

IGBIN MUSICAL TRADITION IN YORUBA CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

The Yoruba of South-western Nigeria like many African societies since the pre-colonial era have paid great attention to their cultural practices including traditional worship of deities such as *sango*, *osun*, *esu*, *ogun*, *obatala* and so forth. In the Yoruba worldview, religious worship remains a major avenue of communing and renewing relationship with the spirit world in order to maintain cosmological equilibrium. Activities connected with act of worship often involve the use of music and musical instruments. While much is known about numerous Yoruba traditional drums such as the *dundun*, *bata*, *bembe*, *gbedu* and so forth, little is known about *igbin* musical performances in the society. This paper, therefore, examines *igbin orisa* musical tradition and its place in Yoruba society. The *igbin* ensemble consists of three drums namely *iyaalu*, *omele-ako* and *omele-abo*. Besides the usual musical function, the ensemble typifies the family as the central unit upon which the Yoruba society is anchored. Effects of acculturation resulting in a shift from traditional worship to other religions especially Christianity and Islam as well as erosion of societal values were also identified. Drawing examples from the organisation and performance practices of *Igbin* music in Yoruba culture, the paper argues that African musicology could make more meaningful contributions including knowledge preservation and promotion of African cultural heritage beyond mere documentation which had hitherto characterised the discipline.

INTRODUCTION

The Yoruba of South-western Nigeria are a people with rich and much cherished traditions and customs. Right from the pre-colonial era, the people have placed great importance to worship not for the fear of punishment by the deities on any reprobate or disobedience to the norms of the land, but more importantly in order to promote peace, tranquillity as well as

harmonious relationship. According to Vidal (1976), ancestral worship and practices of the Yoruba show great reverence to the Supreme Being known as *Olodumare* on the one hand, and accord due respect to the living dead on the other.

In the Yoruba worldview, the world is heavily surrounded by spiritual beings through which mortals make requisitions and supplications to the Almighty. In the same vein, humans seek the support of their ancestors based on the belief that humans cannot commune directly with God. To this end, the Yoruba, by and large, engage in the worship of various deities and also pay attention to various prescriptions pertaining to religious worship. These are carried out as a means of communing and renewing relationship with the spirit world as well as providing avenue for maintaining cosmological equilibrium. As part of the Yoruba traditional jurisprudence, an individual may be made to swear by *ile* (land), *ori* (destiny) or by his/her ancestors when an allegation of a crime is committed secretly, with the belief that some form of impartial judgement will be spiritually meted by the deities.

Yoruba deities are numerous. Neimak (1993) and Johnson (1921) opined that there are as many as four hundred and one Yoruba deities, while Olawole (2005) suggested that they are about two hundred and one. Vidal (1976) identified some of the various deities around which rituals are held; the principal ones being *Obatala* (god of creativity), *Obaluaye* (god of small pox), *Elegbara* or *Esu* (the trickster god), *Sango* (god of thunder and lightning), *Ibiojo* (god of rain) *Yemoja* or *Olokun* (goddess of seas and oceans), *Ogun* (god of iron), and *Orisa-oko* (god of harvest) among others. Adesokan (1998) noted that ancestral spirits are summoned by drums supported by frequent alteration of different vocal patterns such as *orisa-pipe*, *esa* or *iwi* sometimes overlapping in responsorial format.

Omojola (2010) stated that appropriate drums must be used for each particular *Orisa* (deity) otherwise the devotees might incur the wrath of their tutelary deity. For instance, the *ipese* drums and *agogo* (bells) are played for *Ifa*, *bata* drums for *Sango*, *gbedu* drums are used for announcing the passage of a king into the ancestral world just as the drum also symbolises royalty as well as authority. *Agba Iledi* is a set of drums used by members of *ogboni* cult. In the same vein, *agere* drums are played to accompany *isipa ode* (hunter's funeral ceremony) while *apase* is played during the annual *oro* festival wherein the bull roarer features prominently. The worship of *Obatala* involves praises of the deity accompanied with *igbin* drums as well as rendition of songs.

Omojola (2006) described these cultural practices and musical performances as largely indigenous to various communities in Nigeria with their origins and identities traced back to pre-colonial era. It is instructive to note that radical changes have occurred in Nigeria's cultural practices since the advent of Islam and Christianity which represent both sides of colonial divides. Consequently, many of the notable traditional institutions have become completely eroded, relegated to the background or greatly modified.

