



Sociocultural contexts of Yorùbá Traditional Marriage Songs

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Abstract. One of the essential cultural institutions of the Yoruba in Southwestern Nigeria, is marriage. The ‘alaga’ plays an important role in traditional wedding ceremonies. Earlier studies on their activities have concentrated on the linguistic prowess of the compere. This paper examines the sociocultural elements of Yoruba traditional wedding songs and performance which has been neglected in earlier works. The theoretical approach to this study is Dell Hyme's Ethnography of Communication which explores the use of various means of communication among particular people. Ten (10) Yoruba traditional wedding songs were purposively selected as empirical data. Data was analysed using content-analysis. In addition, participant observation was employed by the researcher. The study shows that the engagement songs are embodiments of Yorùbá history, a public display of affluence, background of the bride and groom, the reliance on prayers, and display of humour, all of which constitute the sociocultural contexts of the Yoruba traditional wedding. The marriage ceremony, especially the engagement, ‘idána’, has transformed from being a melting point for the two families into an important avenue for displaying the linguistic proficiency of the Master of Ceremonies; the alága, as well as the rich cultural background of the Yorùbá. The study found that the ‘alága’ role which began as a humble assignment played by the ‘iyáwó ilé’ has metamorphosed into a big business serving families across different economic, religions and tribal background. The study concludes that the ‘alagas’ are major agents of language maintenance among the Yorùbá and also serve as social reformers.

Keywords: *Alága*, Engagement ceremony, Ethnography of communication, Sociocultural, Yorùbá culture,

1. Introduction

A people’s culture is the totality of their art, belief, custom and norms which distinguish them from other cultures. It is the totality of what makes up the life and

living style of a group of people living in the same geographical area (Adesanya and Taiwo, 2019). Languages are the vehicles through which humans convey their deepest thoughts and feelings. Yoruba traditional engagements encapsulate emotional moments not only for the bride and groom but also for the two families coming together. The joining of the two love-birds automatically brings in their responsibilities (Ladele, et al 2006). Adesanya and Táíwò (2019) examined the aesthetics of traditional marriage among the Yorùbá. The writers viewed marriage as a hallmark of Yorùbá culture and identity. The studies described in clear terms the stages involved in traditional marriage and the various traditional elements used in the conduct of the ceremony.

The Yorùbá marriage ceremonies are in stages. The first is the search “ifojúsóde” here, the parents of the groom are the most important players in this regard. They set out to search for a decent and responsible young wife for their son. Friends and family members are also carried along in this search for a good partner for the groom.

The second whose is ‘alárinnà’ the middle man/intermediary. This plays the role of the match-maker. He goes between the love birds, conveying messages from one to the other. This is because the culture does not permit the groom to be to go directly to the woman because, marriage involves two different families, the Yoruba culture indicates that the parents of the would-be groom and bride will do a thorough ‘iwádìí’ investigation which may also include seeking the ‘Ifá’ oracle. This investigation is to ascertain the type of family background of the would-be groom/bride. Johnson (1921, p. 113) remarks that “no girl married without the consent of her parent, the family oracle invariably consulted before the family decision is arrived at”. This will unravel the behavioural pattern as well as the health status of the families. According to Adesanya and Taiwo (2019, p. 52) traditional marriage is important in order to have a helper. People also get married in order to have

children because children are invaluable in Yorùbá society. Their third essence of marriage is to create “cordial relationship and co-existence between the two families” the next stage is consent ‘*ìṣìhùn/ìjòhèn*’. This stage refers to the consensual agreement between both families to hear their words marry each other.

