



Yoruba Dundun Sekere Traditional Music in the Palace of the Alaafin of Oyo

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Abstract. This study focuses on the Yoruba traditional Dundun-Sekere music in the palace of the Alaafin of Oyo. It traces and explores the Yoruba traditional music and Dundun- Sekere ensemble; the study also examines the Dundun -Sekere ensemble of the Alaafin of Oyo; and discusses the textual analysis of the Dundun-Sekere music. This study relied solely on oral tradition, written documents, and live musical performance approaches. The research combines historiographical and ethnomusicological approaches. Historical oral information was collected through interviews with twenty (20) Yoruba traditional court musicians found in the palace of the Alaafin of Oyo who specialize in the performance of different types of traditional music in general and the Dundun-Sekere musicians in particular. The results show that Yoruba traditional music is entirely different from that of Western Europe. The music of the Yoruba society reveals a great deal about its beliefs and sentiments. Music has always been used in the Yoruba traditional cultures to celebrate various ceremonies. Musicianship in the Yoruba traditional society is hereditary. One thing about the Dundun-Sekere ensemble is that the musicians play their instruments and sing along at the same time. The Dundun-Sekere music originated from the Alaafin's court before it spread to other parts of Yoruba land. In conclusion, the Oyo Alaafin's court is the home of the Dundun-Sekere music. The Dundun-Sekere musicians in Oyo have experienced professionals. It should be noted that it is only the Sekere of the Alaafin of Oyo that has cowries and shells in Yoruba land. Others have beads. It is suggested that the music – of the Dundun Sekere ensemble should be documented, recontextualized, and repackaged to teach the upcoming generation and the Yoruba in the diasporas.

Keywords: Yoruba, Traditional, Court Music, Alaafin, and the Palace

1. Introduction

Court music traditions in Nigeria are cultivated in the palaces of the Obas and the Emirs, the Alaafin inclusive. The Alaafin is the supreme head of all the Kings and Princes of the Yoruba nation, as he is the direct lineal descendant and successor of the reputed founder of the nation. The succession to the throne is by election from among the members of the royal family. Alaafin is the first organ out of the four major organs that acted as checks on one another in the government of the Oyo Empire. Alaafin is a supreme King; he is not a dictator. He ruled according to the advice of the council of chiefs called the Oyomesi. The majority of musical expressions described by the early European explorers belong to the court tradition. In each society, court music traditions are customized by the court musicians who are employed as part of the entire court administration.

Traditional religious worshippers on waking up, begin the day by chanting praises of their Orisas. Traders and farmers chant incantations for protection and luck. Even children begin their daily life with music. The tonal advantage of the Yoruba language makes it possible for one to perceive music in every spoken word. Traditional music occupies a very important position in the life and history of the Yoruba people. The Yoruba being ancestors and hero worshippers, each defined hero or ancestors in his/her peculiar music and dance which the devotees use in the worship. For this reason, no religious observances are complete without music.

The place of the Yoruba Dundun-Sekere traditional music in the palace of the Alaafin of Oyo is so important that from the early hours of each morning, music is performed. Ajewole (2007) observed that when there is no performance, the musicians in the palace engage in other occupational activities such as

trading and farming to mention a few. The Dundun Sekere musicians are identified and recognized by the community as performing artists of an inherited craft in which they are specialists. Hence, they are regarded as professionals. Meriam (1964) argues that public recognition of Musicians as a distinctive class of specialists is basic support received from his activity. Out of the prominent forms of music played by the court musicians in the palace – Akunyangba, Apinti, Igba-titi, Bata, Sekere, and other forms of music, Dundun- Sekere is the favourite music of the Alaafin of Oyo.

Yoruba traditional music is divided into groups namely, religious music and secular music. Each group has two sub-groups, namely;

- Vocal and
- Instrumental

The Gangan Magazine (Issue No. 3:1) noted that in the vocal secular music, “Rara” is used by the Oyos, “Ege” by the Egba and Owu; “Olele” by the Ijesa; “Iremoje” by the Ife; and “Alamo” by the Ekiti. All are used at the Yoruba social functions in praise of individuals or Oba

Instrumental Music is required for the worship of all Yoruba deities and each deity has his/her special type of musical instrument used in the worship. But it is not forbidden to use any musical instrument belonging to one deity in the worship of another. The traditional importance of these musical instruments in Yoruba land is so well defined by their uses. Other musical instruments also have traditional importance in the Yoruba land. They are referred to as talking drums because they can be used to imitate human speech tones, especially the Dundun Ensemble.