Islam brought in Arabic culture as evident in vocal music renditions, forms and styles and most of all the introduction of musical instruments including the *alghaita* (African oboe) and string instruments such as *goge*, *molo* and *kuntigi* (Euba, 1977; Vidal, 1988). Christianity, on its part led to the introduction of Euro-Western music as well as the banning of Nigerian

indigenous musical instruments for divine services (Ekwueme, 1974 and Samuel, 2009). Indeed, these traditional musical instruments were labelled ‘Satanic’ and Christian missionaries seriously preached against many traditional practices such as ancestral worship, polygamy, visitations to and seeking some form of assistance from diviners and so forth. In addition, Christianity also used mission schools and churches to introduce melo-drama, stage singing, and congregational singing (Vidal, 1986 and Akpabot, 1986), choral and group singing accompanied with the organ, which were much different from typical African mode of performance (mainly characterised by responsorial style). The situation became more pronounced with the advent of Afro-American and Afro-Caribbean popular music aided by the returnees (Omojola, 1994).

Daramola (2001) identified some of the notable changes in the present day music industry as including the use of electronic musical instruments to create digitally simulated sound and accompaniment, which he labelled ‘Mr. Machine’. Olaleye (2009) noted that to a great extent, this made many who considered themselves as elite to dump their rich cultural music practices in favour of westernised music. The result was the emergence of new Nigerian ‘pop’ musical traditions including genres such as highlife, *juju*, blues, afro-rock, afrobeat, reggae and of recent, hip-pop and so forth, which is enjoying tremendous patronage among the younger generation.

Technological advancement in music and musical instruments also made the interest of the Nigerian youth to divert from traditional music as well as from the norms and values of the society in which they feel estranged. These became greatly manifested in young men wearing long hairs and ear rings, while their female counterparts unconventionally choose to engage in indecent mode of dressing and craving for outlandish dress and hair-style in addition to slangs and queer speeches. Besides, one cannot neglect the positive influences of westernisation. It brought among other benefits, literacy and formal education in which music is part of the education. This, no doubt, has helped the African musicologists in studying their traditional musical materials and other cultural practices leading to its better understanding from international communities.

Although the influence of Islam, Christianity and westernisation in form of modernisation have not totally eroded Yoruba cultural practices, it is however evident that they have left indelible marks on them including music. The only form of music that has largely retained its originality is traditional music. Many of the traditional musical genres especially those used in rituals and for the worship of various deities are still very much intact and they are still being practised in their unique state in the post-colonial Nigeria.

Traditional Music in Post-Colonial Yoruba Society

In spite of the numerous effects of acculturation resulting in a shift from traditional worship to other religions especially Christianity and Islam, some individuals have remained adherents (albeit secretly) of traditional worship and take part in various activities during the worship. Ayankojo (2009) recorded traditional worships and their worship periods in Oyo town. According to this calendar, *Ifa* is celebrated in the month of April, while the sixth day after *Ifa* celebration marks the commencement of *igbin-orisa* also known as *Obatala* celebration in the month of May. The annual *egungun* celebration commences on the

seventeenth day after the celebration of *Obalala* festival between the months of June and July. Afolabi (1998) also had observed earlier that *oro* festival comes up immediately after the *egungun* festival. According to a tradition, *egungun* and *oro* were close friends during their life time. *Ogun* annual celebration comes up in the month of October and it is followed by *oke* festival.

Nowadays, some Yoruba traditional festivals such as *Osun-Osogbo* in Osun State, *ojude-oba* in Ijebu-Ode, Ogun State, *eyo* festival in Lagos State and *iyamopo* festival in Igbeti, Oyo State amongst others have attracted much international attention. All these attest to the fact that the contemporary Yoruba still place much premium on traditional festivals as well as musical activities which accompany them. Indeed, some of the towns and cities hosting these festivals have become tourist centres. In the same vein, many of the foregoing festivals have received considerable scholarly attention as well as the musical instruments with which each of them are celebrated. While much is known about numerous Yoruba traditional drums such as the *dundun*, *bata*, *bembe*, *gbedu* and so forth, little is known about *igbin* musical performances in Yoruba society. This paper, therefore, discusses *igbin orisa* music and its significance in post-colonial Yoruba society.

