Sapientia Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Development Studies (SGOJAHDS), Vol.7 No.3 September, 2024; p.g. 347 – 353; ISSN: 2695-2319 (Print); ISSN: 2695-2327 (Online)

UNDERSTANDING THE EMBER MONTHS: INSIGHTS INTO YORÙBÁ BELIEFS AND PRACTICES IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA

PROF. ADETUNBI RICHARD OGUNLEYE
Department of Religion and African Culture
Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko,
Ondo State, Nigeria
E-mail: adetunbi.ogunleye@aaua.edu.ng
Phone no: +2348166782429
&
Dr. Martins Oladele Olorundipe
Department of Religion and African Culture
Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko,
Ondo State, Nigeria
E-mail: martins.olorundipe@aaua.edu.ng

ABSTRACT

A thorough examination of the alarming rise in road accidents in Nigeria reveals a significant increase in fatal incidents on our highways. The establishment of the Federal Road Safety Corps (FRSC) in 1988 initially seemed to mitigate this issue. However, during the last quarter of each year, commonly referred to as the "ember months," there is a recurring surge in road accidents. Despite the concerted efforts of the FRSC and related traffic management bodies, this seasonal increase has led to the widespread belief that supernatural entities—spirits, gods, and goddesses—are responsible for these fatalities, supposedly demanding blood sacrifices during this period. This paper provides an expository analysis of the Yorùbá perspective about the Ember months; aimed at identifying the underlying and immediate causes of road accidents on Nigerian highways. The objective is to dispel the myth of bloodthirsty deities during the ember months and to propose practical solutions to address the persistent issue of road accidents both during this controversial period and throughout the year. The presentation adopted ethnographic method which aims to interpret cultural practices and meanings from the perspective of the participants, striving to present an insider's view of the culture being studied. By adhering to the recommended measures, it is anticipated that the incidence of road hazards will be significantly reduced, and the associated irrational fears will be alleviated.

Keywords: Ember Months, Yorùbá Culture, FRSC, Public Perception.

Introduction

The final quarter of the year, comprising the months of September, October, November, and December—commonly referred to as the "ember months"—is often regarded as a period fraught with heightened anxiety and trepidation in Nigeria. During this time, a pervasive sense of fear and travel aversion grips many individuals, fueled by the widespread belief that these months are marked by an increase in fatal accidents and other tragedies. This belief is rooted in the culturally ingrained notion that malevolent forces, including demons and bloodthirsty deities, are particularly active during this period, seeking victims to satiate their hunger for blood (*The Nation*, 2017).

As a consequence of this deep-seated superstition, media outlets intensify their broadcasts, inundating the public with cautionary messages and safety advisories specific to the ember months. In response, governmental and law enforcement agencies, such as the Federal Road Safety Commission (FRSC) and the Nigerian Police, heighten their vigilance, deploying additional resources to manage the anticipated surge in road incidents and related emergencies (*Premium Times*, 2017). Religious institutions, including churches and mosques, also play a critical role during this period, organising vigils, special prayers, and extended fasting sessions aimed at neutralising perceived threats and invoking divine protection against these malevolent entities (*This Daylive*, 2023).

This research seeks to critically examine the cultural and psychological underpinnings of the ember months phenomenon, analyzing its impact on societal behavior and public safety initiatives. Through a multidisciplinary approach, the study will explore the intersection of cultural beliefs, media influence, and institutional responses, providing a comprehensive understanding of the ember months' significance in contemporary Nigerian society.

Ember Months in Yorùbá **Land**

In Yoruba culture, the final four months of the year—September (*Owewe*), October (*Owara*), November (*Beelu*), and December (*Ope*)—are collectively known as the "ember months." These months hold significant cultural and spiritual importance, as they are marked by a series of prominent festivals and communal activities that play a vital role in the social and religious life of the Yorùbá people (Ogunleye, 2003). Contrary to the common misconception that these months are inherently perilous, they are, in fact, a time of joy and festivity, deeply rooted in the cultural traditions of the Yorùbá land.

Among the notable celebrations during these months are the New Yam and Ogun festivals, which are not merely cultural rituals but serve as pivotal events that reinforce the community's connection to their ancestors and divinities. Festivals in traditional African settings, particularly among the Yorùbá, are more than mere gatherings; they are communal ceremonies that honor deities and ancestors, marking the transition of seasons or agricultural cycles (Ogunleye, 2003). These ceremonies are designed to ensure fertility, prosperity, and favorable weather conditions for the coming year, reflecting a profound understanding of the interconnectedness between nature and spirituality (Ikuejube, 2000).