2. Literature Review

Earlier studies on Yoruba traditional marriage ceremonies include, Atolagbe (2012), Ayoola (2019) and Adeseye Taiwo, (2019), Aladesanmi and Ogunjinmi (2019), Adejumo (2021), Idowu (2022), Omotayo (2023) and Unuobonah and Kupolati (2023) Adesanya and Taiwo (2019) the study centred around the Yoruba traditional marriage. The study explores the various functions of marriage, such as for social recognition, procreation of children and stability in relationship among others. Overall, the paper believes that the Yoruba traditional culture is a major hallmark of culture and identity (p 87) examined three traditional mixed marriages involving the Yoruba bride and non-Yoruba grooms; These are Esan, Igbo and Ijaw men. According to Unuobonah and Kupolati (2023:), in their study of generic structure and pragmatic acts in Yoruba traditional wedding, “the Yoruba traditional wedding is the most important wedding, since it is based on the indigenous culture of the people and the one most recognised by the families of the couple”. The generic components are thus analysed along pragmatic acts. These include Groom’s family entrance, opening prayer, thanksgiving, letter of proposal, Grooms entrance, bride’s entrance, presentation of gifts, payment of bride price and closing prayer. Aladesanmi and Ogunjinmi (2019 in Omotayo (2023:115) aver that marriage in Yoruba culture is the vehicle that brings about peaceful family co-existent, sex, child birth, child upbringing, child education and a peaceful society”. This highlights the importance of the family in Yoruba sociocultural setting. Idowu (2022) examined an aspect of Yoruba traditional wedding that is gradually going into extinction due to civilization and absence of family bond among others are responsible for this development. The ‘*èkún iyàwó*’ bridal chant is an age-long tradition among the Yoruba where the new bride is escorted by her friends as she moves from one family member to another. It is usually emotion-laden as the chants express the fear of the unknown in her new home. The paper concludes that as important as this cultural practice is, “its continuity seems impossible due to the emergence of new generation of parents and mode of parenting” (p14). In Adejumo (2023), observable changes currently seen in the Yoruba culture are explicitly narrated. Several Yoruba culture such as the socio-cultural institutions, Yoruba

Arts and crafts, literacy culture were discussed in line with civilization and globalisation. While the writer believes that these changes are like ‘double edge sword’ that portends both positive and negative implications. On issues on marriage, Adejumo avers that new developments such as young people finding their partners by themselves without the involvement of the parents or the proposal method of young men kneeling to propose to the loved ones which is an unpopular event in our culture, because the Yoruba society is a patriarchal society. Above all, other new developments such as same-sex relationships, e.g. homosexuality, lesbianism and the modern trend of young people who would rather be ‘baby mama’ or ‘baby papa’ than be properly married as laid down by the tradition and culture of the Yoruba observed to be unacceptable and therefore uncommon among the Yoruba. According to her, “despite the acceptance of same-sex relations in some cultures of the world, the Yoruba society still holds firmly to her cultural norms” (p. 16).

Music plays an important role in the life of the Yoruba. Earlier works on Yoruba music include Olukoju (1985, 1994), and Onadipe-Shalom (2022), Olujinmi, (2011), Olukoju (1985, 1994) expresses the fact that the Yoruba has music/song for each and every event of their lives. One of such are songs relating to marriages. Other relevant songs among the Yoruba include festival songs, folktale songs, political songs, work songs, songs of “mother of twins cradle songs, lullabies, structured songs and some dance music songs. (Olukoju, 1978, Olujinmi, 2011 pp 77-78) Olujinmi, (2011, p.1) asserts that music as “oral literature is a valuable instrument of change in the contemporary society where moral decadence and social ills reign supreme” Onadipe-Shalom (2022) writes on the social and moral values embedded in Fanti songs, a popular Afro-Brazilian music popular on Lagos Island. Part of what the Fanti songs are popular for are the cautionary messages they convey to the listeners. There are songs which ‘call for caution and vigilance in Lagos’ (p.111). In addition, the Fanti songs explain the transient nature of man and the need for mortals to read gently especially as they struggle for wealth and positions in life.

