

# Malokun Festival and Practices among the Mahin on the Ilaje Coast

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## Abstract

Religious beliefs in the precolonial kingdom of Mahin in the Ilaje area of Yorubaland were closely linked to fishing, the fish trade, and other socio-economic activities. Apart from helping to catch fish for immediate consumption, the worship of Malokun facilitated short and long distance trade in fish as a veritable trade article to be exchanged for agricultural goods. This article relies largely on oral interviews gathered from stake-holders such as the practitioners of Malokun religious rites, especially the chiefs and other community members. A group of fishermen were also interviewed alongside some fish sellers in Mahinland and in Igbokoda, the central market of Ilaje. Fishing activity significantly impacted on the development of Mahin in the past. The efficacy of ritual performances is still held in trust by the people whose ways of life are innately fused to the performances of Malokun. The article concludes that like the Mahin, most coastal communities in Yorubaland explored their natural endowments and entrenched them into their socio-economic activities; hence, religious beliefs and economic activities are interwoven and are regarded as inseparable.

## Introduction

Mahin is part of the Ilaje area in the southeast of what is now the Yoruba-speaking part of Nigeria. It lies on the Atlantic coast and is bounded in the West by Ijebu (Ogun State), in the North by Ikale (Ondo State), and in the East by Ugbo, also in Ilaje, and beyond that, the Itsekiri. Like Ugbo, the kingdom of Mahin has existed in its present location for several centuries before colonial rule, and it has existed as an integral part of the Ilaje area. This area was geographically characterized by coastal activities including fishing, trading, boat-building and mat-making. The capital of Mahin is Ode Mahin, but the kingdom also includes many smaller settlements.<sup>1</sup>

Oral accounts of Mahin's origins are diverse. Some argue that Mahin was founded by Oranmule, the father of Aganganjigan Omobuwa, and Alagwe, the father of Agoro, in about the tenth century. Furthermore, official history attributed their origin to Osun, son of Oni Oghoduwa. The Mahin people are said to have migrated from Ile-Ife as a group and settled for some years in the Itsekiri kingdom. They recognized the paramountcy of the Olu of Itsekiri with annual tribute paid in the form of mats and bamboo poles, which were produced locally.<sup>2</sup> The pattern of settlement among the groups was loose, and immigrating groups were easily assimilated by the existing groups. In many cases, the immigrants were from areas considered politically unstable, or from areas with insecure and weak economic bases. Several groups also settled in the area during times of wars.

The Mahin also had close ties to the other Ilaje areas, and in particular Ugbo. Oral accounts trace the emergence of Malokun to Ugboland, a community east of Ode Mahin. The Malokun festival calls to memory how the people of Ugbo migrated from Ile-Ife to the coast of Yorubaland after the coming of Oduduwa and how they received there the blessings of a very supportive goddess of the sea. The festival, which is usually celebrated around June every year in the coastal communities is said to be indigenous to Ugbo and to those whom Ugbo bequeaths the power to do so.<sup>3</sup> However, in Mahin, Malokun is not celebrated as commemorating the origin of the Ugbo people, but to ask for

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1. The Ilaje are scattered in various places along the coastal lines but at various times of the year, they all return to their home to celebrate festivals such as *Umale* (masquerade) *Epo* (raffia costume masquerading) and Malokun (fertility festival for the sea goddess). They are celebrated in several settlements, including Orimoloye, Magbeyinwa, Igbokuta, Mofere, Ode-Mahin, Ugbo, Mahintedo, Itebukunmi, Egunrin, Atijere, Igbokoda, and Orerara.

2. Isola Olomola, "The Eastern Yoruba Country before Oduduwa: An Assessment," *Proceedings of the Conference in Yoruba Civilization*, University of Ife, July 26–31, 1976. For more details on the origins of the Mahin kingdom on the Ilaje coast, see National Archives Ibadan, Ilaje Intelligence Report, Ondo Prof. 1/1, File No.119, RJM Curwen, 1937.

