

## BIRD SONGS IN YORUBA SYMBOLISM

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### **Abstract**

Birdsongs have been a subject of fascination and study among various cultures around the world, and the Yoruba people of Nigeria are no exception. In Yoruba culture, birdsongs are believed to be more than just pleasing sounds; they are seen as messages from the spirit world (Adeoye, 2017). According to Yoruba belief, different species of birds are associated with specific deities and spiritual forces, and these bird songs carry important messages that can be interpreted by those who understand them (Omojola, 2006). This study examines the symbolic meaning of some selected birds in Yoruba land, exploring their functionality meaning in Yoruba culture. The study draws on eco-musicology and semiosis theories. Birdsongs of Yoruba popular musicians from their debut albums were analysed, and data was gathered through interviews with music enthusiasts and indigenous cultural practitioners. The study found in-depth identity meanings, such as the association of the "igunugu" bird with the deity of wisdom and the "adaba" bird as a symbol of fertility, in the music of the birds in Yoruba land. These findings contribute to the pool of knowledge by uncovering the symbolic and identity significance of birdsongs in Yoruba land. This study recommends that these symbolic meanings should be incorporated into school curricula and Yoruba folklore, mythology, and oral traditions to preserve Yoruba cultural heritage and values.

**Keywords:** Birdsongs, Yoruba land, Symbolism and Functional meaning, Eco-musicology.

### **Introduction**

Birdsongs have been a vital part of human culture and tradition, serving as a source of inspiration, comfort, and spiritual guidance. In Yoruba culture, birdsongs are believed to possess spiritual significance, conveying messages from the divine realm. This study delves into the symbolic meanings of birdsongs in Yoruba land, exploring their functional role in Yoruba culture and tradition.

### **Background to the study**

Birdsongs have been an integral part of human culture and tradition, serving as a source of inspiration, comfort, and spiritual guidance. In Yoruba culture, birdsongs are believed to possess spiritual significance, conveying messages from the divine realm. The Yoruba people have a rich tradition of bird worship, with various bird species associated with specific deities and spiritual forces.

The significance of birdsongs in Yoruba culture is deeply rooted in their mythology and cosmology. According to Yoruba mythology, the gods and goddesses communicated with humans through birds, using their songs to convey important messages and guidance. The Yoruba people believe that birds possess spiritual power and wisdom, and their songs are believed to have healing properties and the ability to bring good fortune.

In Yoruba culture, birds are also associated with various aspects of life, such as fertility, prosperity, and wisdom. The "igunugun" bird, for example, is associated with the deity of wisdom, Orunmila, and is believed to possess the power of divination and intuition. The "adaba" bird, on the other hand, is associated with the goddess of fertility, Oshun, and is said to symbolize abundance and prosperity. Despite the significance of birdsongs in Yoruba culture, there is a lack of research on the symbolic meanings of birdsongs in Yoruba land. Previous studies have focused on the cultural significance of birdsongs in general, but there is a need for a more in-depth exploration of the symbolic meanings of birdsongs in Yoruba culture.

Furthermore, the cultural heritage of Yoruba land is facing threats from urbanization, modernization, and globalization, which are leading to the erosion of traditional practices and beliefs. This study aims to contribute to the preservation of Yoruba cultural heritage by exploring the symbolic meanings of birdsongs in Yoruba land and analysing some selected bird songs of Yoruba popular musicians.

This study will focus on the "igunugun" and "adaba" birds, exploring their cultural significance and symbolic meanings in Yoruba culture. By examining the cultural significance of these bird species, this study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of Yoruba culture and tradition, and to preserve the cultural heritage of Yoruba land for future generations.

### **Objectives of the study**

1. To identify the symbolic meanings and associations of the "igunugun" and "adaba" birdsongs in Yoruba culture and tradition, based on data collation and analysis of birdsongs musicians.
2. To examine the Yoruba functional meaning of birdsongs in communicating with spiritual forces and conveying messages from the divine realm, as reflected in the music and practices of Yoruba birdsongs musicians.
3. To document and preserve the traditional practices and beliefs surrounding birdsongs in Yorubaland, highlighting their significance in Yoruba cultural heritage and identity, based on data collation and analysis of birdsongs musicians.