***Igbin-orisa* Worship (Obatala): An Overview**

Myth has it that *Obatala* is Yoruba divinity of creativity. Adelowo (1990), Washington (2005), Tamara (2006) and Daramola (2007) among others affirmed that he is believed to have assisted *Olodumare* in the creation of man. In a similar view, Olawole (2005) stated that *Obatala* assisted in moulding human body with clay, after which *Olodumare* gave life to the moulded body. Historically speaking, *Olodumare* gave *ase* (authority) to all the divinities and sent them to go and create the earth. *Obatala* led other divinities to descend from heaven with the aid of a strong iron chain known as *ateworo* at Ile-Ife the spiritual headquarters of the Yoruba. *Obatala* is, thus regarded among the Yoruba as *Orisa-ala* ‘the great deity’.

Daramola (2007) recorded that each divinity has specific colour(s) by which it is identified or associated. For example, *funfun* (white) scientifically reflects all colours when projected as light. It thus symbolises cleanliness, purity, transparency, forthrightness and peace and this is what *Obatala* is believed to stand for. He is regarded as ‘*Orisa funfun*’. Neimak (1993) also submitted that most Yoruba deities are associated with one form of totem or the other. Some of the animals by which *Obatala* is represented include chameleon, gorilla and elephant. Neimak further submitted that elephants possess long life, while gorilla is regarded as the most intelligent animal. The ability of chameleon to change its colour at will as a device to avoid being ensnared by its predators is not in doubt; and these are some of the attributes of *Obatala*. According to a devotee in Oyo, *Obatala* is capable of providing solutions to every problem and this is why adherents worship him. He is believed to possess power to heal the sick, cure barrenness in women seeking the fruit of womb, bring about rainfall so the land could bring forth bountiful harvest, assist worshippers in their various endeavours and also drive away all forms of evil. As a god of purity, *Obatala* only accepts true worship which requires a righteous attitude from his worshippers.

It is the tradition of every devotee to offer prayers and sacrifices to gods while some communities organise periodic festivals to worship deities. Omojola (2006) identified some

forms of traditional worships. These include *ose*, *itadogun* and *odun*. *Ose* is observed every five days, while *itadogun* is observed every seventeen days. *Odun* is the most elaborate and it is an annual celebration. However, in *Obatala* worship observed by these investigators in Agboorako compound in Oyo, four dimensions of the worship were identified. The first is being *ojoojumo* (daily worship). It is personal and observed every morning at a designated individual/private shrine in individual homes immediately a priest/devotee wakes up, most often before the worshipper speaks to anybody. The second is *ororun* (every five days). It is also personal and held individually in the homes of the priests/devotees, usually between 10a.m. and 12noon along with the family members, relatives and friends that are around. The third level is called *itadogun* (every seventeen days). This takes place at the home of *aare* (chief priest) and it is more of congregational worship of priests and devotees. The last (fourth) and most elaborate level is the annual worship known as *irawe*. The actual date is only determined after due consultation with *Ifá* priest to seek divine guidance as to the most favourable date for the commencement and celebration of the festival. Approval for this event is often granted by the *Oluwo*, the *ifa* chief priest and it is customary that the support of other deities in the town is enlisted in order to ensure a successful outing.

Consultations are also made to find out items required by each of the deities before the commencement of the festival. The celebration of *Obatala* festival often lasts seventeen days. The *irawe* worship is of two sessions - the performance of rituals (privately done) and the actual celebration, which involves public spectacle. The worship is important to the people because it reflects the people's way of life and their belief system. The time of worship is seen as the time to invoke God's blessings, seek protection against ills such as epidemic diseases, untimely deaths and barrenness. It also serves as time to make inquiry about causes of one problem or the other as well as bring priests and people together, to maintain equilibrium within the society and ensure social control. Some of the materials for sacrifice during the worship include: *obi-abata* (a special kola nut), *igbin* (snail), *ori* (shea butter), *eko* (pap) and *efun* (chalk). With regard to the component of music, the worship of *Obatala* is considered incomplete without the use of *igbin* drum ensemble.