3. Malokun is worshipped beyond the Ilaje area. For example, there is a Malokun temple in Benin where priests are known as Ohen Lokun. The temple was believed to have been

the blessings of the goddess of the sea for their fishing, trade and other occupations that require the benevolence of the sea. Thus, fishing communities in Mahin as well as in other communities in the Ilaje coast worship Malokun so as to heighten the propensity of their trade.

It is widely believed that Malokun was a female deity responsible for the economic growth and development of the Ilaje coast generally, including Mahin. If she was appeased she would provide for the people by producing a bumper harvest of fishes. If not, she would determine measures of punishment to erring individuals or groups. It was also believed that Malokun was able to see hidden issues and especially crime and other evils.

In Mahin, as in other Ilaje fishing communities, the Malokun festival is also celebrated for the purgation and purification of the land. The festival generally allows the display and interplay of (oral) literacy, and of cultural and artistic activities. More specifically, the Malokun festival offers the coastal people of Mahin the opportunity to join in the open discussion and criticism of misconduct that are believed to be capable of bringing calamity to the land. The festival is geared towards the effective correction of social ills through the use of songs, and it encourages communication and learning between the performers and the audience.<sup>4</sup>

Malokun festival was celebrated collectively by all Mahin, as well as other Ilaje coastal communities, but not on the same day. As important as Ogun festival was to the Ondo, Oke-badan festival to the Ibadan, Agemo festival to the Ijebu and Osun festival to the people of Osogbo, so also was Malokun festival is to the people of the Ilaje coast including Mahin. It was one of the most important traditional festivals in the Ilaje area beyond the strong historical link with the origin of Ugbo people. It is the only local festival that binds all the people together, and it is celebrated today by many irrespective of their religious beliefs. According to oral tradition, whether you are Muslim, Christian or a free thinker, you are bound to obey the local rules and regulations pertaining to this most important socio-cultural festival when it is being celebrated.<sup>5</sup>

### The celebration of Malokun festival

Malokun festival is usually celebrated in June or later, after sea levels have risen due to the rains. The king or ruler of each town would send a special message to the Aghoro-Uta group (the High Priests) to come and fix a specific

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established for them by the Olugbo. Oral interview with Chief Akingbade, 63 years, an Ilaje-Ugbo chieftain. Interview held at 17 Akereke Square, Ugbo, on June 12, 2016.

4. Oral interview with Mrs Adenike Onetufo, 73 years, a trader in Igbokoda and Irele. Interview held at 2 Larada Street, Igbokoda, on 15 June, 2016.

date for the festival. On this particular day of fixing the date, the Aghoro-Uta, the chiefs and the ruler would gather in front of the palace to agree when the festival should be held. The date was then announced three times; the first announcement date was when it was 17 days to the festival, the second announcement was usually at thirteen days and finally at nine days. The first and the second segments of the date were usually conceived in mind by the Aghoro-Uta and ruler as well as the chiefs. When it was nine days to the festival, the King would send the town crier to announce the date of the festival in the market square for sufficient and necessary publicity, sensitizing all and sundry to be ready to participate in the festival.

At the time when most markets were periodic markets, a day preceding the festival day was usually a market day. By the evening, around 4pm, many people would gather at a hall behind the Malokun shrine together with the king and chiefs. This gathering was usually called Ore-Ule, meaning a convergence of people where topical issues concerning the community were discussed. The ruler presided over this meeting and issues affecting the community were discussed. The ruler also declared before the house what was planned for the community politically, economically and socially.<sup>5</sup> This meeting served as an avenue for people to ask question(s) pertaining to the entire community. It also served as an interactive opportunity between the people of the community, both poor and rich, elders and youths and the king. Thus, it facilitated social unity among the people of the community.



**Figure 1:** Malokun Shrine. Source: Fieldwork in Mahin on 4/6/2016.

5. Oral interview with Chief Adewebi Okunlala, 82 years, a member of the Agoro-Uta group. Interview held at 7 Omonira Street, Igbokoda, on June 12, 2016.