Each ethnic group in Nigeria, including the Yoruba, possesses distinct cultural traits that contribute to the solidarity and integration of the community, even in the face of rapidly changing societal dynamics. Traditional festivals, in particular, embody the unique cultural ideals, aspirations, and philosophies of a people, providing a re-enactment of historical, religious, and traditional events. These events serve as powerful tools for social cohesion, interaction, and mobilization within the community (Ogungbile, 2001).

The timing of these festivals is often determined by natural cycles, such as the phases of the moon, or by supernatural manifestations within traditional belief systems (Ogunde, 1991). The entire community uses these festivals as a rallying point, fostering unity and reinforcing shared values and philosophies. Traditional festivals, therefore, not only mark significant historical and mythological events but also reveal the socio-political history of the community, offering insights that are not easily accessible through written records (Ogunde, 1991).

It is important to emphasize that the ember months are not inherently different from other months of the year; they are simply more concentrated with "end-of-the-year" activities that have deep cultural and social significance. These traditional festivals, which take place during the ember months, hold substantial socio-ethical relevance for the Yoruba community (Ikuejube,2000). Socially, the annual celebration of these festivals provides a rich source of information on the historical and social aspects of the Yoruba people's lives, surpassing what can be gleaned from written records (Ogunleye, 2003).

For example, festivals like the Olojo festival offer valuable insights into the historical connections and cultural affinities between various sub-ethnic groups in Yoruba land, particularly in relation to Ile Ife, the cradle of Yorùbá civilization. During the Olojo festival, the Chief Obalufe recites historical elegies that commemorate the roles of rulers who migrated from Ile Ife to establish different territories, thereby reinforcing the community's shared heritage (Ogunleye, 2003).

Ethically, the celebration of these festivals serves as a social sanction that enforces moral conduct within the community. For instance, the Ogun festival, dedicated to the Yoruba god of iron, underscores the seriousness of oath-taking, as it is believed that those who swear falsely in Ogun's name cannot escape divine retribution, often manifested in tragic accidents (Ayantayo, 1991). This belief underscores the importance of truthfulness and integrity in social relations.

Moreover, during the ember months, traditional festivals serve as a platform for the initiation of individuals into the values, norms, and ideals of a civil society, ensuring the preservation and continuity of culture. Significant life events, such as marriage ceremonies and the completion of capital projects, often coincide with these festivals, further highlighting their importance in the social and cultural life of the Yoruba people. Cultural sanctions are also applied during these festivals to promote harmonious coexistence within the community, thereby ensuring cultural continuity (Ikuejube, 2000).

The final month, December (Ope), which translates to "thanksgiving," is particularly significant as it is dedicated to offering thanks to the Supreme Being for the blessings of the passing year. This month encapsulates the essence of the ember months, which, rather than being a period of fear and danger, is a time of gratitude, celebration, and cultural affirmation.

Ember Months in Recent Years

Contrary to the above discussed Yorùbá perspective of the 'ember months,' the frequent road mishaps and accidents which are happening in recent times have been attributed to the handiwork of various types of imaginary demons and deities associated with the ember months in search of blood (The Nation,2017). The belief is so wide-spread that people are afraid of travelling during these months (Bun, 2012). There is even a Compact Disk made specially for the month of December waxed by a renowned Yorùbá artist; Ogundeyi Gbenga (2019). He sings thus:

December *ko ma ko wa lomo lo,*
December *ko ma ko wa lebi* lo,
Osu bababa la de,
Babaloke sowa ninu ibanuje,
December *ko ma ko wa lebi lo.*

This can be translated as:

May December never carry away our children,
May December never carry away our family,
We are in the ember months
Heavenly Father, keep us away from sorrow,
May December never carry away our family.

In the same vein, another popular Yorùbá juju musician, Fabiyi Ebenezer Obey (1972), expressed his fear during ember months when he sings: 'December *to nbo lona ko ni di wa meru lo*'. Meaning; the oncoming December shall not pack us along with his load. He perceived December as a deadly month that one needs to pray fervently against.

The above quoted songs manifested the type of fear that people are entertaining in recent time. It is this fear and the attempt to disabuse the mind of people about the causes of road mishaps during the period under study that prompted research into this topic.

Causes of Road Crashes during Ember Months

Road accidents are a year-round phenomenon, yet the spike in road crashes during the ember months—September through December—has reached alarming proportions, instilling fear and leading to widespread speculation about supernatural causes (Agwu, 2023). This has led many to conclude that these accidents are the work of mysterious spirits and demons, resulting in a tragic loss of lives and property that often surpasses the toll of major communicable diseases and other health crises (United Nations, 2005). Research identifies three primary factors contributing to road crashes in Nigeria: human error, mechanical failure, and environmental conditions (FRSC 2015-2023).

