
But his sacrifice was not accepted  
Won ni o b'osa oja  
He was asked to make sacrifice to sacrifice to the god of the  
market.  
O boosa oja  
He made sacrifice to the god of the market  
Eboo re o da  
But his sacrifice was not accepted  
Oosa oja o gba  
The market god refused his sacrifice  
Won ni o bori  
He was asked to make sacrifice to his Ori  
O bori, Ori pa  
He made sacrifice to his head repeatedly  
Until his head became bald.

Won ni o bole, Ile lu  
He was asked to make sacrifice to Earth  
Until he created a hole in the earth

Won ni o bo Olubobotiribo, baba ebo,  
He was asked to sacrifice to make sacrifice  
To Olubobotiribo, the father of sacrifices,

O ni oun mo pe baba eni leegun ile  
He said he knew that one's father  
Is the Egungun of one's household.

Oun mo pe iya eni loosa oja .  
He said he knew that one's mother  
Is the goddess of the market.

O ni oun m'ori lori o,  
He said he knew Ori to be one's head,

Oun mo'le nile  
And he knew ile to be the earth

O ni oun o mo ohun ti i je  
But he said that he did not know

Olubobotiribo, baba ebo.  
What was called Olubobotiribo, the father of sacrifices

Won ni enu  
They told him that people's mouths

Enu ni i je Olubobotiribo, baba ebo.  
People's mouths were referred to as Olubobotiribo,  
The father of sacrifices.

Nje kin la mbo n' Ife?  
What is it that we worship in Ife?

Enu won la mbo n'Ifé, Enuu won  
It is their mouths that we worship at Ife, Their mouths

Mo fun' gba mo f'awo  
I have given to those overhere, I have given to those overthere

Enuu won,  
Their mouths

Enu won ko ma le ri mi ba ja  
Their mouths can no longer fight against me.  
Their mouths cannot

Mo wale, Mo, wana  
I have given to those in my household,

I have given to passers-by.  
Enuu won  
Their mouths cannot  
Enuu won koma le rimi ba ja  
Their mouths can no longer fight against me  
Enuu won  
Their mouths cannot.( Abimbola, 1976:37-40)

This Ifá verse taken from Òkànràn méjì could be interpreted to mean that a person cannot live alone and enjoy his life. There must be people with whom a very good interaction and enjoyment are made in the continuum of life.

The importance of deifying mouth is also seen in the story I was told about sudden appearance of special visitors to Òrúnmilà's house one day<sup>66</sup>. These visitors were three in number; their identities were not known to wife of Òrúnmilà. But immediately Orunmila came back from a certain journey, on noticing them he ordered his wife to quickly prepare good food and make ready very good drinks. The wife of Òrúnmilà did exactly the way his husband told her. The visitors ate to their fill and they left. On seeing that they had left, Òrúnmilà told his wife that the three visitors were Arun( disease), Ikú (death) and Èsù ( the trickster).(See also Wande Abimbola. 1976: 187) Yoruba believe that feeding unknown guest(s) at times ward away evil from us. It is likely that Èsù the Yoruba trickster must have invited his other two friends to test Òrúnmilà and to know how hospitable he was. The three friends are some of the most dreaded ajogun in Yoruba land. When I was younger, my father and his friends were found of singing a song especially during a particular feast in our compound which goes thus "Olójó mo rubo enuu, Olójó mo rubo enu. Ikú o gboogun, Enu o ran Olojo, Olojo mo rubo enu. Olojo; the owner of the day I make sacrifice to the mouths, the death could not be stopped by medicine. Mouth could not placate the Olojo, Olojo I make sacrifice to the mouths."<sup>7</sup> The song did not make any meaning to me then, It was in the course of this research I now came to understand that the sacrifice that were being made in form of feasts in those days were for the people and were meant to ward off death. Little wonder, Yoruba will say nitori alaseju laa se gun'yan t'opo. It is because of difficult people to please we prepare excess pounded yam.