### **Methodology**

This study employed an eco-musicological and semiotic approach, analyzing birdsongs of Yoruba popular musicians from their debut albums. Data was gathered through interviews with music enthusiasts and indigenous cultural practitioners.

### **Data Collection**

Primary and secondary data were collected and analysed. The primary data source was conducted using unstructured interview with 20 purposely selected persons in which 3 popular musicians and 17 fan members of the selected musicians were recruited.

“Furthermore, 10 songs from the recorded albums of the popular musicians were subjected to analyses. Secondary data sources adopted for the study were books, journals, articles, discography, magazines, newspaper and the Internet. All the data collected were converted, transcribed and analysed within the ecomusicological and semiosis frameworks. Names of popular musicians used in this study include; Alhaji Sikiru Ayinde Barrister, Ebenezer Obey and Bukola Elemide.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of this study is based on semiotics and ecomusicological theories.

### **Semiotics Theory**

Semiotics is the science or scientific study of signs. Signs are phenomena of life and so, semiotics is the study of life's phenomena in diverse sign forms and categories. According to Berger (2010), the basic unit of semiotics is the signs, defined conceptually as something that stand for something else, and more technically as a spoken or written word, a drawn figure, or a material object unified in the mind with a particular cultural concept. Olaosun (2016) also uses semiotics in his work “‘Nature Semiosis in Two Nigerian Popular Music,’” to depict how musical discourse in Nigeria is enriched by nature's phenomena and how this phenomena are mobilized and explored by musical artistes as sign vehicles to promote and communicate social and moral messages”.

### **Ecomusicological Framework**

“Ecomusicology according to Allen (2018) is the study of musical and sonic issues, both written and performative, in relation to man's environment. In this study, environment is re-defined as the nonhuman physical world. It is the natural world having the living and nonliving creatures and natural processes. Similarly, ecology is more holistic, and relates to the ‘eco’ prefix which originates from the Greek word ‘oikos’ meaning household. Ecology therefore means the complex associations that exist amongst living organisms and his environments”.

Silver (2015) maintained that Gonzaga's songs referenced birdsong by describing the meaning of the bird call in relation to the arrival of rain or drought in Northeastern Brazil. Titus (2017, 2018, and 2019) also employed this while studying flood in Ibadan, birds, ocean and environment”.

“Hinged on semiotics and ecomusicological theories, this study is based on the musical perception, judgment and applications of ecomusicology and semiotics theory. Bird songs are structuralized into different segment of species, and were analysed based on their values, symbols and functional meaning in Yoruba land.

**Results/ Findings**  
**Vulture (Igun)**

Figure 1.1: Image of vulture



Source: <http://pixabay.com/images>

**Igunugun (Black-throated Coucal. Scientific name: Centropus leucogaster)**

Igunugun is a bird species in the Cuckoo family, known for its distinctive call and black throat patch. Igunugu is mostly found in wetlands, forests, and grasslands in sub-Saharan Africa, it feeds on omnivorous, feeding on insects, fruits, and small animals, it is well known for its secretive and skulking behavior, often hiding in dense vegetation, igunugu builds a cup-shaped nest using twigs, grasses, and other plant material. Source: (Yoruba people, Yoruba mythology on igunugun).

**Eye Igunugun Symbolism**

Igunugu bird symbolises Wisdom: Igunugun is associated with wisdom, intuition, and divination, it symbolises Insight: Its sharp eyesight symbolizes keen insight and perception. It also symbolises spiritual guidance: Igunugun is believed to possess spiritual power, guiding individuals towards their destiny. Source: (Yoruba people, Yoruba mythology on igunugun).

