



EXPLORING THE AESTHETICS OF AWON MASS WEDDING FESTIVAL AS POPULAR CULTURE

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Abstract

Popular culture or popular literature is often being referred to as trivial literature or para literature as it possesses virtually similar characteristics of writing. Among its other genres, abound in popular culture are the festival aesthetics which constitutes its dramatic genre. "Awon" Mass wedding festival is one of such festivals celebrated annually in Shao, Moro Local Government, Kwara State. The festival has its many features which are rich in oral tradition and tourist events deployable for modern cultural entertainment. This paper considers the aesthetics of Awon Festival as an exemplary popular culture with a view to explore the richness and impact of the mass wedding festival on the cultural landscape of Nigeria and global setting. The objectives of this essay are: to project the aesthetics as popular culture; to explore the role and tourist potentials of the festival towards the development of Kwara State; to promote the festival for global audience. The researcher participated in the annual two editions (2017 and 2019) of the festival to enable him obtain firsthand information for the analysis. Interviews and recordings were also carried out. The findings of the paper are that Awon festival is both entertaining and didactic as a popular culture in terms of events, oral texture and significance. It is capable of boosting the economy/IGR of the host state and the nation at large. The festival is recommended for global tourism and that the Kwara State Government and the Federal Ministry of Information and Culture should adopt the festival for invigoration in terms of packaging for international audience.

Key words: Awon festival, Popular culture, Tourism, Shao, Aesthetics

INTRODUCTION

It is high time literary minds looked beyond the projection of festivals for mere entertaining effect. Instead, we should begin to embark on literary exploration or artistic exposition of cultural festivals for adaptation and competitive consumption of global audience. This will help to drive home economic viability and development of not just the immediate context of production but in the continent as a whole. At the disposal of a writer are artistic materials/creative gadgets with which to explore, adapt, expose and present the rich and inexhaustible cultural milieu in the aesthetic repository of Africa for the consumption of the international audience. This paper sets out to explore a unique cultural mass wedding festival celebrated in Shao, Moro Local Government of Kwara State of Nigeria, West African sub-region as popular culture. Popular Culture is that artistic event which is meant for the consumption of the ordinary people but spread by means of technology. Examples are festivals, popular songs, drama, popular dance etc.

By its content and form, Awon Mass Wedding falls within the repertoire of oral aesthetics. It is a cultural festival which is both narrative and performative... An artistic exploration of the mass wedding festival presents a rich historical background as well as performances as may be inherent in poetics, narratives and spectacle. The term aesthetics is a branch of philosophy which has to do with beauty or ugliness as may be inherent in an object. Akano (2012:2-5) observes that aesthetics in its literary meaning entails both functional and



formal elements of a work of art as the basic distinguishing feature either in the oral or literary form. Aesthetics is what Stephen Pepper (1970:2) refers to as ‘a science, a department of the science of value’. It means the ornamental or embellishing artistic techniques inherent in a work of art. Aesthetics is the sum total of values, characters, themes or meanings in a literary piece. In undertaking an aesthetic appreciation, the result is usually edifying or delightful through interpretation or explication of the formal or functional materials in a work of art as contended by Yanai (1978:472). On the other hand, the term globalization covers the evolution of a global society in which economic, political, environmental and cultural events in one part of the world quickly come to have significance for people in other parts of the world. It results from advancement in communication, transportation and information techniques underlining the growing linkages of governments, individuals, communities, businesses around the world through economy, politics, technology and culture. Similarly, the term tourism according to Bonink C. and Richards G. (1992) has to do with traveling for recreation, leisure, holidaying.

This study approaches the global and economic exposition of Awon Mass Wedding Festival from the social role of art. Raji-Oyelade (13-20) has a more insightful observation:

Like all other material productions, the literary artifact is a capital superstructure of the base of national wealth, condition, policy and privacy. (And) In its grand conception as an artistic mode in the production of knowledge, literature is a cell of many other networks which determine the quality and extent of national development

Art harmonizes existence giving meaning and interpretation to interrelationship and interaction between man and his environment. Africa as a continent is not just blessed with cultural festivals; its cultural content is fathomless. The artist taps in creatively and produces for global audience with the aid of digital technology. As Ogunsina (297) puts it, “the kernel of literary sociology is that literature does not only reflect, it affects the society; Obafemi (2013:4) opines that the writer does not just reflect his society, he responds and reacts to socio-political happenings around him or her.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The annual Awon mass wedding festival is a tourism event that can catalyze development. The festival requires international tourist packaging for global marketing but as it is at present it does not have the touch of international tourism standards.