***Igbin-orisa* Music**

The place of music in religious worship cannot be over-emphasised. Omojola (2006) observed that music in traditional worship occupies a pivotal role either as a solemn, sacred ritual rendition, or as a flamboyant celebratory performance which is open and accessible to all and sundry. Musical performances in this context tend to be the mediator between the human and spirit worlds in charge of maintaining social control.

Laoye (1973), Adesokan (1998), Daramola (2007) and Omojola (2010) among other scholars affirmed that *Obatala*'s special music is *igbin*. An informant revealed that *igbin* is a symbolically deified drum used during *Obatala*'s life time and accompanied him wherever he went and consequently, it became his interpreter. To date, *igbin* drum ensemble remains the principal music played during the worship of *Obatala* especially during the ritual ceremonies. At one of the worship sessions witnessed by the investigators, an excerpt of deity invocation by the *Obatala* chief chanter (*elegun*) confirms the importance of *igbin* music in *Obatala* worship.

Example 1:

Eeposa! Eeepoosaa!! Eeeeepoosaaaaa!!!
Eni o lugbin lo gbo n torisa nwi
Oko arugbo ko jomo oku
Irunmole tutu nini
Oko arugbo ko jomo onu lode
Okunrin demudemu bi a alu iya agere
Eegun alaso funfum mama je n nu mo o lowo o

Translation

Eeposa! Eeepoosaa!! Eeeeepoosaaa!!! (Salutation)
 It is only the player of *Igbin* drum that understands the deity’s message
 The old woman’s husband will prevent the child from dying
 The cool-headed deity
 The old woman’s husband that keeps a child from going amiss in a public place
 The man of valour, skilful as *agere* drummer
 The Masquerade in white attire; please, keep me from.

Igbin is a cylindrical single-headed membrane drum. According to Akpabot (1986), the set of drums constituting the ensemble were named after *Obatala*’s four wives; *Iya-nla*, *Iya-agan*, *keke* and *Afere*. Omojola (2010) opined that *igbin* music assumed a sacred status when the devotees adapted the drums to accompany sacred rites in honour of their deity, while Daramola (2007) described *igbin* music as portraying spotless white cloths in its simple rhythms with steady and moderate tempo coupled with calculated steady dance steps. Findings from this study however suggest a slightly different version of the foregoing tradition or notion. Our data confirmed that *igbin* ensemble consists of three drums namely *iyaalu*, *omele-ako* and *omele-abo*. *Iyaalu-igbin* is both a melodic cum melo-rhythmic instrument, which is capable of making proverbial and philosophical statements during performance. As the name implies, it is the mother in *igbin* ensemble and thus, the master talking drum. It leads, coordinates the movements by setting the pace for other drums during performances. *Iyaalu-igbin* often accompanies *Orisa* praise singing. Below is an excerpt in steady rhythmic patterns: *Bo bu reke, bobu pee, Ifa tan*.

Example 2:

bo bu re ke bo bu pe_ I fa tan.

Meaning:

If it spoils, then *Ifa* is finished.
 The foregoing statement is allegorical; for it connotes much more than its literal meaning. ‘*Bo bu reke*’ means when something exceeds its elastic limit, while ‘*bo bu pee, ifa tan*’ means if it breaks, it is finished. It alludes to the fact that the peace of the community must be

well guarded; everyone would be negatively affected should social peace be threatened. Therefore, it is expedient for members of the community to strive to maintain harmonious relationship for the sake of all. In addition, the Yoruba traditionally believe that when the descendants of a family are well behaved and the family set up is peaceful, it is because there is no bastard in that family. Therefore, anyone who upholds societal and communal norms is regarded as a true son, while the other who misbehaves and foments trouble is regarded as a bastard. This is further reflected in one of the proverbial statements played by the *iyaa-lu-igbin*:

Example 3:

Ba ba_re nlo bi o ba ba_re nlo bi o I wo ki_ s'o mo a le bi e le yun nni, ba ba_re nlo bi o.

Translation

You are the true son of your father/2x
 You are not a bastard like that individual
 You are the true son of your father

Iyaalu is played with straight stick usually on the right hand, while the left hand is used to either mute or muffle the sound and also to regulate the tempo.

