

RELEVANCE OF ÒWÒ (CHARM FOR RESPECT) TO PERSONAL SECURITY: THE YORUBA EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

The relevance of Òwò (Charm for Respect) to personal security is a topic that has been extensively explored in the Yorùbá experience. Through various research studies and analyses, it has been discovered that Òwò is crucial for establishing a sense of personal security in the Yorùbá culture. This charm can act as a form of protection against harmful entities and serves as a means of warding off potential threats. Òwò is greatly ingrained in the cultural and spiritual beliefs of the Yorùbá community, making it an integral part of their personal security measures. With its unique properties and perceived potency, Òwò has become a popular choice for individuals seeking to enhance their personal security. From its historical significance to its modern-day applications, the significance of Òwò in personal security cannot be overemphasized.

Introduction

There is no gainsaying the fact that without security of lives and property, there can be no development in the world. As such, this issue calls for concern from everyone. It is noteworthy that security as a concept is quite complex. Thus, there is no universally acceptable definition for it. To the ordinary mind, it simply means freedom from danger, anxiety or oppression. Shashi avows that security is something that gives protection or safety. National security for example relates to policies that provide for effective national defense against an external or internal threat¹.

Dopamu noted that “our times are characterized by living daily with the combined forces of destructiveness, untold numbers of wars of religion, spiritual warriors, persecutions, inquisitions, violent intolerances, social bigotries, materialism, secularism, nihilism, various forces of religious disorientation and burgeoning

restlessness”². Therefore, the problem of insecurity can be probed into from all areas of human endeavours.

Religion as a phenomenon has assisted enormously to provide answers to all existential problems confronting humanity. Every Tom, Dick and Harry is desirous of protection. In the actual sense, no individual would like to be exposed to danger, no matter how infinitesimal. From time immemorial, primitive men adopted the use of charms, amulets, talismans, and many other objects as a veritable means of attaining personal security. Native Africans are also not left behind in the use of these objects. This is because they carry these charms and amulets to their farms, work places, war fronts and many places as insecurity is ubiquitous.

With the incursion of the foreign religions (Islam and Christianity) and due to the opprobrious terminologies employed by western scholars to describe the religious practices of native Africans, the usage of these objects suffered a serious decline. However, it can be observed that many people still patronize medicine men who prepare these objects for them despite professing to be Muslims and Christians. This paper therefore examines the usage of *Ọwọ*, a charm for respect among the Yorùbá people as a means of attaining personal security and stemming the tide of insecurity in a developing nation like Nigeria.

Concept of Security among Yorùbá people

Dopamu noted that “the Yorùbá word *ààbò* means security or protection”³. Therefore, it can be said that just like other tribes and ethnic groups in Africa, Yorùbá people do not toy with the issue of security. For them, the Supreme Being (*Olódùmarè*) or (*Ọlórún*) is called *Aláàbò* meaning the Protector. The Yorùbá people firmly believe that the Supreme Being is the Protector, Saviour and Deliverer. As such, His protection can never waver. This therefore makes them to say supplicatory prayers and offer sacrifices of protection to Him.

Furthermore, assisted by the Supreme Being are the various divinities that are regarded as ministers in the theocratic governance of the universe. As such, no one dares to incur their wrath. Each community has its own totem which provides them with security against any external aggression. In addition, ancestors are also venerated by the people as a means of seeking protection from the Supreme Being against evil, dangers, sicknesses, diseases and many other misfortunes. Just like other ethnic groups in Africa, Yorùbá people have great regards for their monarchs. Before the advent of colonial masters, the kings with the assistance of the chiefs direct the affairs of their subjects. In fact, they were the Chief Security Officers of their domains. The age grades, assisted by hunters in various communities served as police officers and soldiers, thereby providing maximum security. We cannot also ignore the roles played by religious officiants, such as

herbalists, medicine men and women, priests, priestesses and many others who help to provide succour to the people through their services.

