

Rhythms of the Gods: Music, Spirituality and Social Engagement in Yoruba Culture

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Abstract

The notions of “icons as objects” and “icons as act” (Kasfir, 1998: 20) are used to analyze the mediatory role of Yorubá musicians in meeting the spiritual and the social needs of their communities. The author explains that Yoruba performers are constantly aware of the discursive engagement between *àsà* (social engagement and cultural practice) and *èsìn* (spiritual devotion), and posits that there is a conceptual engagement between the mediating role of Yoruba performers and the thematic and structural features of their performances. This fact speaks to the constant interaction between *play* and *spirituality* as controlled by the agency of the performer, and draws attention to how Yoruba religious belief is inscribed with social significance.

Introduction: *Àsà and Èsìn* in Yoruba Performance

The constant engagement between the elements of play and spirituality in Yoruba performance provides the setting for understanding the role of the Yoruba performer as a mediator between temporal and spiritual domains of existence. Yoruba masquerade performances are particularly illustrative of this mediatory role. The masker, usually a male, physically relates to the human audiences who follow, tease, praise, observe, and perform with him. He must however also relate to the divine presence of the ancestral forces that he embodies. For while, on the one hand, he must deal with esoteric narratives and age-long rituals that communicate directly with deities, he must, on the other hand, also respond and relate to the social situations within which religious rituals derive meaning in real life terms.

As a luminal agent inhabiting the threshold of these two spaces, the Yoruba performer connects the living with the spiritual; life with death; body with soul; as well as the aesthetic with the divine. Commenting on the interaction between the spiritual and the social in African masquerade rituals, Kasfir (1998: 18) explains that “most African masquerades signify something beside the basic visual and the performative act of a person in a costume playing before an audience.” In addition to the visual and sonic experience generated “through the use of some combination of facial disguise, costume, body decoration, props, movement, vocalization, drumming,” a masquerade outing is premised on “a structure of belief which typically associates this illusion with the embodiment of a spirit or, in certain places, the appearance of reincarnated ancestor” (Kasfir, 1998: 18). Margaret Drewal captures the play element of Yoruba performances through her discussion of the concept of improvisation. According to her, “[w]hen Yoruba people say that they perform ritual just like their ancestors did it in the past, improvisation is implicit in their recreation or restoration” (Drewal, 1992: 23).

Yoruba performers are constantly aware of the discursive engagement between *àsà* (social engagement and cultural practice) and *èsin* (spiritual devotion). For example, Sule Ayantunde, a Yoruba drummer with whom I worked in Nigeria and whose performances are discussed later in this essay, constantly employed the two terms to describe the nature of his performances. The simultaneous employment of masks and musical instruments as objects of worship and play draws attention to the dialectical engagement between the conception of performance material as a symbol of religious belief on one hand, and the demystification of sacred performance to facilitate social interaction and dialogue, on the other. References and allusions to mundane human situations even in the midst of the most serious and intense spiritual worship are not uncommon. Performers and performances often constitute the medium through which the boundaries between these two spaces collapse, and the window through which we may glean how the elements of play and spirituality interact to shape religious rituals and facilitate social conversation and interaction.

The notions of “icons as objects” and “icons as act” (Kasfir, 1998: 20) can be used to analyze the mediatory role of Yoruba musicians in meeting the spiritual and the social needs of their communities. The intersection of these two modes of expression provides a framework for analyzing how ritual and musical material are composed, re-composed, organized and performed in Yoruba culture. There is an engaging relationship between the mediating role of Yoruba performers and the thematic and structural features of their performances. Yoruba religious ritual performance is defined by the constant interplay of the elements of play and spirituality as controlled by the agency of the performer. As John and Margaret Drewal have argued in their discussion of *gèlèdè* masks, performers have “the performative power to marshal the forces in the Yoruba cosmos for society’s well-being. It is at once spectacle and ritual. It is entertaining and it is efficacious. But it is perceived to be more than a mode of persuasion. It is an instrument with which the “gods of society” maintain social control.” (Drewal and Drewal, 1983: xvi).