### **Feast and Vitality in Yoruba Society**

African people in general and Yoruba people in particular make feasting a very important aspect of their lives. This is one of the very important ways African give hospitality to the people especially important guests. As it has rightly been observed; "African traditions of hospitality are deep and sincere, Africans have a tremendous spirit of welcoming in their culture.(Healey & Sybertz, 1996:168) Yoruba people believe that people live to eat and eat to live. Eating and drinking are regarded by Yoruba as part of what keep the body and the soul together. If a survey is carried out properly, it will be discovered that Yoruba people are the happiest community on earth. Even if a Yoruba man or woman is living in tattered penury, and could not boast of a penny, he could still feed very well and could always be assured of his or her square meal. Our ceremonies and our social activities reveal this. If we consider our annual, monthly, weekly and seasonal rituals we will know that they entail elaborate eating and drinking. Yoruba people share food within their community. This is an age long practice among Yoruba people. It is a taboo for a Yoruba person to feast alone or to feast alone with his immediate family in the traditional

Yoruba society. Yoruba will say “Eni ba d’aye je yo da iya je. If you enjoy your life alone you will surely die alone. As small as Birthday ceremony is, many people normally come in their large numbers from every nook and cranny of the society to both rejoice with celebrant to satisfy their hunger and quench their thirst. It is also an auspicious time to bless the celebrant and to say special prayers for him or her. The invited and the uninvited are usually found in any organized feast. Local jesters and local poets, local drummers and singers who are not solicited are necessary part of the crowd. Some after eating at the place of feast will still find a way of taking part of the food home. Ile –Ife people has a tradition of singing for such people who after eating to their fill still steal part of the food and drink. They will sing: O fe kan o ran/2 times. O di ‘ran s’ewe o o k’eba s’apo, o fe kan o ran o eeh<sup>8</sup>. It will soon be your turn/2times, after eating my food you put some wraps of food in your pocket and meat inside leaves, it will soon be your turn. People do not castigate or beat people for stealing food in Yoruba land especially during feasting periods. It is seen as part of the fun. It is also very interesting that all food components are usually present at various rituals and ceremonies. A rich man who kills many cows or sheep or turkey or chicken is not doing it for the fun of it but to take care of some of the people who are not particularly invited. Nigerian society is notable for “thugery”, who are usually found in this type of occasion with the sole intention of causing problem especially if their gustatory desires are not met. To prevent trouble therefore this group of people is well taken care of and they in turn constitute themselves into special security squad. Feasting is not restricted to savage and barbaric or developing world as this alone, it is also a common feature of a more civilized society of the world. It is important feature of human society and usually a binding force. Feasting is a social urge as also noted by Fox in his write up as regards to food:

It is profoundly social urge. Food is almost always shared; people eat together; mealtimes are events when the whole family or settlement or village comes together. Food is also an occasion for sharing, for distributing and giving, for the expression of altruism, whether from parents to children, children to in-laws, or anyone to visitors and strangers.

(Fox, [http://www.sirc.org/publik/food\\_and\\_eating\\_11.html](http://www.sirc.org/publik/food_and_eating_11.html))

He observes again that, “lavish food entertainment is part of ancient tradition of food hospitality used mainly to impress strangers” (Ibid). Claude Levis-Strauss was quoted to have said that: rich foods are usually reserved for the grandest occasions. The ordinary daily menu is not served... (ibid).

People look forward to feasting time in Yoruba land. But does this make Yoruba people damnably gluttons? Not so, but time of feasting is seen as time to socialize with old friends and a time to discuss politics, family matters and community issues. Ordinarily the kinds of food that some people could not afford to eat in their homes are usually served. Big varieties of meats, special foods like pounded yam, Ofada rice, Ikokore and the rest of them.