**Yoruba Functional Meaning on Eye Igunugun.**

Igunugun's songs are used in divination rituals to communicate with the divine realm. Wisdom-seeking; its presence is sought in times of uncertainty, seeking guidance and wisdom. Igunugun's sharp eyesight is believed to offer protection from harm and negative energies. A Yoruba adage says “iran igun ni jebo, iran akala ni joku”, this means vultures eat foods offered as sacrifice to god, while akala (close related species) feeds on corpse. He gave more insight that vultures naturally fly high in sky which is believed among the Yoruba people that when it picks on the sacrifice, and flies high, it presents it to the gods in the sky to accept the sacrifice. Source (Researcher).

Vulture also feeds on rotten food. However, in some part of Yoruba land, humans do not eat vulture; for that reason, vulture lives long. Although human does not eat vulture, they use it in sacrifice to signify long life and protection from death.

The Yoruba uses igunugun as symbol of longevity, thus, songs are sung into lives that need healing of longevity of life. A popular Yoruba adage on this goes thus; “igunnugun iku lewe,” Sikiru Ayinde Barriter also put this into song;

*Igunugun iku lewe dandan*  
*Ma dagba ma darugbo dandan*

Vulture doesn't die in young, compulsorily,  
 I will live long till old age.

# IGUNUGUN KI I KU LEWE

SIKIRU AYINDE B. (1948 - 2010)



Another Yoruba adage also says it best: *igun yeyin on feyin pamo, atigun, ateyin re, won se sebe*. This is interpreted as when a vulture hides its eggs after laying it, both the egg and the vulture can't be used for cooking stew. This is because man does not eat vulture or its produce, this adage is often employed in some part of Yoruba land to abuse, critic and correct persons who are proud. Iyalode music enthusiast said that, "Pipa lori igun pa, Obo na ni tie lara". That is, the vulture has a bald head and the monkey has its own sickness, implying that no one is perfect. Absence of sickness in one does not mean that the person is absolutely well, look beneath the person and one will discover something that may be wrong. To further buttress the Yoruba adage with its meaning on: *Igun yeyin o nfeyin pamo atigun, ateyin re won sefi sebo*. Vulture lay eggs and hide them; both vulture and its egg cannot be used for rituals. The adage is used to criticise proud person that there is nothing so special about the person once they do not benefit from his wealth. The second line of the adage is also used to affirm or bust that one cannot be harm or use as a prey. In track two of *Igba owuro*, Ebenezer Obey says:

*Eye toba fara wegún, eyin aro nio sun* a bird that compares itself with vulture will sleep behind the tripod stand

*Awa na ko o, olorun oba ma ni* it is not by our understanding, it is the Lord's doing  
*Awa la lulu mama lu tana* we are the ones that play new things always  
*Awanako o, olorun oba ma ni* it is not by our understanding but the Lord's doing  
*Awa la pede ma ma pe tesi* we sing without repeating the previous one  
*Awanako o olorun oba mani* it is not by our understanding but the Lord's doing

## Eye Toba Fara Wegun

## Ebenezer Obey

Call

Resp.

4

7

10

This song says do not compare yourself with someone else, live your life independent of others. Have a focus and be determined to achieve great things in life, be creative in whatever you do and finally, we rely on God to achieve these things.

**Dove (Adaba)**



Figure 1.2: Image of dove,  
Sources: <http://pixabay.com/images>

**Adaba (African Grey Hornbil. Scientific name: Tockus nasutus)**

Adaba is a bird species in the Hornbill family, recognized by its grey and white plumage, distinctive horn-like casque on its beak, and loud, trumpeting calls.

Adaba is found in savannas, woodlands, and forests in sub-Saharan Africa, it feeds on omnivorous, feeding on insects, fruits, and small animals, it's known for its social behavior, often living in small groups, adaba females seal themselves in tree cavities or rock crevices, using mud and saliva, while males provide food. Both birds are known for their unique calls and distinctive physical characteristics, making them popular among birdwatchers and nature enthusiasts. In Yoruba culture, these birds are revered for their symbolic meanings and significance in traditional practices. Source: (Yoruba people, Yoruba mythology on igunugun).