Omele-ako is the smallest drum in the ensemble. It is a single-headed conical shaped drum played with two sticks and produces a variety of rhythmic patterns. In the performance, *Omele-ako* acts as the forerunner; its role in the ensemble is more of fixed ostinato with occasional digression and improvisation. *Omele-ako* is thus referred to as ‘*Omele isaaju*’ (forerunner). It plays the role of standard rhythmic pattern by maintaining the pace set by the *iyaa-lu-igbin* for other drums in the ensemble. It acts as the nucleus of the ensemble.

Example 4:

Omele-abo on the other hand is a melo-rhythmic instrument. It is the female counterpart of *omele-ako*. As a female sounding drum, its sound production is softer than that of the male. They both look alike except that *omele-abo* is bigger in shape than *omele-ako*. It employs similar playing techniques with that of *omele-ako*. The depth of sound is one of the inherent features that distinguish it from its male counterpart. It is also a time keeper, but maintains different entry point from *omele-ako*. While the latter begins on the beat with its fixed ostinato, *omele-abo* starts off the beat sometimes using hocket techniques in terms of

rhythmic organisation. Sometimes, it imitates the rhythmic patterns of *iyaaalu*. An example of the rhythmic patterns produced by *omele-abo* during performance is illustrated below:

Example 5:

O go pin ra o go pin.

Meaning

You are totally dull,
You are very dull

The above interpretation might appear insulting, but it merely suggests the personality of *Obatala* as a gentle and tolerant deity. It does not in any way signify that *Obatala* is stupid. The foregoing is better expressed in another Yoruba proverb that states: *yiyo ekun, t’ojo ko*. This means ‘the gentility of a tiger does not imply cowardice’. *Obatala* is, thus a non-violent being.

Omele-ako, and *omele-abo* are played with two straight sticks. The drums are usually played during the weekly (*Ose-Osa*) and *Irawe* (annual worship celebration of *Obatala*). Only *Obatala* priests are permitted to play *igbin* drum during worship sessions, ordinary worshippers are forbidden. The playing of *igbin* used to be the exclusive right of the chief priest (Aaje of Aaje family), as he was the person solely endowed with the authority to safeguard it in his shrine. However, the contemporary practice is that almost all the priests now have *igbin* kept in their individual shrines. As at the time this study was conducted, members of Aaje family were yet to nominate a new Aaje since the demise of the immediate past one. The implication of this is that the primary statutory responsibility of the family might soon go into oblivion if steps are not taken to elect a new Aaje. Indeed, the consequence might be grave in the light of a popular Yoruba adage: *Oosa ti a ko ba fi han Omo, piparun ni yio parun*. This means dereliction on the part of a generation to transmit its lineage tradition (in this case religious worship acts) to its successor would signal the end of such a custom. To this end, this age long tradition is gradually becoming an endangered species. If care is not taken to revive it, then it is bound to atrophy.

The ceremonial aspect of the worship is characterised with singing, dancing and dinning accompanied with a combination of *bata* and *dundun* ensembles. *Bata* ensemble comprises *iyaaalu* and a set of three secondary drums: *omele abo*, *omele ako*, *kudi* (all tied together) and a small drum known as the *adamo*. The *dundun* ensemble has *iyáalù dùndún*, *omele-ako*, *omele-abo*, *kàràngó* and *gúdúgúdú* as its members.

Significance of *Igbin-orisa* Music in the Present day Nigeria

The role of traditional music in ensuring socio-religious equilibrium in a society cannot be over-emphasised. This is because music remains a product of the people and an ever-present phenomenon in any given society. By and large, music addresses social, cultural, religious,

educational, political and economic needs of a society. The performance of *igbin-orisa* music particularly when the three aforementioned Yoruba drum ensembles - *igbin*, *dùndún* and *bata* combine is most spectacular. This has notable implications for the post colonial Nigerian society, which is presently crises-ridden. The gradual loss of once cherished patriotic acts of nationalism as evident in present day corrupt practices, religious bigotry, nepotism, tribalistic tendencies could be reversed if Nigerian citizens would imbibe the spirit of togetherness and oneness that characterise *igbin-orisa* music performance. Many of the societal values as contained in slogans such as unity in diversity, national rebirth and so forth should be inculcated into the younger generation right from childhood, with the older ones also living by examples.