Human Error

Human error is the leading cause of road accidents on Nigerian highways, with driver behavior playing a critical role. Overconfidence and excessive speeding are particularly prevalent during the ember months, as drivers, motivated by the desire to maximise profits or impress others, frequently exceed speed limits. This reckless behavior increases the likelihood of accidents, especially given the potential for sudden vehicle malfunctions such as tire bursts or brake failures (FRSC, 2024).

Dangerous overtaking is another common human error. Drivers, both commercial and private, often engage in risky overtaking maneuvers, disregarding the safety of themselves and others. This is especially hazardous on sharp bends or narrow roads, where poor judgment and haste can lead to catastrophic collisions. Driving under the influence of alcohol and drugs further exacerbates the risk of accidents. The festive atmosphere of the ember months often leads drivers to consume alcohol or stimulants like kola nuts, Indian hemp, or even cocaine, under the misguided belief that these substances enhance their driving abilities. However, these substances impair judgment, increase overconfidence, and ultimately contribute to reckless driving behaviors that can result in fatal accidents.

Lack of concentration is another critical factor. Drivers may become distracted by engaging in arguments or discussions with passengers, using mobile phones, eating, or adjusting the radio. Such distractions, even momentary, can lead to severe consequences on the road.

Mechanical Failure

Mechanical failures, often due to inadequate vehicle maintenance, also play a significant role in road crashes. Poorly maintained vehicles are prone to engine malfunctions, tire bursts, brake failures, and other issues that can lead to accidents. Regular vehicle maintenance is essential to prevent such incidents, yet it is often neglected, particularly in commercial vehicles.

Environmental Conditions

Finally, environmental factors significantly impact road safety during the ember months. Poor road conditions, including potholes, collapsed bridges, and the presence of fallen trees, create hazardous driving environments. Adverse weather conditions, such as heavy rains, fog, and river overflows, particularly during the harmattan season, further complicate driving and increase the risk of accidents (Wole, et.al., 2024).

In conclusion, while supernatural explanations for road accidents during the ember months persist in popular belief, a closer examination reveals that human error, mechanical failure, and environmental conditions are the true culprits. Addressing these factors through improved driver education, stricter enforcement of traffic regulations, regular vehicle maintenance, and better infrastructure can significantly reduce the incidence of road crashes during this period.

Strategies for Mitigating Incessant Road Accidents

Addressing the persistent issue of road accidents requires a multifaceted approach that considers both human behavior and governmental intervention (Ugwu, 2021). These strategies can be categorised into two primary factors: human (individual) and governmental.

Human Factors

Human factors focus on the responsibilities and actions of both drivers and passengers, which are critical in reducing road accidents:

1. Regular Vehicle Maintenance: Drivers must commit to consistent vehicle maintenance, including regular checks and repairs, to ensure that their vehicles are roadworthy and less prone to mechanical failures that could lead to accidents.
2. Abstinence from Alcohol and Drugs: It is imperative that drivers abstain from consuming alcohol or drugs before and during driving. These substances impair judgment, reduce reaction time, and significantly increase the risk of accidents.
3. Adherence to Traffic Laws: Drivers should strictly obey all traffic laws, including speed limits, traffic signals, and road signs. Compliance with these regulations is essential for maintaining order and safety on the roads (Wole, et.al., 2024).
4. Consideration for Other Road Users: Drivers must exercise caution and be considerate of other road users, including pedestrians, cyclists, and other drivers. This involves respecting the right of way, using indicators, and being patient.
5. Avoidance of Distractions: To ensure full concentration, drivers should refrain from using mobile phones, eating, or engaging in activities that divert their attention from the road. Distraction, even for a moment, can have fatal consequences.
6. Safe Driving Practices: Drivers should avoid over-speeding and dangerous overtaking. These practices significantly increase the likelihood of collisions, particularly on narrow or winding roads.

7. Use of Seat Belts: Both drivers and passengers must consistently wear seat belts. This simple practice has been proven to save lives by reducing the severity of injuries in the event of an accident.
8. Passenger Responsibility: Passengers should avoid actions that may distract the driver, such as loud conversations, arguments, or any other behaviors that could take the driver's focus away from the road.

