

FOLK LITURGIES AND NARRATIVES OF HOLY WELLS AMONG THE YORUBA OF SOUTHWEST NIGERIA

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Building on Celeste Ray's extensive research on Ireland's holy wells, I show how folk liturgies underlie meanings that are closely related to some of the practices that manifest around holy wells among the Yoruba in southwest Nigeria – meanings that are often neglected in the holy wells literature. I adapt some holy wells terms as they appear in existing studies for illustrative as well as for comparative purposes. Their interpretation and analysis will, however, focus on the liturgical narratives that best fit the article's perception of what is local to holy wells among the Yoruba. With a focus on two holy wells, *Olokun* and *Ori Aye*, the article draws on the testimonies of local knowledge, close research encounters of ritual practices and performances and readings from extant literature to open the window through which holy wells and their various manifestations in the socio-cultural life among the Yoruba could be properly assessed and adequately understood.

Keywords: Folk liturgies, Yoruba, holy wells, *Olokun*, *Ori Aye*, Ile-Ife, Ondo

Introduction

In traditional Yoruba religious practice, liturgy manifests both as an arbitrary and non-arbitrary category of public worship comprising prayer, offerings, music, and dance (see Akintoye 2010; Awolalu 1979: 103). These contents should not be confused with the modes and manners in which they are “syncretically” practised, or the fusing of new ideas with conventional beliefs as Deana Weibel has described the practices of “religious creatives” (2005: 111). Traditional Yoruba religious liturgies, unlike what exists for religious faiths introduced into Nigeria, are adequately preserved in oral traditions which leads to an appreciable understanding of the Yoruba people's worship behaviors, since they are thought to have passed “unbroken” from one generation to another. To preserve these liturgies of worship are chief priests who are required to uphold traditional conducts of worship within sacred landscapes or other public or private religious spaces.

The article draws its inspiration from anthropologist Celeste Ray's extensive research on Ireland's holy wells and the human or religious agencies (saints) associated with them. Her extensive research on sacred waters, holy wells, saint cults, and folk liturgies in Ireland has spurred several critical publications on these themes in the last few years (see Ray 2020; Ray 2019; Ray 2015; Ray 2014; Ray 2012; Ray 2011; Ray

2010). Building on Ray's perspectives, this essay offers insights into the agency of holy wells and social transformations which occurred around them at different historical periods. To do this adequately, some holy well concepts in existing studies developed or coined by Ray, and by scholars of similar orientations, will be adapted for illustrative as well as for comparative purposes. Interpretations and analysis shall focus on the liturgical narratives that best fit the article's perception of what is considered autochthonic to holy wells among the Yoruba. The article focuses on two holy wells, namely *Olokun* and *Ori Aye*, drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2016 and 2019 in Ile-Ife East Local Government Area, Ile-Ife, Osun State and Ondo West Local Government Area, Ondo State, respectively. The two holy wells are situated in the southwest region of Nigeria. The methodology is based on oral interviews with key informants and participant observation. The article aims to open the window through which holy wells and their various manifestations in the socio-cultural life among the Yoruba can be properly assessed and adequately understood.

Folk liturgy: some insights

Folk liturgy, as a concept, captures the activities associated with holy well visitation where a "well side" performance or traditional holy well practices occur. These activities, such as prayers or votive deposition, are carried out in a particular order to which holy well worshippers or visitors are expected to replicate. Key to these practices, Ray (2015: 417) observes, "Are those accepted as efficacious through generations of repetition rather than through sanction from official religious authorities." What Ray suggests here is that well side practices are personalized and often derived from age-old or generational customs or traditions without the functional role of presiding authorities. What then are folk liturgies? Gwen Neville (2003: 7–8) defines a folk liturgy as "a religious gathering, service or ritual with patterns and uncodified rules shaped by populations rather than religious officials, which often takes place in the open-air and that can be sacramental" (in Ray 2015: 417). Neville's observation, according to Ray, has a strong resonance with different religious beliefs and is encountered in different periods and spaces. The analogous religious actions of well visitors or pilgrims at sites outside the holy well structures create a separate, contrastive liturgical world that is transgenerational. Ray suggests that folk liturgical practices may be revised, questioned, mediated, or even elaborated. In the context of this article, folk liturgies are connected to peculiar "localist" categories apprehended within distinctly traditional hierarchies. Folk liturgies, within the milieu of holy wells among the Yoruba, involve complex ritual transactions that are consecrated in real and historic categories of encounters re-enacted in rituals and everyday worship.