It is however important to examine the importance of the Yoruba Dundun-Sekere musical genre in the palace of the Alaafin of Oyo to appreciate the value of this study.

1.1 Aim and Objectives of the Study

This article engages in the study of the Yoruba Traditional Dundun -Sekere Music in the palace of the Alaafin of Oyo. The main objective of the study is to:

- Trace and explore the Yoruba traditional music and Dundun-Sekere ensemble.
- Examine the Dundun-Sekere ensemble of the Alaafin of Oyo;
- Discuss the textual analysis of the Dundun-Sekere music of the Alaafin of Oyo

1.2 Research Methodology

This study relied solely on oral tradition, written documents, and live musical performance approaches. The research combines historiographical and ethnomusicological approaches. Historical oral information was collected through interviews with twenty (20) Yoruba traditional court musicians found in the palace of the Alaafin of Oyo who specialize in the performance of different types of traditional music in general and the Dundun-Sekere musicians in particular.

2. Findings and Discussions

Analysis and discussion of the findings in this study are in line with the stated objectives of this study as stated below:

(A)The Yoruba Traditional Music and Dundun-Sekere Ensemble.

Yoruba traditional music is entirely different from that of Western Europe. Akin Euba (1961:130) describes Nigerian music as a combined vocal and instrumental effort in which music-making seldom takes place without its participants indulging in dance movement. Omibiyi (1992:29) remarks that music in the African Context is an integral part of life, where everybody participates in its performances. The music of the Yoruba society reveals a great deal about its beliefs and sentiments. In society, however, music may not have an equal effect on everybody, because people do not generally have the same preferences for music. Music has always been used in traditional cultures to celebrate various ceremonies such as marriage, child-naming, housewarming, and so on. Institutions that patronize music in Nigeria include Kings’ palaces, hotels, nightclubs, restaurants, and drinking bars. The practice of using music in the Yoruba traditional culture cannot be over-emphasized. Music is part of the culture. It is a reflection of the culture of the people.

The process of Yoruba Dundun Sekere traditional music has been widely discussed by great scholars such as Nketia (1996), Smith (1962), Euba (1986), Wachmann (1966), Vidal (1996), Omibiyi (1975), Ajewole (2008 & 2016) etc. The Yoruba Dundun Sekere traditional music has been well analyzed by these scholars. A summary of their views on the music is as follows: The training process in the Dundun Sekere traditional music starts very early in the life of a child. The African mother sings to her child who begins to develop sensitivity to music right from the cradle. The mother also teaches her child to become aware of rhythm by rocking the child to music and singing some syllables in imitation of drum Melo-

rhythms. African mothers often carry the babies on their backs when attending ceremonies and rituals and this gives the children early exposure to actual musical situations. As soon as the child's motor reflexes are sufficiently developed, he/she is given a toy instrument to play with. This is more evident in drumming, especially among the Ayan (drummers) family in Yoruba culture. It is a practice in the Ayan family to give a child his first drum around the age of five. This is a miniature Kanango (drum) which is the smallest of the varieties of tension drums. While using the drum as a toy, the child begins to acquire the techniques of handling the instrument and using it to play simple speech phrases.

Learners are taught by a master musician, especially among the Ayan family. It is the training received by the learners; their musical perception or lack of it as well as their life's experience and environment that account for what they perform, how they perform, why they perform, and the way they perform. Drummers also teach children by using appropriate sentences and syllables to illustrate drum patterns. One of the most important methods is to allow trainees to learn on the job. The technique of sound production in African drumming is acquired comparatively quickly. The most difficult aspect of drumming is the mastery of the language of talking drums. A pupil sometimes has to wait for long periods before getting opportunities to hear drum texts appropriate to certain ceremonies when such ceremonies are infrequently performed. The slow process of music education in African traditional society demands that the mastery of a given type of music should take a very long time.

