

## AN EXAMINATION OF THE WORO AGERE FESTIVAL AMONG THE IJEBU IGBO PEOPLE OF OGUN STATE IN NIGERIA

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**ABSTRACT:** This study examined the socio-cultural impact of Woro agere festival in Ijebu Igbo, located in Ogun state of Nigeria. Woro Agere festival is a socio-cultural festival attracting people of all affiliation. Woro agree festival thus shares similar attribute with Egungun festivals and others in terms of the way they invoke the spirit for the peaceful conduct in the society. Despite the influence of westernization, modernity and religion, cultural festivals are apparently given prominent attention by the people of Ogun state. Many of the people are both Muslims and Christians, but cultural identities remain pivotal among the people of western Nigeria. Culture is highly valued in the society. It is also regarded as their identity, memory, pride, achievement and their contribution to world civilization. In fact, among the Ijebu, festivals have been given more attention so much so that the celebrations of most of these festivals are announced over print and electronic media. Agere festival is a very prominent institution. It is an institution which performs political, judiciary and religious functions among the natives. It is used for social purposes, and to preserve order in private and community life. Hence, it is a major component of the indigenous Ijebu Igbo culture. Since Culture is seen in the African social context as transcending the arts or artifacts, Folklore literature, music, dance and other artistic paraphernalia. Primary and secondary sources were used in the study. Extensive oral interviews were conducted with traditional rulers and indigenes of Ijebu Igbo. The study simply helps to expose the values associated with traditional festivals and why it's important to practice it especially the promotion of socio cultural values, norms and customs among the people of Ijebu Igbo

### I. INTRODUCTION

Yoruba is the name given to represent the ethnic group and language of those living in South-West Nigeria. The Yoruba's have a very rich culture with a strong spiritual background. These cultural wealth and spiritual beliefs are exhibited during their festive periods. There are festivals celebrated in all the Yoruba communities, some are peculiar to certain Yoruba communities. The Ijebu People inhabit the South-central part of Yorubaland - a territory that is bounded in the North by Ibadan, in the East by Ondo, Okitipupa and the West by Egbaland.<sup>1</sup> The Southern fringe is open to the sea with the coastlines of Epe, Ejirin and Ikorodu. Despite the political division which has these three towns in Lagos while the main part of Ijebuland remains in Ogun State, the people have always regarded themselves as one entity.<sup>2</sup>

The Ijebu people are part of the Yoruba people living in the South-Western part of Nigeria to the coast. They are prominently occupying parts of Ogun and Lagos state of Nigeria. Like every other pre-literate people, the history of the Ijebu people is both obscure and uncertain. It is obscure in that until barely two hundred years ago, there was no written history. Even now, people still have to rely on traditions handed down from one generation to another. This way of recording history, as realize, is not entirely reliable. Memory may fail; political exigencies may force on the historian the necessity for hiding the truth or remolding the whole story. All these factors must be carefully weighted together when reading through the early history of the Ijebu people. All these reasons attest to the adoption of various origin of the history of the Ijebu People

#### Origin of the Ijebu People

Scholar such as Ogunkoya<sup>3</sup> says that the province now called Ijebu was at one time a desolate, uninhabited forest waste and that it was populated by waves of migration from the East. Some have claimed that the "East" referred to was a place called Wadai. Others claim that the East refers to is in far away. Some Ijebu people also claimed to have come to their present abode from Ife like other Yoruba in their oral tradition.

Extant Ijebu traditions claim that the town of Ijebu-ode is said to have been founded by three brothers: Olu iwa, Ajebu and Olode who came from Ile-Ife and from the two of them the town got its name. Ajebu and Olode The

local historian D.O. Epega also reports the above tradition. Same goes for the historical account of the origin of Ijebu-Igbo which was published in 1927.