After all the discussion, the king, chiefs and the Aghoro-Uta prayed for the success of the festival, the development of the community as well as peaceful co-existence among the people at large. The items used to pray were kolanut, alcohol, and alligator pepper. Instructions were given to participants to celebrate the festival without fighting each other because Malokun abhors the shedding of blood.

According to tradition, it was sacrilegious for anybody in the community to use goat, fowl, or sheep as sacrifice for the worship of Malokun, although there is an exception for cow. Malokun required no sacrificial animal either for atonement or for propitiation, and especially the blood of human beings was forbidden to her. This was said to be in memory of a long period of animosity between rival groups in the area, and it is probably due to the carnage witnessed during the period of slave raiding occasioned by the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

For the celebration, a big cow is slaughtered at the side of the river, which was cooked and eaten by all the celebrants. (As the cow was not killed as a sacrifice for Malokun but for the feast, the taboo on blood did not apply here.) During the performance of the rites, prayers are offered by the king to the goddess in order to appease her and demand for fortunes. During the celebration different groups and individuals perform different types of magic and display their knowledge of medicine and esoterism. Both males and females are



**Figure 2:** Dancing during Malokun festival celebration in Mahin Kingdom.  
Source: Fieldwork in Mahin on 4/6/2016.



**Figure 3:** Aghoro-Uta and other chiefs during the Malokun festival celebration. Source: Fieldwork in Mahin on 4/6/2016.

allowed to partake in the celebration of the Malokun festival.<sup>6</sup> Chief Akingbade asserted that in the coastal communities, men, women as well as the young participate actively in the celebration of Malokun. He asserted further that singing and dancing around the town and the Malokun shrine is usually done by the women while Ogele Malokun, a traditional dance which is associated with Olokun festival (in Ile-Ife) is usually performed by the youths in the community purposely to create an awareness of the beginning of the Malokun festival to the people.

Furthermore, between the hours of 3–5 p.m. on the festival day, the king and his chiefs would give thanks to the deities inside the Malokun shrine. According to tradition, before the Oba eventually comes to the Malokun shrine, about two or three of the High Chiefs would dress in white trousers without putting any cloth on top to call the Oba to the thanksgiving service. It was mandatory for the king to walk from his palace, accompanied by many people, to the shrine. On this particular day, the king would appear in the traditional dress of his forefathers. For instance, in Irele where the sea goddess was being worshipped as *Ore*, the *Olofun* (king) of Irele would appear in the traditional attire of *Ajana* the first *Olofun* of Ireleland. He would also wear the traditional cap which was made of velvet and decorated with ornaments.<sup>7</sup>

6. Oral Interview with Mrs B. Ajonijebu, 50, a petty trader at Igbokoda market. Interview held at 7 Omonira Street, Igbokoda, on June 13, 2016.

7. Oral interview with Mrs Adenike Onetufo, 73 years, a trader in Igbokoda and Irele. Interview held at 2 Larada Street, Igbokoda, on 15 June, 2016.

All the activities of this place were in the hands of the Malokun performers that is; the Aghoro-Uta and Bojutoro. The king and his chiefs would thank the Malokun deity for its protection over the community. They also made a plea for future endowments of the community at large. More importantly, all the canes, sticks and palm leaves used by the participants were dropped in front of the Malokun shrine.

### Economic impacts of Malokun festival

Mahin society was built around the coast, and the sea produced all that sustained the people. The main food item consumed by the people in precolonial times was fish and there were various types of fish caught and consumed. Many of the indigenous fish of the past have however almost disappeared from the staple food of the people, including electric eel, tilapia fish, mormyrid, red snappers, shynynose, stingray, spade fish, sword fish, shark, and cuttlefish. However, cat fish, African bonny fish, mud fish and shrimps are still popular.<sup>8</sup> In the nineteenth century, this fish was eaten with pupuru, which was a food item produced and prepared from cassava (cassava tuber), and consumed with orugbo or marugbo soup, which is made with marugbo leaf as well as other local leaves and has a medicinal or cleansing effect.

