

Gelede Ketu revisited: Performance, gender, and the politics of identity in contemporary Yoruba culture

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doi: <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/aa.v23i1.8>

Abstract

Gelede is a vibrant Yoruba masquerade tradition with deep roots in the Ketu region, now in southwestern Nigeria and the Republic of Benin. Although frequently examined for its artistic and ritualistic qualities, its role as a political and gendered discourse in modern African cultural contexts remains underexplored. This paper revisits Gelede as a

performative, living tradition that facilitates negotiation of identity, power, and femininity across changing sociopolitical conditions. It draws on ethnographic fieldwork and oral histories collected in Ketu communities, underpinned by insights from postcolonial theory, African feminist scholarship, and performance studies. Gelede is positioned as a dynamic cultural archive that fosters community reflection and critique while resisting binary thinking around gender, spirituality, and tradition. This research expands existing discourse on indigenous performance as resistance and cultural preservation in postcolonial Africa.

Keywords: Gelede, Ketu, identity, femininity, cultural archives, gender discuss

Introduction

Gẹlẹdẹ is a masquerade festival celebrated primarily among the Yoruba-speaking peoples of Nigeria and Benin republic, particularly the Ketu subgroup. Traditionally performed to honour the powerful spiritual and social roles of women, especially mothers and female ancestors, Gẹlẹdẹ is often associated with the veneration of Ìyá laaku- in Ketu Yoruba dialect (the Great Mother), believed to possess profound metaphysical power. While oral traditions trace Gẹlẹdẹ's origins back several centuries, most scholars place its formal emergence no later than the eighteenth century.

It is widely recognized as a vibrant spectacle that blends music, satire, ritual, dance, and communal commentary. The festival is held annually, often in the dry season or early march, with elaborate performances taking place at night (known as Èfẹ) and during the day (Gẹlẹdẹ proper). Participants include male masqueraders, drummers, singers, and community members, men and women alike, who actively engage in the festivities. Although the masked performers for Tetede are exclusively male, but the representations they embody often depict female spirits, social archetypes, and deities, particularly those associated with fertility, motherhood, and spiritual balance. While many studies (e.g., Drewal 1983, Lawal 1996) have analyzed Gẹlẹdẹ as a ritual that celebrates aesthetics,

spirituality, and feminine power, there is a tendency to interpret it as a static cultural relic. Such interpretations risk overlooking its political and performative dimensions, particularly its capacity to respond to evolving socio-political conditions.

This paper argues that Gelede should be viewed not as a mere folkloric tradition, here understood as a body of orally transmitted customs, beliefs, and performances handed down across generations, but as a dynamic and politically charged site of meaning-making, since the eighteenth century, though oral traditions suggest much earlier origins. It serves as a performance of community memory, a commentary on contemporary life, and a space for negotiating identity, gender, and power. This positions Gelede in line with other Yoruba festivals, such as Oro and Egungun that function as both cultural heritage and social critique. The Ketu community, believed to share ancestral ties with the Yoruba city of Ile-Ife in present-day Osun State, provides a compelling context for this study. In Ketu, Gelede has historically functioned as a mechanism of communal bonding, spiritual expression, and gendered discourse. Although previous scholarship has emphasized its symbolic representations and religious undertones, fewer studies have probed how the festival adapts to contemporary realities such as globalization, migration, youth unemployment, and religious plurality.

Origins of Gelede

The origins of Gelede often emerge through both historical and mythical perspectives. Historically, this tradition traces back to three key locations, Old Oyo, Ketu, and Ilobi, as possible starting points. Lateef Emilandu, a native of Imeko says during the Imeko March 2024 festival, that Ketu people are known for their colourful Gelede performances. There's a well-known story about its origins involving the death of a king. In his account, Lawal (1996) recounts how twin sons were left to compete for the throne, and when one

of them realised he would not be chosen, devised a plan to eliminate his brother.” In response, the second twin created a disguise, an illusion of another person, to outwit his rival (Lawal, 1996). On the mythical side Gelede closely connects to Iya Nla, or the Great Mother, a powerful figure who represents motherhood and twins. This version of the story aligns with the “Yoruba Odu Ifa divination tales”, which form the foundation of many Yoruba myths. “The Odu Ifa consists of 256 poetic verses”, called *ese Ifa*, each telling a story of struggle and the wisdom needed to overcome it.

