

**AN ASSESSMENT OF THE WORSHIP OF *AYELALA* (GODDESS OF JUSTICE) DEITY AND THE  
ILAJE KINGDOM OF ONDO STATE**

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**ABSTRACT**

The worship of deities has always been a major religious preoccupation among the Ilaje kingdom of Ondo State. Among these deities is *Ayelala*, a water goddess, who is not only worshiped with pomp and pageantry but also highly revered and respected for its judicial powers. As a deity of retribution and justice, *Ayelala* is believed to possess great powers which she uses against varying forms of social vices, such as armed robbery, sexual offences, and witchcraft, etc. *Ayelala* is reputed for seeking vengeance when the offender has forgotten his or her crime, and strikes her victims by inflicting on them bodily swelling and in few cases, dryness. The study employed the qualitative research design, to provide the general background of the worship of *Ayelala* (goddess of justice) among the people of Ilaje kingdom. Data were gathered from primary and secondary sources. The primary sources involved the use of unstructured oral interviews with resource persons. The secondary sources involved the use of text books, scholarly journals, specialized magazines and the internet. The data were analysed using the historical and expository tools. The historical method was used to evaluate the historical evolution of *Ayelala* among the Ilaje. The expository method presented a vivid portrayal of the *Ayelala* Deity in Ilaje kingdom. The study found out that the worship of *Ayelala* is widespread in Ilaje kingdom despite the mysterious myths surrounding the origins of the deity. The study established that *Ayelala's* role as an arbiter of justice underscores the importance of civic values held within communities where the deity is worshipped – which are also values that undergird intergroup relations in Ilaje and other African communities.

**Introduction**

This study seeks to provide the general background of the worship of *Ayelala* (goddess of justice) among the people of Ilaje kingdom. The work provides information on the origin of *Ayelala* deity, the process of membership initiation and the place occupied by *Ayelala* in Ilaje kingdom. This is to provide a clear understanding of the circumstances and dynamics that have characterised the evolution and worship of *Ayelala* in Ilaje kingdom and beyond.

***Ayelala* (Goddess of Justice) Deity and the Ilaje Kingdom of Ondo State**

In Yoruba land, many deities are known as *orishas*. These *orishas* include *Osun* (deity of love and sensuality), *Oya* (deity in charge of the wind), *Yemoja* (deity of fertility), *Ayelala* (deity of justice), *Aja* (deity of the whirlwind and forests), *Oba* (deity of rivers), etc. Among these deities, *Orisha Ayelala* has maintained a feared position within the Ilaje ethnic group of Nigeria for centuries. She is the *Orisha* of justice and vengeance. She is a powerful and sacred deity. Ilaje people respect her for her role in punishing crimes and ensuring justice is served (Aderibigbe and Aiyegboyin, 2017).

*Ayelala* is known to be an effective deity that punishes crimes of various types. She is a powerful and widely respected deity because of her capacity and witches caught up in her clutches are known to confess their sins in the open. She is one of the rare females who are venerated in Yorubaland as ancestors. The “deified ancestors were human beings who had lived extra-ordinary and mysterious lives on earth, so much that when they died they were deified as god” (Aiyegbeni Johnson, Oral Interview).

Adewale (1988), reports that “an average traditional Ilaje man/woman will mention *Ayelala* at least three times daily.” *Ayelala* as a fearsome deity is the terror of liars, immoral people and doers of other forms of evil. Hellgren

(1988), avers that “*Ayelala* is powerful and a widely respected goddess because of her capacity to mete justice to witches, wizards, thieves etc.” In Ilaje kingdom, anybody that dies through *Ayelala* is defiled and his/her corpse is expectedly taken to a designated forest to be abandoned. “Even the person’s properties either bought or acquired through other means with his/her name, are also discarded in the forest” (Adepoju Linus, Oral Interview). In the event that anybody is indebted to the victim of *Ayelala*, such debt must be paid by the debtor to the priest of *Ayelala*. On the contrary, the debtor could send the money to the relatives of the victim, or drop it where it can be seen by relatives of such victim. If the debtor fails to act in this way, he/she invites the wrath of *Ayelala*, who hates injustice and cheating (Abayomi Fakunle, Oral Interview, 2024).