The Yoruba performer and his audience are thus constantly aware that religious experiences are meaningful only when they reflect and respond to the existential reality of social and cultural life. And because the ultimate purpose of Yoruba religious rituals is to give validity and meaning to social experience and enhance the quality of life, the Yoruba performer often conceives the expressive domains of song, drumming, dance, costume and masks as a metalanguage that connects humans and deities in the task of social engineering. The role of human agents in bridging this gap is critical, and relies on the efficient manipulation of the tools of worship: the effective use of the mask, the drum, the human body and the voice, to mention just a few, is dependent on the agency of maskers, drummers, dancers and singers.

The ensuing discussion derives from many years of observing and participating in specific Yoruba religious ceremonies, and from a series of field research conducted in Western Nigeria (Yoruba land) between 1990 and 2007. In addition to analyzing two sacred drummed texts, I provide brief ethnographic accounts of two ritual performances--*òshun* and *egúngún* festivals--as enacted in the Yoruba town of Oshogbo in 2007. The ethnographic descriptions are conceived to facilitate an understanding of how Yoruba ritual performance resonates with social and spiritual significance. The two drummed texts that I analyze were performed by a group of Oshogbo drummers under the leadership of Sule Ayantunde, a master drummer, in Oshogbo in 2007. As a prelude to my discussion, it is instructive to briefly describe the nature of Yoruba religious belief.

Yoruba God (*Olódùmarè*) and His Deities (*Òrìsà*)

Ancestral spirits, deities and *Olódùmarè* (supreme ruler) represent key agents within the Yoruba belief system. Yoruba deities (*Òrìsà*) are numerous, numbering over a thousand.¹ As Alana (2004: 69) explains, Yoruba deities fall under three categories, namely primordial deities who have existed since the time of creation; deified ancestors; and deities that are associated with natural objects like rivers and hills. Primordial ones include *Òrúnmìnlà*, the deity of knowledge and divination, and *Èsù*, the unpredictable deity of human conduct who can be both malevolent and benevolent, and who reports back to *Olódùmarè* on matters relating to human activities. Examples of deities in the second category are *Sàngó*, the deity of thunder and lightning, and *Ògún* the deity of war, metallurgy, vengeance and justice. In the third category are deities like *Oya*, the female deity of the River Niger, and *Òkèbàdàn*, which is associated with a sacred hill in the city of Ibadan. All deities, no matter their status within the hierarchy, are answerable ultimately to *Olódùmarè*, the supreme ruler of heaven and earth. Music plays a critical role in defining the personality of many of these deities as I explain later.

Ensemble Sounds as Sacred Voices

Of the different forms of Yoruba music (drumming, song, chant and dance), drumming is the one imbued with the greatest spiritual significance. Drum ensembles are generally of two main categories—sacred and social. Yoruba sacred ensembles include single-headed membrane drums like *ìgbìn*, *ìpèsè*, and *ògìdán*, each of which is associated with a specific deity (Euba, 1990: 93). This is because “appropriate drums must be used for particular *Òrìsà*; otherwise they [the devotees] will incur the wrath of their tutelary deity” (Adegbite, 1988: 16). *Ìgbìn*, for example, is associated with *Obàtálá*, the arch-divinity and deity of children; while *ìpèsè* is performed in ritual activities devoted to *Òrúnminlà*. *Ògìdán* drums are performed to appease and venerate *Ògún*, while *bàtá* is the principal musical instrument of *Sàngó* worship.ⁱⁱ

The *dùndún* hourglass drum, which originally was regarded primarily as a social ensemble, now also functions within religious rituals. Unlike other Yoruba drums, this drum consists of leather strings, which connect its two drum heads and are pulled or relaxed to alter the surface tension of the drum head, thus enabling the drummer to generate different pitches and imitate the tonal patterns of Yoruba language. Although Yoruba drums are dominated by those made from a single, hollowed and carved tree log, other examples include those made from gourds (such as *kìrìbótó*), and from earthenware (such as *àpíntì*).