Research questions

- Q1. How effective/rich is celebration of Awon festival for tourist development of Kwara state?
- Q2. What is the role of Awon festival in cultural promotion of Kwara State?
- Q3. What challenges militate against the acceptance of Awon festival as popular culture?

POPULAR CULTURE: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The invigoration of the study of popular culture or popular literature as the case may be is being emphasized on daily basis as researches keep pouring in from scholars. The field lends itself to oral rendition with a touch of artistry or performance. As observed by Tomlinson (1991), the content is so diffused that it is almost confusing demarcating between what is ‘popular’ and what is ‘unpopular’ in terms of cultural practices. There is also the delineation of the folk’s or cosmopolitan artistic ingredients especially distinguishing between old and modern, rustic and refined or primitive and civilized. Two things are clear about the term popular culture or popular literature; popular culture is para literary, sharing literary features



just as its sociological or scientific flavour. This is why popular culture is referred to as para literature or trivial literature. In other words, the field is artistic and entertaining; it has content and form; it can take a narrative, poetic or dramatic form. Thus, the entertainment may veil its didactic flavour just as literature can be interpreted. Popular culture has its genres as literature but its packaging and value may not be a serious artistic finesse. This implies that that practice or tradition realized as ‘popular’ can also be literary. It is both thematic and formalistic. What then is popular culture?

Raymond’s taxonomy of the form and content of pop culture may be instructive here. Popular culture could be referred to as a cultural product that are deployed, narrated, staged or practised for entertainment purposes as well as for moral lessons. According to Raymond Williams (2016) popular culture encompasses two main aspects: culture and media. He goes further that it is an artistic material that is a by-product of cultural practice and its spread to different parts of the world or target audience via certain channels. Thus a material that is cultural and made popular or known to a wider audience via technology which may be traditional or modern. The other aspect or meaning of popular culture is whether it is rustic or civilized. The word culture connotes a way of life that concerned with spirituality, entertainment, intellectualism and aesthetic of a particular people, race or group.

Culture as defined by Tomlinson (1991) can be considered to mean ceremonial processes; a people’s belief, ethics, customs, social codes, religion, value system and behavioural codes among other things. On the other hand, literature refers to oral or written artistic materials which bear permanent values. Popular culture is a subset of both culture and literature.

The Encyclopedia Britannica defines popular culture as popular art that embraces any dance, literature, music, theatre, or other art form intended to be received and appreciated by ordinary people in a literate, technologically advanced society dominated by urban culture. Popular art in the twenty century on such technologies of reproduction or distribution as television, printing, photography, digital compact disc and tape recording, motion pictures, radio and video cassettes.

Popular culture encompasses the artistic values emanating from folk’s culture and propagated or advertised through the entertainment industry, the media and targeted at ordinary people in society. Popular culture abounds in stories, events plays, poems, music, chants being written or performed by an individual or a group of performers but that is resplendent of cultural echoes of a given setting. Karin Berber(1999) captures the two components of popular culture as “visible things which would have otherwise been ignored; it is an area of traditional and elite culture, the vast area that is flexible and ever changing, representing a loose collection of different cultural expressions”.

In categorizing popular culture as a literary product, Peter Swirski argues that popular culture is popular literature which is referred to as paraliterature in French and trivial literature in German and that it is a literary phenomenon and not a mere cultural nuisance because it has its socio-aesthetic status which demarcates it as the beauty of “literary democracy”. Some scholars have defined popular culture as residue of cultural studies. The conclusion drawn by Swirski is instructive; that popular fiction has had no appreciable harmful effect either on highbrow literature, on its intellectually refined consumers, or on the society as a whole. What it does is to perform a valuable socio-aesthetic role rather than constitute a cultural menace.