### **Blood Feast as a Production of Vitality**

Osun Osogbo festival has attracted a lot of researchers from the fields of Anthropology, Sociology, History of religions both in Nigeria, Europe, America, Germany and other parts of the world (Ogunbile; 2002). It is a civil religion of a culturally bounded people of Osogbo sub-ethnic Yoruba group. Osogbo is located in the South Western part of Nigeria, and it is the Capital of Osun State. Osun Osogbo has also served as tourist center for the large contingent of

people all over the world. It is not surprising therefore, that the UNESCO has officially recognized Osun Osogbo as the World Tourist Center<sup>9</sup>. Different things bring people to Osun Osogbo festival; some come as a result of needs such as looking for blessing for the fruit of the womb, some for blessing in business, some for yearly ritual performance, some for yearly pilgrimage and some for initiation and reenactment of allegiance to Osun. Osun festival takes up to two weeks of celebration and a lot of actions are packed into this ceremony. The final ceremony is the day that Arugba (votary maid), usually a virgin, who has not been betrothed to any man goes to the Osun river for “Mythical renewal of primordial origin” of Osogbo people (Mircea Eliade; *ibid*). The Arugba embodies Osun. She is the representation of goddess Osun. Osun is regarded as the goddess of fertility and she was one of the sixteen divinities sent by Olodumare to Isalaye, she happens to be the only female divinity among them (Idowu Bolaji; 1962: 65). The religious polarity of the Osogbo community collapses into one at the time of Osun festival. People from different parts of the Nation-Nigeria, and many Oduduwa sons and daughters in Diasporas usually come for this great annual festival. Arugba comes out the last day of the Osun Osogbo festival, and the King of the town who also embodied all Orisas, and as the representation of the primordial king of the land, though a Muslim will have to go to Osun shrine on this very day( Ogungbile, 2002: *ibid*). Different families related to Osun Osogbo dress in their family uniform and make their adequate representation with singing and dancing, entertainment by different cultural groups, and the eating and the drinking. But apart from these entire features, there is one important feature that is worth noticing and that is blood communion that goes on at the center of the shrine of Osun Osogbo. This is a typical example of Eliade’s and Carrasco significance of the center in the Myth of Eternal return and the City of Sacrifice (Mircea Eliade, 1965&1976; Carrasco 1999:21-25). Different people bring animal donation inform of pigeon, cockerel and Sheep for different kinds of reasons. The sheep to be brought must be pure white in colour, otherwise it is not accepted. They are brought either in fulfillment of the vow made in the previous year(s) or as a fresh gift to seek the favour of Osun to get a child, wealth, get job, gain admission, and prosper in business and to be safe in life journey. All these animals are brought to the shrine of Osun with other prescribed materials. But the most important thing that attracted me the last time I went was the pulling off of pigeon or cockerel head and the blood sucked in the ritual of what I term priest- client covenanted role<sup>10</sup>. A priest was noticed to be saying some incantations before he sucked the blood of a pigeon and then the clients were also invited to do the same in the presence of the goddess Osun. To the uninitiated, the whole idea of sucking fresh blood is barbaric and dirty but to the people concerned, there is a sense in it, spiritual element is infused into the life of the participants which has separated them from ordinary people since the blood of pigeon and or cockerel itself has become a sacred meal. It is an injection of vital force into the body and makes one to exist in the realm of the spiritual at all times. Though the blood is at once a sign of covenant but it is not far from regarding it as a ritual feast of cyclical renewal. Blood feast of this form is common to the worshipper of Ogun-the god of iron and war. At the time of spiritual ecstasy, a devotee of Ogun could suck blood of a cockerel. This aspect of Yoruba religion shows that foods are not only way vitality can be gained it could also be gained through this esoteric practice of blood meal.

## **Conclusion**

In this essay, we have been able to show that relationship of the mouth to food and its role it plays in human life and society as a deity is very important in negotiating vitality. Mouth is such an important part of the bodily organs that its use and its misuse can affect the whole human life.

Through our mouth we say prayers, incantations, deliver lectures as I am doing, but beyond that one can refuse a bad omen or reject a bad suggestion through the instrumentality of the mouth. Yoruba worship the mouth more than they adore themselves because they know that mouth can invite good and can also invite evil.