The social and religious functions of Yoruba musical instruments often change over time. Two drum types, *bàtá* and *dùndún*, whose roles and functions have changed in recent times provide interesting perspectives on the ways in which the sacred and the secular have continued to merge in Yoruba performances. *Bàtá*, originally a sacred instrument, is now also performed in social contexts. Likewise, *dùndún*, because of its ability to “talk” eloquently, is now commonly employed in sacred contexts that were originally associated exclusively with drums like *bàtá* and *ìgbìn*. This is in addition to its continuous domination of social performances.

The association of instrumental ensembles with specific deities and religious activities illustrates the centrality of music to Yoruba religious worship. As tools of worship, some musical instruments and their sounds are culturally regarded as icons of specific religious cults. Indeed many ensembles derive their sole significance within the context of sacred rites with which they are associated. As Adegbite (1988:16) has observed, for example, drums like the cylindrical *àgbà-obalùfòn* and *ìpèsè* are performed only very occasionally, sometimes just once in a year and at specific annual festivals. Such sacred drums are rarely used in other contexts and are kept in sacred groves.

Cooking the Drum: Àyàṅàgalú-the Deity of Yoruba Drumming

It is generally believed that the first Yoruba drummer was a man named Àyàṅàgalú (see Euba, 1990: 90). It is for this reason that members of Yoruba drumming families bear names that begin with Àyàn, a prefix of Àyàṅàgalú. Examples of such names are Àyántúndé (Àyàn returns), Àyánlèkè (Àyàn is victorious) and Àyányemí (Àyàn is good for me). But the significance of Àyàngalú goes beyond its role as a means of solidifying ancestral and vocational identity. Àyàṅàgalú is also regarded as the deity spirit of the drum and a guardian spirit for all drummers (Euba, 1990: 90). The spiritual force of Àyàṅàgalú is often symbolically represented on individual drums. In the *dùndún* ensemble, for example, the *gúdúgúdú*, the only member of the ensemble with a pot-like shape, is regarded as the sacred symbol of the spirit of Àyàṅàgalú. The *ida* and the *kúsanrín*, two important parts of *gúdúgúdú*, are imbued with the spiritual power of Àyàṅàgalú. *kúsanrín* is a circular metallic object at the base of the instrument, while *ida* is a paste made from a tree sap and affixed to the center of the drum head. *kúsanrín* and *ida* are believed to be emblematic of the sacredness of the *gúdúgúdú*, setting it apart from the remaining members of the *dùndún* ensemble.

It is interesting to note that *ida* and *kúsanrín* also serve purely acoustic functions. *kúsanrín*, for example, provides an anchor for the series of leather strings that help to hold the membrane of the drum firmly. *kúsanrín* also helps to hold in place a series of wooden pegs that are placed between it and the base of the hollowed wood body, helping to facilitate greater resonance. In the same vein, the positioning of *ida* right at the center of the drum membrane is a device to partition the drum head into a couple of pitch areas. The characteristic two-tone melo-rhythm of *gúdúgúdú* is made possible by this partitioning. All the drummers that I discussed with in Ila-Orangun, Oshogbo, Ikirun and Ibadan were aware of the sacred and acoustic functions of *kúsanrín* and *ida*.

The complementary relationship between acoustic and spiritual functions as represented in these two elements seminally illustrates the interface of play and spirituality in the organization of many Yoruba ensembles, and mirrors the intersection of the physical and the spiritual in Yoruba cosmology. The awareness of this duality by Yoruba musicians shows that they are conscious of their roles as performers and mediators who reconcile the social and spiritual needs of their community.

Constructing a drum involves the enactment of rituals that are designed to appease Àyàṅàgalú, and activate the spirits that are believed to reside in the trees from which drums are made into “talking” eloquently. Such trees must grow by the road side and thus conversant with human conversation. The physical process of making a drum and the attendant rituals are referred to as *ilù síṣè* (the cooking of the drum). Items of appeasement used in this process include pieces of kola-nut, which are broken, prayed over and eaten; and local dry gin, which is poured as libation on the ground and on the wooden frame of the drum.