The above position by Swirski corroborates Berber's that though "popular culture often escapes the attention of the outside world, it forms the ingredient of the lifestyle of the urban population". He asserts further that one of its commonest elements is the fact that pop culture:

are products of a dialogue between modern culture and modernity; it results from selective and creative arrangement of specific elements, forms, themes, materials and techniques. Western culture and indigenous forms a new product that is adapted to new tunes and surrounding audience

Popular culture is a blend of the traditional, the rustic and the primitive that is/has been made popular by technological innovation in print, electronic and digital discs. It is the creative enterprise of the folks but enjoyed and embraced by the elite through technological aids and innovations. Popular culture is so popular by virtue of its graduation from its rural or rustic processes to its popularity through mass media and other advertising digitals. It is the product that cannot be tapped, accessed or consumed in its rustic setting but lifted and propagated via technological breakthrough to the rest of the world.

Popular culture is driven by its mass appeal and wider or global distribution brought about by its cheapness, availability, affordability, and accessibility. The utilitarian value of popular culture is its entertaining purposes. But beyond entertainment, the ideological or radical touch of popular culture as an art subsumes in the tenets of cultural materialism as propounded by Raymond Williams.

Williams himself gives three different definitions of popular culture which embrace its scope, utility and reference. He defines popular culture as "a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development". This he relates to the role of philosophers, artists and poets in the formulation of cultural ethos. Williams (2001) also defines popular culture as "a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period or a group". This he captures under creative artistry as a signifying process which popular culture entails and can be utilized for. Culture underlines a people's way of life interms of value specificity or uniqueness. These are notable interms of social practices, cultural events, festivals, value orientation, celebrations among others as may be feasible in certain social settings. These signifying practices according Williams "are texts obtainable in soap opera, pop music, comics etc."

As para literature, popular culture has its form and content which encompass both entertainment and moral values or didactic lessons. This is the aspect of ideology which may be radical or liberal which Graeme Turner contends is "the most important conceptual category in cultural studies". Above all, popular culture is in the categories of popular dance, popular theatre, popular music, popular festivals and a host of others. Even certain myths and narratives qualify as popular culture as already aided by technological innovations, media and advertising. Awon Mass Wedding Festival as Raymond William has contended of pop culture in general, is a typical example of popular culture being celebrated annually in Kwara State of Nigeria. It encompasses the narrative, the poetic and the dramatic.

AWON MASS WEDDING FESTIVAL: ORIGIN AND PERFORMATIVES

A festival is an event, usually and ordinarily staged by a local community. It usually centres on and celebrates some unique aspects of that community. Festival is celebratory centering on



a theme. For Tomlinson (1991) a festival is usually a cultural fiesta or a feast which is celebrated in honour of gods, goddesses and God. Thus we have music or dance festivals, religious festivals, cultural festivals, etc.

Awon Mass Wedding Festival is a feast in honour of the Awon goddess. Historically, this was a one-breasted goddess which appeared to the people of Shao of the earliest time of the ancient community precisely during the reign of Ohoro Olanibo, the first monarch of the Shao Community. Whatever is regarded as the authentic account of the historical origin of Awon Mass Wedding Festival must have been sourced from oral tradition which obtains in a community like Shao where written tradition was introduced to it via contact with western education. But even then, the historical account of the festival has since been reduced to writing by individuals as well as government. In his published work, **Shao: My People, their Tradition, Custom and Culture** (1996:92) Oke writes:

In Shao, the institution of marriage is given a pride of place in the culture of the people. Giving out a daughter in marriage in Shao is not the affair of the mother and the father alone; it is the responsibility of the entire community. Marrying off girls in Shao is being practised as it was enjoined by the mysterious woman, AWON, who had visited the town at the early life of the town.

According to the Awon Priest, Chief Oloruntoogun Ojetunde, the festival came into being through the contact between an ancient Chief in Shao, Omo Larele, (Son of Larele), one of the founding fathers of Shao, who was also a hunter. He had discovered a small stream where he was always visiting to drink water during his hunting expeditions. On one of such hunting adventures, he had an encounter with a strange woman who appeared to him mysteriously and claimed the ownership of the stream. Corroborating the story by the Awon Priest, the reigning Ohoro of Shao, Oba Bamidele Alabi Adegbite said the woman, Awon goddess, later appeared to Omo Larele in the larger community where she was received by Ohoro Olanibo and his other Chiefs. Omo Larele is today a principal Chief in the ancient community as Iboo of Shao and third in rank to the monarch. The mysterious woman who gave her name as **Awon** was taken to Ohoro Olanibo by Omo Larele where she was received with pomp and pageantry. She was later made to stay with another man for nine (9) days before departing the town. The man she stayed with is now known and addressed as **Alawon, the Awon priest**. (Wole Oke (1996) **Shao: My People, their Tradition, Custom and Culture**).