Commenting on the pre-colonial ethnographic record of European travelers and curio-collectors like D' Avazac, Lloyd and Pereira on Ijebu origin, Tunde Oduwobi says: Contemporary observers knew little of the political characters and institutions of the Ijebu kingdom during the nineteenth century. This was largely because until the eve of the colonial period the Ijebu, for commercial and political reason, kept out foreigners from their country, the British authorities in Lagos, for example, held a wrong impression of the political configuration of the Ijebu kingdom, believing that it was a federal of some sort.<sup>4</sup>

Ogunkoya also claims that Ijebuland was populated by three waves of migration and did not mention exactly where they came from. The first Ijebu migration he said was led by a man named Olu-iwa, accompanied by two warriors Ajebu and Olode.<sup>5</sup> Oduwobi says although no living historian knows the meaning of *Ijebu*, being an ancient term, we all do know what it is not. Oduwobi says this because Johnson Samuel in allusion to Ijebu history in his book *History of Yoruba* tried to define Ijebu as “\*je” “Tbu” which he translated into food of the deep and associated the origin of the word with Olowu of Owu who came into existence only about 1,000 A.D.<sup>6</sup>

Adesanya claims that the Ijebu originated from Wadai. According to him, the Ijebu originated directly from Noah of the Biblical and Koranic tradition. Adesanya claims that Noah, the only man saved from the Biblical and Koranic flood had his name corrupted to Onuwa, later to Oluwa and later to Olu-iwa and therefore Oluwabi. Hence, Adesanya argues that the Ijebu should be referred to as ‘Omo Oluwabi’ and not “Omo Alare” or “Omo Obanta” since, (according to him) Obanta is not the sole “root” of all the Ijebu but only a leader of an Ijebu migratory wave. Further in his thesis, Adesanya says there are eight Ifes namely: Ife Awaye, Ife Owoni, Ife Owolaa, Ife Ilere, Ife Owodaye, Ife Ojugborongu, Ife Oyelagboo and the present Ile-Ife. Further, Adesanya says the Ife Owodaye is the Wadai which he claims that the Ijebu came from. Adesanya interestingly (apart from his early denials of the Ife tradition like the Awujale) made an allusion to Ife by admitting the fact that a wave of the Ijebu migrants came from the known Ife and co-habited with the antedate people at Odoluwa (the original name for Ijebu -Ode). Ayandele corroborates Ayantuga’s position. He submits that the Idoko were the autochthonous dwellers of Ijebu and that they were wiped out by the Ijebu immigrants led by Olu-iwa.

Ogunba on the other hand, inverts the order of migration proposed by Ayantuga by postulating that the first settlers in Ijebu were led in by Olu-iwa and that they were followed by another set, the Idoko group presumably under Osifaderin. Ogunba too, did not mention the point of Ijebu origin before their migration to Ijebuland. According to him, the Idoko established political sway over many settlements in Ijebu including Ijebu- Ode where they placed a viceroy in the person of Osinumesi. The power of the Idoko was subsequently terminated by the establishment of the Awujale dynasty. Ogunba concludes that the political and cultural marginalization of the Idoko by the new dynasty in the succeeding centuries caused many of them to flee their original homes in the Imusin area during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>7</sup>

Whereas Abimbola on the origin of the Ijebu people says: .it is very important to let researchers be aware that it was political exigencies, conspiracy, hatred, injustice, disrespect for others, fear of domination and other factors that had in the past contributed to not having a proper record on the Ijebu history. The Ijebu migration was in three or more waves and at the first was under the legendary Olu-iwa, the greatest forebear of the Ijebu people.

Another leader, Arisu, also led his group of Ijebu migrants to Ijebu-Ode and settled down... the last group of Ijebu migrants was led by Obanta.

The origin of the Ijebu, according to the incumbent Awujale of Ijebuland, who is also the paramount traditional ruler in the land, Oba S. K. Adetona remains unchanged from his earlier position that the Ijebu people came from Wadai Sudan. Oba Adetona had said these several times and at various fora. To him and his ilk, the Ife tradition, to which several Yoruba states trace their origin, is nothing to write home about. The Awujale maintains this despite the claim of some traditions that he is a son of Oduduwa.<sup>8</sup>

In the 18th and 19th centuries, Yorubaland witnessed several political power struggles in the form of the Owu war (1821), the Gbedeke war (1831), the Apomu war (1879), the Kiriji war (1879), and the Ekiti Parapo war (1894).<sup>9</sup> One of the reasons for these wars was that most towns wanted to get slaves to sell to the British. The war also caused people from different cultural backgrounds to leave their homes and settle in new places. What is interesting is that the Ijebu kingdom was the only kingdom that survived the political chaos and anarchy that devastated most towns and villages in the region<sup>10</sup>