The drum maker, usually the drummer himself, would pray to Àyàṅgalú to grant his drum *ofò* (potent speech-utterance), and protect him from the attack of known and anonymous enemies. The focus on the element of speech and utterance highlights the emphasis on the verbal and spiritual orientation of musical communication.

Drummers also appease the spirit of Àyàṅgalú before any major performance. This practice was enacted on many occasions during my field research. At Ibadan, for example, Musibau, a *bata* drummer that I have worked with for many years, insisted on pouring libation and praying to the spirit of Àyàṅgalú before performing and talking about his drums. Right in my presence, Musibau opened the bottle of the dry gin that I had been told to bring, poured a few drops of the gin on the drum, took a number of sips and splashed the gin from his mouth to the drums. This little ritual was performed to pray and pay homage to Àyàṅgalú, and as a form of spiritual cleansing. The interface of social engagement and spirituality is however most vividly illustrated within the context of ritual performances. I shall now briefly discuss two examples, *egúngún* outing and *Òsun* festival, as enacted in Oshogbo in August 2007.

Yoruba Ritual Performance: Two Ethnographic Accounts

a. An *Egúngún* Performance in Oshogbo

On July 15, 2007, I watched a public “outing” (*ijáde*) of *lábúàtá*, a masquerade in Oshogbo, Western Nigeria. *Lábúàtá* is a family masquerade (*eégún idilé*) of the Adegoke family of Isale Oshun, Oshogbo. The July 15, 2007 “outing” was the first of its three performances for the year, and was devoted largely to paying homage to the *Ataoja*, the king of Oshogbo. In spite of its status as a family event, *lábúàtá*’s *ijáde* is witnessed by a large segment of the general public, and enjoys the special blessing and interest of the *Ataoja*.ⁱⁱⁱ *Lábúàtá*’s outing is mandatorily accompanied by a *bátá* ensemble. In 2007, the ensemble consisted of a large number of supporting drummers playing the *omele abo*, *omele ako* and *omele kúdi*;^{iv} and two master drummers who alternated on the *iyáàlu bátá*, the leading drum. Given the rigorous nature of playing *iyáàlu bátá* and the extended nature of this particular ritual and musical event, it would have been too challenging for a single drummer to lead the ensemble for the entire performance. The larger of the two drum heads of *iyáàlu bátá* and *omele abo* is known as *ojú òjò*. *Ojú òjò* is usually played with the palm of the right hand, while the smaller drum head (*sásá*) is played with the left hand using a rubber or leather beater. *Omele ako* and *omele kúdi* are usually tied together and played by a single drummer. In 2007, two additional *omele ako* and *omele kúdi* were used for the event because of the relatively large number of participants. A description of the event now follows.

On the day of the outing of *lábúàtá*, family members from far and near gather in the family compound together with friends and neighbors. At about NOON, the masquerade emerges from its chamber, a room inside the family house, and is immediately heralded by the sounds of *bata* drums. *Lábúàtá*'s attire is a large tattered looking garment whose backside consists of a dry, unshaven animal skin-leather that hangs from the neck area down to the feet. *Lábúàtá*'s face mask is a carved wood consisting of three undulations at the top, each of which represents the three children (two sons and a daughter) of the Adegoke family.

Lábúàtá and members of the Adegoke family spend about twenty minutes by a small tree right in front of the house, engaged in a sacred and private ritual. They pray for the family and pour libation in honor of departed members. *Lábúàtá* thereafter visits neighboring houses before leading a procession to the king's palace, about a kilometer away. We move together to the palace, where a large crowd of people had gathered to await *lábúàtá*'s arrival. The music of the procession comprises of female singers chanting family epithets to the accompaniment of *bátá* drumming.