The Ilaje have a rigid conviction in the anger of the Supreme Being and deities upon the wicked members of the society. Once there is an accusation, a misunderstanding, or a grievance by one person or party against another as a result of perceived foul play, the concerned person or people revert to *Ayelala* where vows are made and oaths taken to unfold the truth and punish the offender. Anyone who then goes contrary to the vows taken or take the oath in falsehood will be appropriately dealt with appropriately (Abiodun Grace, Oral Interview, 2024).

### **Origin of *Ayelala* Deity**

There are various myths that try to explain the origin of *Ayelala* deity. This study chose for narrative here the most popularly recounted of the myths. Traditionally, Iya Adeleke reports that *Ayelala* as a word was a form of exclamation in the past among the Ilaje people, literally meaning, “this world is mysterious” (Oral Interview). Within this context, when people were confronted by any phenomenon that they could not explain, they expressed their surprise by exclaiming *Ayelala*.

However, *Ayelala* in the context of this study is a local goddess who has been worshipped in Ilaje and surrounding environments of Yoruba land. It is widely held that *Ayelala* was a slave woman who was initially a trader in herbal medicines and devotee of many divinities. It was during the course of her trading activities that she got to the riverine area of the present Ondo State. At the onset, she was faced by a lot of difficulties in her quest to interact with the local people because of dialect barrier. As a result of this, people were apprehensive of her intentions and made life difficult for her (Adewale 1988).

The woman was lucky and ran into a helper who adopted her and kept her in safe custody. In order to repay the kind gesture of her helper, the woman subjected herself to all forms of menial jobs. It was during her interaction with her helper that it was deduced that the woman came from *Ona 'ke*, a corruption of the Yoruba word, *Ilú-Oke*. Hence, to refer to anyone to come from *Ona-ke* means saying that the person comes from either Kwara State or Ekiti State. Thus, no one can say with all precision her place of origin since there is no documentary evidence to authenticate the various information gathered.

Tragedy struck when *Ayelala* was made to bear the consequences of the sin of another who had run to take asylum among the Ijaw. The woman had desecrated the land, causing an epidemic to befall the people. Her asylum in Ijaw land caused serious disaffection between the Ijaw and the Ilaje. Before sacrificing *Ayelala*, a covenant of reconciliation and ritual kinship was made between the Ilaje and Ijaw on the following terms, among others – “*Ayelala* was to kill any member of the parties to the covenant who plans evil against one another; *Ayelala* was to punish with death, any member of the two groups who practices stealing, sorcery and witchcraft against each other” (Afolabi, 2020).

*Ayelala* as a person was known to be a gentle lady. She was easy going, understandable, lovely and kind. An incident happened in which she was unjustly accused of evil doing. She was neither tried nor her voice heard. She was later buried alive according to oral literature. As she was about to be buried alive she shouted “*ah! aye yi ma la la o*” (ah! This world is not alive) which has been shortened as “*Ayelala*”. After her death, the truth of the incident was unraveled to the people and they felt bad by what they did, they later made serious efforts to pacify the said lady by naming a junction after her “*Ayelala* Junction” in Ilaje Local Government of Ondo State (Oral Interview, 2024).

The process by which *Ayelala* became deified is not quite certain. However, her deification has popularly been linked with manifestations and fulfillment of what she promised before her death that anyone who contravened any terms of the covenant between the Ilaje and Ijaw would be killed by her. Dayo narrates that “soon after the covenant, one Aluhuri died instantly because he demanded more than the recommended amount from an Ijaw man who committed adultery with his wife. Hence, *Ayelala* struck him” (Oral Interview, 2024). With this happening and

various subsequent manifestations, the people came to believe in the potency of *Ayelala* which led to her deification.

From then onwards, whatever was believed to prompt judgments and incur the wrath of *Ayelala*, such as the violation of any covenant was taken seriously by the people since the fear of *Ayelala* was instilled into the minds of the people. Even in ordinary day to day life activities of the people, they are careful not to deal fraudulently. For instance, in the process of sharing anything between two people, it is easy to hear one say, *temiju tire lo* (mine is bigger than yours) and his/her partner to answer reassuringly *Ayelala e ma ni pa e* (the goddess will not kill you). This is to clear the air that one does not have any grudges against the other and thus there is nothing for the goddess to avenge (Oral Interview, 2024).