#### **Evolution and Practices of Woro Agere Festival**

The origin and evolution of Woro Agere festival started many years ago before the birth of the forefathers of the Ijebu Igbo people. It is a common trend that most of the culture and festivals in Yorubaland cannot be traced to a particular generation as no major oral source to buttress the claims that the festival commenced in a particular era. It is thus what most people met on ground and handed to their unborn generation and thus remained a legacy till modern time. The practice is not untraceable to any particular age.<sup>11</sup> It started growing years after years and continue to expand more as civilization comes in every year. Woro festival always takes

place during the dry season in the month of February and March of every year.<sup>12</sup> During the festival, series of socio-cultural and economic activities take place. It is believed that the festival casts away evil spirit around the village.<sup>13</sup>

Woro Agere festival is celebrated after the traditional festival of Obirin-ogowu had been performed in Ijebu ode. The evolution of the name Woro can be traced to a popular leaf in Ijebu Igbo known as "Woro." This leaf has a long stalk with broad leaves. It is usually in the forest, around broads and streams.<sup>14</sup> Woro leaf signifies peace and tranquility.<sup>15</sup> The Baale or Olori-ilu (head of the village) and his traditional chiefs would sit down to deliberate on the date of celebration and other necessary rights preceding the day of the major celebration. They sometimes adopt the month of February and March every year which are predominantly during dry season as the appropriate time for the festival. The local government played a major role in the celebration of the festival. Apart from area of financial assistance, other necessary logistics were also provided by the local government. The major assemble place for the last phase of the festival is approved by the local government since the celebration had taken modern dimension. All the women in the village were advised to put woods in the fire at about 3 pm in the afternoon on the festival day. After about 10 minutes in the fire, the Baale or Olori-ilu would take a wood each from the fire and run outside to the middle of the village and shout "Oso yo Aje yo" which means "witches and wizard should stop."<sup>16</sup> Other women would similarly carry their woods which were in the burning fire and join the Baale or Olori-ilu in the shout and everyone would drop their burning wood on the ground to make a massive bonfire. The women folk would form a round circle surrounding the fire shouting "Oso yo Aje yo."<sup>17</sup> After some minutes, they will pick the wood and go to another spot and drop the burning woods. When they get home they will hang the leaves at the entrance of their houses door. Woro means "let there be peace in and around the village" and in Yoruba parlance which is the authorized and indigenous language of celebration is "ki ara ko tu wa-ko ro wa" meaning "let there be peace in our body too good health."<sup>18</sup> The festival has proved to be a dependable source of blessing for the Ijebu-Igbo indigenes at home and abroad. The uniqueness of the festival is the prayers and blessings, dancing, singing and other comical activities which hold on the day of celebration

### **Economic benefits**

The economic aspect of the festivals stems from the fact that during the festival period, people of Ijebu Igbo descent across the globe converge in their home town of Ijebu Igbo and purchase Aso ebi and every members of each family are expected to purchase. The availability of textile exhibitions across many streets of Ijebu Igbo from January to February every years in preparation for the festival is a major economic impact of the festival.<sup>19</sup> Trade and other commercial activities flourished during this period of the years. People sewed new cloths known as Aso-ebi and there were also the selling of other commodities such as beads, drinks palm wine, Burukutu to mention but a few.<sup>20</sup>

### **Socio-cultural aspect**

Every culture and festivals often has some socio-cultural dimension which often gives meaning to the specific festivals. In Ijebu there are several festivals celebrated annually. These include the Ojude Oba, the Agemo cult, oro to mention but a few. The celebration of these festivals does not hinder the performances of other culture and religion. It is interesting to note that predominantly, Islam is an integral part of their culture as it was after the celebration of Eid-Adla or Ileya festival that the Ojude Oba festival takes place in Ijebu land. The Woro Agere festival like others does not stop the performances of other religions. When it started there was no church, mosques and the worshippers' belief that during the time, barren women often used the festival celebration as an opportunity to plead, beg the gods for the fruit of the womb and gods answered their prayers.<sup>21</sup> Apart from them, farmers also seize the opportunity of the festival to ask for raining and prosperous harvest of their crops.<sup>11</sup> People from other parts of Ijebu also visit the area during the celebration to ask from the gods for what they desire. The people of Ijebu Igbo often accept the festival years as the beginning of their own new calendar year.<sup>23</sup> So as the Christians depend on the Christmas calendar and the Gregorian calendar while the Muslim depend solely on the Hijra which marked a watershed in the history of Islam especially the migration of prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina. There were also lot of activities taking place during the celebration; there were music and dancing in almost every household apart from the main hall which is approved by the traditional leaders for the whole celebrations. Different local and international musicians from hip hop to local and traditional music are played from all through the day as mark of celebration of the festivals