The performance at the king's palace lasts for about 90 minutes. The king and some of his chiefs emerge from inside the old palace and sit in the porch, periodically acknowledging salutations from town folks. The masquerade does not move close to the king because it is a taboo for the king to see the body of a dead person or its representation in form of a masquerade. The crowd forms two parallel rows, demarcating an arena and a passage from the masquerade party to the veranda of the *Ataoja*. Some of the pilots of the *egúngún* move in turns to pay homage to the king, while the king's errand person moves back and forth between the king's party and that of the masquerade to deliver monetary gifts from the king and his chiefs to the masquerade, the drummers and the women chanters who continue to embellish the performance with their sonorous voices.^v

The performance involving *lábúàtá*, drummers, chanters and the participating audience at the king's palace illustrates how musical entertainment is provided within the context of a Yoruba religious event. Although the entire event is conceived as a form of ancestral veneration, and although the opening part of the event is a private offering to ancestral spirits, the procession through the town and the display at the king's palace represent a public performance in which *lábúàtá* interacts and performs with the crowd around him. The arena of performance is dynamic and interactive as audience members sing and tease the ferocious masquerade.

b. *Òshun* Festival in Oshogbo

Òshun festival is held annually in the town of Oshogbo as in many other Yoruba communities in Nigeria.^{vi} *Òshun* is the focus of elaborate religious activities amongst Yoruba communities within Nigeria and outside, in countries like Benin, Brazil, Cuba and the United States. My discussion here however concentrates on *Òshun* Oshogbo (*Òshun* festival of Oshogbo), which is the most spectacular of *Òshun* festivals anywhere in the world. Although a religious event to appease and venerate *Òshun* (a Yoruba female deity believed to have the power to heal, give children, grant wealth and protect), the festival also provides the forum for the community to renew their allegiance to the king and affirm a sense of group solidarity. In recent years the festival has also become a political event at which politicians promote their interests. The final day of the festival (*ojó Òshun*) comes after days of rituals, many of which are restricted to a limited set of people. The first of these is known as *ìwópópó* (street cleansing procession) performed to spiritually cleanse the town. *Ìwópópó* marks the official commencement of series of events culminating in *ojó Òshun*.

Many of the rituals event leading up to *ojó Òshun* are designed to acknowledge the importance of other prominent Yoruba deities, although the festival itself is dedicated largely to *Òshun*. On the fourth day, for example, the appearance of masquerades serves to venerate *Sàngó*. The ritual lightening of a 16-burner lamp (*àtùpà olójúmerìndínlógún*) on the sixth night is also of great spiritual importance. During this ritual, the king and members of his family dance round the lamp three times before dawn. This ritual event is performed to venerate *Òsanyìn*, the Yoruba deity of herbal medicine. On the seventh day, *ifá* (divination) rites are held, while the eighth day is dedicated to honoring *Oya*, the deity of the River Niger. Also celebrated on the eighth day is *Orò*, the deity of the wind.

Ojó Òshun, the ninth and final day of the festival, is dedicated to *Òshun*. For many people, this grand finale is the real *Òshun* festival. On this day, a votary maid (*arugbá*), a virgin girl selected from the royal family through divination, carries a calabash containing items of sacrifice from the king's palace to *Òshun* grove, the venue of the festival. *Arugbá's* possession to the grove also features the chief priestess, the king and his household, chiefs, and members of Oshogbo community amidst drumming and singing.^{vii} On arrival at the grove, *arugbá* is greeted by thousands of participants and visitors who had been waiting for her to come. She later retries to *Òshun* shrine, located within the grove. The king later addresses the people after which he proceeds to the shrine to pray. *Arugbá*, the chief priestess and the king later return to the palace, marking the official end to the sacred part of the festival. Powerful drumming, exuberant dancing and singing continue throughout the festival.

