

MEMORY ARCHIVE THROUGH THE SUBSTANCE OF YORUBA MUSICAL CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

The context of musical performance in Africa is determined by the general conditions, in which it is performed, as well as the principles, philosophies, and events that inform the compositions. Songs have through the years commemorated significant traditional events, thereby fixing the memory of important incidents in the minds of the audience with lasting effects. These songs are preserved in oral performance traditions, in forms of musical documentation and presentation. The texts of songs often give us more insight into the past than the survivors in the present generation could provide. They sometimes present to us explanations that lead to our understanding of the human creative processes and value judgment in the society as well as provide proof of identity among a people or peoples. Not only so, songs are sources that define social-ritual restrictions of some traditional practices, observances and behaviours, with respect to context of performance and functionality. They therefore are capable of helping us to revalidate the authenticity of certain musical-cultural history that link the past with the present. This paper thus examines traditional African songs as sources by which research data on indigenous knowledge systems can be obtained and evaluated.

INTRODUCTION

Music itself, being part of an oral tradition, provides substantial information on all aspects of a people's culture. Thus, it is necessary to justify objectively the usefulness of oral tradition in the process of investigating music. A Yoruba traditional musician is one who has got facts of reality through imagination and oral sources to subsequently transmit onward to the present and future generation his creative art. His music lives within him and in the hearts of his audience. His song texts may be found to be expository, narrative and instructional in the folk idiom, upon unfolding events over substantial period of time.

Memory archive provides information that deals with some incidents of lasting interest. It helps to test the authenticity of certain musical history and gives clues on musical interaction, isolation, retardation and growth. The acquisition of musical expertise in Yoruba traditional society is in three stages. The foremost is the stage of observation by listening to the performances of an older and more experienced musician. The second is the stage of the imitation. This is when conscious and definite instruction

and correction are given in measures. The last stage is that of active participation in any traditional or social-musical events. The examination of the memory archives as it helps the Yoruba musicians to sustain the musical culture of the land is the focus of this paper.

MUSIC AND ORAL TRADITION

Kofi Agawu argues that:

African music is best understood not as a finite repertoire but as a potentiality. In terms of what now exists and has existed in the past, African music designates those numerous repertoires of songs and instrumental music that originate in specific African communities, and performed regularly as part of play, ritual, and worship, and circulate mostly orally/aurally, within and across languages, ethnic, and cultural boundaries (Agawu, 2003: xiv).

Oral tradition is the passing of beliefs or customs from one generation to another without being written. However, there has been much controversy about the authenticity of such an unwritten tradition by those who have not had much significant interaction with the music of such culture. What many people do not know is that traditional artists/musicians are custodians of their societal history. Collins English Dictionary, for instance, describes an artist as: 'a person who practices or is skilled in an art; who displays in his works qualities such as artist expertise' (Collins, 2005).

Oluyemi Olaniyan (2000) observes that a traditional musician is an entertainer who acquired or inherited his musical expertise through oral tradition from older and more experienced musicians. The above view points to us that the traditional musician is one who has got facts of reality through imagination and oral sources to subsequently transmit onward to present and future generation his creative skills. His works (music) live within and outside him, even in the heart of his audience. His song texts may be found to be expository, narrative and instructional in the folk idioms, upon unfolding events, over substantial periods of time.

Furthermore, it is an acknowledged truth that culture develops chronologically from the simple to the complex. Therefore, any culture's oral tradition facilitates the understanding of the critical view that the simple songs and information contained in them are probably the oldest. This offers one an extra-ordinarily precise periodization of contacts between people's music as well as the migrations of a cultural group through

times. Music itself being an oral tradition in Africa provides substantial information on all aspects of a people's culture as well as oral tradition in speech provides such information about all musical traditions of a people. Thus, it is necessary to justify objectively the usefulness of oral tradition in the process of investigating music.

THE CONCEPT OF YORUBA SONGS

Atinuke Idamoyibo (2007) quotes Broody (1966: 180) that:

Knowledge about music has to do with its history and development; its various forms and styles; its instruments; its personalities and its fortunes in the history of man... On the other hand, knowledge of music means dealing with musical materials, musical productions of one sort or another.