### **The Uniqueness of the Festival**

The Woro Agere festival is very unique among others of its kind in the Ijebu nation. The fire display bears eloquent testimony to the uniqueness of the festival. The drama and cultural display of different groups and the Baales' performance corroborate the uniqueness of the celebration. From each individual home, they will carry burnt "ember" small piece of woods, lit it with fire, run and singing to the nearby river and roam the street for

about 500 meters. The general atmosphere is very lively as shouting takes place among the children and some elder to mark the acceptance of the atonement to the gods which is in form of libation.<sup>24</sup>

The villagers would shout Osoyo-Aje-yo meaning, witches and wizard. "Je ki oni nkan se" meaning "let individual does whatever he likes."<sup>25</sup> They sought from the wizard not to intervene as the celebrants are on their way to the river or brook and they would dip the fire inside the water, drop the stick. On the way coming they uproot "ewe woro"-woro leaves which is green in nature. Around the river or brook the green leaves are many in the river and they people were dancing and singing back home.<sup>26</sup>

They would do this in about three to four spots and eventually head towards a nearby stream and drop the burning wood inside the stream. The significance of this exercise is to symbolize that the head of the witches and wizard (Oso and Aje) had been drowned to perish. This also implies that apart from the presumed witches and wizard all the evil doers, blackmailers, gossipers among others had been perished and those still in the act would eventually perished.

The women thereafter enter the forest near the stream and plunge the stalks of the Woro leaves around. The Woro leaves grow abundantly near the stream. They will pluck as many leaves as possible and tie them in four with palm leaves- mari-wo which is a symbol of victory.<sup>27</sup> The women would then return to the village with their tied Woro leaves singing and dancing in the village at various spots they will drop their Woro leaves. They will go round the village receiving money gifts from chiefs and elders starting from the Baale and Olori-ebi of each family. They would also drop the Woro leaves in front of the house visited.<sup>28</sup>

Once this festival is performed, it is believed that Peace and tranquility will reign in the village. There would be abundant rainfall for the farmers to plant their crops and this helps to herald rich and plenty harvest for farmers. There would be no diseases or epidemics and untimely death of children and youth in the village. Barren women will become fertile, conceive and bring forth children with ease. One significant things noted in the past was that there is always rainfall on the night of the day the festival was performed, and this simply shows that the cultural and spiritual rites performed as part of the programmes during the festival was accepted by the gods.

### **Social Impact of the Festival**

The Ijebu people of Ogun state have one of the best cultural practices in the world. Their lifestyle and social orientations are often rooted in their culture. Regardless of the advent of civilization, the Ijebu people culture remains a dominant theme in their socio-cultural activities and this features has distinguishes them from others. Culture is the way of life of people. It is the total manner in which a human society responds to an environment. It includes customs characterizing a social group; social heredity of a particular community; meaning, values, norms, their actions and relationships; beliefs, laws, traditions and institutions; religions, ritual, language, song dance, feast, living habits, crafts, equipment.

Going by the above definition, culture entails all facets of human endeavor. It is a long-term process that is transferred from one generation to another. Culture varies from one society to another. It is life in all its totality, it is not static; it changes from time to time. A Yoruba festival such as Woro Agere has a socio-cultural importance. The festival has been used as a means of projecting the image of the Yoruba in general and the Ijebu in particular.<sup>29</sup>

The Woro Agere gives the Ijebu an opportunity to renew their allegiance to their king every year they return home from different places within and outside Nigeria.<sup>30</sup> During the festival, they express their support for the king and wish him a peaceful tenure.