In her valedictory speech, the woman, Awon instructed Ohoro and his Chiefs, her hosts, to set a day aside to commemorate her visit by giving all marriageable girls out in marriage. She equally told them that the community should expect prosperity so far they took to her instruction. Awon had hardly finished her speech when she fell down and vanished into the air and immediately, water started to gush out and flow from the spot. Water flowed to join the erstwhile stream discovered by Omo Larele to become a big river known and called Awon River till the present day. The very spot where Awon goddess had fallen down and vanished to become a pool of water has since been referred to as *Awonyale (meaning Awon goddess has branched home)*.

THE PERFORMATIVES

As a cultural festival, Awon Mass Wedding is celebrated in stages as a number of activities are orchestrated to usher in the annual mass wedding fiesta. These events are not just significant; they are interwoven leading to great performances on the part of the custodians. These events are dramatically witnessed usually on important days marking the festival up till the climax and beyond. The events are as follows:



- Fixing of the Day for Awon Festival: It involves the Awon Priest (Alawon), Chiefs Iboo and Ajanki of Shao and other traditional titled chiefs all assembling at the Awon goddess shrine. The fixing of the day is normally done in consultation with Ifa Oracle while they usually pick thirty days (plus or minus) based on market days calculation. This is called “etadinlogbon” or “etalelogbon” (plus or minus 30 days). The fixing of the day event takes place every August or September.
- Gathering of firewood: This is an exercise carried out by family members of the intending bridegrooms. Family members, friends and well-wishers often join hands with the bridegroom in cutting and gathering trees into a big heap. They leave them to dry up before packing them home for cooking activities. Since the festival is celebrated for about a week, the gathering of firewood in heaps helps reduce the cost of cooking. The exercise is carried out with enthusiasm, ecstasy and solidarity.
- Ojo Inabi: It is the day preceding the eve of the wedding, two nights to the wedding day. Two major events take place on Inabi: women from the bridegroom’s house are seen carrying two bundles of firewood, two big baskets of yams and a big cock. Those items are parts of gifts from the bridegroom’s family for the bride’s family. They are meant to prepare delicious meal for the bride before her final departure from her parent’s house.

The other event takes place later in the evening usually around 8.00pm. This is the Inabi proper when the bride sets out accompanied by friends and well-wishers as she visits relations and sharing kola nuts, cigarettes, bitter kola, sweets etc. to people. This night is called the night of “Gidi-gidi, bomu bomu”. It is an energy-sapping procession as a crowd of energetic young men and women (youths) and teenagers join the procession which is usually riotous including a rigorous race. Even from the songs:

Solo: gidi, gidi

Chorus: Bomu bomu, B’omu

Solo: b’omo olomo doju dele; (should anybody’s child fall down)

Chorus: Ko si temi nbe (it does not concern me)

This riotous procession like a relay race goes around the town amidst singing and wild joy. The procession ends as participants withdraw in twos, threes as they get tired.

- **Aisun Iyawo** (Wedding Eve): This is the eve proper and it is the last night the bride spends in her parent’s house. The main event that takes place is the ‘Eka Iyawo’ or ‘Ekun Iyawo’. The bride files out with a lit lantern in her hand and she is accompanied by her friends and peer group members. She goes round her relations’ houses singing or reciting their Oriki (panegyric) and sobbing. The bride chants the praise name, outlining the heroic attributes and accomplishments of her forefathers in honour of her parents. The Eka Iyawo is expected to bring out the richness of Awon Festival in panegyric rendition as family ancestral backgrounds, exploits and heroes and heroines are praised. It is also a day when brides are challenged as spectators get to know how good the brides are in chanting their ancestral praise names.
- **The Wedding Day:** It witnesses many things as many events are staged: there is the display of bridal ware called Igba Iyawo. The bride’s earthenware – pots, plates, cooking utensils among others are washed and displayed on mat to dry up outside. The display readily informs passersby that there is a bride in that house.