The context of music has to do with the general conditions in which the music is performed, while the musical concept has to do with the general idea, thought and understanding of a particular music through oral tradition. Songs have been known to persist for generation when they commemorate some traditional events or when they deal with some incidents of lasting interest. These songs are preserved in oral traditions as a form of documentation through oral tradition; one is able to trace the development of music through time. It helps to test the authenticity of certain music history and give clues about contacts the music or the songs have had with other people's culture and enable one to determine its significance and originality.

It also helps to know the historical background of some songs, where they were played when they are played, why they are played and how they are performed. The musical context of a song known through oral tradition is very important; it helps us to know the kinds of music as whether sacred or secular. Some songs are dedicated to the worship of gods and goddesses, but they are now popular that they are being sung anyhow and anywhere. An insight into the context of such music through oral tradition would at least put a kind of limitation to the performance or usage of such music. Some people sing songs which are dedicated to certain gods and goddesses without knowing that by so doing they are directly participating in the worship of such gods and goddesses.

'Olukori' for instance, is a song that was dedicated to the ownership of Kori the goddess of fertility but is now being taught in schools as part of cultural repertoire. Through oral tradition, it has been found out that in Ikorodu, Lagos State, many decades

ago, young married women or the newly married ones were subjected to the worship of Kori. It was their belief then that Kori the goddess of fertility has the power to give children, hence, the newly married bride was made to worship her in songs in order to have children. They were expected to move from house to house declaring the ability of the goddesses to give children, after which they move to the shrine. No conventional instrument was employed as accompaniment to the kori songs, nevertheless, improvised instruments like tin milk beaten by small sticks were used to beat them.

These basic concepts and explanations provide music scholars with the understanding of the human creative processes that produce music, as well as the need for audience participation in musical performances in Africa. Not only so, oral tradition defines social ritual restrictions of musical practices with respect to context of performance and functionality. The concept of music is better explained in oral tradition. Chernoff (1979) in his explanation of participation in African music writes that:

Traditional music is a very close form of participation or cooperation in which the resulting sound is the proof that the participation is working. Everything starts from the feeling of the people in corporation resulting in musical sounds within the bounds of the style being played. This means that one's participation, accuracy in rhythm, finding the right entry points, the right coordination, the right relationship, normally precedes other considerations. (Chernoff, 1979: 72)

Participation is an integral aspect of musical performance in Africa where audience is a part of the performance.

THE CONTEXT OF YORUBA SONGS

Meki Nzewi argues philosophically that:

Music in Africa is a philosophy of life; a transaction of meaning and processes of communal living... a process of conducting relationships, coordinating the societal systems, coping with the realities of human existence and probing the supernatural realm or forces (Nzewi, 1999: 1)

Yoruba songs are performed in social and ritual contexts where they objectify the belief system and social order of the people. The songs are part of oral traditions themselves, because they preserve traditional occasions and events, which are historical; though difficultly lies in the problem of the authenticity of the texts in terms of the

accuracy of the message or description on conveyed. The context of music is determined in language practically. Music is bi-lingual. It speaks two major languages, the lyrical language and the melodic/rhythmic languages. The clues to the understanding of the rhythmic language are in oral tradition. Only those who have ears for it and are familiar with tradition understand the drum language. The language of the drum is old and proverbial. It is also poetic in that certain poetic formula forms the basis for the musical presentation. That is why the court musician of the kings in Yoruba land are not just musicians, but custodians of local history and membership is restricted to family members who grew in the palace setting only.