The popularity of pupuru was part of the diffusion of foods that accompanied the domestication and production of cassava which was brought to Yorubaland by the Saro – formerly enslaved Yoruba-speakers who returned to West Africa – from Dahomey.<sup>9</sup> In other parts of Yorubaland, yam was the preferred starchy food. For most of the nineteenth century, cassava only served as fodder for animals because it contains chemical components that are difficult to digest.<sup>10</sup> However, unlike most parts of Yorubaland, yam does not grow easily in the sandy soil of Ilaje (or Itsekiri, or Izon), whereas cassava does. It appears that the people also found an efficient way of making the cassava edible as pupuru is fermented before it is processed.<sup>11</sup>

Pupuru is also eaten by the Itsekiri and Izon communities, who also rely heavily on fishing and trade. The shared preference could reflect cultural links

8. Oral interview with Chief Akingbade, 63 years, an Ilaje-Ugbo chieftain. Interview held at 17 Akereke Square, Ugbo, on June 12, 2016.

9. Oral interview with Bosedede Mobuse, 45 years, a fish trader along the Ilaje coast. Interview held at Igbokoda market, Igbokoda, on June 15, 2016.

10. Olusola Adu-Peters, "Threatened Indigenous Food Items in Ondo Province of Southwestern Nigeria 1850–1960," Unpublished M.Phil. Thesis, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife, 2016.

11. Oral interview with Mrs Gladys Abass Kolawole, 46 years, a local food vendor and fish trader. Interview held in Igbokoda on June 13, 2016.

but also similar environmental factors. For many older Mahin respondents, pupuru was far more palatable than the taste of fufu, which is produced in a similar manner and more widely eaten across Yorubaland. One of our respondents told us that,

This food is peculiar to Mahin people, though, the presence of fish is emphasized. Pupuru with marugbo soup was my best food, I don't think I can live in a week without eating it [sic].<sup>12</sup>

But while many people were very happy with the staple diet of pupuru, marugbo and fish, the trade encouraged by Malokun's spiritual protection of the waters that enabled trade by canoe and flying boat connected the Mahin with the people of Ikale, Ondo, Oke-Igbo, Ijebu and other areas of the coast and Delta. Fish was exchanged for food crops such as cassava, but also yam, maize, cocoyam, fruits and wild or hunted animals. Later many farmers also engaged in the production of cash crops such as kolanuts, palm oil and cocoa. When the producers of these goods interacted with the Mahin, they always took the blessings received from Malokun to their farms.

Today, Irele in Ikale is one of the leading staple food producing towns for the Mahin. Its farmers realize much of their wealth from the sale of their produce to Ilaje in preparation of the festival.<sup>13</sup> The high demand from the Mahin towns, and from Ilaje more generally, boosts prices. During the festival, fish that used to sell for a hundred naira (N100:00) before might be sold for one hundred and fifty Naira (N150.00) during the festival. But equally, five tubers of yams that were sold at the rate of three hundred Naira (N300:00) are likely to increase to one thousand and five hundred Naira (N1,500:00).

The reason for the high demand is that these yams were used to make pounded yam for offering sacrifices to the ancestral gods during the festival.<sup>14</sup> Malokun was believed to have the collective responsibility of making people wealthy and prosperous. The Mahin people eulogize the goddess and extol her virtues as a kind-hearted queen of the coast. Such a song usually goes as follows:

Malokun bu ogho wa  
Ji mi tete nu wa.<sup>15</sup>

12. Interview with Chief Joshua Adetemi, elder brother of Oba Adetemi Owowole Amapetu III of Mahinland on June 4, 2016.

13. Interview with Chief Joshua Adetemi, elder brother of Oba Adetemi Owowole Amapetu III of Mahinland on June 4, 2016.

14. Oral interview with Adewebi Okunlala on the historical background of the festival on June 12, 2016.

15. Oral Interview with Mrs B. Ajonijeju at Igbokoda on June 13, 2016.



Malokun provide fish  
So that I can be wealthy.