Charms and Amulets among Yorùbá People

A charm is an object which is believed to have metaphysical, magical and protective prowess. *Funk and Wagnalls' New Encyclopedia* explains that a charm is “any formula, act or object supposed to have magical power to ward off danger or to bring good luck”⁴. Although the term originally meant the chanting of a verse believed to exert occult influence, it came to mean an object worn or carried for protection or good fortune.

On the other hand, amulets are jewels worn to provide security and protection for the wearer against attacks from evil and demonic forces. Ingredients used in the preparation of charms and amulets include roots, leaves, bark of trees, bones, egg shells, oysters, skulls, feathers, etc. Animals such as lizards, tortoise, chameleons, snails, parrots, vultures and many others are used in the preparation of these items.

In the Yorùbá language, charms and amulets are called *òògùn*. A popular adage among them goes thus: “*òògùn tí kò jé, ewé rẹ̀ ló kù ìkan*”, meaning “a charm that is not efficacious lacks appropriate ingredients”. Thus, the Yorùbá believe that the Supreme Being gave the primitive men the power and ability to prepare these items for the benefit of man. Olaosebikan, quoting Dopamu classified charms and amulets into eight categories namely, “charms against specific techniques of sorcery, charms against witches, charms tailored to specific aspects of human activities (for example, one that brings luck), charms connected with agriculture, charms connected with games (mostly attributed to hunters), charms connected with natural forces, charms connected with the protection of human bodies against untoward happenings (e.g. *Ọ̀wọ̀*) and lastly, charm connected with diseases and sicknesses”⁵. The Yoruba have strong conviction that these charms cannot be potent except the Supreme Being wills it to be.

Ọ̀wọ̀: Its Origin and Purpose

Dopamu explained that “the Yoruba have different types of magic which are expected to safeguard property and the human body, the most important of these is *Ọ̀wọ̀* (honour; respect)”⁶. If an individual has a powerful and potent *Ọ̀wọ̀*, he or she does not need to fear any danger. Oni in an oral interview explained that “this is because everybody will accord due respect to the person. The person will possess immunity against attacks from witches, wizards, sorcerers and other evil forces. Also, thieves will not go near such an individual and he cannot be involved in motor accidents”⁷. Oni stated further that during the Ifẹ̀/Modákẹ́kẹ́ communal clash, the *Ọ̀wọ̀* charm gave him immunity against being hit by stray bullets.

Mbiti⁸ noted that the use of good magic is accepted and esteemed by the society. Magic is used in the treatment of diseases or in warding off evil powers. As such diviners or medicine men help their clients to prepare charms, amulets and many others. Thus, it can be fully established that *Ọwọ* originated from the primitive times and dates back to the beginning of the Yorùbá Indigenous Religion which began by intuition. Just like other ethnic groups in Africa, the people are not oblivious of evil spirits which are inimical to human existence and development. Hence, they ventured into the use of metaphysical powers to protect themselves against human-invented evils.

Olaosebikan⁹ noted that the existence of charms and amulets were revealed to the earliest Yorùbá men through *Ọsanyìn*. He noted further that according to popular myth, *Ọrúnmìlà* bought *Ọsanyìn* as a slave. One morning when *Ọrúnmìlà* was going out, he instructed *Ọsanyìn* to clear the surroundings, but he did not. When *Ọrúnmìlà* came back, he was so furious to find *Ọsanyìn* idle. *Ọsanyìn* later explained the usefulness of these plants to *Ọrúnmìlà* as reason for not clearing. So going by this myth, *Ọsanyìn* taught *Ọrúnmìlà* the usefulness of plants, herbs as well as the procedures for preparing various charms, *Ọwọ* inclusive. The idea of *Ọwọ* is not peculiar to Africans. People in the western world equally looks for how to protect themselves from trite danger, even though this is invisible, unlike that of Africans which are quite pragmatic like *Ońdè* and *Ìfúnpá*. It is true that the aforementioned objects are visible. However, they are not exposed. This is because they are worn under dresses and it is only the person wearing them that would know.