### Membership of *Ayelala* (Goddess of Justice) Cult

Basically, membership of *Ayelala* is predominant among the Ilaje and Ijaw people. However, in contemporary times, people who are neither Ilaje nor Ijaw have been found to embrace membership of the *Ayelala* cult. These people who have heard of the fame and power of *Ayelala* and who have come to revere her, seeking and trusting in her protection against attacks of adversaries would acquire the cult in their communities. To become a member of the *Ayelala* cult, one would be required to supply, among other things, “three to six yards of white cloth, a cock, one lump of native chalk, four bottles of gin, kolanuts, live cowries and nine shillings (now ten thousand Naira) to be divided equally between the Ilaje and Ijaw priests” (AjalaOlu, Oral Interview, 2024). With the presentation of these items, the would-be member is then initiated by the priest in charge of the particular shrine into the cult of *Ayelala*.

As practiced by the adherents and devotees of other deities, the devotees to the cult of *Ayelala* also perform various ritual sacrifices. The sacrifices which are offered to *Ayelala* are not restricted to only the priests and priestesses. Instead, any initiate is eligible to lead in the offering of sacrifices. For instance, “if anybody is being punished by *Ayelala* and the offender happens to confess, anybody around who knows the articles of the sacrifices as well as the procedures could lead the sacrifice and it is believed that *Ayelala* would pardon such offender” (Ologbosere Oni, Oral Interview, 2024).

The formula for the sacrifice is unique and requires some items to be used. These items have to be provided before the commencement of the sacrifice. The items required are “a bottle of palm oil, a lump of native chalk, kolanuts of four parts, some tubers of yam, a white cock and one clay pot” (AremuOsifo, Oral Interview, 2024). The articles are laid before the shrine of *Ayelala*. Adekunle Balarabe narrates the process:

The person to lead the sacrifice draws seven lines with the native chalk; he then breaks the kolanut which he/she throws on the ground to determine the success of the sacrifice. If in the process of throwing the kolanuts, three pieces out of four opens, then it is believed that it is a sign of acceptance by *Ayelala*. He/she therefore calls the name of *Ayelala* three times and makes the supplication of making the sacrifice known to *Ayelala*. He/she places the head of the cock in the space between the big toe and other toes and stretches the neck in order to cut the head; he/she later leaves the body of the cock to struggle indicating that *Ayelala* has accepted the sacrifice (Oral Interview, 2024).

After the sacrifice, the carcass of the cock is cooked and eaten by initiates present, accompanied by pounded yam from the tubers of yam presented. However, before anybody eats the food, the small clay pot is provided where some pieces of yam are mixed with the palm oil and the head of the cock is placed on a designated spot for *Ayelala*. This portion meant for *Ayelala* is placed before the statue of *Ayelala* in the shrine. When this is done, other people can eat the remaining portion. After the eating, they sing and clap to the song:

<b>Ilaje</b>	<b>English</b>
<i>Ayelalaigbokoko</i>	The mighty and awesome queen
<i>Okekelukeobaobinrin</i>	She was who early in the day
<i>Ajifotin we bioyinbo</i>	Bathes in gill like the white man
<i>Opobodudu</i>	The aged black woman
<i>Aja ni 'jo olorangbagbe</i>	She who can never be guilty
<i>Aja majebi</i>	when she takes action
<i>Ukuapa ma han</i>	Death which has absolute right.
<i>Ayelalaigbokoko</i>	The mighty and awesome queen (Ayenuro Ayenuro, Oral Interview)

### Initiation Rites into *Ayelala* (Goddess of Justice) Cult

The initiation into the *Ayelala* cult involves the confession of belief in *Ayelala* by an intending member,

accompanied by the priest stating the usual standard of conduct demanded of all the devotees of *Ayelala*. The intending member vows that he/she would observe the code of conduct. A white cock is then killed and the blood is spilled on the five cowries of the main emblem of *Ayelala* which are specially concentrated and wrapped in a piece of white cloth which are then delicately placed in a white bowl. Gin and kolanuts are served; and merriment takes place among the people present. The emblem of the goddess is now presented to the initiated member who takes it away and establishes a centre of worship in his/her place of abode. In this way, the area of jurisdiction of the goddess extends (OlagokeAyodele, Oral Interview, 2024).