The ideas put forward above by Ray, Neville, and others offer some contrasting points through which to explore the practice of folk liturgy in Ile-Ife and Ondo, where the *Olokun* and *Ori Aye* wells are situated. Often used liturgical terms in the extant literature such as "the veneration of saints," "blessed persons," "pilgrimages," "holy

day(s),” or even “religious work towards the deceased” (see, for instance, Ray 2015: 415–432; Frontinus, 1973; Brennehan 2005: 789–805; Cordner 1946: 24–36), are for the most part symbolic imprints of holy wells repertoires in Europe which do not exist in the folk liturgical practices among the Yoruba of Southwest Nigeria. It is, nonetheless, interesting to note that these liturgical terms have their respective local equivalents in the two study areas, instances of which will be cited subsequently. Holy wells among the Yoruba are not presided over by saints, monks or hermits, but by gendered deities (male, female, or both). While pilgrimages are not performed at the sites of the *Olokun* and *Ori Aye* wells, they receive what could be termed as an individual, compound, or communal visitation. Also, the celebrations of the holy day(s), which are dedicated periods at holy wells elsewhere, are known appropriately in the study area as festival days (*Ojo odun*). This usually lasts between a day and several weeks, although no religious duties are required to be performed on someone else’s behalf, particularly for the deceased as seen in holy well practices in Europe.

Folk liturgies around Nigerian holy wells are transgenerational, that is, the practices are passed down to several generations. However, these are practices that have often been renegotiated or modified, as Ray suggests. In the case of the study area, the process is influenced by what can be referred to as “cross-cultural re-ordering” via the introduction of Islam, Christianity, western education, and colonial rule. For this study, I define the concept of folk liturgy as bodies of ritual activities or religious exercises observed at, or at a distance from, holy well sites, either in individual, filial, or communal capacities. These ritual activities or religious exercises through folk liturgy are presided over by hierarchical religious structures with both codified and uncoded conventions held in exclusive or inclusive spaces to affirm and to draw ultimately from the therapeutic powers of a *primaeva* deity.

It is important to restate that “folk liturgies” associated with Yoruba rituals are rarely known outside its borders. The concept within Yoruba religious milieu or practices applies, for instance, to the rich rendition of folk music by men, women, and children either in praise of the local deity of a community or family compound, the king or priest, or in recognition of a past encounter that rescued the people from danger. This explains why they can now not be sustained within globalized models of hierarchy. Why this is so is hinged on the fact that there often exists a non-hierarchical power structure that circulates between the Yoruba king and his “subjects;” the priests and the king, fellow priests, and the people; and the priests and other local power structures within the system.

This essay identifies and examines the localized liturgical narratives of Nigerian holy wells drawing on research at the *Olokun* and *Ori Aye* wells among the Yoruba. Although the two holy wells perform dissimilar functions or roles, as sacred water bodies, they, in many respects, express closely related meanings in terms of their reputation for certain therapeutic qualities, retention of “folk memory,” dry and wet conditions, and antiquated identities among others. To demonstrate this adequately, some of the common terms – namely, *stations*, *rounding*, and *votives* – identified in the extant holy well literature will be adopted afterwards for purposes of comparison, but with alternative narratives.

The liturgies of stations

Stations are physical structures that manifest in different forms and numbers and can appear seemingly haphazardly within sacred landscapes (Ray 2015: 418). Stations may take the form of a tree, monuments, megalithic tombs or unusually shaped stones, and they are spots where specific prayers are offered and other ritual activities performed (Ray 2010: 8). For instance, while trees are potential votive receivers, stones can serve as sitting platforms to earn a cure for a bodily defect such as back pain. Stations lie close to each other (but in some cases are located farther away) which helps to ease the rites performed by holy well visitors. Two major rites, among others, are carried out on this spot as part of the functions of these stations. First, holy well visitors are required to move in a clockwise direction on each station and second, on the individual station, a prescribed prayer is expected to be read in each direction. This cyclical course of action is known as “rounding” or “the pattern” (Ray 2015; Foley 2013: 113; Gillespie 2010: 228–229). After this ritual is completed, the visitor, as part of the required steps of devotion, is expected to deposit a votive item either close to the well or on the station which, in this case, could be a tree or bush, which is also considered blessed. Votive deposits particularly intended for a tree station include most importantly a cloth or a rag and are dependent on the visitor’s specific needs or requests. The presentation of votives is considered as an expression of appreciation that a request will be heard by the holy well’s presiding spirit (Ray 2020: 5). Removing a votive is deemed offensive as the visitor’s prayers may not be duly acknowledged by the genius loci of the holy well.