Bridal Procession: The first activity the brides engage in on this day is the plaiting of hair which must be ‘Ojonponti’ (Rain does not beat ear). It is the hairdo that is unique to all the brides of the year in Shao community. Then the bride gets dressed which usually is done in a relative’s house. The bridal costume is made up of Aso ofi, umbrella, jewelries, bangles/iyun beads for the neck and wrists. The accompanying percussion signifies bridal background as hunter’s, Ifa’s or profession or exploits. Of this bridal procession are the following excerpts:

After these formalities, the march to the market square begins. At this time, brides are not in a hurry; they march slowly on their way and occasionally halt to sing the praise names of their relatives. This slow march is known as KIKASE IYAWO (counting the brides’ steps). At the market square, each bride carries an umbrella in her right hand and covers her face as tradition demands and starts reciting the Ekun Iyawo to bid farewell to spinsterhood.

(Kwara State Government Publication on Shao Awonga Festival, (p.8)

With Ekun/Eka Iyawo, the brides bid farewell to their family members and parents. Ekun Iyawo is the praise song or chant usually panegyric which is emotion-laden and tunefully rendered. It is the rendition of chants relating to their parental cognomen or ancestral exploits.

Bride: *Bi emo erin, egboun erin, bi eomo osa, ejiyo lobe*
Awa lomo oja melo la nna nile oluwojobi
Awa lomo oja meta la nna nile oluwojobi
Ajumo na won a na oja kola
To ba di lale won a na tataré
Tataré su mi loni, kola lo wu emi
Emi lomo oluwojobi

Translation:

If you don’t know me, you hear the voice of elephant
If you don’t know me, you taste salt in the soup
Even if you don’t know me, you hear my voice; I am the
daughter of Oluwojobi.

The brides are also expected to kneel down in honour of the Ohoro of Shao, the Monarch and sing his ancestral praise.

Awon Dance: usually performed by old women from Iboo and Alawon compound. Before, Awon Dance used to take place two months after the Awon Wedding Festival day. Of this past, Oke writes

It is a traditional dance by every woman in the town to the goddess of Awon. On the day set aside for the Awon dance, no woman must go out of the town to anywhere; every woman is expected to remain at home to ‘bake cakes’ for Awon (duro ko din akara – duodika). To prevent any woman from flouting this order, a masquerade by the name, Duodika goes to station itself along the road that leads to Ilorin which is the road that is plied daily by majority of the women. (p.94)

Then the dance used to commence in the late afternoon as women assemble at the arena, the frontage of the house of the Awon priest. The dancers would form a circle round a massive rock to dance round amidst drumming and singing. The drummers beat bata and gangan drums to enhance the rhythm.



But Awon dance was rejuvenated during the celebration in 1993 and it has since become part of the event featuring on Awon Day.

The dance was rejuvenated during the 1993 Awon to add colour and glamour to the festival. It involves the aged among the women folk. These never tired culture activists (women) engage in the very energetic and highly galvanizing dance. The very alluring traditional musical instrument is orchestrated by the bata drum. (Kwara State Council for Art and Culture publication, p.11).

Awon dance is performed amidst singing and drumming which are rendered in unique and sonorous rhythms. The songs, mainly ballads by its content readily give information about the town's (Shao) rich cultural background, the festival. Excerpts:

Chorus: Gboun mi, efufu lele gboun lodo Awon lodo

Gboun mi, efufu lele gboun lodo Awon lodo

meaning (carry my voice, ye wind, carry my voice to the river goddess)

Solo: Mo mo gbele koto de elekoto

Ibunbu la' tu okun – Elekoto

Ibunbu la' tu osa – Elekoto

Taloje tudo laarin – Elekoto

Keja oja won lomuje – Elekoto

Kodo out won re sale

(I have come with my swimming tactic; we approach swimming in slide; no one plung into the deep; lest the river drown them, lest fishes bite their breasts)

Solo: Mo mo gbelekoto de

Chorus: Elekoto

Solo: Lele lonfe, Ajoda di taya lefe lonfe

Omi maa kun, ko i to wa we

Omi maa kun

(Ajoda turns the swimming goward; let the river swell, it is not enough for us)

Solo: Iyawo bi mo lekan ko ro mi boju, bo o lo lo, enia ko ba nle

(the bride gives birth once, she doesn't have water to rinse her face; she may go away, you met people in the compound)

The songs chorus river Awon's attributes and invectives on lazy and dirty wives. The dance steps rise to a climax as the women disperse removing their veils. They usually end the dance with the song:

Solo: Bole dija, o dija

Chorus: Ko dija

Solo: Bomo olomo doju dele

Chorus: Ko si temi nbe (2x) meaning let it become a fight; let anybody's child fall flat, it doesn't concern me.