### **Cultural impact of the Festival**

A major cultural significance is that the festival serves as an avenue for people to serve their motherland.<sup>31</sup> The king in one of his speeches after the festival acknowledged the contributions of the age grades to his domain by saying that; we are pleased to observe the positive contributions that our unique institution continues to make to the development of Ijebuland.<sup>32</sup> We are pleased to see a healthy rivalry among them in their efforts to do something tangible for our society so as to immortalize their names in the annals of Ijebu history.<sup>33</sup>

The festival also promotes cultural contact. The festival is usually graced by people from all works of life. Other ethnic groups in Nigeria also participate in the festival whereas people from neighboring countries are not left out. This has promoted peace, tranquility, and harmony, which contribute to socio-economic development and integration.<sup>34</sup>

The festival also signifies Yoruba flair for traditional attire. A typical Yoruba man wears *Ewe woro* for social activities whereas the women tie similar *Aso ebi* after the major rites has been done. These clothes show the beauty of the Ijebu culture. More so, music, dance, and drums are an integral part of the Yoruba culture. There is

no occasion in Yorubaland that is not accompanied by music; each festival has its peculiar music, be it religious or social. Music brings life and meaning to cultures and traditions. Music, dress, chieftaincy titles, and respect for the monarch are carried over from the African culture, which the Ojude Oba festival depicts.

### **Spiritual Significance of the Festival**

Islam is a religion brought to Yorubaland through the efforts of Hausa-Fulani jihadist since the advent of the new faith; it has had a great impact on the norms, customs, and traditions of our society. Part of Islam influence on Africa is that, there emerged a number of festivals which have gained prominence over the traditional ones. In the history of Islam, as Islam began to spread far and wide into various foreign lands, strange and new ideas began to appear amongst the new Muslims. These ideas were foreign to the Muslims of Arabia who had received their Islamic education through the pure teachings of the prophet's companions. Many of those who had accepted would often maintain certain beliefs and superstitions that were present in their societies and culture before their conversions to Islam. A festival like Woro Agere is an aspect of African culture which marked the end of a major traditional festival in Ijebu ode. Primarily, the spiritual significance is derived from the origin and aim of the festival

Furthermore, just as the Ojude Oba festival is a continuation of Eld Adha Muslim festival which typifies the killing of rams, the Woro Agere festivals too are performed during the dry season after the celebration of another festival in Ijebu ode. The festival is not only celebrated by Muslims; Christians as well as people from other faiths join the Muslims in this celebration. The woro Agere festival encourages peaceful co-existence of people of different faiths. More so, the festival always begins with an opening prayer by the religious leaders. As such, the festival serves as an avenue to pray for the king, his members of cabinet, the people, and community as a whole

In many Yoruba societies, dresses or the traditional roles play important roles in ceremonies.<sup>35</sup> It is one of the ways to display one's economic status within the society. In the Woro Agere day celebration, the age grades try to beat one another through the kind of dress they wear. Therefore, it is not surprising when people of different age grades dressed in the most expensive kinds of cloth known to the people of the community.

In the age grade that comprises men and women, all are supposed to dress in the same pattern of cloth. The sheer impact of bulk and color and stripes created by an assemblage of individuals in close proximity, each person robed in identical pattern and hue, is indeed considerable. The attire worn in the previous festival would not be repeated in the next festival. This is to show their economic status and wealth and make a statement that they are doing fine in their age grade. Most often, it is an entirely different dress that would be worn in the next Woro-agere day festival. The difference would not only be in colour but also in style.

Traditionally, the favorite colors of the Yoruba are tan, the rich natural tone of the silk known as *sanyan*, and blue, ranging from the palest to the deepest blue black obtainable from the indigo dye pots. Reds and an occasional yellow are also traditional preferences. More recently, however, innovations in pattern and hue have come to be prized, so that there is a more varied palette and an increased reliance on commercially manufactured yarns rather than dependence on hand-spun and locally dyed weaves. Hence, it has become customary that age grades would wear *agbada* (big overall cloth for men), laced with green damask.