*Ayé oo / Fúngbà diè
ní oo / Èdá wayé máyà wo
n a bàlújé
/ Ayé oo / Fúngbà diè
ní oo.*

[This life is only for a short spell /
Man grips the Earth so tightly / And
corrupts the Earth.]

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3. Theoretical framework: Ethnography of Communication (EC)

Ethnography of communication (EC) aims to study language and communication in actual occasion and interaction. It is a multidisciplinary research approach that employs ethnographic accounts of actual communications events and occasions in order to understand distinct cultural and contextual dimensions of communication. Formerly referred to as ethnography of speaking, the theory postulates that to a large extent EC is culturally distinctive in its nature, forms, and meanings”. Hymes, (1962, p.120) Remarks that ethnography of speaking “is concerned with the situation and uses, the patterns and functions of speaking as an activity in its own right” and that communication is culturally-distinctive (p.450). the choice of this theory for the study is based on the background that Yoruba wedding songs bear strong cultural meanings that understood and decoded by the generality of then people.

Presentation and discussion of data.

This section presents the various traditional wedding songs, the social and cultural contexts of their usages and demonstrations by the *alagas*. This socio-cultural context refers to the social and cultural factors that influence individuals and their behaviours within a particular society or community. These include level of gender, education background, religious belief, economic status and attitudes. All of these are captured in the wedding songs as presented in this paper.

Ten (10) engagement songs from four traditional wedding ceremonies are employed in this study. Songs are regular phenomenon Yoruba in Yoruba language. There are songs from different occasions ranging from joyous to sad moments. Òjó (2014, p135) remarks that “songs play significant roles in the social, political and economic life of the people”. In addition, she explains that singing is part of the cultural life of the Yorùbá. Ayòlólá (2019: p 88) examines length of marriage and marital adjustment. He is worried by the rate of divorce being witnessed which takes place in our society today. According to her, there are marriages that do not last up to a year. Hence, such ‘statements of “you are the sugar in my tea” (Oláyiwoḷá, 2009). The traditional engagement ceremony and mode of engagement presents to a longer extent the common anomalies in marriages today. These include problems

at infidelity poverty, spousal battery or domestic violence and unwillingness to take responsibilities. The study emphasis the need for marital counsellors who would be useful in social work and religions organizations.

The wedding ceremony exhibits dialogue/Turns – taking, frequent interactions and conversations are carried out by the masters of ceremony. Wardhaugh (1998:195) explains the concept of call and response in the following:

A greeting leads to a return of greeting, a question leads to an answer, a request or offer leads to an acceptance or refusal, a complaint leads to an apology or some kind of rejection, a statement leads to acceptance or rejection, a farewell lead to a farewell and so on.

The example below demonstrates such turn-taking between the *alága idúró*, for the groom’s family and *alága ijókòó* for the bride’s:

Ta le wá wá?
Who do you look for?
Ta le bèèrè?
Who do you ask for
Ta le sọ pé ewá rí?
Who have you come to see
Alaga şàlàyé o. M.C. explain
 The *alága idúró* replies:

(ii) *Tori Titi bèbí şoun laşe wá –*
We have come because of Titi baby
A fé ké ẹ funwa ká fi şe yàwó –
We want you to release her to us as a bride
 The word ‘bèbí’ used here as a loan word, is employed by the *alága idúró* to describe physiology. This conversation reveals the cultural value of greetings among the yoruba. Ethnography of communication indicates that speech patterns are culturally implied. The *alaga* asked the same question with the same semantics in three different forms.