The festivity is also heightened with performances from **hunters** as they chant and display as well as the **acrobats**. There are usually **guest artists** from within and outside, Kwara State. The Festival usually comes to a close with the blessing of the brides by the monarch, Ohoro of Shao. The following day witnesses the Oko Ewu (bridegroom's caricature) celebration by the bridegrooms.



Based on the analysis of events of the festival, the following findings are hereby put forward.

Globalizing the Tourist Potentials of Awon Festival:

In discussing the globalization of Awon Mass Wedding Festival, it must be emphasized that the festival's tourist potentials are huge, fascinating and multi-dimensional. But the concern here and now is the exploration and showcasing of these inherent tourist attractions as they are yet to be tapped or fully developed for global audience and consumption.

In this manner, the attention of the stakeholders in tourism industry in Nigeria is hereby first drawn to the untapped, unexplored and underdeveloped tourist endowment of Awon Mass Wedding Festival. The Federal Government of Nigeria through the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and National Orientation, should as a matter of policy, undertake the showcasing and marketing of the festival. Awon Festival is listed in the calendar of the National Tourism Development Corporation (NTDC) as a national cultural fiesta. The Federal Ministry saddled with cultural promotion should provide the enabling law and environment for the entrepreneurial packaging of the festival through a public private partnership arrangement.

Awon Festival is open to corporate packaging and sponsorship: Multi-national companies, Tourism and Travel Agencies, Event Managers of national and international standard are favoured to step in and take over the modeling, showcasing and marketing of the unique features of the festival for tourist world over. Such enterprising packaging will rake in steady income for the nation and open up business avenues for all categories of traders, hoteliers among others. Awon Festival is a crowd puller as hundreds of thousands of spectators flock to the ancient town of Shao to behold and partake of the yearly exotic and spectacular traditional bridal display of maidens decked in traditional attire rich in embroidery and dye. The tourist attractions of the festival are not just dynamic and enormous but they are of traditional artistry and entertaining. Its ornamental segments and epoch-making six-day performance enterprises offer different tastes in aesthetics and entertainment.

Branding and rebranding of the Festival as a major revenue drive for government and the host community: Bridal costumes which are usually traditional *Aso ofi* of variegated colours and adorning neck beads are symbolic and up for branding by sponsors. There are also umbrella which are hovered over the brides. These are equally symbolic bridal attire for adornment. They could be in company's colours, logo and trade name among others. Opening up Awon Festival for Beauty pageant will drive its global and corporate social outlook. A yearly beauty pageant contest is fashionable for a unique cultural mass wedding as this. An Miss Awon Beauty Contest of international taste and standard will not only serve as promotional enterprise, it will as well help mobilize huge income in several fronts for the nation, individuals and companies.

Theatrical Adaptation of the historical Background of Awon Festival is germane for diversification of its revenue potentials. Professional dramatists and movie producers should find the festival a good artistic material for adaptation and rewarding economic venture. From the coming/discovery and encounter with the Awon deity, the one breasted-goddess by the ancient founders of Shao to the primal staging of Awon Mass Wedding Festival are rich cultural materials good for theatrical adaptation for international audience. The products will be soft sell to rake in bountiful harvest in naira and dollar.

Oral Exploration and uploading of the repertoire of Eka Iyawo (bridal chant) into digital gadgets is artistically diversifying: Eka Iyawo is quite unique to Awon Festival as an undying



traditional bridal practice. These bridal chants are awaiting digital production which should be in mass number marketable by tourist agencies.

Serene Babamogba and Yelu Hills and River Awon Topography awaiting landscaping and occupation as tourist resort: These are open to investment in hotels, resorts and accommodation or event centres for local and international tourists during and after celebration. A number of organizations have been showing interest in packaging the festival for tourist attraction. This confirms the statement on www.ranscampus.org that Awon Mass Wedding is tourism potential that is yet to be tapped as Shao remains a centre of tourist attraction to the people world over.

Significance/Impacts of Awon Mass Wedding Festival: The celebration of Awon Mass Wedding goes beyond commemoration of the visit of the deity, the one-breasted woman which appeared and instructed the people of Shao on the annual staging of the festival. It is a celebration of fertility, procreation and motherhood.