These two ethnographic accounts highlight important features of Yoruba ritual performance. In both cases, musical instruments function as tools of worship and as icons of transcendental powers. In the *egúngún* performance, *bàtá* drums function as a symbolic representation of the spiritual significance of *lábiúàtá*. But the drum ensemble is also a major component of an entertaining musical performance through which the masquerade relates to his immediate physical and social environment. The masquerade, in spite of the burden that he carries physically (the heavy attire and the mask that he wears) and spiritually (his exalted state of mind as facilitated by days of praying and fasting prior to his outing), responds sporadically to the music, generating cheers from the audience. The procession of the masquerade to the king's palace and the demarcation of the space between the masquerade party and the royal dignitaries also illustrate the ways in which spiritual power is reconciled with political authority. Musical performance on *bàtá* drums helps to bridge the gap between political and spiritual powers, while facilitating a triangular interaction between spiritual power, royal authority, and the ordinary citizens of the community.

In the *Òshun* event, *dùndún* music helps to navigate the various "journeys" that take place during the festival. These include the procession of the votary maid to and within the grove; and the movements of the king between the two main physical spaces and domains of power at the arena of the festival: the political pavilion (from where he gives his annual address to his subjects) and the shrine (where he prays for them). In addition, *dùndún* music facilitates communication between *Òshun* and worshippers; and helps to delineate and integrate spiritual and political spaces and powers through musical renditions that identify and connect the personalities that define such spaces and powers. To further demonstrate the ways in which spirituality and sociality complement one another in Yoruba ritual performance, I shall now analyze an example each from *Òshun* and *egúngún* drum performances that I recorded in Oshogbo in 2007.

Drumming for Egúngún

My notation of standard drum patterns for *egúngún*, as performed by Ayantunde and his group, is shown in Figure 1, a polyrhythmic structure that may also be performed in honor of *Sàngó*, the deity of thunder and lightning. Figures 1 and 2 are provided at the end of the article. The patterns shown in Figure 1 are performed by four supporting drums (*omele*) of the *dùndún* ensemble, namely *kánran isáájú*, *kánran àtèlé*, *gúdúgúdú* and *aguda*. The patterns are defined within a 12-pulse cycle in which *gúdúgúdú* and *aguda* consistently play the smallest unit of durational movement, which I have represented as an eighth note pattern. Unlike *gúdúgúdú*, which supplies a two-pitch pattern, *aguda* supplies a pattern whose every third stroke is played by the palm of the left hand. This muffled sound contrasts with the remaining strokes of the instrument, which are produced through the use of a curved wooden beater (*kòngó*) of the right hand. The cycles generated by *gúdúgúdú* and *aguda* are in alignment with each other, while interlocking with those of *kánran isáájú* and *kánran àtèlé*. These ostinato patterns accompany the speech-based narratives of *iyáàlù*, the lead drum.

Although each *egúngún* is ascribed individual liturgical chants as defined by their specific familial and ancestral identities, some chants have become permanently inscribed into a common repertoire of materials from which excerpts may be performed for any *egúngún* ceremony. One such chant is known as *àkìjà* (motivational chant), chanted to rally a masquerade into action: to make him engage in, for example, a dance through which his spiritual powers may be brought into full force.

In the drummed *àkìjà* transcribed below, the phrases “My father eats only yam porridge, not cassava porridge” and “Have you given him anything?” remind all of the type of food that must be offered to this *egúngún*. Unless the appropriate food offering is provided, the *egúngún* will neither dance nor respond to the requests of his devotees. It is striking how the drummer alternates between “talking” to the masquerade (referred to as “my father”), and the audience. The drummer shifts from playing epithets loaded with imageries that convey the power and awe of the masquerade to a direct communication with the audience, telling them (through drumming) to pay their dues and respect to the masquerade. Those who refuse to honor the masquerade dishonor their ancestors and should therefore be punished accordingly. The references to food and dance in the drummed chant somehow also serve to demystify the supernatural identity of the masquerade. By urging the masquerade to dance, the drummer draws attention to the social environment of the masker and the need for him to entertain his audience. The drummer thus reminds the masker that although he embodies ancestral powers, he must also relate to his immediate physical environment and serve the social needs of the people.