Quoting Lawal (1996) freely now, one particular *ese Ifa* traces Gelede’s origins back to Yemoja, the revered mother of all Orisa (deities) and living things. According to legend, Yemoja struggled to conceive and sought guidance from an Ifa oracle. The oracle advised her to make sacrifices and perform a special dance, one that involved wearing metal anklets and balancing wooden figurines on her head. After completing the ritual, Yemoja finally became pregnant. Her first child, a son named **Efe**, became known for his humour and wit, qualities still reflected today in the Efe mask, which plays a key role in singing and jesting during performances. Yemoja later gave birth to a daughter, Gelede, who inherited her mother’s large frame and love for dance. As time passed, both Efe and Gelede married, but their spouses faced difficulties conceiving. Seeking solutions to their childlessness, they turned to the Ifa oracle which advised them to repeat the same ritual their mother had performed. They followed the guidance, dancing with metal anklets on their feet and wooden figurines atop their heads. To their joy, the ritual worked and they were blessed with children. This event marked the beginning of the Gelede masked dance, a tradition that continues today, performed by their descendants to honour the wisdom of the past and celebrate fertility, motherhood, and the power of community (Lawal, 1996).

The Gelede festival is a community event usually held annually between March and May, and sometimes times December ending, lasting two to three days. Performances take place both during the night (known as *Efe*) and in the daytime (the main *Gelede*), each with distinct purposes. The night performance features the Efe mask, whose songs and satire address social issues with humour, while the daytime masquerades involve dancers wearing large, elaborate headdresses that dramatize everyday scenes, myths, and moral lessons (Drewal & Drewal, 1983). Men perform as masqueraders, but women play central roles as singers, drummers, and composers of songs. The festival is dedicated to honouring mothers, especially *Ìyá Nlá* (the Great Mother), and is believed to secure fertility, social harmony, and protection for the entire community (Lawal, 1996).

Theoretical framework: Gender, performance, and postcolonial identity

This study is grounded in a blend of theoretical perspectives that help decode Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ's complex role as both cultural expression and political discourse. At the core is Oyewumi (1997), gender theory, which provides a culturally embedded prisms for understanding gender not as a rigid binary but as a fluid, relational force. In Yoruba cosmology, female power is spiritual, moral, and societal. This challenges Western feminist assumptions by emphasizing community roles over individualism and revering the agency of women through symbolic practices such as satirical songs, masquerade performances, and elaborate masks in the Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ festival, which celebrate motherhood, critique social vices, and affirm women's metaphysical power (Drewal & Drewal, 1983; Lawal, 1996; Oyewumi, 1997).

Building on this is performance theory, particularly insights from Richard Schechner and Diana Taylor, who argue that embodied practices function as living archives-repositories

of knowledge transmitted through movement, ritual, and repetition. Taylor's notion of the "repertoire" (2003) underscores how performances like Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ encode memory and critique within the body, bypassing written forms. This makes Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ a crucial tool of intergenerational knowledge transfer, social commentary, and resistance. Postcolonial theory also plays a vital role. Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ's ability to adapt to modern pressures, such as globalization, migration, and neoliberal state ideologies, demonstrates what Homi Bhabha calls the "third space," where tradition and modernity intermingle. This hybridity allows communities to rearticulate identity on their own terms, resisting both colonial erasure and modern marginalisation.

Together, these frameworks reveal Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ not only as a ritual of honour and celebration, but also as a space for negotiating belonging, gender power, and cultural continuity in the postcolonial Yoruba world. Therefore, our research questions are:

- i. *How does Gelede perform identity and gender in contemporary Ketu-Yoruba society*
- ii. *What does the festival reveal about Yoruba cosmology, especially in relation to women's power?*
- iii. *How do its performances serve as tools of preservation, resistance, and critique in the postcolonial moment?*

To answer these questions, this study draws on ethnographic methods, oral narratives, and interdisciplinary theoretical approaches. It contributes to scholarly conversations in African studies, gender theory, and heritage discourse by framing Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ as a living archive of Yoruba cultural expression. While Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ has been widely documented in relation to its aesthetics, ritual functions, and gender symbolism (Drewal & Drewal, 1983; Lawal, 1996; Oyěwùmí, 1997; Adepegba, 1983), few studies have directly addressed the specific concerns raised in this research. Existing scholarship tends to focus either on

Gẹlẹdẹ's cosmological foundations or on its artistic and performative elements, without examining how these dimensions intersect to shape contemporary identity politics, gendered power, and postcolonial negotiation. For instance, Drewal and Drewal (1983) highlight the ritual and visual dimensions of the festival, while Lawal (1996) foregrounds the metaphysical underpinnings of female power; however, these studies do not explore how Gẹlẹdẹ functions today as a site of cultural preservation and resistance within a changing social landscape. Similarly, although Oyewumi (1997) theorizes gender through Yoruba epistemologies, this work is not situated within the ethnographic performance context of the Gẹlẹdẹ institution. To our knowledge, no research has simultaneously examined identity performance, gendered cosmology, and postcolonial cultural critique within contemporary Ketu-Yoruba Gẹlẹdẹ practice. This study therefore fills a crucial gap by integrating these strands and analyzing how Gẹlẹdẹ operates as a dynamic, living archive in the present moment.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative ethnographic approach so as to be objective, drawing upon firsthand fieldwork conducted across several Ketu communities. Data was collected through participant observation during Gelede festival in early March, 2024. Thirty structured interviews were conducted with elders, masqueraders, women, and cultural custodians in Imeko, Idirin or Idigny, Ile-Ketu, Iwoye Ketu, Ilikimu, Isanlu, Okeagbede, Ilara Agudo, Tata and Ijoun). All interviews were transcribed, translated where necessary, and subjected to thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and cultural meanings.