Although the length of training varies with the natural abilities of individual pupils, it is quite usual for music specialists to spend up to twelve (12) years learning their craft. Ijala chanters among the Yoruba of Nigeria begin their pupilage at the age of six and usually continue to receive tuition up to the age of 18. A comparable length of time is also required before a trainee Dundun drummer can graduate to mastership. There has always existed a system of music education in Yoruba traditional society.

In Dundun -the Sekere ensemble, the elderly people in each Ayan family are regarded as leaders. The elderly person is usually responsible for the training and instruction of the young ones. Most of the Ayan children start learning the art of drumming, using the Kanango drum which is the smallest among the two-faced drums. The interested people who do not belong to Ayan, are normally taught how to handle the accompanying instruments like Saworo, Gourd-rattles, and the like. The Dundun-Sekere music is

hereditary from one generation to another. Due to this fact, the leader of the Ayan family distinguishes themselves by adding to their names the prefix 'Ayan'. Ayangbemi, Ayanlola, and Ayanyemi among others are examples of such names.

Musicianship in the Yoruba traditional society is hereditary. The father who is a traditional musician teaches his children the art of musicianship. The process that is involved is as follows: The scene opens every evening in the inner courtyards of the family compound where there is some privacy. The father takes a turn repeating each item several times for his child to watch, then he invites him to join him slowly and they both perform together for some time. He instructs him to perform alone to find out if he is following the examples well. If there are signs of progress, he introduces a new item or variations of what he had already taught. This continues on regular basis, after which the child performs on his own before a few members of the family, and finally, other members of the public join in.

3. The Dundun -Sekere Ensemble of the Alaafin of Oyo

The process of the musical performance of Dundun-Sekere in the palace of the Alaafin of Oyo is as follows: On the stage, the leader of the Dundun-Sekere music organizes the performance by chanting the praise of the Alaafin in acapella. Everybody, including the Dundun drummers, Iron clappers, and the Sekere group will all be on alert to perform. The leading Dundun drum (Gudugudu) may lead the whole ensemble to start the performance. There are lots of variations in the performance. The lead vocalist may start the music through a signal to other members of the group or by singing the Alaafin's praise to start the performance.

One thing about the Dundun-Sekere ensemble is that the musicians play their instruments and sing along at the same time. The singers repeat the text immediately after the lead vocalist, first without accompaniment, and then follow by playing the Sekere (Maracas) interlude. This is followed by vocal recitation taken by the lead vocalist and the whole ensemble sets the music rolling. This is the style that characterizes and dominates the Yoruba Dundun-Sekere music of the Alaafin's court. The Dundun-Sekere musicians in Oyo have experienced professionals.

The Dundun-Sekere music originated from the Alaafin's court before it spread to other parts of Yoruba land. The Oyo Alaafin's court is the home of the Dundun-Sekere music. The Dundun-Sekere drummers of the Alaafin have a supple wrist with

which they produce the right kinds of tones and dynamics on their drums. The court musicians naturally have a retentive memory. As the Dundun set of drums builds up greater patterns of rhythm and boom with thundering sounds, the master drummer beats the drum to represent the Alaafin's praise. He improvises and makes use of proverbs, while the bells around the drumhead jingle, and add colour to the music. Then enters the onomatopoeic Sekere, which has cowries and shells attached to it to add rhythmic colour to the music and stimulate the dancers. It should be noted that it is only the Sekere of the Alaafin of Oyo that has cowries and shells in Yoruba land. Others have beads.

4. Textual Analysis and Discussion of the Dundun-Sekere Music of the Alaafin of Oyo

4.1 Tonality

Three types of scales have been identified in the music by the Dundun-Sekere musicians in the Alaafin of Oyo's palace. These are pentatonic, hexatonic, and heptatonic patterns. These scales are also rearranged to form modes.

4.2 Melodic Structure

Melodies in the court music of the Alaafin of Oyo with very few exceptions are usually short and repetitive with a central focus on call and response. The melody patterns are shaped according to the speech pattern and in most cases dictate the instrumental rhythms. The melodic structure can be seen in the given musical samples for the study.