Indeed, whenever the people are hungry they usually beckon on Malokun to come to their rescue and this is usually done through songs. The songs may be different and varied according to the prevailing traditions in each of the Ilaje coastal communities. For example, in Ugbo, an Ilaje coastal community whose origin is traced to the worship of the Malokun festival, it is a common phenomenon for them to sing whenever they desire the benevolence of the sea

Malokun Olugbo ebi o!

Malokun Olugbo no food to eat!

Immediately after reciting this verse, it is believed that the people would receive blessings from the sea. Often the strong waves of the sea would become calm and they could embark on their fishing expeditions. The significance of shouting Malokun Olugbo was to provide abundant fish and also to reaffirm the tradition that the act of worshipping Malokun is indigeneous to Ugbo. It also assures them that all is well in Ugboland and by extension, in all the coastal communities of Ilaje. If after the shout of Malokun Olugbo, the people still fail to catch fish this means all is not well in the land.<sup>16</sup> Another important song associated with the celebration of Malokun festival but which is synonymous with the Ugbo people is Aramufe Malokun Olugbo. The song goes as follows:

Aramufe ologele  
Okomoke o  
Okomoke  
Aramufe ologele (3x)  
Igbakugba wo mu mi je  
Mori kutukutu  
Igbakugba yi we ba mu mi je  
Mori gbaragboroyo  
Aramufe ologele  
Okomoke o

The lyrics loosely translate as saying that when the sea gives the people fish they become fat, but when it does not give them fish, they became thin. Overall, then, Malokun festival plays a significant role in the economic life of both the coastal and upland communities. The festival enables individuals to see and enjoy special foods and other commodities, and it also allows those who

16. Oral interview with Mrs Adenike Onetufo, 73 years, a trader in Igbokoda and Irele. Interview held at 2 Larada Street, Igbokoda, on 15 June, 2016.

trade to increase their profit. The contribution of the festival to the economic development of the people generally cannot be underestimated.

The celebration of Malokun festival was also a means of asking the goddess for protection against enemies, epidemics and diseases. It offered the people the opportunity of enjoying divine blessing and good government. Many participants prayed to the goddess to protect the living and look after their welfare. Others who believed in life after death carried sacred objects to the shrine to ensure that they would not lack in the world beyond. The celebration of Malokun festival also involved a thanksgiving which was always accompanied by feasting.<sup>17</sup>

Malokun was also considered the giver of natural remedies for ailments and diseases. Over the centuries, the coastal communities of Mahin found fish medically significant to their existence; undoubtedly, the use of fish in traditional medicine had a lot of positive effects on healthcare. The medicinal power of fish is illustrated by the fact that a large proportion of the population in this society, prior to the introduction of Western medicine, survived the menace of various diseases, organized a vibrant society and participated actively in diverse economic and social ventures. This shows that the people, in the absence of western medical therapeutics, were able to depend on traditional therapies to overcome incurred diseases and sicknesses. As much as indigenous fish was significant for the political economy of the people, it was much more significant to the health-care demands of the people in the pre-colonial years.<sup>18</sup>

It also aimed at initiating the people into values, norms and ideals of a civil society for the preservation and continuity of culture beliefs. Thus, some offences or misdeeds which were not punishable legally were sanctioned culturally to promote harmonious co-existence among the people within the social environment and to ensure continuity. The songs connected every aspect of the people's customs and tradition and constitute a major sub-genre of oral poetry which reflected in the people's socio-cultural inclinations. Thus, songs in the celebration were not mere cultural display, but were poetically enriched both in contents and in forms. This also served as one of the social sanctions used in the enforcement of morality.