Plate 1: Emblems of *Ayelala*



Source: *Field Trip by the Researcher, 2024*

Whenever any initiate from the communities where the shrines are located takes oath or makes a covenant to *Ayelala*, it automatically becomes binding. The ritual takes the form as follows:

A shallow hole is dug in the ground, water is poured into it, and a kolanut split and cast into the water. The two people who are entering into covenant kneel face to face with the hole in between them. Then one says: “Oh earth, come and preside as we make this covenant. If I should break the covenant, may I be carried away by the earth (may I disappear from the surface of the earth)”. Then he or she stoops down and sips some water and eats a piece of the kolanut. The second person does exactly the same and the covenant is thus concluded (Onunwa 84).

These items are significant to the oath taking. The water signifies the abode of *Ayelala*. It indicates the presence of the deity as a witness to the oath. The kolanut shows the agreement between the parties involved and the earth invoked is the arbiter of the covenant. The two parties agree on the terms of covenant and enter into a ritual kinship. The terms and conditions of the covenant are varying. Those who are involved must be faithful and honest to the terms of the contract or bear pain of the displeasure of *Ayelala* which is believed to involve the loss of the covenant breaker. In addition, members of the oath or parties to the covenant are expected not to plan evil against one another or risk being killed by *Ayelala*.

Similarly, any *Ilaje* or *Ijaw* who is wronged and calls on *Ayelala* to avenge the wrong, and it is believed that *Ayelala* will speedily do so. In the case of accusation of adultery, the offending man would not be killed but be made to pay to the wronged man the sum of twenty five shillings (five bags of cowries), or its equivalent as deciphered by the priest or priestes in contemporary society as satisfaction. Anything other than that would incur the displeasure and wrath of *Ayelala*. It is believed that anyone who swears falsely by *Ayelala* or breaks an oath or covenant made before *Ayelala* will come under her judgment and punishment, which involves developing swollen face, hands, legs and stomach before death (Femi Oguntwase, Oral Interview).

Plate II; Image of man struck by *Ayelala* at Orioke



Source: *Field Trip by the Researcher, 2024*

Notably, the cult of *Ayelala* is stronger in towns and villages situated close to rivers and seas. The belief generally is

that it is in such places that her influence is greatly felt. In such areas, even if there is no *Ayelala* shrine, when a person who believes in her powers seeks vengeance on an evil doer against him/her, what he or she does is to report that matter to *Ayelala* by taking a halfpenny (or a hundred naira note) and casting it into a river, stating his or her complaint, which is then believed to have been conveyed to *Ayelala*. In some cases, where the complainant desires a quick action, he or she fastens the fee to the tail of a live fish called *Belebele* which is customarily used for this purpose. This fish is thrown back into the river with the belief that it would swim rapidly with the message to *Ayelala* (Ogundele Deji, Oral Interview, 2024).

#### 1. Symbol of *Ayelala* Deity

There are some symbols and materials involved in the invocation of *Ayelala* deity. Some of the material required for the invocation of *Ayelala* deity include:

A cock or duck, white cloth, seven needles, seven parrot feathers, seven alligator peppers and seven native chalks. All these items are concealed in the stomach of the cock or duck and wrapped with the white cloth. The cock will be eventually soaked in the *Ayelala* water and a curse will be pronounced on the evil doer. When the evil doer is caught by the deity he or she will swell as the cock or duck swells in the water. *Ayelala* is highly praised and highly revered (Olatunji Fred and Ola Jidefor, Oral Interview, 2024).

The emphases on the number of items as seen above signify the days of the week. It is an indication that *Ayelala* is ever watchful and will respond to anyone that invokes her at any time. In other words, *Ayelala* never sleeps in the face of evil. *Ayelala* shrines are typically located on the outskirts of communities, usually close to rivers or streams. According to Adewale, “these shrines are adorned with palm fronds, white cloths, cowries, pots, calabashes, and various symbols associated with her presence” (88).