These methods were chosen for their suitability in capturing the lived experiences and cultural nuances of the Gelede tradition. The analysis is further informed by Geertz's

(1973) concept of ‘thick description,’ which emphasizes interpreting cultural practices within their social contexts, allowing Gelede performances to be understood not just as spectacle but as layered texts of meaning. The research is further informed by archival materials and secondary literature in Yoruba studies, anthropology, and performance scholarship.

Table 1: Categories of Secondary Literature Supporting the Research

Field of Study	Key Themes Explored	Representative Sources
Yoruba Studies	Gelede origin, cosmology, cultural symbolism	Lawal (1996); Drewal & Drewal (1975); Idowu & Oriola (2021)
Anthropology	Ritual, gender, kinship, ethnography	Geertz (1973); Spradley (1979); Babalola (1971)
Performance Scholarship	Embodied knowledge, repertoire, theatre as critique	Taylor (2003); Drewal (1983)

A critical insider-outsider perspective was maintained: one co-researcher is a Ketu native with lived experience of the Gelede tradition, ensuring that the analysis was culturally grounded rather than extractive. The integration of oral history, ethnographic observation, and scholarly sources provided a robust basis for understanding Gelede in both its traditional and contemporary forms. Fieldwork was informed by critical ethnography, which not only describes cultural practices but interrogates their power dynamics, symbolism, and historical importance. Emphasis was placed on how participants themselves interpret the festival, thereby centering indigenous voices and epistemologies.

Theoretical analysis: Cultural frameworks in Gelede

Communities across the world closely tie their cultural practices and traditions to local identity and heritage, as scholars of performance and anthropology have long noted. Geertz (1973) emphasizes that rituals and symbols serve as ‘models of’ and ‘models for’ reality, embedding identity in cultural practice. Taylor (2003) further demonstrates how embodied traditions function as a ‘repertoire,’ transmitting memory and reinforcing heritage beyond written archives. Similarly, UNESCO (2008) highlights festivals like Gẹlẹdẹ as intangible heritage, essential for sustaining cultural identity and community cohesion.

In relation to Gelede festival in Ketu land, this connection is especially vivid. Gelede is not just a celebration; it is a powerful expression of cultural meaning that is grounded in both symbolic tradition and the everyday social and economic life of the people. In Ketu towns such as Tata, Ijoun, Imeko, Ile-Ketu, Ilara Agudo, Ilikimu, and Idigy, the festival draws several hundred participants, with entire households contributing in different ways. Male masqueraders perform the dances and wear the carved headdresses, women compose and sing songs, elders oversee rituals and enforce taboos, drummers and musicians set the rhythm of the performances, while children and younger community members participate as apprentices and spectators. In this way, the whole community is implicated in sustaining the festival, each role reinforcing identity, spirituality, and social cohesion.

Various cultural theories help unpack the meanings of the festival and its continued relevance in contemporary Ketu society. This exploration centers on structural functionalism, which sees society as a system of interdependent parts. As Radcliffe-Brown (1952) explained, rituals function to sustain social equilibrium by binding

individuals to communal structures. In a similar vein, Durkheim (1995) argued that ritual gatherings reaffirm collective identity and moral order dynamics vividly expressed in the Gelede festival, where the whole community participates in honouring powerful mothers and reinforcing shared values. The Gelede festival fits perfectly into this framework. Through its explained rituals, performances, and communal gatherings, the celebration reinforces social cohesion. It affirms shared values, norms, and beliefs, creating a sense of continuity and purpose. The gendered portrayals within the festival, particularly the way roles are performed and understood, reflect societal expectations and provide a symbolic structure that holds the community together. Symbolic interactionism gives us a more personal way to understand Gelede.

As Mead (1934) explains, identity is shaped through role-taking, a process visible when masqueraders embody spirits like Tetede while community members interpret and react. Blumer (1969) further emphasizes that meanings evolve through social interaction, which helps explain why Gelede songs and masquerades adapt to address contemporary issues while preserving ancestral values. In Gelede, everyone involved, whether they are performing, organizing, or simply watching, helps bring the festival to life. Through their participation in dance, music, and masked performance, they imbue each symbol with meaning. The colourful costumes and carefully carved masks are not just for show, they tell stories. They carry the weight of memory, identity, and generations of pride, turning each performance into a living conversation between the past and present.