The above expression is symptomatic of the folk liturgies performed at several holy wells in Europe, but manifest in different forms in Southwest Nigeria. Stations in the context of the two study areas do not appear in the form of trees, monuments or unusual stones, but are rather “a stopping place” (O’Malley 2014: 41) that might be, in the context of this study, a widened network of mud earth or tarred road. These stops, for instance, are often observed at the annual *Olokun* festival day dedicated to *Olokun*, the deity of the *Olokun* well, held each April during a long procession by members of the *Olokun* well cult. The procession commences at the sacred *Olokun* temple and moves to the palace of the traditional ruler of Ile-Ife. Each of the stops is highly charged with rich renditions of folk songs in praise of the deity, *Olokun*, electrifying dances, and other rites. These stations which are also present at the site of *Ori Aye* well are flat surface areas on the road that are connected via several crossroads. Stopping places are recognized by participants based on “generational customs or traditions” but, most importantly, they are activated for ritual use by the actions of individuals who play roles in key traditional agencies. For example, during the annual *Ori Aye* festival held in January, the *Ayadi*, warrior head chief and member of the key traditional agency in Ondo, make calculated stops on the road adjacent to the *Ori Aye* well for multiple purposes that include giving a warning to residents and guests to keep away from the festival. It is interesting to note that the *Ori Aye* festival is a tightly-knit traditional event whereby only key actors can participate.

The closed nature of the festival is said to be conveyed through a warning by the *Ayadi* to outsiders who “are required to ‘isolate’ themselves from the ritual and non-ritual experience of the festival” (Raheem and Omojeje 2020: 153–154). Sufficient effort has been made to paint a different outlook of holy wells in two culturally different contexts – Ile-Ife and Òndó. One obvious difference from the two illustrations above is that while stations appear as physical “erect” structures at specific locations within a large sacred landscape in Europe, in Nigeria, they may instead be marked by bends in a path that are not aligned or straight (disorderly). They are not necessarily located within the sacred landscape of a holy well. In most cases, and as earlier indicated, stations could be equated with flat surfaces such as tarred or mud earth roads, narrow road paths or crossroads where at different intervals of a procession, participants stop to perform specific rites.



Figure 1. Road paths equivalent to a station, Ile-Ife, Osun State, Southwest Nigeria. Photographed by Oluwafunmiyi Raheem (2019).

Drawing parallels between Europe and Christianity and holy wells in Nigeria, on the one hand, or African and European practices at holy well sites, on the other hand, can be regarded as problematic or questionable. There is, however, substantial evidence or other case studies that can illustrate the wider patterns into which the parallels are drawn in this article fit. For instance, the cures, rituals, and guardian deities associated with the sacred mineral springs in South Korea (*yaksutö*) illustrate how Korean Buddhism syncretized many aspects of traditional shamanistic folk beliefs (Yoon 2020: 168–176). Also, for the Australian Aborigines, Ancestral Beings were said to have travelled, visited, and dwelled at waterholes across the area’s landscape (Brady 2020: 97–109). Likewise, the Tewa People of New Mexico, whose major

spirit, *Blue Water Old Man*, is said to offer life-sustaining benefits (Ford 2020: 134). The same can be said of watery underworlds to which holy wells give access, where accounts indicate that they were strongly tendered among the Maya from prehistory (Dunning 2020: 50–58) and as well virtually all Nigerian wells which are protected against encroachment and tendered with very rich votive depositions by their gatekeepers (personal communication with Chief Omotayo Kolawole Adisa, Chief Priest of Olokun, at Olokun Temple, Ile-Ife, 9 April 2019).

The article employs cross-cultural comparisons such as these because none of these sacred water or holy well rituals are entirely unique – all humans have them (similarities exist between them around the world) and comparison is one of the best tools to deepen our understanding of pan-human ritual engagements with our most basic resource – water.