In one of the previous Woro festivals, all the age grades wore the same pattern of cloth; the only difference was the color of caps for men and the headgear of the ladies.<sup>36</sup> The reason for this was that that year's festival was used to campaign for the creation of a new local government for the Ijebu Igbo.<sup>37</sup>

### **The future of Woro Agere in Ijebuland**

It is believed that festival has a very bright future in Ijebuland but that certain things must change to bring it in the realities of modern time. According to Chief Ifayemi Awote "I have said this many times that the Woro Agere festival should be modernized and turned into a tourist attraction. The place they use for dancing in Ijebu Igbo would be turned into a small stadium where people can sit comfortably, and watch these people dance.<sup>38</sup> Whatever they can make out of it, part of it would go to the community in that area, another part would go to the performers, that is the Olojas themselves, and to the maintenance of that place. I have no doubt in my mind that the Agere festival would attract lot of attention. People would definitely pay to see them dance. Also, life is not stagnant, so also, tradition cannot be stagnant. It would be modernized with time.<sup>39</sup> The issue with the Agere now is that women should ensure they do their part by lighting the fire while men abstain from sex for three months before the celebration. As such, women are denied the freedom of movement on occasions that

they are out. But to save that situation, the Agere should find a way to carry their load without denying women their freedom of movement as enshrined in the constitution.

I have attempted to expound the guiding beliefs of the Ijebu igbo people with regard to the celebration of the Woro Agere festival. The festival, it should be noted, finds its basis in the people's belief in honoring the baale of Ijebu Igbo. It is also a time for the people to display their aesthetic taste in fashion. The artistic and creative talents of the people in terms of dressing, drama, music, and oral communication are also put into great use. However, beneath the hustle and bustle, and sparked display of colors of this traditional festival, one can discern its attendant religious cultural significance. Through this festival, the people are not just entertained but the religious and cultural values find an outlet too. In addition, it is also the time most Ijebu people come home to celebrate and reconnect to their roots, reflecting the religious, social, and cultural responsiveness on the part of the people.

Woro Agere is an important cult among the Yoruba natives that cannot be underrated. It is a powerful festival which performs political, judiciary and religious functions among these natives. However, since the time of colonialism, all these functions have been eroded and replaced with modern political and judiciary system and foreign religions. Of course this has led to a deviation from the African cultural self-preservation, self-appreciation and self promotion. This is an acute post – colonial social problem about which many well – meaning people are concerned and solutions are being sought. The only few places where traditions customs, and native laws regulate the African lives are the rural communities

### Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper examined the history of Woro Agere festival in Ijebu Igbo area of Ogun state. It showed the uniqueness of the festival and the different approach taken during the celebration of the festival. The paper also finds out that Ijebu people valued their culture regardless of their religious affiliations. Their culture still remained a priority for them. It has also been proved that the Ijebu Igbo culture has a lot of significant contributions to the growth and development of the society. Apart from its role in bringing peace and tranquility to the entire villages, it also helps to provide baby for the barrens and helped by supplying adequate rainfall for farmers for a robust yearly harvest. The celebration takes place in the summer of the every year and it welcomes everybody regardless of their area of interest. Commercial activities also major feature of the Woro Agere festival. Food, soft drinks, clothes and face caps, among others are sold during the festival. Woro Agere festival is very unique and possessed lot of benefits for the well-being of the Ijebu nation in general. What is undisputable is that Woro agere festival fosters unity, togetherness, peace and helps to expose the cultural richness of the Ijebu people

There is the urgent need to turn the festival to point of tourist attraction so that tourists all over the world would participate and invest heavily in the augmentation of the festival. The state government should be partner in the attempt to elevate the culture to greater height, unlike others too. For instance the Lagos State government partners the private sectors in hosting the Lagos carnival which shows the display of different aspect of Lagos rich cultural heritage. There is need to modernize the festival so that foreigners can come in to participate, this will showcase the cultural richness of the Ijebu people to the world. There is also the need for the local and state government to intervene in areas of financial assistance and enactment of legislations to allow smooth running of the festival. Once this is done, it would go a long way to putting the festival in the right perspective.

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1	High chief Rasaki Ogunremi	Civil servant	75/male	23 of June,2019
2	Chief Sunday Afolabi	Baale	69/male	23 of June ,2019
3	Chief Mrs Folashade Ogunnebi	Iyalode	65yrs/female	23 of June 2019
4	Mr. Kehinde Sonoiki	Local historian	59/male	23 of June,2019
5	Chief yesufu Awote	Elder	70/male	23 of Junet,2019
6	Chief Saka ikuforiji	Elder	61/male	23 of June,2019
7	Mr. Sunday Ekundare	Youth leader 2	42/male	23 of June,2019

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