Meanwhile, cultural materialism shifts the prism to the tangible and economic aspects of the festival. As Williams (1977) reminds us, cultural forms are always embedded in material conditions, and rituals like Gelede depend on the labour, skill, and resources of the community. Similarly, Harris (2001) emphasizes that cultural systems cannot be separated from the economic and ecological realities that sustain them. Behind the

spectacle of Gelede lies a network of resource mobilisation and artistic labour: the production of masks, costumes, and ceremonial elements requires investment and skilled craftsmanship. This material dimension enhances the festival's economic value, boosting local livelihoods, supporting artisans, and showing how culture and economy intertwine to sustain tradition.

Furthermore, male dancers embody feminine spirits by wearing masks that represent women, engaging in deliberate role-reversal. We saw this first in Gelede Ijio, whose Ketu influence cannot be taken lightly. This act challenges conventional gender roles and opens up a space for dialogue around gender identity and expression. Such performances provoke thought about the flexibility of identity and the possibility of rethinking deeply ingrained cultural norms. On an aesthetic level, the festival is a feast of artistic narratives. The visual spectacle, lively costumes, elaborate masks, and theatrical performances, serves as both entertainment and cultural preservation. Each piece of art tells a story, preserves memory, and contributes to a collective cultural archive, ensuring that the legacy of the Ketu-Yoruba continues to thrive across generations.

Having said this, we all can see that, the Gelede festival is more than just a celebration, it is a living expression of culture. For the Ketu-Yoruba people, whose communities are organized around kinship networks, age grades, and religious associations, the festival reinforces collective identity by honouring mothers, ancestors, and the metaphysical powers that sustain society. Structural functionalism reveals its role in maintaining social order by reaffirming respect for elders, regulating morality through satirical performances, and ensuring fertility and prosperity for the community.

Symbolic interactionism highlights personal and communal meaning-making, as masquerades, songs, and dances are not just entertainment but tools through which

participants interpret their roles in family, economy, and spirituality. Cultural materialism, meanwhile, highlights how the festival reflects the material conditions of society and the interdependence between ritual and everyday survival. Together, these perspectives provide a holistic knowledge of Gelede as a lively cultural phenomenon grounded in Ketu-Yoruba identity, spirituality, and communal resilience.

Literature review and scholarly

A Yoruba proverb wisely states that, in the world of human actions, true originality often eludes us, as many aspects of our lives tend to be influenced by imitation. This notion becomes particularly relevant when we examine the extensive research on Gelede. Scholars such as Drewal (1973), Gotrick (1985), Idowu (2021), and Olatunji et al. (2016), among others, have all explored various facets of Gelede. However, there remains a wide gap in exploring its evolving importance within modern identity politics, gender discourse, and diasporic expression.

Lawal (1978) provides a useful framework for understanding the origins of cultural practices in the Yoruba community. According to him, traditions that explain the origins of phenomena can be divided into two categories: the mythical and the historical. The mythical tradition attributes the creation of things to divine forces, while the historical tradition seeks to locate the origins of events within time and space. While myths are often easier to interpret, historical accounts, especially those passed down orally, can be more challenging, as they may be subject to distortion or intentional alteration over time. Attempts to trace the origins of Gelede to specific places such as Ketu or Ilobi often end up being imprecise and conflicting. Lawal (1978) acknowledges this complexity and the challenges it poses to establishing a clear historical narrative.

A more recent study by Lawal et al. (2022) offers a more profound understanding of the Gelede festival, which intertwines drumming, dancing, and singing in a ritual designed to honour femininity. The Gelede performance involves masked dancers representing both male and female identities, a guide, a group of drummers, and a deeply engaged audience. The careful planning and dedication that go into the annual observance of this ritual across various communities illustrate its profound cultural importance.

According to Drewal and Drewal (1975), the Gelede performance carries an energy that mirrors the build-up of a thunderstorm, anticipating the arrival of the rainy season. The town is notably quiet during the day, as most people rest after the previous night's Efe performance. As the evening approaches and the heat subsides, spectators slowly gather to witness the Gelede spectacle. Drummers take their positions at the newly set-up palm-frond entrance, marking the beginning of the performance in the central market, they observed.