The liturgies of rounding or patterns

Rounding (circumambulation) or patterns are cyclical movements made around a holy well. It is a well-side exercise observed by visitors, pilgrims, or devotees as physical and ritual components connected with holy wells, and as part of the activities that constitute the functions of stations. Rounding is also strongly associated with the folk liturgy of the two holy wells selected in this study. But before this exercise is thoroughly examined, it must be stated, as earlier mentioned, that two major rites are linked to the function of stations. The first rite is a clockwise movement around a holy well and the second is a prescribed prayer that is required to be performed at every rounding on each station. For many holy wells in Europe, these rounding rites are performed three consecutive times (Zachrisson 2020: 320) or more on each station along with prayer recitals or what is known as the “recitation of the rosary” observed simultaneously. After the completion of each round, a pebble or small stone is deposited on a nearby stone heap which is later followed by a large feast or celebration (O Giollain, 2005: 26; Hall and Hall, 1843).

Although, as Ray (2011: 275) suggests, “Rounding holy wells is a localized folk pilgrimage ritual with many parallels in other religions and around the world,” this phenomenon is, nonetheless, slightly different in the context of this study. In most cases, rounding occurs in a clockwise form, but not so with the *Olokun* well, in particular, which is made in an anticlockwise direction, an action that is considered a taboo or misfortune in many holy well sites elsewhere (Ray 2014: 94). Rounding at sacred sites within many Yoruba cult groups occurs either three or seven times, the latter being the most prescribed number. It is not clear what the central importance of the rounding ritual is, what it symbolically represents, or for what purposes it serves apart from being part of the rites/rituals observed around holy wells. While Varner (2009: 125) is of the view that doing the rounds at holy wells was a means of guaranteeing the wish or a cure for a holy well visitor, Carroll (1999: 32) notes that it “earned [for visitors] the remission of punishment for sin.” It is, however, possible

that the rounding ritual among the Yoruba is primarily an avenue to pay homage through prayers to the deity residing in a sacred agency (personal communication with Efunlade Ifakola, at Iya Idi-Agba Quarters, Oja Ejigbomekun, Obaloran Compound, Ile-Ife, Osun State, October 8, 2019; Oyeyemi 2017: 98). The rounding ritual and the deity for whom this is done symbolize what Eliade identifies as “a break in the homogeneity of space [through] which passage from one cosmic region to another is made possible” (1963: 37). If Eliade’s argument is viewed critically, it means that in a situation of this nature, holy wells manifest multipotent potentialities where they become a numinous space for both devotee and deity to meet – a form of rallying point – where peculiar interests are derived or shared (Awolalu 1979: 117).

The role of prayer recitals such as the Rosary is an important devotional component of holy well rounding in Europe (see Ray 2011: 102; O Giollain 1998: 41) but again, these manifest in different contexts in Nigeria. During the *Ori Aye* festival, all prayers rendered at the site of the *Ori Aye* well generally adhere strictly to the prescribed modes as configured in Òndó religious practices. The same applies to the *Olokun* festival where prayers are both of non-ritualized composition and ritualized forms (for example, chants, praise poems, praise songs, and incantations). In this sense, prayers are not specific but are often officially and unofficially conducted collectively and individually by the traditional ruler of the town, well priests, well devotees, visitors, and/or others present, all of whom direct their needs to the deities of both wells, respectively. It must be stressed that prayers among the Yoruba are petitionary (Awolalu 1979: 103) and are presented to a deity with the belief that such a petition would be accepted if the deity so wishes. These prayers, when they are offered, elicit a loud response of “may it be so” or *Ase*, which emphasizes the need for the deity to hear and grant such prayers or requests.



Figure 2. Rounding exercise at the Olokun well. Photographed by Oluwafunminiyi Raheem (2021).

The liturgies of the votives (Ebo)

Votive practices are an important well-side liturgy that often occurs at the final stages of a holy well visitation. Votives are ritual materials, gifts or offerings deposited at a sacred site, but gifts to the deity of the site can also take the form of an intangible action such as rounding. These materials are removed from the earth and offered far away from human retrieval and re-application (Wait 1985: 51). In his view on votives, Mbiti (1991: 146) notes that they are “the concrete expressions of human intentions to God and the invisible world,” and “through them, the visible world penetrates the invisible world.” What this suggests is that at the point a votive is deposited, it becomes an “unbodied” element that cannot be called back or utilized for the same or other purposes. Interestingly, the removal or re-use of votive deposits is regarded as a grievous offence for which serious sanction is invoked (Roymans 1990: 83). In whichever form or behavior a votive deposit manifests, the practice necessitates a deposition before a holy well or a sacred agency in other cases after which prayer is immediately recited.