“Bàbáà Mi Jíjọ” (My Father, Please Dance)

- i. Bàbáà mi jíjọ
My father, please dance
- ii. Ijọ leégún n jọ
A masquerade should dance
- iii. Bàbáà mi ì mää jègé, okà yókà
My father will only eat yam porridge, not cassava
- iv. Àtègé àtokà, èwo le fún baba
But have you given him anything?
- v. Ìdí abéré ókulè sára aso
The tail of the needle goes with the dress
- vii. Ìdí òpòlò ókulè sí kònkò
The tail of the frog goes with that of a toad
- viii. Bóo lóò dára, òrò àsimò
Punishment awaits those who refuse to honor a masquerade

Drumming for *Òshun*

Drum performances for *Òshun* are also of two types: the drummed chant of *iyáàlù* and the ostinato patterns of supporting drums, namely (in this example) *kánran isáájú*, *kánran àtèlé*, *gudugudu* and *aguda*. The *gudugudu* is particularly important because it is the one instrument that plays in full the rhythmic pattern that is associated with *Òshun* (see Figure 2). The two constituent phrases of *gudugudu* are also divided between *kánran isáájú* and *kánran àtèlé* as can be observed in Figure 2. The groove shown in Figure 2 constitutes what I would like to refer to as the sonic symbol of *Òshun* (because it is generally associated with the deity), and provides the cyclic foundation for *iyáàlù*, the instrument which plays the chants and songs that praise or supplicate the deity as illustrated in the excerpt below.

Àasà Bán Sé (Help Me, Aasa)

- i. Àasà bán sé, àasà bán sé
Help me, àasà (one of *Òshun*'s praise names)
- ii. Àasà bán sé, *Òshun* bán sé; pàmúrògòso
Help me àasà; pàmúrògòso (another praise name for *Òshun*)
- iii. Kí ní ñjọ? Omi ní ñjọ
What is it that is dancing? It is water that is dancing
- iv. Kí ní ñbò? Omi ní ñbò
What is it that is coming? It is water that is coming
- v. Ìyá ìjèshà, omi ní ñbò
The mother from Ijèshà; it is water that is coming
- vi. Omi ìrorùn ni mo fi sìn
Water of peace, goodness and comfort, we worship you
- vii. Omi ìrorùn la fi sìn
Water of peace, goodness and comfort, we worship you
- viii. Omi ìrorùn la fi sìn
Water of peace, goodness and comfort, I worship you
- ix. Ládékojú òshun Òshogbo
Wealth that is complete, *Òshun* of Òshogbo
- x. Ìyá ìjèshà, alómi lódù,
The mother from Ìjèshà, big storage of water
- xi. Ògbudù gbadà agbadà gbarawó
[Onomatopoeic epithet phrases describing the movement and sounds of *Òshun* River]

In the opening two lines of the chant, the drummer offers prayers for solutions to problems and for guidance from *òshun*. In the next four lines, he drums a variety of epithet words for *Òshun*. Phrases like “omi,” (water); “Ìyá Ìjèshà,” (the mother from Ìjèshà,); and “Omi ìrorùn” (water of peace, goodness and comfort) are part of a variety of epithets by which *Òshun* may be addressed. In the very last line, the onomatopoeic phrase “Ògbudù gbadà agbadà gbarawó” is descriptive of the sounds that accompany the movement of *Òshun* River as it traverses the undulating topography of its course. The recurring word “Ìjèshà” is historically significant. It refers to the people of Ilesha town, a place generally regarded as the ancestral home of Oshogbo people.

In this drummed chant, the drummer functions as the voice of other devotees and participants on whose behalf he drums imageries to praise and supplicate *Òshun*. For example, whereas he personalizes this act of worship in line six by drumming the phrase “Omi ìrorùn ni mo fi sìn” /I salute and worship with the water of peace, goodness and comfort,” he collectivizes it in lines seven and eight by performing the phrase “Omi ìrorùn la fi sìn” /We salute and worship with the water of peace, goodness and comfort. This reinforces his role as the voice of the people, an intercessor and synecdoche that conveys the devotion of the people to *Òshun*.