Types/Methods of Preparing *Ọwọ*

There are numerous types of *Ọwọ* charm known to the Yorùbá people. These can be seen from the different procedures, components and ingredients involved in its preparation. Oni¹⁰ explained that it can be prepared through Incision (*Gbéré*), concoction (*Àsẹje*) or can be worn in form of rings, chains, mascots and other amulets. These objects can be put inside the pockets, inside the cap or hung at the entrance of a building. Animate and inanimate objects such as roots, barks, leaves, skulls bones, dried lizards, egg shells, cowries, feathers, snails, hens, eggs and many others are used to prepare *Ọwọ* charm. This charm can be done through incision, preparation of concoction as well as wearing of amulets and mascots. At this juncture, it therefore becomes necessary to discuss these identified methods above one after the other for a better comprehension of these concepts.

1. Incision (*Gbéré*)

An incision is a cut on the skin of an individual. Therefore, to incise means to deliberately cut an individual's skin which may be deep or mild. From time immemorial, native Africans have always engaged in the incision of their skins in their practice of magic and medicine. Among the Yoruba people, incision is

known as *Gbéré* and the process of incision is called *Gbéré sínsín*. No wonder Mbiti¹¹ explained that for Africans, medicine men are the greatest gift to the society. They are known as *oníṣẹ̀gùn*.

After the *Ọ̀wọ̀* charm has been prepared with the necessary ingredients, the medicine man then incises the skin of the individual for whom the charm is prepared. Oni¹² explained that this can be done with blades, axes, knives, broken bottles, snails' shells and many other sharp objects. This can be done on the forehead, hands, wrists, limbs or any other part of the body. As the incision goes on, the appropriate incantations are said and the medicine man goes further to rub the prepared items on the incised part of the body.

As a matter of duty, the individual for whom the charm is prepared is told to observe some taboos which are capable of rendering the charm inefficacious. After these, the charm is tested to ascertain its potency. Oni¹³ explains further that the potency of these charms may vary among individuals and as such, the medicine man ensures that he identifies the potent type for his clients. In addition, the client may be asked to offer some sacrifices or say some prayers to make the charm potent. It is a known fact that the Yorùbá people believe that only the Supreme Being wills the potency of charms. Incision as a method of preparing *Ọ̀wọ̀* is not seen. Visible objects used by the westerners for protection include life jackets, bullet-proof vests and many others.

2. Concoction (*Àsẹ̀jẹ*)

This has to do with the preparation of various medicines, food or other substances out of many ingredients in form of concoction to be swallowed by the individual for whom it is prepared. Some of the ingredients may include kola nut, honey, bitter kola, plantain, dried fish, charcoal, alligator pepper, alcohol and others. As such, the person for whom the charm is prepared is then told the taboos that can render the charm impotent.

3. Amulets/Mascots

The *Ọ̀wọ̀* charm can also be worn in form of amulets such as rings and chains. For instance, *Ìgbàdí* is worn on the waist. *Ìfún pá* and *Olóndè* are worn on the elbows and wrists. Also, *Bàntẹ́* is worn also on the waist.

Taboos of *Ọ̀wọ̀* Charm

A taboo means an inhibition that results from social custom or religious ethical teachings. In the Yorùbá language, it is known as *eèwọ̀*. For a charm not to lose its potency, specific actions must be totally avoided. According to Oni¹⁴, the following are taboos associated with *Ọ̀wọ̀*. They are listed as follows;

1. An individual may be told to refrain from eating some animals such as dogs, cats, pork, squirrels, monkeys, etc.
2. Abstaining from sexual intercourse when in possession of the charm.

3. The charm must not be touched by a woman during her menstrual period.
4. An individual maybe told to avoid getting intoxicated.
5. The person in possession of the charm can be told to avoid eating some delicacies. For example, *èkuru*, a popular delicacy among the Yorùbá.