Votive materials or items take a variety of forms and could include strips of cloth or rags, rosary beads, hair accessories, pebbles, written tracts, household items, or bottles. Other materials deposited close to holy wells in Europe comprise shoelaces, marine shells, hair bands, coins, small souvenirs, and pins (Kelly 2002: 26). Patrick Logan (1980) listed some of the votives he noticed at Seir Ciaran in Co. Offaly, Ireland, in 1974, as including a metal corkscrew bottle-opener, a baby’s pacifier, a string of elastic, small crosses, and cloth scapulars. The importance of leaving a votive at a holy well site, which could be left on the ground close to the holy well or may be thrown or poured into the holy well itself, vary cross-culturally; two are identified here. One, votives are deposited by holy wells to guarantee the action of a petition or “in thanksgiving that [a] prayer will be or have been answered” (Ray 2015: 425). Two, a visitor’s pressing needs are deposited (prayed or rubbed) into the votive which is then left behind for the holy well to resolve. For instance, a cloth dipped in a holy well could be used by rubbing over a cut wound and then left behind or tied to a nearby bush or tree with the belief that as the cloth withers, so would the bodily cut. Votive deposits for saints have to do, according to Ray (2015: 426), with reciprocity – in the sense that a holy well responds to a visitor’s needs on the condition that he or she fulfils or delivers on a promise to honor the holy well site and tend to its care. The forms in which votive materials are offered or deposited may appear similar across cultures, but votive materials are themselves often strikingly contrastive, although in Nigeria some are fixed for each holy well deity. Unlike in Europe, votive materials deposited at Nigerian holy wells fall under three classifications – animal votives, consumable votives and non-consumable votives. The Yoruba refer to these classifications collectively as *Ebo* (sacrifice) (Awolalu 1973: 81).

Animal votives are part of the sacrificial materials recognized in the ritual practices of many cults around the world; the Yoruba are not unusual in employing this class of offering. Within the sacrificial practices around holy wells, and in several other religious and secular practices among the Yoruba, the animal votive is, indeed, a symbolic marker that is made up of two key inseparable living forces – life (or soul)

and blood. The relationship between these two forces is concretized in the belief in African societies that “life is closely associated with blood” (Mbiti 1991: 63). Kenyan philosopher John Mbiti observed that animal blood is shed to give back the life of such animals to the Supreme Being who is generally regarded as the creator of all lives. This does not mean that a votive is presented or offered directly to the Supreme Being as Mbiti suggests. Although the animal votive is deposited to call the attention of the Supreme Being to a petition, this votive is of no immediate or long-term need to the Supreme Being. This votive is received by deities and other supernatural beings who (if satisfied with the votive and purpose for which it is given) then present the petitions (but not the votive) to the Supreme Being for resolution. Mbiti corroborates this by suggesting that animal votives “are made to lesser spiritual beings, such as divinities, spirits and the departed ... [who] act as go-betweens between men and God ... [and] are expected to receive the offerings and sacrifices, and then relay people’s requests to God” (1991: 66). The ritual of bloodletting could, therefore, be understood not in terms of the “eliminating” form of offering through which life is extracted from an animal, but in a manner that is considered “regenerative.” In the case of exigency with potential life or death impacts for humans, animal life is perceived as required. Therefore, as the blood of one animal life is shed, so are several other lives protected and saved (Mbiti 1991: 146). Some of the animal votives that feature prominently in the sacrificial practices of holy wells and on festival days include sheep, nanny-goats, rams, pigeons, snails, domestic fowl, and catfish.



Figure 3. Some votive materials ready for deposition ((L-R: Seaman’s Schnapps, monkey arm (dried), live cock, palm oil, palm wine, and bag of salt). Photographed by Oluwafunmiyi Raheem (2017).