Governmental Factors

Governments at all levels have a crucial role to play in ensuring road safety. Their responsibilities include:

1. Infrastructure Development: The government should prioritize the construction and maintenance of durable roads and bridges. Well-constructed infrastructure reduces the risk of accidents caused by poor road conditions.
2. Strict Law Enforcement: Appointing and supporting dedicated law enforcement agents who are committed to strictly enforcing traffic regulations is vital. These agents must be empowered to penalize traffic violations effectively.
3. Operational Traffic Systems: The installation and maintenance of operational traffic lights and other control systems are essential for managing traffic flow and preventing accidents at intersections and other critical points on the road.
4. Licensing and Regulation: The government must ensure that only qualified individuals are issued driver's licenses and vehicle registrations. This involves rigorous testing and vetting processes to ascertain that drivers are knowledgeable, skilled, and capable of handling vehicles safely.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The analysis presented above reveals a significant misrepresentation and misunderstanding of the Ember months—September through December—in recent times. Contrary to widespread misconceptions that these months are inherently dangerous, characterized by heightened supernatural activity and bloodthirsty spirits, the indigenous Yoruba perspective offers a different narrative. For the Yorùbá people, the Ember months are traditionally viewed as a period of joy, celebration, and community, marked by various festivals and cultural events.

The root causes of road accidents during these months are not mystical but rather stem from identifiable and preventable factors. These include human error, such as the excessive ambition of commercial drivers striving to complete more trips than is safe; mechanical failures due to poor vehicle maintenance; and environmental challenges, including adverse weather conditions and poorly maintained road infrastructure.

Given these findings, it is imperative to shift the focus from superstition to pragmatic solutions. Addressing the actual causes of road accidents requires a concerted effort to improve driver behavior, enhance vehicle maintenance practices, and invest in better road infrastructure. By focusing on these tangible factors, we can significantly reduce the incidence of road accidents during the Ember months and dispel the unfounded fears that have long been associated with this time of year.

It is recommended that public awareness campaigns be intensified to educate the populace on the true causes of road mishaps. Additionally, there should be stricter enforcement of traffic laws, regular vehicle inspections, and ongoing improvements to road conditions. By adhering to these recommendations, the perception of the Ember months can be transformed from one of fear to one of safety and celebration.

References

Agwu, J. (2023). Demons of Ember Months. Retrieved on 10th October, 2024 from thisdaylive.com/index.php/demon-of-ember-months

Ayantayo, J.K. (1999). Religious Ethical issues in the Oath of Office in the Nigerian Constitution. *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*. xxxi (1&2):102.

Bun, E. (2012). Road Traffic Accidents in Nigeria: A Public Problem. *Short Communication*. 3(2):35.

Fabiyi, E. O. (1972). *Keresimesi (Odun tuntun*). Retrieved on 21st October, 2024 from https://youtu.be/GiGwS2STsaQ?si=5cZ7FThkv8Bp-SAI

Federal Road Safety Commission (FRSC) (2015-2023). Nigerian Highway Code. Retrieved on 1st September, 2024 from https://www.highwaycode.com.ng/

Ikuejube, G. (2000). Socio-cultural Relevance of Traditional Festival for the Yoruba People of Nigeria. *Zaxred: Ondo Journal of Religion*. 1 (1):25.

Ogunde, S. E. (1991). Culture and its Manifestations. Lagos: Federal Ministry of Information.

Ogundeyi, G. (2019, December 16). December *Ko Ma Ko Wa Lomo Lo* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6focpUl8qVY

Ogungbile, D.O. (2001). Yoruba Cultural Identity: A Phenomenological Approach to Osun Festival. Odumuyiwa, E.A. (ed). *Religion, Science and Culture. Ikene*: NASR.

Ogunleye, A. R. (2003). Modernity and Religion: A Critique of Olojo Festival in Ile –Ife. M.A. Dissertation, Department of Religious Studies, University of Ado-Ekiti (Now EKSU).

Premium Times (2021). Why road accidents increase in 'Ember' months-FRSC. Retrieved on 1st September, 2024 from https://www.premiumtimesng.com/regional/ssouth-east/487526-why-road-accidents-increase-in-ember-months-frsc.html?tztc=1

Punch Newspaper (2024). Ember months: FRSC moves to reduce road crashes in Ogun. Retrieved on 1st September, 2024 from https://punchng.com/ember-months-frsc-moves-to-reduce-road-crashes-in-ogun/

The Nation (2017). Road Accidents, Demons and Realities. Retrieved on 10th October,2024 from https://thenationonlineng.net.

Ugwu, F. (2024). Ember months: What Nigerians should do before praying against accidents. Retrieved on 1st September, 2024 from https://dailypost.ng/2024/09/01/ember-months-what-nigerians-should-do-before-praying-against-accidents-fr-kelvin/

United Nations General Assembly Verbalism Report (2005). Meeting 38, session 60.

Wole, M., Musa, H., Shareefdeen, A., Lanke, O., & Sikiru, B. (2024). The Ember Months: A dark time for road safety in Nigeria? Journal of Road Safety, 35(3), 44–52. https://doi.org/10.33492/jrs-d-24-3-2328472