

THE SOCIO-CULTURAL ROLES OF ÌREGUN MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS AMONG YAGBA-YORUBA PEOPLE OF KOGI STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Several studies have considered the place of musical instruments in various cultural settings. However, little scholarly work on iregun musical instruments and their usage in impacting culture among Yagba-Yoruba [1] people is still largely lacking. This paper examines the role of Iregun musical instruments as sources for inculcating socio-cultural ideas among the Yoruba people of Kogi State. Data were sourced through interviews, participant observation, and non-participant observation during various performances of iregun musicians at Mopa and Isanlu communities in Mopa-Muro and Yagba-East local government areas of Kogi State. Based on culturalism theory, I argue that iregun musical instruments have the potential to chronicle the uniqueness of the Yagba Yoruba people and to globalise their cultural heritage, preventing it from going into oblivion and extinction. Moreso, musical instruments in conjunction with the singing could help build morality, virtue, language, dressing, and belief systems, among others.

Keywords: Iregun Music, Socio-cultural, Yagba people, Musical Instruments

Introduction

Ìrègún music is a satirical musical genre of the Yagba, a sub-ethnic group of the Yoruba nation in Nigeria, and characteristically objects to unethical acts of taking vainglory for assistance rendered to unfortunate people in society. Though the name, which literally means "taking vainglory," is retained as its socio-cultural signifier, its performance contexts have largely altered in contemporary times. The musical genre is primarily vocal-based, but the musical instrument has a lot to teach as it sometimes emulates the voice and at other times gives a speech or message during performances. *Yàgbàland* is majorly located in present-day Kogi State, the north-central part of Nigeria, and situated along longitudes 7.30° to 9.34° E and 7° to 8° N (Iyekòlò, 2006).

The objective of this paper is to examine the playing techniques and the role of Iregun musical instruments in the process of impacting culture among Yagba people. This paper attempts to answer the following questions: How are Iregun musical instruments classified? What are the playing techniques of the instruments? And what are the cultural lessons imbibed through the messages from Iregun musical instruments?

Data was collected through interviews with Mr. Maku Sunday, the leader of the Iregun musical group. Other members interviewed are Mrs. Grace Abedo, Mr. Majekodunmi, the chief drummer of the group, and Mr. Egere, the chief dancer. Other people interviewed were. The research was carried out in Mopa and Isanlu communities in Mopa-Muro and

Yagba-East Local Government Areas, respectively. These communities were selected because the performers and leaders of Iregun socio-cultural groups live in these communities and perform here and in other communities too.

Culturalism Theory

This paper is premised on Malinowski's (1944: 150) culturalism theory. Malinowski argues that culture is essentially an instrumental apparatus by which man is put in a position to better cope with the concrete, specific problems that face him in his environment in the course of satisfying his needs. He notes that it is an integral in which the various elements are interdependent. Such activities, attitudes, and objects are organised around important and vital tasks into institutions such as family, the clan, the local community, the tribe, and the organised teams of economic cooperation, political, legal, and educational activity. From a dynamic point of view, that is, as regards the type of activity, culture can be analysed into a number of aspects such as education, social control, economics, systems of knowledge, belief, and morality, as well as modes of creative and artistic expression. Iregun musical instrument classification, construction, playing techniques, and functions are culture-based among the Yagba people of Nigeria, where the instruments are constantly used to modify the social and cultural lives of the citizens.

Classification and Construction of Iregun Musical Instruments

According to (Maku, An Iregun Performer, 2011 in an interview) notes that *Ìrègún* musical instruments are classified in relation to the manner in which they are manipulated to produce sound; that is, the technique of sound production, nature, size, gender, and role; nature of peculiar sound; construction techniques; physical characteristics, functions, beliefs, and values in *Yàgbà* culture.

Ìrègún music makes use of three out of the four groups that Sachs and Hombostel provided, namely membranophone, idiophone, and aerophone. The membranophone includes *Iya-Ilu Iregun*, *gudugudu*, *omele ako*, and *omele abo*. The idiophone entails the rattles, while the aerophone entails the *iyeh-flute*. Chordophone instruments are not part of the Iregun ensemble. According to (Makanjuola the Chief drummer of iregun instruments, 2012 personal communication)

A membranophone is any musical instrument that produces sound primarily by way of a vibrating, stretched membrane. Omíbíyì (1977:25) describes membranophones as instruments on which sound is produced through the vibration of membranes. Leather drums are invariably carved out of solid logs of wood and covered with the skin of various animals. Other materials include gourds, earthenware, tins, and so on. They occur in a wide variety of shapes, such as conical, cylindrical, bowl- or cup-shaped, and even in the shape of an hourglass, as of the *Ìrègún* musical group in *Yàgbàland*. While some can only produce a pitch, others are constructed in such a way that they could produce varied pitches for tuned instruments. Some are single-headed, opened at one end and closed at the other end; others are double-headed, closed at both ends with skin; either one or

both ends are played. The skin of the drum itself may be glued, nailed, or suspended by pegs or tension thongs.