**Eye Adaba Symbolism**

Adaba birds symbolises fertility: Adaba is associated with fertility, prosperity, and abundance. It symbolises creativity: Its beautiful songs symbolize creativity, joy, and celebration. It also symbolises love: Adaba represents love, passion, and romance.

Yoruba functional meaning on eye Adaba fertility rites: Adaba's songs are used in fertility rituals to invoke the goddess of fertility, Oshun. Osun is celebrated during weddings, births, and harvest festivals, symbolizing joy and abundance. Love and relationships: Adaba's songs are believed to promote love, harmony, and balance in relationships. Source: (Reseacher).

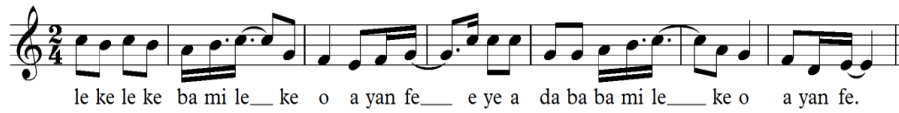
**Yoruba Functional Meaning on Eye Adaba.**

Doves are beautiful, pleasant, gentle and harmless. Adaba is believed to bring good tiding and fortune in Yoruba land. Eye adaba is a symbol of purity and holiness; when it descends on someone, it signifies sanctification and separation. A Yoruba chant captures this best when it says "Lekeleke bami leke, eye adaba bami leke o", that is, cattle egret descend on me, dove too descend on me too. In an interview with Adebayo (2020, a music enthusiast) stated that some bird songs in folktales are used to entertain children, such folk songs usually depict Yoruba cultural believe, example of use in this respect would be:

<i>Lekeleke bamileke o, ayanfe</i>	Lekeleke rest upon me, the beloved
<i>Eye adaba bamileke o, ayanfe</i>	Dove rest upon me, the beloved.

## Lekeleke

EBENEZER OBEY (1942)



Children are usually taught to stretch forth their fingers towards heaven and wiggle it at the sight of cattle egret, which usually flocks in large number. Cattle egret white feathers, signifies purity, these two birds (cattle egret and dove) are believed and seen as symbol of purity and peace, which are seen as emblem of the Almighty God, and that is why fathers would pass it on to generations' bird songs which connote the sustainability of his cultural believe and heritage.

Furthermore, dove also means open heaven more reason why Asa used it on her album *The Captivator* "Eye adaba, eye adaba, eye adaba ti nfo loke loke loke, waba lemi o, oju mo ti mo mo rire o". "Dove that flies up high, come on me, it's a new dawn, and I've seen good things".

## Eye Adaba

Bukola Elemide  
aka Asa

O - ju - mo ti mo mo r'i - re o

4

n'i - le yi o o - ju - mo

6

ti mo mo r'i - re o

9

E - ye a - da - ba e - ye a - da ba e - ye a -

12

da - ba tin fo l'o - ke l'o - ke wa ba le mi o o - ju - mo

16

ti mo mo r'i - re o

This means that when dove rests on a person, he enjoys good fortune all day long. Dove also connote the spirit of God, it is recorded in the bible Act 2:9 when the spirit of God descend on the disciples it endowed them with power, might and boldness for the task ahead. Dove image is used as a symbol peace.

In Yoruba tradition, both Eye Igunugun and Eye Adaba are revered for their symbolic meanings and functional significance, reflecting the deep connection between nature, spirituality, and human experience. Source: (Reseacher).

**List of Selected Songs**

There are quite no of album waxed by the selected musicians, but here are the names, tittle of album and the track no of the selected songs used in this work. 2 Yoruba chant songs and 8 songs on birds were drawn from these selected tracks and were put under proper musical analyses.