Again we have noted in this paper how taste of food can only be appreciated through the mouth. Yoruba will say Enu la ti mo didun obe. We know the sweetness of the soup when it is tasted in the mouth. This can be interpreted to mean; the sweetness of a pudding is in the taste. Food inform of drip is not regarded as food by the Yoruba. There must be a taste of food and it is only through that that the soul is well nourished. A person who cannot eat by him/herself is counted to be out of this world. Yoruba will say Emi ti o je ata emi yepere. A soul that does not eat soup (pepper) is a mere (useless) soul. Some foods are regarded as carrying more important vital elements in them than the other. That is while a Yoruba man does not just eat any food anyhow. There are categories of food that must be present when there is an important feast and not just any food. Thus Yoruba will say;

Iyán l ‘óúnje,  
Okà l’òògún  
Àì rí rárá là n’ j’èko  
K’ènu má dilè ni ti gbúgbúú

Real food is pounded yam;  
Cooked Yam flour is medicine  
If we don’t have any of these,  
We can resort to eating gbúgbúú.

If a person in the Yoruba setting has a reason to celebrate but refuses to do so, or if he does but does not give the feast the special attention it deserves. They would lampoon him and abuse him with different kinds of songs and words. They are fond of saying Otí gbé’lé ahun kan. Wine goes sour in the house of a miser. I believe this essay opens more avenues for further studies in future, since each aspect treated could stand as a topic on its own.

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### Unpublished Work

- Ogungbile David O (PhD; 2002) *Myth, Ritual and Identity of Oshogbo Religious and Cultural life*. Submitted to the Department of Religious Studies in partial fulfillment of the award of Doctor of Philosophy in Religious Studies.

### ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> This opinion runs in sharp contrast to what Freud has theorized for many years that man's quest is for pleasure and satisfaction derivable from sex (Freud, 1914). This paper contends that man's primary need is first and foremost food and not sex.

<sup>2</sup> This information was gotten from Rev Fr. (Prof.) T .M. Ilesanmi (Rtd) at his residence at Roman Catholic of SS Peter and Paul Church, Lagere Ile-Ife, Osun State, Nigeria. Date of Interview was Tuesday July 24, 2006 Time 6.30pm -8.30pm. Professor Ilesanmi was a Professor of African Languages and Literatures at the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Osun-State, Nigeria. He retired from the University system due to Federal Government policy of Retirement at the age of 65 for University lecturers.

<sup>3</sup> The process of modernity and the influence of Pentecostal/Evangelical movements are making this practice to become obsolete. However in the older traditional churches this practice is still going especially those that are not being influenced by the Modern day Christianity.

<sup>4</sup> I was born into Alapinni family. I had the privilege of partaking in this ritual in 1978. There is no child of my father who did not go through this ritual of initiation.

<sup>5</sup> This information was gathered from Chief Biodun 'Faloowore, Lokore of Ife Land on 24 May 2005 at the Oba Ooni of Ife palace. His age was 52 at the time of interview.

<sup>6</sup> From Prof. Ilesanmi July 24, 2006

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<sup>7</sup> This experience dates back to the sixties and seventies when I was still very much at home with my parents. My father and his friends normally sang this song around meal and palm wine.

<sup>8</sup> Ife is an important Yoruba town, in fact Ife is regarded as the cradle of the Yoruba race, and the practice of feast is a regular phenomenon in Ile-Ife. I have been in Ile- Ife since 1981.

<sup>9</sup> See the programme of events of Osun- Osogbo of 2005 page 39. Chief S Adejare Agboola, the Otun Akogun of Osogbo land who was also the Chairman of the Osun Festival Committee revealed this in his address.

<sup>10</sup> I have been attending Osun-Osogbo since 2004. It was the last time I went in 2005 that I was privileged to see this important ritual at the Osun shrine. August 5, 2005.