Babalola (1971), as discussed by Drewal and Drewal (1975), explains that Gelede is ultimately an homage to the forebears of the community, especially the matriarchs. This underscores the idea that Gelede is a space where women are at the forefront. The ancestors emphasized the importance of respecting these powerful women, referred to as *awon Aje*, as neglecting them could lead to disastrous consequences. The festival is a reminder to cherish and nurture them to maintain the balance and vitality of the community. Gelede's role in addressing the complexities of witchcraft and fertility through a mythical lens is a core part of Yoruba cultural heritage (Lawal, 1978). While Gelede honours various deities (*orisa*), its main focus is on Iya nla, the Great Mother, who is said to possess immense spiritual power, including control over witchcraft. Iya nla is also known as Iya wa, meaning "Our Mother," or Yewajobi, which translates as "Mother of Us All" (Lawal, 1978).

Olatunji and Koenane (2016), in research cited by Klein (2007), highlight how Gelede has evolved from its roots in Yoruba communities in Nigeria and West Africa to an important cultural phenomenon influencing the global Black diaspora, including regions such as Latin America, Europe, and Australia. Originally, the festival was a local street event where the community gathered in town squares or marketplaces for socialising and sharing experiences. Over time, Gelede has gained a more profound and far-reaching influence in the performing arts and global culture (Olatunji & Koenane, 2016).

Idowu and Oriola (2021) provide an interesting perspective on Efe, a ritual particularly important in parts of Yewa and Ijio Meso, Nigeria. Among the Yoruba, especially the Ketu and Anago people, Efe plays an important role in transforming society through its rituals. Lawal et al. (2021) emphasise the belief that women possess the power to give and take life, and Gelede serves as a platform to honour and acknowledge the vital role women play in maintaining societal harmony. The masks used in the festival, known as “Great Mothers,” symbolize profound respect, especially for elder women and priestesses.

Further research by Idowu and Oriola (2021) reveals the shared maternal lineage between Efe and Gelede, with both tracing their origins to the goddess Yemoja. Yemoja’s struggle with infertility and her consultation with the Ifa oracle are central to the creation of both Efe and Gelede masquerades. The oracle instructed Yemoja to engage in masked dances and rituals to conceive, and after following these steps, she gave birth to Efe (representing humour and wit) and later to Gelede, her daughter. This narrative highlights the profound spiritual connection between the two traditions.

Drewal (1974) further elaborates that Efe, a nocturnal rite, precedes the afternoon grandeur of Gelede. “The Efe songs convey specific themes and come to life through the

Gelede masks and costumes.” As Drewal (1974) and other scholars (Babalola, 1971; Beier, 1958; Verger, 1965) have noted, the mothers in the Gelede performance are seen as possessing a spiritual force (*ase*) comparable to that of the deities. This force is neutral, neither inherently good nor bad, and can be channeled for either positive or negative outcomes. The power of the mothers is central to the festival, and their role in balancing community life is crucial.

As the evening draws to a close and the final Gelede performance unfolds, the audience reluctantly disperses, carrying with them the memories of an engaging and powerful spectacle. As Drewal and Drewal (1975) beautifully put it, “the favourites homeward, where they recall with pleasure the spectacle of Gelede.” While existing scholarship has extensively discussed Gelede’s multifaceted roles within Yoruba culture, focusing on its ritualistic, social, and communicative dimensions, a wide gap remains in exploring its evolving importance in modern identity politics, gender discourse, and diasporic expression. These are the gaps our research aims to fill.

Results

Finding 1: Gender, identity, and cultural belonging in contemporary Ketu-Yoruba society

During our fieldwork in Imeko, thirty structured interviews were conducted across communities, but here we highlight five men’s accounts because they reveal a particularly vivid pattern in how Gelede performs identity and gender. Most of these participants, three in their 70s and two in their 60s and late 30s, expressed the deep cultural and emotional significance of the festival both at home and in the diaspora. One participant compared the festival to religious pilgrimage, saying:

*“For us, Gelede is like what Catholics is to Vatican. No matter where we are, it draws us back.”
Another interviewee emphasised the festival’s ability to unite people across religious divides:*

“I am a Muslim, but when Gelede comes, I am also a son of Ketu. The festival is not idol worship; it is honour for our mothers and our ancestors.”

A third respondent connected Gelede to identity in the diaspora:

“Even abroad, when I hear the drums of Gelede during diaspora meetings, I feel Ketu inside me. It reminds me that I belong somewhere.”

For many Ketu-Yoruba people, therefore, Gelede is not simply a festival but a homecoming. It reconnects families, revives memory, strengthens bonds, and reaffirms cultural identity. Importantly, participants consistently distinguished Gelede from idol worship, describing it instead as ancestral honour and cultural affirmation. Songs during performances also reinforce this relevance, addressing pressing modern concerns such as youth unemployment, *japa* (migration for better opportunities), inflation, and political corruption. For example:

*“Esin ko fo li nma e t’ewo gbajo,
bo s’alufa a ni, bo je woli ni,
buoda i wa so ti e.
E’le so o pe ebo la nse,
p’oloun ko fo li ka jo.”*

(Culled from Gelede performance, 2024)

*“Christianity or Islam doesn’t stop me from dancing to Gelede songs.
Whether you’re a pastor or an imam,
come and celebrate with us.
You may call it ritual,
but the living God does not forbid our cultural joy.”*

As they sing, elders and women form a circle, dancing gracefully while holding horse-tail fans, while the community awaits the appearance of Tetede (the female spirit) and her partner, Efe. Although Tetede symbolises womanhood, the masquerader behind the

mask is always male, a symbolic inversion that underscores the reverence for women's spiritual power in Ketu-Yoruba cosmology.