It is interesting to note that the shedding of life and blood is only one aspect of a whole which explains the connection between animal votive and sacrificial behaviors around holy wells. Other animal body parts such as the hide or meat, horn, heart, and skull,

for instance, are similarly important components of the animal votive and are, in most cases, permanent fixtures in the festivities that signpost holy well ritual observations or practices. The meat of the animal identified as a votive is, on several occasions, consumed by holy well devotees while the hide, for instance, may be used for medicinal and other ritual purposes. In essence, the unseen make-up (for instance life or soul) and the non-consumable part of animals (blood) can be counted as the most essential part of the animal votive sacrificed to a deity of a sacred agency, while the seen and consumable part such as the flesh is shared among devotees in a feast. An important point to note here is that holy well feasts are either closed or open, depending on locality and the nature of the feast on each festival day. The feast which accompanies the *Ori Aye* festival, for instance, is also closed to outsiders while the feast derived from the *Olokun* festival is largely adapted for the benefit of the people at large (participatory). An animal votive, at the point it is deposited, becomes an important ritual category that elevates a holy well status as a center of visible and invisible powers.

The second class of votives are the consumables which include local gin, yam, schnapps, water, palm wine, palm oil, corn pap, kola nut, sugarcane, bitter kola, milk, sweets, popcorn, groundnut, and honey. Each of the identified votive materials contains special powers for various purposes that are, in many ways, sacrificial. They are selected in line with the preference of the holy well deity and, given that each deity is exacting in its choice of the votive, any deficiency or unsuitable mixture from what can be regarded as a “great diversity of [votive] materials” automatically renders the sacrifice inadequate (Awolalu 1979: 163). The third class of votives (non-consumables) includes white clothing, salt, cowrie shells, native chalk, camwood powder, and beads, to name a few. These votive materials are simply iconographic symbols that are often associated with the nature and identity of the holy well deity and are meant to be replicated by devotees through body adornments or colorful inscriptions and murals on the wall of holy well shrines.



Figure 4. Kola nut votive being sorted out before the commencement of a holy well festival. Photographed by Oluwafunmini Raheem (2017).

Why is the votive part of the ritual practices or symbolic gestures at the site of holy wells? Consumable votives, particularly those associated with food items, are central to the worship of the holy well deity and Yoruba divinity (*orisa*) tradition itself. Since holy wells, in a transnational context, are believed to possess or are presided over by a spirit, saint, or divinity figure (depending on the geo-cultural locality), consumable votives are, in many respects, important sources of “nourishment” for these supernatural forces. It is through this divine nourishment that a petitioner establishes both a direct level of communication and a higher level of relationship that yields the type of benefit solicited from the *otherworld* which holy wells conveniently represent. Consumable votives, as I pointed out earlier, are consumed by the devotees of a particular deity of a holy well or the deity of the holy well itself, depending on the ritual structure or sacrificial framework in place. In most cases, the meat of the animal that serves as a votive material is meant, as part of the ritual practice, to be consumed by the devotees while the blood remains exclusive to the deity. There are instances, however, where both devotee and deity are meant to consume the votive at the same time or at specific intervals. The kola nut (the caffeine-packed, star-shaped fruit of the West African Kola Tree, *Cola acuminata*) and gin are two examples of consumable votives that are first used for divination and then deposited. While invocations are pronounced on the kola nut, broken into its four lobes and sometimes washed in local gin after which all lobes are together cast upon the bare earth, the gin is poured on the earth as a libation. The kola nut and gin are immediately chewed and consumed, respectively. Through this practice of shared meals by the deity and devotee, Awolalu (1979: 143) notes that they begin a mutually beneficial, established, and enduring relationship. Although material votives are deposited for the deity to consume in a literal sense, they are also beneficial for the petitioner and those who partake in nourishing the deity.

The animal votive deposition or “sacrifice” at the site of Nigerian holy wells holds symbolic meanings that are cosmogenic. For instance, in the Yoruba creation story, the domestic fowl is valued as a companion of the divinities and as the first denizen of the earth which later accompanied humans to inhabit the earth. As one with very deep knowledge of heaven and earth, the domestic fowl is significant for a petitioner who desires to send spiritual messages across to heaven (Abimbola 1997: 4). It is important to note that the scarification of animals is not understood as a votive itself but a practice that gives potency and efficacy to the votive presented or deposited at sacred (watery) sites. This is similar to the domestic fowl which represents an indispensable companion that assists the petitioner’s communion with the *otherworld* and could explain why it features prominently as one of the key votive materials that are sacrificed to a deity or at the site of a holy well.