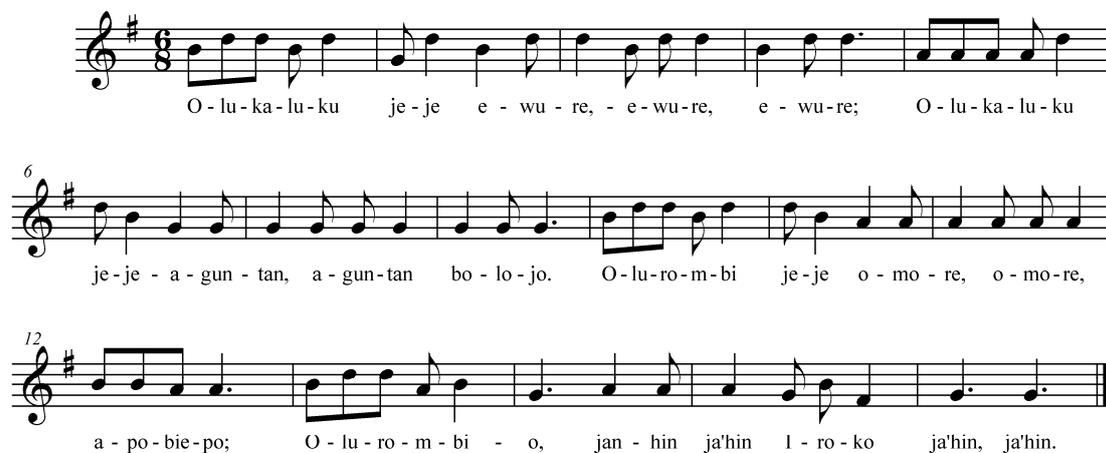
African music is complex because the musical rhythm must first be interpreted into words or texts before the analysis. The use oral of tradition comes in here because that is where the true interpretation can be found. At the palace of the Olubadan, for example, the kind of music that the court musicians perform is a symbolic representation of power, dominion and higher phenomenon, which are the royalty, or the institution of the Olubadan's office. The musicians here are quite familiar with the history of the king's family and so, the master praise singer is a skillful and competent poet and historian. For example, when the musicians wake up in the morning, they stand by the bedroom window of the king to sing and chant. One of such songs goes thus:

King Olubadan, Odutade the son of Odulanan,
Did you wake up well or not?
The mouse wakes up well at Opoile,
The Ibojo rat wakes up well in its hole;
How well do you fare today?
If you wake up well, I have been blessed,
King Olugbon never wakes up so well than that,
King Aresa never wakes up well than that;
If you wake up well, it surfaces me.

This is the translated version of what they actually sing. The song is mainly rhythmical with limited melodic range. Some works are quite unfamiliar, works like 'Opoile', 'Ibojo,' 'Olugbon,' 'Aresa,' etc, are better understood in oral tradition. Some

songs are themselves oral tradition. They narrate heroic or historic events of the distant past to the present generation, thereby providing explanation to certain cultural behaviour and settlements. A song like Orurombi, for instance, has passed through several generations and is still being sung today. See example 1 below.

Example 1: Olurombi



O-lu-ka-lu-ku je-je e-wu-re, -e-wu-re, e-wu-re; O-lu-ka-lu-ku
 je-je-a-gun-tan, a-gun-tan bo-lo-jo. O-lu-ro-m-bi je-je o-mo-re, o-mo-re,
 a-po-bie-po; O-lu-ro-m-bi-o, jan-hin ja'hin I-ro-ko ja'hin, ja'hin.

Text

Olukaluku jeje ewure, Ewure, Ewure,
 Olukaluku jeje agutan, Agutan bolojo;
 Olurombi jeje omo re, Omore aponbi epo,
 Olurombi o jahin jahin, Iroko jahin jahin (2ce)

Translation

Everyone makes a vow of goat, goat, goat,
 Everyone makes a vow of sheep, a bigsheep;
 Olurombi makes a vow of her child, whose complexion is fair like the palm oil,
 Olurombi is uncompromising and Iroko is uncompromising.

The song has to do with a vow that was difficult to redeem. Olurombi vowed out of emotion, to give her child to the Iroko if she was able to conceive and when her supplication was granted, the daughter grew up to be very beautiful and fair in complexion. This made it very difficult for Olurombi to redeem her vow. The Iroko tree,

on the other hand, rejected every other form of substitute that Olurombi proposed and demanded for her child. Olurombi was not willing to sacrifice her child; the Iroko was also not willing to compromise its position.

Olurombi song is simple and straightforward. Anybody who is familiar with oral tradition can easily understand it, even though it is now being used to teach children moral, it is oral tradition in its own right. It teaches that children should not vow out of emotion, because a vow is a debt that must be paid. Through oral tradition, one is able to bring out the value of the song from the text, in order to appreciate it better. It also helps to analyse the context of the song and bring to focus better understanding of the musical context.