Ìrègún musical instrument builder (Mr. Olúségun Jimoh 2012 Personal communication) who is a senior technologist, explains that the very first step in the making of a drum is the ceremony, which placates the spirit inhabiting the tree that is to be cut down for the wood from which the drum frame will be subsequently carved. Olusegun Jimoh explained that the tree must be one that has grown in Yàgbàland and is accustomed to hearing human voices; only then will its wood speak well as a drum frame.

Jimoh, Ilètógùn, and Makanjuola (2012) (respondents) agree that drums can be deaf (*Ìlù diti*). To them, if the wood is not properly ceremonised before cutting or if the tree falls on its own and it is being cut to wood for the frame of *Ìrègún* drums, the drum will not be able to produce the correct sound. Jimoh (2010, personal communication) affirms that a tree in the forest that has not been accustomed to hearing human voices will be unsatisfactory because its wood will be dumb as a drum frame. Moreover, every drum has its own alter carved on the drum frame. Here is the actual spot in which the drummers communed with their patron deity of drumming. Makanjuola (2010, personal communication) explains that *Ìrègún* drummers must not neglect their regular communion with their patron. A drummer who neglects his regular communion with his patron deity of drumming will find either that his drum goes to pieces, or he will be constantly out of employment. *Ìrègún/bembe* drums include *Ìyá-Ìlù*, *Omele ako* and *abo*, and *Gúdúgúdú*.

Idiophones are instruments that make sounds by themselves when they are hit, shaken, or scraped. Omíbíyì (1977:1) notes that idiophones are self-sounding instruments that produce sound without the addition of a stretched skin, string, or vibrating column of air. Their sounds emanate from the materials available in the environment, where they are made either by being shaken, scraped, stroked, plucked, or stamped. They are made of materials such as gourd, wood, metal, and cane.

An Aerophone is any musical instrument that produces sound primarily by causing a body of air to vibrate, without the use of strings or membranes, and without the vibration of the instrument itself adding considerably to the sound. It is one of the four main classes of instruments in the original Hornbostel-Sachs scheme of musical instrument classification. Hornbostel-Sachs divides aerophones according to whether vibrating air is contained in the instrument itself or not. These are instruments on which the sound is produced through the vibration of a column of air (Omíbíyì, 1977:22). Aerophones are grouped into three categories: one, instruments of the flute family; two, pipes; and third, horns and trumpets. *The Ìrègún* flute musical instrument is made of wood. They are open-ended and designed to be played horizontally; they vary in length and size.

Playing Techniques of Iregun Instruments

In *Ìrègún*, drums are struck with sticks. It is one of the four main divisions of instruments in the original Hornbostel-Sachs scheme of musical instrument classification. All membranophones are drums. Hornbostel-Sachs (1914) divides drums

into three main types: struck drums, where the skin is hit with a stick and the hand. String drums, where a knotted string attached to the skin is pulled, and friction drums, where some sort of rubbing motion causes the skin to vibrate (a common type has a stick passing through a hole in the skin that is pulled back and forth). *Ìlù* in *Ìrègún* music is similar to the Sach-Hombostel membranophonic classification. *Ìlù* are made of skin on which sound is produced through the vibration of the membrane.

Iya-Ilu Irègún is a drum with a double membrane, one on each end. The *Ìyá-Ìlù* also known as the talking or mother drum, is most notably used as a speech surrogate because of its wide range of pitches, though its pitches are not as wide as those of the *dundun* talking drum. First, it acts as the leader of the *Ìrègún* ensemble. The *Ìyáìlù* player is the leader in the performance of *irègún* music. It is clearly distinguished from other members of the ensemble in terms of size and decorations. An example of *Ìyá-ilù* is represented in Figure 1.

The *iyá ilù irègún* drum playing positioning is simple. The normal practice is to carry *iyáalu* on the left shoulder by means of the shoulder strap in a suspended manner. The *kongo*, held in the right hand, is used to strike the surface of the drum on the thinner side. *Ìyáìlù* is made to rest against the hip-bone of the player. See figure 1. Below



Fig. 1. Mr. Makanjuola Iregun Chief Drummer Playing *Ìyá ilù Irègún*- Picture by the researcher

The *Ìrègún* ensemble, like other Yorùbá drums, is classified based on a family unit comprising a father, mother, and children with relatives as members. *Omele* comes from the word *omo-ile*, which means children in the family. They are usually two (*ako* and *abo*). It must be noted here that there is no distinction between *omele ako* and *abo*, except that one is made to play the leading role while the other plays the supporting role. *Omele ako* and *abo* are shaped like *Ìyáìlù* of *Ìrègún* but smaller in size. They are both secondary

drums of the *Ìrègún* ensemble. The *ako* is about 10 cm wide and 25cm long; the *abo* is almost the same size. They are capable of playing one tone each; they are slung on the drummer's shoulders and supported under the armpit.