Secondly, it is important to note that Yoruba traditional membranophonic instruments are generally grouped into families. In other words, it is rare for them to adopt drums singly. The notion of family as a vital unit within the entire societal set up is very paramount to the Yorùbá. Each family of these ensembles has a principal instrument often referred to as *iyá* (mother) played by the leader of the ensemble. This explains why the principal drum is known as *iyáàlù* (mother drum) in most Yorùbá set of drums such as *dùndún*, *bàtá*, *kète* and *bembẹ*. With regard to the *dùndún* ensemble, *gúdúgúdú* is referred to as the father, while the children in the family are *omele isáájú*, (supportive forerunner) and *omele àtélé* or *ikehin* (supportive follower). In the same vein, the *bàtá* set has *omele akọ* (secondary male) and *omele abo* (secondary female) drums. As the performance of music is important in *igbin-orisa* worship celebration, so also are the roles and contributions of each member of the ensemble. The failure of a drummer to play his part properly as and when due, is bound to negatively affect not only the music performance, but also cause some form of dysfunction in the entire worship process.

On the other hand, the conventional Western European household unit (nuclear family) comprises the father, mother, and children. This however is not usually the case in African culture. Specifically, the traditional Yorùbá family system favours the extended family set up wherein membership is not restricted to the aforementioned numbers, but extends to uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces and cousins as well as close relations who are all part and parcel of the family and are generally referred to as brothers and sisters. It is in the light of above that there are other supportive members of a drum ensemble or a mixture of two or more distinct instruments combined together.

This practice is not limited to drumming or instrumentation alone, it seems to permeate the entire Yorùbá cultural fibre and governed by what is known as ‘the spirit of togetherness’ or collective responsibility. This is well embedded and articulated in the following Yorùbá sayings:

*Kí á rìn, kí á pọ, Yíyẹ ní ny'eni,
Ká f'owọ wẹ owọ, l'owọ fi nmọ,
Àjèjè owọ kan kò gbẹ igbá d'óri,
Àgbájọ owọ lá fí nsọ'yà,
Àrínpo omọ ejò ní nse'kú pa
wọn.*

Walking together is complimentarily beautiful
Both hands are cleaner when they are rubbed on each other
A single hand cannot lift the calabash to the head
In togetherness, lies our strength
Snakes are most vulnerable to attacks by humans because they
go their separate ways

All these can be summarised as “united we stand, divided we fall”. The basis for mutual co-existence among members of any family therefore is governed by the concept of division of labour and leadership-followership operating within the spirit of team work.

Conclusion

The Yoruba, by and large, traditionally engage in worship of various deities such as *Sango*, *Ogun*, *Obatala* among others and pay attention to rules and regulations of religious worship. Indeed, religious worship remains a major avenue of communing and renewing relationship with the spirit world in order to maintain cosmological equilibrium for the attainment of peace in the community. This practice was more observed in the pre-colonial Nigerian society. However, despite the influences of foreign cultures and modernisation, the practise has survived till today. Most of the worship rites involve the use of music, with each deity having a specific drum ensemble associated to it. In other to avoid the wrath of these deities, appropriate music especially drum ensemble must be played.

The Yoruba still place high premium on traditional worship. *Igbin-orisa* worship is the worship of *Obatala* with *igbin* drum ensemble containing *iyaaalu*, *omele-ako* and *omele-abo*, rendition of songs as well as chants. Each of the drums in the ensemble has its specific musical line to be played during worship. The worship might not be accepted if any member of the team fails to play his role appropriately in order to ensure a successful outing.

The contemporary Nigerians have a lot to learn from this practice in her bid to ensure a better nation. There is no gainsaying that the task of nation building involves every citizen. Each member is a team player, be it leaders or followers; everyone should endeavour to play his/her role to the best of one’s ability. Moreover, Nigerians, in spite of their diverse ethnic groups and the fact that they speak different languages have been known for their warmth and peaceful co-existence. It is high time that modern Nigerians confronted myriads of challenges confronting them. This paper suggests that this is possible if the people would embrace the communal spirit and promote extended family system which once flourished in this nation, whereby members learned and accepted to live together as members of a larger (extended) family.

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