4.3 Rhythm

The rhythm of the Alaafin's Dundun-Sekere court music relies on two popular Yoruba rhythms, one slow and sensuous, and the other fast and percolating. The instruments used in the music provide complex and steady beat patterns that can speak to those who can understand. There are elements of divisive, additive, and hemiola rhythms in the music. Cross rhythm sheds light on the temporal dimension in the music. Alaafin instrumental music performed by the Dundun-Sekere musicians is particularly rich and varied. Perhaps the most striking thing about the music is its dynamic rhythmic quality. The following are the characteristics of the rhythmic structure:

4.3.1 Speech rhythm

The Yoruba language possesses a natural order of stress on certain syllables used in speech which is called speech rhythm. This, in turn, gives rise to a natural rise and fall of the voice, and thus speech melody is created. The normal stress from spoken words is the same as the stress used in setting them to music in the court music.

4.3.2 Polyrythm

The polyrhythmic effect is created on talking drums by the Dundun-Sekere musicians. Different autonomous rhythmic patterns that enter at different entry points are commonly found in various court music of the Alaafin of Oyo.

4.3.3 Hemiola

Several instances in the music also reveal the juxtaposition of triplets against two notes of the same value. This is found in the rhythmic patterns of common songs – "Laye Olugbon", "Toba Lase", "Eni sun m'oba". Other rhythmic features in the Dundun-Sekere court music of the Alaafin of Oyo include cross-rhythm, syncopation, and irregular rhythm. It is observed that the harmonic structure used by the Dundun-Sekere court musicians of the Alaafin of Oyo involves the doubling of melody above or below at intervals of seconds, fourths, fifths, and sixths which automatically results in parallelism. The harmony is mainly parallel in progression.

4.4 Form

The most common forms used by the Alaafin Dundun-Sekere court musicians are 'Call and Response' and Solo. In the call and response, the songs are usually already familiar songs that the audience joins spontaneously after the lead. Though the cantor merely introduces the first phrase or the whole song, there is no clear-cut demarcation between the leader and the chorus like in the songs 'Eni sun m'oba', "Ki le n f'oba pe", 'Layiwola j'oba', etc. In the solo, the song is usually performed with the speech surrogate like in the Dundun ensemble. The implicit response is manifested in the actions of the people to whom the message of the music is directed. Songs 'Aye Atoba', 'Toba Lase' etc. are examples of this type of form.

4.5 Text

The song texts of the Alaafin of Oyo Dundun-Sekere court music consist largely of traditional materials, including proverbs and praise chanting (Oriki). The

texts are derived from proverbs, and folk songs and feature a lot of Yoruba idiomatic expressions. It should be noted that contextual occurrence and current affairs provide necessary stimulus from the composition of the text. The texts are also reflective or philosophical, sentimental or satirical, and humorous. It requires some knowledge of oral tradition before one can fully understand and interpret the texts. For instance, the song 'Kile n foba pe' is used to extol the Alaafin in order to reiterate the high esteem in which Oyo people hold their King. The song 'Layiwola O Ju won lo' is used to show respect to the -Late Alaafin – Oba Olayiwola Adeyemi III who happened to be the first literate Alaafin in Oyo town. The song 'Oba Toto' reinforces the traditional belief of the Oyo people as regards the respect and dignity ascribed to the Alaafin. In the song 'Toba Lase', the Oyos are pledging their full obedience to their King.

5. Conclusion

Apart from the general appraisal of the music, this study has revealed some of the various activities of the Dundun-Sekere court musicians in the palace of Alaafin of Oyo. The presence of the Dundun-Sekere court musicians seems inevitable in the success of the palace activities. The Dundun-Sekere ensemble has the goal of praising the Obas, the Chiefs, and some other highly placed people who are connected with the palace. They achieve this goal in their different performances as described in this study. Based on the significant place of court music among the Yoruba, it is suggested that the music – of the Dundun Sekere ensemble should be documented, recontextualized, and repackaged to teach the upcoming generation and the Yoruba in the diasporas.

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