For example, in Olurombi song, some stylistic devices were employed. Repetition is the prominent device in the song. *Olukaluku jeje* was repeated in the second phrase, while Olurombi appeared twice in the second and the last phrase. *Jahin jahin* is repeated in the last phrase twice. *Ewure* appeared three times in the first phrase and was replaced with *agutan*, which also appeared three times in the second phrase. There are various forms of traditional music in Yoruba land, most of which can be grouped into two, sacred and secular musical forms. Sacred music is used during indigenous religious festivals in worshipping the gods, while secular music serves social functions in marriage ceremonies, naming ceremonies, house warming, etc.

Another prominent example is 'Laaye Olugbon'. This song narrates historical events of the distant past to the present generation. The song goes thus:

The musical score is written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 6/8 time signature. It consists of three staves of music. The lyrics are written below the notes, with hyphens indicating syllables that span across multiple notes. The lyrics are: 'Laa-ye O - lu-gbon, mo-ge - 'bo-run me-ta, e o ma ko-we lo - 'rin. Laa-ye A - re-sa, m-ge bo-run me-fa e o ma ko-we lo - 'rin. Laa-ye A - bi-o-dun, mo-ge 'bo-run mo-ra 'ran, mo - ra san-yan ba-ba so a-fo-le. Ni-o-pe 'le-yi-o - dun a-fo-le.'

Example 2:**Laaye Olugbon*****Text in Yoruba***

Laaye Olugbon mo ge 'b'orun meta

E o maa kowe l'orin

Laaye Aresa mo ge 'b' orun mefa

E o maa kowe l'orin

Laaye Abiodun moge 'b'orun

Mora'ran, mo ra sanyan baba aso

Af'ole, nio pe'le yi odun, Af'ole.

Translation

During Olugbon's reign I bought 3 shawls

Take note of my song

During the reign of Aresa, I bought 6 shawls

Take note of my song

During Abiodun's reign I bought shawls

Velvet, woven silk, the most expensive cloth

Only the lazy will say this land is not prosperous

The song shows that during the reign of Olugbon there was hardship, during the reign of Aresa was relief to an extent, but in the reign of Abiodun, there was plenty; there was no hardship at all. An attribute of music, which makes it especially useful in studying oral tradition through its cultural context, is the fact that it is a creative aspect of culture, which, though recording, can be documented as we have it today. This can be repeated over and over and studied in details.

DOCUMENTATION STRATEGY

The methodology of studying music through oral tradition can be based on interview and observation as a participant or non-participant. Apart from the knowledge of field investigation, other ethnomusicological approaches could be adopted which include the method by Alan, P. Merriam, Arnold Rose and Nicholas Babchuks as

observed by Ovaborhene Idamoyibo (2005). For a musical research to be deep, it must be based on oral sources, which could take place in the palace where traditions are still kept pure or in the villages where the values of tradition have not been diluted.

A visit to the palace of Olubadan led to an interview with the head of the palace court musicians, who stressed the significance of oral tradition in the understanding of music. He explained the importance of the “*gbedu*” (a membrane drum) at the king’s palace and that nobody lower than the king in status is privileged to have this kind of musical performance. He explained the significance of “Aaro” (a round bell) as a symbol of royalty. He explained how a good knowledge of tradition helps to compose standard songs that are used in the praises of the kings and in the worship of the gods. He also explained the right of initiation in order to play certain music and added that the master drummers in the place are all members of the *Ayan* family.

He unfolded too, that, a regular sacrifice is offered to Ayan, the god of drums to improve their drumming skill daily. All the drummers in the palace are traditionalists and so the most significant method of collecting information by scholars who do not want to be initiated is through interview and observation as non-participants. The leader of the court musicians explained that their profession is a restricted one; that is it is meant for the palace musicians and their children only. They believe that the gods are responsible for teaching them musical skills and all a little “Ayan” boy has to do is to observe until the gods are ready to bless him with drumming skills.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, oral tradition helps researchers to understand music better. The study of African music through its preservation and presentation of culture details provides explanation to this legacy. Good methodology of collecting oral data guarantees effective transmission of research findings. Oral information, if systematically collected, can provide tangible information on the growth and retardation of the musical culture of the Yoruba.

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