## Conclusion

Malokun festival continues to be highly relevant, but it has also changed. In the olden days, the festival did not give any recognition to strangers. It was

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17. Oral interview with Bosede Mobuse, 45 years, a fish trader along the Ilaje coast. Interview held at Igbokoda market, Igbokoda, on June 15, 2016.

18. Adu-Peters, "Threatened Indigenous Food Items".

believed that any visitor or stranger found on the festival day was instantly beaten to death. Hence the slogan *Ajo Ku Ode*, meaning 'visitors should not be seen', was a common slogan among the folks during the celebrations.<sup>19</sup> Also, according to tradition, the festival was usually celebrated mainly by the youths.

Before the advent of the British, gender restriction was placed on participation of the festival. For instance, women were not allowed to pass through the shrine of Malokun and were forbidden from watching the high priests in the shrine of Malokun while conducting the rituals. All activities taking place in the shrine were in the hands of male Malokun priests such as the Aghoro-Uta and Bojutoro.

However, there was a drastic change in the celebration of the festival especially in the 1970s, when the presence of the Federal Government in the state increased. As a result, women, as well as adults participate fully in the celebration of the festival. This was done purposely to protect the lives of visitors to the celebration. Since then, the festival has been a socio-cultural factor of unity between the natives and the strangers. It is not uncommon now to see many strangers such as Igbo, Urhobo as well as Calabar exhibiting their cultural heritage together with the natives on the festival day. In recent times the Malokun has become a major unifying socio-cultural festival in Mahin unity. Like the Osun festival in Osogbo, Ogun festival in Ondo and the Argungu fishing festival in Kebbi, North Western Nigeria, Malokun has become an event that attracts many people from home and abroad.<sup>20</sup> Although Malokun festival now allows non-indigenes to participate in the celebration, non-indigenes are not allowed to be involved in the actual/ritual worship which usually takes place inside the Malokun shrine.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, Malokun festival has, over the years, spread not only to the coastal areas but also to the upland areas beyond Mahin. In Ondo town particularly, there is a street named after the sea goddess and another one named as a habitation for the worshippers of Osun, another sea goddess.<sup>22</sup> All these are living testimonies of the significance of the celebration of Malokun as the bestowal of wealth, good fortune, food and good relationships.

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19. Oral interview with Mrs Adenike Onetufo, 73 years, a trader in Igbokoda and Irele. Interview held at 2 Larada Street, Igbokoda, on 15 June, 2016.

20. For more on Argungun fishing festival in Kebbi, as it is related to Malokun festival in Mahin, see [www.Airkhaleej.com.argungu](http://www.Airkhaleej.com.argungu) and [infoguidenigeira.com](http://infoguidenigeira.com). see also <http://en.m.wikipedia.org>, retrieved on June 6, 2016.

21. Gbade Ikuejube, "Socio-Cultural relevance of Traditional Festival for people of Nigeria," in *ZAKRED: Ondo Journal of Religion*, 3.1 (2000).

22. Oke Osun and Yemoja are names of streets associated with the worshippers of the sea/river goddess in the upland community of Ondo. For more details, see, Ajishola Omojeje, "The Administration of the Native Courts in Ondo Town, 1915-1960," Unpublished M.Phil. Thesis, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, 2007.

However, despite the greater emphasis on celebration, some people would argue that the social relevance of the Malokun festival has been grossly affected by the advent of western education and Christianity. One reason is that traditional morality, as celebrated and upheld by the celebration of traditional Malokun festival contrasts sharply with modern morality as preached by the adherents of Christ. The introduction of western type of education further limited the cultural value of the traditional festival because it undermined traditional beliefs and practices, not only of the Mahin people, but also of other areas where the worship of Malokun is being practiced. Some educated sons and daughters of Mahinland believe that they can no longer participate in indigenous practices, which they regard as fetish, evil and full of superstitions. The resultant effect is that indigenous beliefs and practices no longer hold sway among the people as they no longer have desired impact on the people's lives and activities.