S/N	Selected Artistes	Title of Album	Track No
1.	Sikiru Ayinde Barrister	Fuji Fantazia Fuji Garbage Series 1 and 2.	Track 2: Aba Ni Kan Nda Track 1 and 7.
2.	Chief Commmander Ebenezer Obey	Igba Owuro  Mukulumuke	Track 5 And 6: Ai So Aba And Eye Toba Fara Wegun
3.	Asa; Bukola Elemi	The Elevator	Track 2:Eye Adaba

**Recommendations**

- i. Songs on birds should be promoted and distributed to other parts of the country.
- ii. Scholars on music should re-focus their studies on ecomusicology.
- iii. Competent scholars and researchers, adequately familiar with their cultural landscape, should be mobilized and facilitated to conduct research and document songs on birds in their own localities.
- iv. The media houses should from time to time feature programs that will project and inform audience of ecomusicological activities using ethnomusicologists as resource persons.
- v. The government should see reasons to sponsor music educators for further studies and seminars to strengthen the frontier of knowledge on ecomusicological activities in the country since it promotes unity and progress.

**Conclusion**

The study found that the musical patterns of the Yoruba people were consistent with African traditional music depicting the ancestral origin of the Yoruba people is Africa. The use of vulture and dove in Yoruba songs was not by chance; but is a veritable artistic and proverbial tool for passing deeper messages which ordinarily cannot be uttered aurally to the audience. Away from that, birds were found to have deeper cultural and ritual relevance in Yoruba tradition. The examinations of the 3 popular Yoruba musicians who played at different times revealed that they had common musical patterns, rhythms and harmonies; and were able to preserve and transmit the tradition and culture of Yoruba land. This study has concluded that song on birds represent the Yoruba virtue and value. This study has opened a new vista of knowledge in ecomusicological study and the socio- cultural analytical value of songs on birds.

**List of Selected Songs**

There are quite no of album waxed by the selected musicians, but here are the names, tittle of abulum and the track no of the selected songs used in this work. 5 songs on birds were drawn from these selected tracks and were put under proper musical analyses.

S/N	Selected Artistes	Title of Album	Track No
1.	Sikiru Ayinde Barrister	Fuji Fantazia Fuji Garbage Series 1 and 2.	Track 2: Aba Ni Kan Nda Track 1 and 7.
2.	Chief Commmander Ebenezer Obey	Igba Owuro  Mukulumuke	Track 5 And 6: Ai So Aba And Eye Toba Fara Wegun
3.	Asa; Bukola Elemi	The Elevator	Track 2:Eye Adaba



Other songs on birds includes:

## EYE ADABA

EBENEZER OBEY

E ye a da ba ku\_\_ ku\_\_ ku\_\_ a o mo 'bi e ye ti n fo o.

## Yine ni'n ye ele ile - Chant 4

Yi - ye ni'n ye e - ye - 'le ri - ro ni'n  
 ro'a - da - ba lo - run a - yo ni'o gbe - yin a - ye a o

## Eni Inu mi - Chant 3

E - mi i - nu\_\_ mi'n gbe - re\_\_ bo e - mi i - nu\_\_ mi'n gbe - re\_\_ bo  
 a - da - ba\_\_ o - ro - fo\_\_ e - mi i - nu\_\_ mi gbe 're\_\_ bo\_\_

## DOKTO FUJI


by Sikiru Barrister

mo ti ni mi o ma ki se doc tor fu ji ni kan so so\_\_ ki ni un c d ge ne  
 ral ni mo je\_\_ 'gun nun gun ba si le a wo di nso wi pe o  
 gun nun gun o baa re o pa pi pa o ma ki pa gun o a ki ma i je gun a ki ma i fi  
 gun bo'ri\_\_ E pe k'a wo di o ba si le o ko wa yan bi i gun, ko lo ma de ku o lo deo.