Consequently, they are saddled with rhythmic roles. The drummers hold one drumstick each and apply the palm of the other hand at the rim to affect the play of some muting to generate more tones, as they desire. Just as the name *omele-ako*, the male front guard or forerunner, indicates, it is the first to begin to play among the subsidiary drums, and its major role is to maintain the rhythm and tempo set by the *iyáílù*. The example below is a rhythmic pattern for *omele ako*.

Music example 1



Music example 2



Omele ako and *abo* are carried on the left shoulder like *iyáílù*. The only difference is that it is made to rest on the side of the stomach of the player. They are also played while seating, *Omele ako* and *Abo* are placed on the left leg while the player is seating See examples in plates below



Figure 2. Mr. Asa an Iregun drummer, playing the Omele ako Iregun- picture by the researcher



Figure 3. Mr. Abiodun Iregun drummer playing Omele Abo Iregun- Picture by the researcher

Gúdúgúdú is the only single headed membrane drum in the ensemble. It is the smallest among the drums and the only one not played with drum sticks in the ensemble. It is played with two twisted leather thongs made from ram or goat skin. It is shaped like a bowl and the wooden frame is covered with a membrane held in position by five small pieces of wood on which the leather straps of goat skin are fastened. *Gúdúgúdú* is the only member among the secondary drums of the ensemble that is of dual tone. This is made possible by the black substance pasted on the surface of the membrane. This black substance makes tone variation possible when played.

The black substance is called *ìdá*. Whenever the drummer hits the point of the black spot a lower tone is produced, but whenever the drummer hits other parts of the membrane a middle tone is produced. The rope made of woven cloth is hung on the neck region of the player, while the drummer's abdomen supports the drum. The leather thongs that are used in playing the drum are either tied to it or kept separately detached. Sometimes the drummer used improvised rubber like material to play when leather thongs are not available. Plate 19 exemplifies this. Also, music example 9 typifies the rhythm of *gúdúgúdú* in the ensemble.

Music example 3



Gúdúgúdú requires the wearing of neck strap (*òjá*) around the neck of the player or around the waist in a manner that the drum rests on the players' abdomen with the head facing outwards. *Gúdúgúdú* player alternatively uses a pair of *bílálà*, *osan* and sometimes a plastic held on both hands to play the instrument. Also the player placed the instrument in between its legs while seating.



Figure 4. Mr. Makanjuola Ayo an iregun drummer, Seating Playing Position of Gúdúgúdú. Picture by the Researcher

Idiophones range from simple to complex and occur in two major categories. The first are those that are basically rhythmic, while the second include those that combine both the rhythmic and melodic components. Omíbiyì (1977:2) explains that the rhythmic idiophones include the instruments that are shaken, struck, scraped, and stamped to produce the required rhythm, and this again is musically grouped as primary and secondary rattles.

Rattles are those played as part of ensembles and are either struck or shaken directly. Rattles are the only idiophone instrument used in an irègún ensemble. *Ìrègún sekere*, rattles, are primary rattles made of gourds and produce sounds by striking. The gourd rattle, called *Sèkèrè*, and covered with nets, sea shells, pieces of bone, and bamboo, to which is fastened cowry, accompanies the *Ìrègún* music ensemble in Yàgbàland. Rattles of different shapes and sizes are used in *Ìrègún* music. It may be spherical, either without a handle or with the neck of the gourd or calabash serving as the handle. The sample of *sekere* used in *Ìrègún* musical groups, music example 10, shows the rhythm that *sekere* plays in the ensemble.



Figure 5. Mrs Funke A. Member of Iregun musical group playing at a function Picture by the researcher

Music example 4



Sèkèrè is beaten as well as shaken. It is usually done in a brisk, side-by-side, rotary motion. The instrument is gripped by the right hand around the neck, and the left hand is placed inside the strings at the bottom of the instrument. The heel of the left strikes the bottom of the instruments, giving impetus to the shake. The notation merely indicates the point at which the player causes the bead to strike the surface of *sèkèrè*, either by hand stroke or shaking. The sound of *sèkèrè* in a musical ensemble is pervasive and sonorous. Its structural role in the ensemble is essential.