Plate III: A Smaller movable shrine of *Ayelala*



Source: *Field Trip by Researcher, 2024*

The *Ayelala* deity is venerated by initiates in shrines with the insignia of the deity and other paraphernalia hung or kept strategically around the shrine. The shrines are usually located at the outskirts of towns or villages, preferably close to a river or a stream. According to Adeleke, “these shrines are adorned with palm fronds, white cloths, cowries, pots, calabashes, and various symbols associated with her presence.” *Olori-Ayelala* or *Iya-Ayelala* are priests and priestesses responsible for conducting rituals, performing sacrifices, consulting oracles, and administering oaths in the name of *Ayelala*. Afolabi reports that “the veneration of *Ayelala* encompasses a range of rites and ceremonies, each serving distinct purposes such as invoking her power, seeking her protection, appeasing her, or requesting her favour.” The rituals could be analysed as indicated below.

- i. *Ebo Ayelala* (Offering ritual): This is a ritual that involves making various offerings to *Ayelala* in order to seek her blessings or forgiveness. The common items used for such ritual include such “white animals as chickens, goats, sheep, or cows, in accompaniment of items like kola nuts, gin, palm oil, salt, honey, and other objects deemed pure and pleasing to her” (Olagoke Patrick, Oral Interview). The sacrifice is placed on a mat or tray and transported to her shrine by the priest or priestess, who recites prayers and praises dedicated to her.
- ii. *Ofo Ayelala* (Oath Ritual): This is a form of oath taken in the name of *Ayelala* deity in order to solemnly affirm the truth or fidelity of a statement or action by a person. Olu Osibanjo narrates that “Participants typically hold a knife or razor blade in one hand while touching a container of water, such as a pot or calabash, with the other. During the oath-taking, individuals declare statements like, ‘If I lie or betray this oath, let *Ayelala* kill me’ or similar affirmations” (Oral Interview). This oath is held by adherents to be absolutely binding and irreversible once it is taken. In case they are violated by anybody, the consequences are usually severe.
- iii. *Aro Ayelala* (Invocation Ritual): It is a ceremony that involves “pronouncing curses in the name of *Ayelala* against individuals who have wronged or offended others” (Adeleke, 2005). In this ritual, the name of the offender is written on a piece of paper or a leaf and placed inside a vessel filled with water at *Ayelala*'s shrine.

The person issuing the curse utters phrases like, “*Ayelala*, I call on you to punish this person for what he/she has done to me” or similar declarations. The curse is believed to be potent and inescapable, resulting in various afflictions or misfortunes imposed by *Ayelala* upon the offender (Olusegun Abdul, Oral Interview)

- iv. *Ifa Ayelala* (Ritual for Request of Favours): This is a divination conducted in *Ayelala's* name to expose the truth in hidden situations or to ascertain the cause of a particular problem. Under this divination, sixteen cowries are cast onto a wooden board or mat and interpreting the patterns they create (in the absence of cowries, the same number of palm nuts could be used). The priest/priestess beseeches *Ayelala*, saying, “*Ayelala*, I ask you to reveal the truth or the cause of this problem” or similar invocations. *Ifa Ayelala* is regarded as accurate and trustworthy, capable of unveiling concealed secrets or mysteries under *Ayelala's* guidance (Raheem, 2021).

### Conclusion

This paper has situated the locus of *Ayelala* (goddess of justice) within the gamut of traditional religion in Ilaje kingdom. Ilaje is a kingdom that migrated from Ile Ife and settled in their present homeland. They are traditionally religious, with *Ayelala* being one of the popular deities worshipped in the land. Even though the univocal origin of *Ayelala* does not exist, there are agreements on such as issues as her being female, her prowess in punishing offenders and her capacity to uphold justice.