We also observed that masks frequently carry "Pele" tribal marks, a distinctive pattern associated with both the Ketu and Sabe subgroups of the Yoruba. This further situates Gelede as a marker of ethnic identity.

In line with our research questions, these findings suggest that:

- i. On identity, and gender, Gelede enables men to embody and honour female power through masquerade, affirming gender as relational rather than fixed.
- ii. On cosmology, the reference for Tetede (Female Gelede that first appear) and the great mothers (Iya laaku), highlights the spiritual centrality of women in Yoruba thought.
- iii. On resistance and preservation, by satirising social ills such as unemployment and corruption, the festival functions as a performative critique of contemporary society while sustaining ancestral traditions.

Finding 2: Gelede as living archive, resistance, memory, and women's power

Interview participants consistently described the festival as a vessel of memory. As one elder woman in Idigny explained:

"Gelede is our history in dance and song. Even if books are lost, the masks will tell our children who we are."

Others highlighted its corrective role in community life. A 50-year-old masquerader from Ilara-Agudo told us:

“When we sing about greed or corruption, it is not just entertainment. It is our way of warning leaders and guiding the young.”

Another participant, a female drummer from Imeko, 65, connected Gẹlẹḍẹ directly to women’s spiritual authority:

“The power of ase is in women. Men may wear the masks, but the spirit is our mothers’. Without them, there is no Gẹlẹḍẹ.”

These testimonies align with the understanding of Gẹlẹḍẹ as both cultural archive and political commentary. The festival models alternative gender politics by acknowledging women’s power not merely in symbolic terms but through community-affirmed rituals. In portraying women’s power as spiritual, moral, and societal, it challenges colonial patriarchy and complements African feminist frameworks that Centre relational agency over individualism.

At the heart of Gẹlẹḍẹ lies the concept of ase, a Yoruba term representing the spiritual energy and life force that women carry. The performances highlight the roles of women as caregivers, mothers, and custodians of cultural knowledge. Gẹlẹḍẹ honors the contributions of women, fosters deep respect for female elders, and challenges gender stereotypes, promoting a more inclusive society.

Beyond its entertainment value, Gẹlẹḍẹ carries profound cultural and moral importance. As Drewal (1983) explains, these performances address essential societal issues such as morality, community harmony, and protection against malevolent forces. Songs critique the growing preference for quick wealth over honest work, while others discourage harmful practices like prostitution and skin bleaching:

“Awun omude ode oni o’fe sise mo, oogu owo ni un nwa kiri, ola ojiji ni un nwa. K’ira k’ita ki d’ola, ise l’oogu ise, ise la fi ndeni g’iga.”

This translates to:

“Youth seem more drawn to money rituals and fraud than traditional jobs as a means of acquiring wealth. However, it is important to understand that there are no shortcuts to success. Hard work and diligence are the true remedies for poverty.”

Through satire and song, the festival becomes a corrective tool, sustaining memory, affirming women’s power, and preserving the moral fabric of the community:

“Omuge iwoyi, e sorayin, e ye b’oramo, ara bibo ki sasa ini, dudu l’adeda dani, eeye tun rayin da. Ko s’ere nnowo i’nobi.”

Which means:

“Young girls should stop bleaching their skin. Our cultural heritage teaches us to embrace our natural skin tones, as given by the Creator. There is no true benefit to prostitution.”

Finding 3: Artistic and Performative Dimensions of Gelede

Gelede performances feature complex dance routines accompanied by rhythmic drumbeats known as *Agunbe* and voices singing in the Ketu-Yoruba dialect. These varying rhythms represent different aspects of the performance. Dancers move fluidly, using gestures to convey layered meanings. Participants in our study repeatedly stressed the aesthetic power of Gelede. As one carver, 55 years old, from Idirin noted:

“The mask is not just wood; it is a story. Every line, every colour speaks of the mothers and the spirits they carry.”

Another interviewee, a young drummer, 35 years old, from Ile-Ketu, described the rhythm's role in guiding the masquerade:

"When the Agunbe starts, the dancer does not dance alone. The drum tells him when to move, when to stop, when to speak. Without the drum, there is no life in the mask."