The folk liturgy of votive deposition perhaps most clearly illuminates the symbolic reality of ritual behavior around holy wells. The strikingly diverse positions on votives as a component of folk liturgy demonstrate what Ray (2012: 144) believes are “the variety of ways of engaging sacred landscapes even within shared local traditions.” The reasons for votive use are multifarious but, as a common practice, this

was a means to generate what MacKenzie (1995: 301) understands as “a ceremonial connection with a sacred place” where affirmative, rather than an antipathetic influence, could be derived. To deposit or leave votives in the form appropriate to particular holy wells is an age-old custom among the Yoruba and, indeed, across many cultures. The liturgies of votives are complex with explanations that could easily be expressed in terms of symbolic references to spirituality rather than to its mundane manifestations.

Conclusion

Folk liturgy is a concept popularized in holy well literature. Although its underlying meaning is closely related to some of the practices seen around many holy wells or holy well landscapes/sites, in the study area, this is not usually stressed in most of the holy well research or studies carried out by holy well scholars. In African studies, “liturgy” is a term that is often associated with Catholic Christianity (Uzokwu 1997) and within the African Independent Churches popularly called *Aladura* (Ray 1993: 266–291). Yoruba traditional religious practices were not documented in writing, unlike the ritual customs of many Nigerian Christian sects, so folk liturgies, such as those at holy wells, are still in need of recording. The most important factor for Yoruba worship, however, is that it is to be carried out “in reverence and [...] an appropriate manner and mood if the desired effect is to be achieved” (Awolalu 1979: 99). Each act of worship contains clearly defined elements, the most salient of which are: orchestrated and set actions, sacrifice, cultic functionaries, and sacred places.

The ways by which liturgy is connected with “public worship” appear to be the same for private worship. What this means is that public liturgical practices, although prescribed, also manifest in private worship. For instance, the supplication, adoration, or communion with the object of worship (deity) could be observed by a devotee privately and personally before a consecrated shrine inside the home or within the domestic compound. Here, the devotee emphatically carries out both ritual and non-ritual categories of worship as prescribed by the cultic functionary responsible for such tasks on festival days and at community-recognized sacred places (Oke 2002: 48). Traditional worship or belief among the Yoruba is centered on ancestral deities who are strongly linked to individual extended families, the community, or the kingship institution. Samuel Kunhiyop (2008: 14) corroborates this view that in the African worldview, especially that of the Yoruba, beliefs are replete with an abundant body of invocations, rituals, and practices all directed to ancestors, gods, and spirits. These invocations are accomplished to appreciate the ancestors for responding to personal or collective requests. While such conduct occurs at personal, communal, or kinship levels, they are also applicable around holy wells, though the key difference is the essential relevance of folk liturgies where actors play diverse roles as opposed to non-actors who are sometimes isolated or expected to replicate well-side performances.

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Narodne liturgije i narativi o svetim bunarima među narodom Yoruba u jugozapadnoj Nigeriji

Nadovezujući se na opsežno istraživanje Celeste Ray o irskim svetim bunarima, u radu se pokazuje kako narodne liturgije leže u osnovi značenja usko povezanih s nekim praksama koje se tiču svetih izvora naroda Yoruba u jugozapadnoj Nigeriji – značenja koja su često zanemarena u literaturi o svetim bunarima. Pritom se prilagođavaju neki postojeći pojmovi koji se odnose na svete bunare u ilustrativne i komparativne svrhe. Njihovo će se tumačenje i analiza, međutim, usredotočiti na liturgijske narative koji nabolje odgovaraju percepciji članka o tome što je lokalno kod svetih bunara Yoruba. Usredotočujući se na dva sveta izvora, *Olokun* i *Ori Aye*, članak se oslanja na svjedočenja lokalnih znalaca, bliske istraživačke susrete s obrednim praksama i izvedbama te čitanja iz postojeće literature kako bi otvorio prostor za valjanu procjenu i adekvatno razumijevanje svetih bunara i njihovih različitih očitovanja u društveno-kulturnom životu naroda Yoruba.

Ključne riječi: narodne liturgije, narod Yoruba, sveti bunari, *Olokun*, *Ori Aye*, Ile-Ife, Ondo