Display of wealth

The modern-day engagement ceremony is a day to showcase the affluence and wealth of the two families. The *alága* as a spokesperson for the families demonstrates their skill and language competence. The *alága* on the husband side will lead the songs with family members dancing and rejoicing:

(iii) *Ẹ máa káḷo*
Come along .
Ẹ máa káḷo
Come along
Nilé ọlólá

To the house of the noble
È máa kálo
Come along
Àwa kì í ùbì olóṣì
We are not a poverty-stricken family
È máa kálo
Come along

This song emphasises on the importance of the two families. Traditional weddings are basically family in nature and are avenues to showcase all the wealth, affluence, elegance and influence the alága made use of two contrasting words. Two opposing words are words here ‘olólá’ the ‘honourable/wealthy’ and ‘olosi’ the ‘poor/dishonourable’/ pauper. The two lexical items demonstrate the social and economic classes we have evidences in the society. It is a normal phenomenon that the rich always prefer to associate with people of same financial capability. Apart from this, parents are careful to give their wards to promising young people. 66

In addition, because traditional weddings are mainly family-centred, both parents are conspicuously honoured in various songs. For example, this is a song to honour the father:

(iv) *Omọ ò lè jòbaba, ká má bínú omọ*
We cannot be angry with a child as long as the child looks like the father
Omọ ò lè jòbaba, ká má bínú omọ
We cannot be angry with a child as long as the child looks like the father

(v) *Àràbá ni bàbá ooo*
Araba is the father (the king of trees)
Àràbá ni bàbá oo
Araba is the father (the king of trees)
Èni a bá lábà ni baba
The one we met in the shed is the ‘father’
Àràbá ni bàbá ee
Araba is the father (the king of trees)

The two songs above in (iv & v) demonstrate the sacred position the Yorùbá place the father who is the head of the family. The Yoruba society, being patrimonial in nature, songs like these are rendered with great jubilation to the admiration of the father, who in return, along with other family members lavishes loads of cash on the alága. Moreover, the likeness here does not only relate to the physical remembrances but other attributes visible in the father, for example, diligence, punctuality, neatness, kindness and others.

(vi) *Màmá ló lomọ lóitọ*
Of a truth, the child belongs to the mother

Màmá ló lomọ òdodo
As a matter of fact, the child belongs to the mother
Lójọ iyáwó
On the wedding day
Màmá ló lomọ
The child is the mother’s

This song clearly demonstrates the socio-cultural values attached to the Yorùbá female gender, in this case, mothers on wedding days. The mother is celebrated having successfully trained the young bride. This is especially appreciated where the bride has successfully gone through her education or vocational training. In Yoruba culture of motherhood is regarded as sacred. The axiom “orisa bi iya ko si” no deity like a mother, therefore, the song is every relevant in this social context.

Attitude is one major sociocultural factor which can be positive or negative. A family’s positive attitudes to education is publicly celebrated in traditional wedding ceremonies. The Yoruba are the first set of people to receive western education in Nigeria. In 1842 This is evident in the fact that it is not only the parents of the bride/groom that are celebrated. Another member of the family that is conspicuously honoured on engagement days is the educated and brilliant bride’s younger’s sister. This is the person that reads the engagement letter presented by the husband’s family. However, if the bride does not have a younger sister, she can take any of her family members to do this. This younger sister reads meticulously to the admiration of all guests and is showered with prayers and loads of cash in appreciation of her efforts. It is unusual to see a male reading the engagement letters but it is not totally out of place because of the gifts involved which the bride would love her siblings to receive. The song below clearly states the positive attitudes of the parents to western education. The Yoruba people are one of the most educated races in Nigeria and their influence can be found in various human endeavours.

(vii) *Yunifásitì dára*
The University is a good place
Ibi tí àwọn òmòwé wà
Where the scholars are
Ibẹ lomọ mi yóò lọ
This is where my child will go
Orí yóò gbé wọn dé bẹ ooo
Their heads (gods) will get them there.

The engagement ceremony is the right time for parents of both the bride and groom to shower prayers on their wards. This is iwúre in Yorùbá land.