A female singer 62 years old, from Ijoun highlighted the communal dimension:

"Our songs give meaning to the dance. We remind the masquerade what to say and remind the people what to learn. Without our voices, Gẹlẹḍe would be empty."

The visual appeal of Gẹlẹḍe lies in its elaborate costumes and masks. Performers wear ornate outfits adorned with colourful fabrics, beads, and symbolic trinkets. These elements often reflect the revered qualities of women. Masks depict women, animals, and supernatural beings, with exaggerated features carved to express specific emotions or ideas. In the Ketu-Yoruba community, the festival embodies their cosmology, linking it to feminine deities (*Awun Iya ini*), ancestors (*Alale*), and elemental forces.

Gẹlẹḍe requires rigorous training in dance, song, and symbolic rituals. Spiritual leaders (*Oluawo*) oversee this process, ensuring that performers not only master the art form but also understand its spiritual and historical meanings. These rituals serve to appease the spiritual realm while educating the community about its heritage. Beyond artistic expression, Gẹlẹḍe functions as a vehicle for cultural preservation, reinforcing communal values and celebrating women's contributions to society.

Notably, during the festival in Imeko and Ijio Meso, an understudied aspect of Gẹlẹḍe emerges. When performers first appear, their opening words often reflect their religious background. A Muslim performer might begin with *"Bisimillahi ramoni roimi"*

while a Christian might open with a Bible verse in the local Yoruba dialect, “*Baba wa ti nbe l’oorun*” (“Our Father in Heaven”). This intersection of faith and tradition explains the evolving nature of Gẹlẹdẹ within contemporary Yoruba society.

Table 2: Alignment of findings with research questions

Research Questions	Findings	Key Insights
i. How does Gẹlẹdẹ perform identity and gender in contemporary Ketu-Yoruba society?	Finding 1: Gender and Identity	Gẹlẹdẹ operates as a homecoming and cultural affirmation, uniting people across religious and generational divides. Male masqueraders embody female spirits, symbolizing reverence for women’s power and enacting gender as relational rather than fixed.
ii. What does the festival reveal about Yoruba cosmology, especially in relation to women’s power?	Finding 2: Gẹlẹdẹ as Living Archive, Resistance, Memory, and Women’s Power	The festival functions as a repertoire of memory, grounded in ase. Performances highlight women as custodians of spiritual and moral

		authority, while songs critique harmful practices and affirm community ethics.
iii. How do its performances serve as tools of cultural preservation, resistance, and critique in the postcolonial moment?	Finding 3: Artistic and Performative Dimensions	Through dance, drumming, masks, and satire, Gẹlẹdẹ preserves Yoruba cosmology while addressing modern issues (e.g., unemployment, corruption, migration). Artistic elements reinforce communal values while adapting to contemporary pluralism.

Discussion

This study set out to examine how the Gẹlẹdẹ festival performs identity, reveals Yoruba cosmology, and sustains cultural meaning in the contemporary postcolonial moment. The three findings, identity and gender, Gẹlẹdẹ as a living archive, and its artistic and performative dimensions collectively demonstrate that Gẹlẹdẹ functions as far more than an entertainment spectacle. It is a dynamic site where memory, spirituality, and social critique converge.

First, the festival performs identity and gender in ways that affirm belonging across divides of age, faith, and migration. Male masqueraders embodying female spirits highlight the Yoruba conception of gender as relational and fluid rather than rigidly binary (Oyewumi, 1997). This supports African feminist critiques of Western gender frameworks while showing how ritual performance provides a homecoming space for dispersed Ketu-Yoruba communities.

Second, the framing of *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀* as a living archive underscores its role in preserving and transmitting cultural memory. The songs and satire performed during the festival serve as correctives, addressing issues of morality, fertility, and youth behaviour. In line with Taylor's (2003) concept of the repertoire, these embodied practices function as archives without written texts, ensuring the continuity of Yoruba cosmology, particularly the veneration of women's power through *ase*. Here, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀* challenges colonial and patriarchal erasures by positioning women as custodians of moral and spiritual authority (Lawal, 1996; Drewal, 1983).

Third, the artistic and performative dimensions of the festival reveal how music, masks, and dance operate as tools of both cultural preservation and adaptation. The festival is not static; the incorporation of Islamic and Christian prayers at the beginning of performances illustrates its negotiation with plural religious identities, echoing Radcliffe-Brown's (1952) insight on ritual as a stabilising force within changing social systems. The artistry of *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀* also sustains livelihoods, linking Harris's (2001) cultural materialist perspective to the Yoruba recognition that aesthetics and survival are intertwined.

In conclusion, these findings show that *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀* is not a relic of the past but a living cultural phenomenon. It continues to perform identity, affirm Yoruba cosmology, and provide tools of resistance and critique within a postcolonial, globalising world. For the Ketu-

Yoruba, the festival is at once a spiritual contract, an archive of memory, and a creative stage through which new meanings are negotiated.