Positive Aspects of *Ọ̀wọ̀* Charm

Charms and Amulets have their positive aspects if properly utilized for the well-being of the society. Some positive aspects of *Ọ̀wọ̀* charm among the Yorùbá people are as follows;

1. It is basically to provide personal security for individuals. As noted earlier, the concern for peace and security is a global phenomenon because there can be no meaningful development without it.
2. In addition, *Ọ̀wọ̀* charm has also helped to bring about social cohesion and unity among the Yorùbá people. This is because it reduced incidences of kidnapping, theft, conflict, chaos and other vices.
3. The use of *Ọ̀wọ̀* has helped in the preservation of the cultural and social traditions of the Yoruba people as against the dangers posed to it by western civilizations.
4. The usage of *Ọ̀wọ̀* charm has assisted the Yorùbá people to better appreciate the values inherent in their religious traditions, thereby enabling them to have utmost respect and reverence for them.
5. Though the Yorùbá people acknowledge that long life is a gift from the Supreme Being, the *Ọ̀wọ̀* charm has been very potent because it has helped to reduce incidences of untimely death among them.

Relevance of *Ọ̀wọ̀* to Personal Security of Nigerians

Security of lives and property is very paramount to human existence. Insecurity however is a major predicament confronting Nigeria. It is the state of being in danger, uncertainty or vulnerability to life threatening situations, such as wars, violence, conflicts, quarrels, reprisal attacks, communal clashes and many others. On a daily basis, we read about and hear of unpleasant scenarios such as kidnapping for ransom, attacks by Fulani herdsmen, student riots, assassinations, armed robbery attacks, theft, banditry, brigandage, youth militancy or restiveness, *Boko-Haram* insurgency, suicide bombing and many others. All the above-mentioned ugly occurrences have brought about the killing and maiming of innocent people in their scores, unprecedented hunger, outbreak of deadly diseases and many others. Most importantly, such incidents have wreaked a lot of havoc to our economy as billions of naira have been dissipated towards stemming this ugly tide.

As such, the use of charms and amulets, which appear to be moribund in the contemporary days due to the influences of western civilization as well as foreign religions (Islam and Christianity), should rather be encouraged. Osoba¹⁵ noted

that “with the insurgence of ethnic militia in form of Oòduà Peoples Congress (OPC), *Bakasi* Boys and *Arewa* Youths, the use of charms and amulets has bounced back to life”. Osoba explained further that as the use of charms and amulets in terms of personal security seem fascinating, there is need for its usage to be censored. This is due to the fact that miscreants may make use of it to wreak havoc on unsuspecting victims.

Thus, if properly harnessed, *Ọ̀wọ̀* charm can be used by Nigerians, irrespective of the socio-political, economic or religious affiliation to combat the problem of insecurity. For instance, an individual with a potent *Ọ̀wọ̀* can never be a victim of kidnapping, assassination, armed robbery, accidents, insurgency, wars and many other life-threatening occurrences.

Conclusion

It has been established that there can be no meaningful development in an atmosphere of insecurity and chaos. Within the context of African Indigenous religion, charms and amulets have been a very potent means of providing personal security. When an individual is secured, then the entire community is secured. In light of this, *Ọ̀wọ̀* (charm for respect) is one of the means by which Yorùbá people protect themselves against unforeseen catastrophic circumstances.

Insecurity has become a major challenge confronting Nigeria as a nation over the years. In fact, it has become a cankerworm and a clog in the wheel of her resolve towards attaining greatness. The western scholars and missionaries of the foreign religions (Islam and Christianity) made native Africans lose the sufficient values inherent in their religion as well as traditions. Rather than utterly condemn the usage of charms and amulets, its positive use should be encouraged by all and sundry. This will go a long way to stem the tide of perennial insecurity in Nigeria, thereby restoring her lost glory and dignity.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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