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**List of Informants**

<b>SN</b>	<b>NAME</b>	<b>AGE</b>	<b>SEX</b>	<b>OCCUPATION</b>	<b>PLACE</b>	<b>DATE</b>
1	Deji Thomas	60	M	Village Chief	Aheri	12/02/2024
2	Adepoju Linus	68	M	Elder	Etikan	14/02/2024
3	AbayomiFakunle	50	M	High Chief	Mahin I	23/02/2024
4	Aiyegbeni Juliet	60	F	Priestess	Mahin II	16/03/2024
5	AdelekeOsundare	55	M	Trader	Mahin III	19/03/2024
6	Abiodun Grace	67	F	Priestess	Mahin IV	19/03/2024
7	Olatunji Fred	54	M	Educationalist	Ugbo I	19/03/2024
8	Ola Jideofor	65	M	Chief Priest	Ugbo II	23/03/2024
9	Tomololu Tunji	50	M	Civil Servant	Ugbo III	23/03/2024
10	BabatundeBukky	56	F	Teacher	Ugbo IV	24/03/2024
11	Oluwafemi Ade	40	M	Farmer	Ugbo V	25/03/2024
12	AjayiFaseun	50	M	Trader	Ugbo VI	25/03/2024
13	Amotoson Silver	52	M	Teacher	Aheri	26/03/2024
14	OkosunAdebiyi	69	M	Elder	Etikan	26/03/2024
15	Fabiya Philip	50	M	Herbalist	Mahin I	27/03/2024
16	OlapupoAdeniyi	57	M	Elder	Mahin II	27/03/2024
17	Ibeyelbeji	42	M	Trader	Mahin III	27/03/2024
18	Aiyedatiwa John	61	F	Fisher	Mahin IV	28/03/2024
19	OladeleAiyegbeni	39	M	Student	Ugbo I	28/03/2024
20	BashiruDimeji	41	M	Fisher	Ugbo II	29/03/2024
21	Tunde Peter	53	M	Herbalist	Ugbo III	29/03/2024
<b>SN</b>	<b>NAME</b>	<b>AGE</b>	<b>SEX</b>	<b>OCCUPATION</b>	<b>PLACE</b>	<b>DATE</b>
22	Olagoke Patrick	56	M	Fisher	Ugbo IV	30/03/2024
23	OluOsibanjo	51	M	Trader	Ugbo V	12/04/2024
24	Olusegun Abdul	57	M	Herbalist	Ugbo VI	12/04/2024
25	IyaAdeleke	59	F	Priestess	Aheri	13/04/2024
26	Femi Oguntwase	41	M	Pastor	Etikan	14/04/2024
27	OgundeleDeji	51	M	Herbalist	Mahin I	14/04/2024
28	AjalaOlu	59	M	Herbalist	Mahin II	16/04/2024
29	OlagokeAyodele	48	M	Patient/Teacher	Mahin III	16/04/2024
30	AremuOsifo	39	M	Farmer	Mahin IV	19/04/2024
31	AdekunleBalarabe	60	M	Elder	Ugbo I	19/04/2024
32	BabajideDayo	50	M	Pastor	Ugbo II	19/04/2024
33	GbonkaBasorun	66	M	Lecturer	Ugbo III	23/04/2024
34	TitiAyenuro	44	F	House Wife	Ugbo IV	23/04/2024
35	Akeem Funmi	53	F	Student	Ugbo V	23/04/2024
36	AdeolaOlakunle	22	M	Trader	Ugbo VI	25/04/2024
37	OlufunmilayoAbiodun H.	39	F	Teacher	Aheri	25/04/2024
38	DapoSeyi	41	M	Teacher	Etikan	25/04/2024
39	AbiodunMakinde	50	M	Village Chief	Mahin I	26/04/2024
40	OlusolaFaseun	56	M	Elder	Mahin II	26/04/2024
41	AdetusaOjo	70	M	High Chief	Mahin III	12/05/2024
42	Olu Patricia	65	F	Priestess	Mahin IV	12/05/2024
<b>SN</b>	<b>NAME</b>	<b>AGE</b>	<b>SEX</b>	<b>OCCUPATION</b>	<b>PLACE</b>	<b>DATE</b>
43	Ayo Bamidele	55	M	Trader	Ugbo I	12/05/2024
44	Oluwose Lucy	51	F	Priestess	Ugbo II	14/05/2024
45	EhinmowoAdetusa	59	M	Educationalist	Ugbo III	23/05/2024
46	KalejaiyeFabiya	48	M	Nurse	Ugbo IV	26/05/2024
47	OgunbiyiBamaiyi	39	M	Civil Servant	Ugbo V	26/05/2024
48	Ogunkunle Isaac	60	M	Elder	Ugbo VI	27/05/2024
49	Femi Ogundele	57	M	Ayelala Priest	Aheri	28/05/2024
50	AdeanifoOgunleye	65	M	Fisher	Etikan	28/05/2024