No matter the religious background of the clients, prayers for the newly-wedded are considered imperative. The Yoruba believe that prayer is needed for what is good to stabilise and to wade off every evil occurrences. In spite of the fact that some of the ceremonies end in the church or conducted in the Islamic way, the engagement ceremony is never declared over without prayers from parents, families and well-wishers; e.g right from the beginning once the members of the groom's family are seated, the *alága* ijokoo declares:

È jẹ́ ká òkò ká gbàdúrà 2X
Let's rise to pray 2x
È jẹ́ ká òkò 2X
Let's rise 2X

One of such outpours of prayers is shown below:

Olúwatóyìn, Abigail, (of the bride names)
 Olúwà yòò fọmọ deyín ládé
 The lord will crown you with children
 Nítórí ọmọ ni adé ìgbéyàwó
 For children are the crowns of marriages

The conceptual metaphor in the songs above is 'adé'. The meaning of 'adé' is a crown which is a symbol of royalty. Here children are considered as primary benefits of a marriage. Hence, children are considered as added blessings to marriages just as icing are to cakes. The prayers continue:

Kó máa bí dọkítà
 To give birth to doctors
 Kó máa bádájọ
 To give birth to judges
 Kó bí kọmìṣhọ̀nà
 To give birth to commissioners

It is the prayer of every parent that their descendants achieve greatness in life. Hence, the prayers for children who will grow to become doctors, judges and commissioners. Again, this depicts the seemingly top and lucrative professions in the social hierarchy.

The Yoruba culture considers marriage as a journey, hence the 'ìwúre' prayers for the newly-wed. In the earlier times, during the bridal chants, songs like this can be heard:

Ilé ọkọ yá (2x)
 It's time to go to your husband's house
 Orí iyá rẹ ó sin ẹ lọ
 May your mother's Head go with you
 Ilé ọkọ yá
 It's time to go to your husband's house.

The word 'orí' is used as a cultural metaphor because it represents the very being of the person, *ori inú* the

inner head. Orí in Yorùba is considered the pathfinder in fact one's success in choice of partner, marriage or any endeavour in life is thought to be a result of one's orí. In essence, a woman who has a good home is said to have 'orí ọkọ' meaning she has a good destiny in matters relating to matrimony whereas one who did not succeed is referred to as not having 'orí ọkọ'. Therefore, this engagement song brings to fore the Yorùbá concept of orí in marriages. 'It is the real essence of being, the personality -soul, which guides and helps a person before he is born' Ogunade (2006: p 178) asserts that orí inú is a "person's spiritual element or being which is invisible but actively present when one is being created, throughout life, at death, and when one appears before the creator in judgement" Akande (2020: p 6) states that 'ori' is an 'embodiment and a repository of all supernatural energy from where the essence of Yorùbá spirituality and existence emanate'.

Although engagement ceremonies are basically traditional, there are evidences of youth culture. The traditional marriage M.C.s provide popular youth music, youth language and common slangs among the youths. The examples above demonstrates the fact that conversations usually start with a pleasant word or a question and answer. In addition, the ceremonies can also be conducted in English language or code-mixed with English when the families involved are not all Yoruba. In modern days the use of English is clearly evident especially among the educated *alága*. For examples, the A-Z of the bride beautifully rendered by Fere Jesu. I must say I have never heard this from any *alága*. She says:

Our wife is simply Amiable, she's Articulate, she's Ambitious,
she's beautiful, she's bouyant, she's brilliant,
she's charming, she's cheerful.
She's dutifull,
she's eloquent, she's efficie nt, she's effective

These complementary remarks and more describe the beautiful new bride. The bride is made to stand in the middle while her friends form a circle around her with this song:

Who is in the garden
A little fine girl
Can I come and see her
No! no!! no!!!

Marriage ties can be between a Yorùbá man/woman of another tribe,v. The *alága* is able to code-switch the two by promoting the language and culture of the two languages. The importance of traditional marriages is seen in the fact that whether the would-be-couple are together physically or separated by distance, the *alága* know how to conduct the ceremonies.