# Eye

(Igba Owuro)


Ebenezer Obey

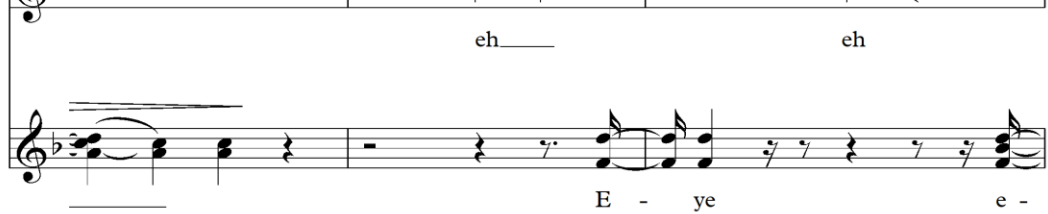
Call   
Ai - san a - ba o


Resp.   
Lo m'e-ye wa

3   
Ai - san a-ba o

  
je 'gba l'o-ko o \_\_\_\_\_ Lo m'e-ye wa je 'gba l'o-ko o \_\_\_\_\_

7   
eh \_\_\_\_\_ eh

  
E - ye e -

10   
- ye kii \_\_\_\_\_ je 'gba o eh \_\_\_\_\_

# Eye Adaba

Sikiru Ayinde

A - da - ba'n p'o - ge - de

2  
bi \_\_\_\_\_ p'e - ye - le \_\_\_\_\_ o gbo e -

3  
ye - le ku-ku'n gbo o ti - ti - ti to'n\_ ti - ri ki\_

6  
se pe ko le ja o - ru - ko lo'n sa fun

8  
ni - to ri\_ pe\_ bi - bi i - re'i - ye ko se fo - wo

10  
ra ni to ri e lo se' - n da - ke

**Primary Data Source**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Status</b>	<b>Address</b>	<b>Date of Interview</b>
Ebenezer Obey (Yoruba popular artiste)	82	Male	Married	Kings Hall, Ikire, Osun State	04/12/2020
Mr Lukman Kolawole (Sikiru Ayinde Barrister M.D Music director of band)	52	Male	Married	Monatan, Ibadan	10/ 01/2020
Mr Babatunde Laidi (Head of distributor of record, Ibadan Zone)	50	Male	Married	Ogunpa Market, Ibadan.	20/10/2019 18/01/2020 23/01/2020
Iyaloja Alatede Odeyale (Head of herbal medicine)	76	Female	Married	Oje market, Ibadan.	18/01/2020
Mrs Morufa Sumeila (Music enthusiast)	55	Female	Widow	Oje market, Ibadan.	18/01/2020
Mr. Korede Kareem (Music enthusiast)	48	Male	Married	Ogunpa market, Ibadan.	16/10/2020 20/10/2019 18/01/2020 23/01/2020
Mr Adebayo Samuel (Music enthusiast)	58	Male	Married	Ogunpa market, Ibadan.	22/10/2019 17/01/2020 24/01/2020
Prof. Lamid Olakunle (H.O.D Wildlife Department, U. I)	51	Male	Married	University of Ibadan	09/04/2019
Dr. Adeyanju Adewale (Ornithologist Wildlife Department, U. I)	42	Male	Married	University of Ibadan	09/04/2019
Mr. Azeez Monsuru (Yusuf Olatunji's M.D)	39	Male	Married	Oyo Palace	12/01/2020
Mr Afeez Bakare (Ebenezer Obey's Fan)	45	Male	Married	Ogunpa Market, Ibadan	18/01/2020
Mr. Ojo Oladiipo	48	Male	Married	Oau campus	12/01/2020
Dr. Femi Bamigbade	42	Male	Married	Linguistics Dept. O.A.U	14/02/2020
Prof. Ajibade G. O	58	Male	Married	Linguistics Dept. O.A.U	10/02/2020
Mr Tobi Akinrinade	23	Male	Single	Yoruba student, O.A.U	24/06/2019
Mr. Ojoifa Ifarinmola	24	Male	Single	Yoruba student, O.A.U	12/05/2019
Ogunbodede Odeniyi (Oluode Ibadan)	65	Male	Widowee	Moniya, Ibadan.	Moniya, Ibadan.

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