Igan-iregun flutes are used as solo instruments, playing fixed tunes, improvised pieces, giving signals, and arousing excitement among *Ìrègún* dancers. In a musical ensemble, *igan*, flutes, combined with drums, and rattles accompany singers. *Igan*, which accompany *irègún* musical performance, is end-blown. It has incised decoration and a geometric design made with a hot implement. See Figure 6 for the instrument. Music example 11 exemplifies one of the rhythms played by *Igan*.

Music example 5



Igan is a melodic and earophone instrument of *Ìrègún* music. Playing of *igan* is by placing the opening against the lips. See plate below



Figure 6 Mr. Bayodele A. an Iregun Flute-Igan player at a wedding ceremony- Picture by the researcher



Figure 7. Iregun Instrumentalists in a procession for a performance- Picture by the researcher

Socio-Cultural Roles of Iregun Musical Instruments

Ìrègún music serves different functions in Yàgbàland, ranging from social, moral, religious, to political.

Iregun Instruments as a Historical Record of Yagba Communities

Iregun instruments function as resources for historical records. Iregun instruments, as used, tell the history of the Yagba people. According to Makanjuola's 2011 personal communication, "on several occasions in Yagbaland, iregun musical instruments are employed to accompany the songs, and more than just the singing, the messages through the iregun instrumentals expound on some historical antecedents of the Yagba people." Mr. Makanjuola further notes that *Ìrègún* musical instrumental pieces reflect the vocal music and have historical facts connected to time, place, events, For example, the *Igan*-Flautist plays a piece like this:

La-re- du___ la-re- du___ I-yin la ra_ ha la-re

The song texts expresses the historical narrative of a group of people in the community called *Ilafin-Isanlu* where some prominent iregun performers came from. Descendants are commonly known as *Laredu* in Yagba land and the *igan* instruments re-echo the song that *Laredu* people in Yagbaland are men of honour, glory and distinction. This account is based on the history of the *Laredu* in *Isanlu-Ilafin*.

Iregun Instruments as Sources of Entertainment and Correction

Iregun musical instruments play the role of entertaining the audience. This happens during different performances in ceremonies. According to Maku (Maku, 2010 Personal Communications), "apart from iregun songs, the instrumental music of iregun entertains as well. That is why sometimes we stop singing and just play instruments to entertain our audience."

In one of the performances that the researcher witnessed, the chief drummer played a tune about the evil of stealing other people's properties. The text says:

Ole aboju wokoko ole-
Ole aboju wokoko ole
Ole aboju wokoko ole
Ole aboju wokoko ole

Meaning

You are a thief with a covetous eye
 You are a thief with a covetous eye
 You are a thief with a covetous eye
 You are a thief with a covetous eye

Iregun instrumental tunes provide stimulus to re-thinking about behaviours that are contrary to the norms of the society and such vice that could even be dangerous to both those who indulge in them and the society.

More so, iregun instrumental music cautions youths against indecent dressing. Like the texts below:

Omo Olu Ode

Omo olu ode obara jemsi ehin gbe m'ma wonu
Oyam I lile ese hinu e ponnhayin mo'ilile

Translation

The daughter of the chief hunter
 If you allow me to fall cause of
 Looking at your scanty dressing
 I will not be happy with you
 Because my wife is at home
 She is neither pregnant nor breast feeding



The piece **Omo Olu Ode** is a corrective measure against ladies who dress scantily and exposes private part of their bodies to imbibe the culture of chastity and dress well. tell about an incident during a burial ceremony in Mopa community performance.

Iregun Instruments as Sources of future Occurrences

Ìrègún music tells people about the reality of death. And the need to prepare for it. It tells about the life here after with the ancestors and that we cannot avoid it. The piece below is an example:



The tune titled *Iye ghoku* tells about an iregun. The piece says she does not have anything to bother, worry and care about though original vocal piece musical instruments re-echos the messages for inner penetration and communication purposes.

Conclusion

From the discussions, we have seen that iregun instruments play vital roles in inculcating culture in people in the community. *Ìrègún* is steeped in music-society dialectic, although the genre is on the verge of extinction. It would be most helpful for cultural memory if the genre was preserved through structured documentation. To help keep the Iregun genre from extinction, it is best achieved through a collective response of the three tiers of government: the Federal, Kogi State, and the three local government areas in Yàgbà Land. Also, corporate organisations, nongovernmental organisations, wealthy individuals, and all Yàgbà indigenes at home and in the Diaspora have a duty to support the projection of *Ìrègún* music to the world. Greater effort should be made by the government, various funding bodies and agencies, and indeed, all stakeholders, to encourage *ìrègún* performers in particular by providing them with finance to purchase musical instruments for the groups. The time is now for genuinely committed individuals to engage in meaningful research, performances, and broadcasting of the genre through several media and internet facilities to prevent many of the atrophying cultural practices from going into total extinction.

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