Although, some people opined that the marriage M.C. make wedding engagement ceremonies expensive, professionals in this field maintain that they operate within the economic proven of the celebrants. For instance, Fèrè Jèṣù has conducted engagement ceremonies for both the rich and the poor. One of such is the engagement ceremony of a Senator of the Republic of Nigeria. Moreover, one *alaga* can serve as MC for both families in situations where the families do not intend to do an extensive or elaborate ceremony. So, it is exactly what the clients want that the *alága* offered at any engagement ceremonies.

The *alága* through their songs serve as social reformers. In the songs below, the *alága idúró* educates the audience on placing love between young people above money. At another occasion, when the *alága ijokoo* maintains that anyone with the intention of getting married to a rich family must be wealthy, the *alága iduro* responded that it is not money but love that is important.

Alága ijókóó: Eo láa ná

He will spend money

Èbi oko sè ẹ gbó

Groom's family, can you hear me?

Ọ̀nìyàn tó máa fẹ̀ gbajúmọ̀ láya

Whoever will marry the rich

È o láa ná

Will spend money

Humours can be seen in the interactions between the two *alágas* or the bride/groom. Woven around this humour is the call to adhere to the cultural value of the Yoruba people which places good name, integrity, care and love for one another. This is captured in the following response by the *alága idúró*.

Alága idúró: È ní súúrù Madam now

Be patient, madam

A lówó, A lenu, a ní gbogbo ẹ̀

We have money, we are influential, we have everything

Sùgbón ohun tóju owó lo ni ifẹ̀.

But what is bigger than money

È máa gbọ.

listen

Ìfẹ̀ láa ní he/she must be in love

A bódgbó àwé

Are you listening, my brother

Ìfẹ̀ láa ní

He has be be love

Ọ̀nìyàn tó máa fẹ̀ gbajúmọ̀ lókọ ifẹ̀ láa ní òò ẹ̀é

Whoever will marry a celebrity must be in love

4. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated the fact that Yorùbá traditional wedding songs by the *alága* showcase both

the aesthetics of the language as well as the affluence of the families concerned. They demonstrate the capacities of the families and in return the *alága* are rewarded with loads of money being spray on them. Cultural values are also communicated through their songs The modern day *alága* has brought so much professionalism and grandeur to the ceremony and are therefore likely to be among the Yorùbá for a long time. The knowledge of these songs serves as sources of local histories, panegyrics and humour all of which promote Yoruba language and cultural values. The importance of this paper is demonstrated in its analysis of linguistic, social and cultural contexts of Yoruba traditional wedding songs.

Appendix

Mrs Deborah Ibijoke Rufai aka Fere Jesu: A Short Biography

The *alága* Fèrè Jèṣù Deborah Ìbìjoké Rùfàì, an indigene of Kwara State was born and nurtured in Lagos State. She had all her education in Lagos State. Although she would have loved to learn the engagement skill under an expert, she did not have a formal training for the job. The first set of opportunities to do the job appeared when her friends were to get married. She resorted to studying from her lessons notes in the University as a student of Yorùbá and communication Arts. Fèrè Jèṣù started her *alága* business in September 28, 1998. She started the Fèrè Jèṣù school of engagement in 2008 and first graduation was in October 2010. She has graduated 26 professional *alágas* who are doing well in their different of locations, both within and outside the country. She recalled her first outing and how she pleaded the senior *alága* to kindly relate with her with ease since she was just an amateur.

According to her, she decided to start *The Fèrè Jèṣù School* after reports of the inadequacies of her band members from clients. At first, the training was informal but later become formalized by having the ethics of the profession documented. By this, the complaints of inefficiency were drastically reduced. She acknowledges God's providence on her performance by the numerous senior *alága* she has followed to marriage ceremonies. The desire to maintain and transmit the cultural heritage of the Yoruba is paramount and clearly evidenced in her performance. Fèrè Jèṣù believes that the *alágas* are adding several innovations to improve their performance. She avers that the *alaga* are also front liners in the promotion language and cultural identities of the Yoruba people.

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