In its publication of 1996, entitled **Shao: A Land of Mass Wedding** the Kwara State Council for Art and Culture portrays Awon Festival as ‘a celebration of womanhood during which all maids in Shao Town are given in mass marriage as instructed by the one-breasted fiery woman whose appearance and departure were all events of mystery’. Also, the Kwara State government official website www.kwarastate.gov.ng in its publication, *Historical Perspective of Shao Awonga Festival* have it that ‘Awon had pledged to always bless the people of Shao with children if her injunctions were followed.

Marriage institution was ordained by God and first between the Edenic Adam and Eve from where humanity has since taken the cue. Awon Festival is a mass marriage which centers on procreation, multiplication, and expansion of the people. Marriage is a legal union between a man and a woman who love each other and who have decided to make their relationship public, official and permanent. Annually between forty and eighty maids are given out in marriage during Awon Mass Wedding celebration. It is indeed a repopulation avenue for humanity

Legality: Awon Mass Wedding confers legitimacy on marital status or union of the maids given in mass marriage. It is one of the steps that bride price is usually given to the bride’s parents. The traditional kola nuts and the sum of five thousand naira are given to the bride’s parents during the introduction. All these are fulfilled to confer legality on the union even before the mass celebration. *An identity:* Awon Mass Wedding remains a unique cultural heritage of the people of Shao. It has put the ancient town in the world map of festival thereby propelling it to global limelight as a land of cultural tourism mass wedding festival. Founded before Ilorin, the Kwara State Capital, Shao is an ancient town named after Awon River as Shao Awon.

A unifying factor: The festival remains a unifying factor among indigenes of Shao. During the celebration, regardless of religion, clan or sect, sons and daughters of Shao usually come together to participate fully in the unique and culturally defined festival. It is usually worked upon and watched out for during the annual calendar of the people.

In addition to the above is the belief in the efficacy of the spiritual blessing of the Awon goddess. The goddess is a symbol of unity and spirituality for the people of Shao.

The ancient town of Shao is at the Northern fringe of Yoruba ethnic territory of Nigeria. Shao is located on the world map at longitude 4⁰ 35E and latitude 8⁰ 35N. It is bounded in the East



by North Hills, and by Babamogba Hills in the West while in the North and South are rivers Moro and Awon respectively. The cognomen or praise Chants of the Community give ample information about its vibrant cultural festival, its farm endowment and minerals. The people of Shao are always proud of the town, mainly when they listen to their cognomen:

Shao Awonga, Omo Onibu eja	(Shao people blessed with the deep of
Shao Awon wowe, aribusola	fish, one who laughs, Warrior of Oya Ajoda,
apotubu erin	goddess, Awon of many children, with
Akogun Oya	mansions at Basa and Wede tributaries)
Olomo winkin winkin	
Abile gbangba ni basa	
Abodede pirimu pirimu ni wede	
Shao sodun Awon kodo magbe	(the people of Shao celebrates Awon Shao
sodun Awon kodo mafa	Festival, let the river swell 2x, Shao
	people blessed with the deep of fish, Shao
Awon omo onibueja	Your river full of tilapia with which
Shao Awon gbogbo odo kiki isin	we enjoy okro soup)
ati ikoro	
Shao Awon omo onibu remi remi	
Ati isin ati ikoro	
Lao fi jorunla ni Shao Awonga	

CONCLUSION

The paper has discussed features of Awon Festival and its suitability for tourist adaptation. Awon Mass Wedding has really metamorphosed into a symbol of cultural identity that amplifies the people’s social life. From the rich poetics of the Awon ballad songs and Ekun iyawo to the galaxy of costumes underlining a great fiesta, the festival remains a superlative attraction and taste for both local and international tourists.

Definition of Terms

- Awon:** a river goddess, one-breasted woman, the fountain of Awon mass wedding.
- Awon yale:** where Awon goddess had fallen to become a pull of water.
- Awon Ojubo:** the main grove/spot where the goddess is beseeched.
- Awon mu:** the spot where Omo Larele discovered during his hunting expedition.
- Alawon:** the Awon priest and custodian of Awon Festival.
- Ekun iyawo:** bridal chants in honour of their parents and ancestors.
- Igba iyawo:** bridalware usually displayed on Awon festival day

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