Socio-cultural importance and contemporary expressions

Gelede performances are structured around satire, spirituality, and symbolic inversion. Masks depicting women, animals, and societal archetypes perform dances, songs, and rituals that deliver both reverence and critique. The central figures, Efe (the male jester) and Tetede (the female spirit), embody duality: humour and seriousness, masculinity and femininity, critique and celebration.

Although men perform Gelede, the festival revolves around the veneration of female spiritual power (*awon iya wa*). This reflects a Yoruba cosmology where spiritual agency is fluid and powerful women, both living and ancestral, are honoured. Gelede thereby contests Eurocentric binaries of male/female, sacred/secular, and public/private. Gelede is also a powerful form of social commentary. For instance, during a recent Gelede festival in Imeko, performers used satire to critique high cost of living and urge political accountability. In the diaspora, Gelede has been reimagined through contemporary theatre and Yoruba cultural festivals in Brazil and the United States, underscoring its versatility and resilience.

“Emo de, gbogbo nkan lo ti gbowo lori loja. Gari ko seeto, ewa ke ko se i ra, Iresi ko se i sun mo.

Epo i bentiro d’ogun, eyin ijoba ini, ebe la nbe yin, e’ saanu i mekunu.”

This translates to:

“As market prices soar, trouble looms. Inflation has made rice, beans, and cassava flour unaffordable, and even buying gasoline has become an obstacle. We humbly appeal to those in power to consider the struggles of the less privileged.”

Through performances like this, the Ketu and Ijio people use Gelede as a platform for discussing power imbalances and social concerns. It provides a voice for the community, urging leaders to address pressing economic and political issues. Beyond its critical role in social discourse, Gelede is a celebration of heritage and collective memory (Drewal & Drewal, 1975:15). The festival takes place during major ceremonies and civic events, blending music, dance, and symbolism into a display of tradition. By retelling historical narratives through performance, Gelede preserves cultural wisdom and transfers it from one generation to the next.

At its heart, Gelede is about community and connection. It brings people together, regardless of background, to share meals, stories, and experiences. As community members put it, *"They dine and wine together,"* strengthening social bonds and reinforcing a shared cultural identity.

Contemporary relevance and cultural sustainability

Gelede remains relevant today due to its rich symbolism, problem-solving potential, and contributions to cultural preservation and tourism. Grounded in Yoruba cosmology, it explains the strength and importance of women, addresses social challenges, and provides opportunities for both economic development and the safeguarding of cultural heritage. At its core, Gelede reflects the Yoruba worldview, which emphasizes women's vital roles in various aspects of life. The carefully carved masks used in performances symbolize diverse feminine attributes, portraying women as both nurturers and forces of change. This symbolism continues to resonate in contemporary society, as gender equality and women's empowerment remain pressing global issues.

Beyond its cultural importance, Gelede serves as a platform for addressing societal issues. Its satirical performances, which traditionally critique social norms, can adapt to reflect

current concerns such as corruption, environmental degradation, and social injustice. The ability of Gelede to engage with relevant themes through artistic expression underscores its adaptability and enduring relevance. In an era of increasing globalization and cultural homogenization, Gelede also plays a crucial role in preserving Yoruba-Ketu identity. The interconnected elements of its masks, music, and dance serve as a living link to ancestral traditions. Community-based educational initiatives can further strengthen this connection by raising awareness about Gelede's historical importance and fostering a sense of cultural pride among younger generations, who are now addicted to *japa*.

Furthermore, Gelede holds important tourism potential. As world interest in cultural tourism grows, the festival's colourful performances offer an authentic experience that can attract visitors eager to explore Yoruba traditions. This, in turn, can create economic opportunities for local communities through accommodations, transportation, and artisanal crafts. However, sustainable tourism development must prioritize the preservation of Gelede's cultural integrity, ensuring that commercialization does not dilute its traditional essence.

Conclusion: Implications for scholarship and cultural policy

This paper has argued that Gelede should be viewed not as a museum-piece of Yoruba culture but as a contemporary space of meaning-making and resistance. As an indigenous performance system, it offers insight into how African communities respond to internal and external pressures while preserving cultural integrity. Scholars interested in gender, performance, or heritage preservation would do well to support living traditions like Gelede, not only for what they reveal about the past, but for how they shape the future. This includes funding community-led documentation as being done across Ketu land and Ijio-Meso, supporting intergenerational knowledge transmission, and integrating Gelede into wider cultural policy frameworks. Further research should compare Gelede across

Yoruba subgroups and explore its role in gender discourse, intangible heritage policy, and transnational identity formation.

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