Conclusions

I have explored the ways in which drums, chants, and masks function as tools of performance and as objects of religious worship and how performers act as intermediaries between deities and humans. Drums and rhythms function as a means of delineating the character of deities and ancestral spirits, and of invoking and edifying their presence. The bifurcation of religious worship into public and private spaces exerts a significant impact on the organization and mediation of musical performance, the role of musicians, the musical functions and spiritual significance of musical instruments, and the content of instrumental and vocal performance. Sacred and private ritual offerings are usually followed by public performances (as enacted in festivals) in which community members participate. In the latter, the tone of performance is loud, celebrative and communal. As illustrated in *Òshun* Oshogbo, such festivals often constitute a thanksgiving performance that provides a closure to weeks and days of appeasements.

The conception of ritual performance to meet the social and aesthetic needs of the people while serving to edify spiritual beings speaks to the ways in which Yoruba religious cosmology is inscribed with social signification. And it is in this sense that the mediatory role of the performer becomes visible. In reciting liturgical and musical material, the Yoruba performer constantly balances the spiritual and social needs of his community. The performer ensures that objects of performance like musical instruments and masks simultaneously function as icons of spiritual devotion and as a means of generating a mode of cultural performance that entertains and facilitates social cohesion. Religious rituals are actor-mediated by drummers, singers and maskers whose actions facilitate spiritual devotion and social engagement.

Notes

¹ For further discussions on Yoruba religion, see Awolalu, W. 1979. *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites*. London: Longman; Idowu, Bolaji. 1962. *Olodumare in Yoruba Belief* London: Longman; Falola, Toyin and Genova, Ann (editors.). 2006. *Orisa: Yoruba Gods and Spiritual Identity in Africa and the Diaspora*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press; Lucas, J. O. 1941. *The Religion of the Yorubas*. Lagos: Church Missionary Society. McKenzie, P. R. "Yoruba Orisa Cults: Some Marginal Notes Concerning Cosmology and Concepts of Deity" *Journal of Religion in Africa* 8 (3), 189-207.

² For further discussions on the classification of Yoruba drums and their sacred roles, see Adegbite, Ademola. 1988. "The Drum and its Role in Yoruba Religion" *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 18, Fasc. 1 (Feb., 1988), pp. 15-26; and Ortiz, Fernando. 1954-5. *Los instrumentos de la música afrocubana*, 5 vols. Havana: Ministerio de Educacion.

³ I was at the family compound of the Adegoke family and was able to meet and discuss with the man who became the masker. He told me that he had been preparing for the occasion two days before, fasting and abstaining from alcohol. He warned me not to take pictures, an injunction which I took very seriously.

⁴ Members of this ensemble were drawn from within the town as well as from the neighboring town of Ikirun, just about twenty kilometers from Oshogbo.

⁵ In Yoruba societies, it is a taboo for a king to see a dead body. A masquerade being a symbolic representation of departed ancestors must also not be seen by the king.

⁶ For studies devoted to the practice of oshun religion in Yoruba Diaspora communities, see Castellanos, Isabel. 2001. "A River of Many Turns: The Polysemy of Ochun in Afro-Cuban Tradition" in Murphy, Joseph. M and Sanford, Mei-Mei (editors.) *Oshun Across the Waters: A Yoruba Goddess in Africa and the Americas* Bloomington: Indian University Press. Pp. 34-45; Ribeiro dos Santos, Ieda Machado. 2001. "Nesta Cidade Todo Mundo e d'Oxun: In This City Every One is Oxun's" in Murphy, Joseph. M and Sanford, Mei-Mei (editors). *Oshun Across the Waters: A Yoruba Goddess in Africa and the Americas* Bloomington: Indian University Press. pp. 68-83; Murphy, Joseph. M. 2001. "Yeye Cachita: Oxun in a Cuban Mirror" in Murphy, Joseph. M and Sanford, Mei-Mei (editors). *Oshun Across the Waters: A Yoruba Goddess in Africa and the Americas* Bloomington: Indian University Press. pp. 87-101; Flores-Pena, Ysamur. 2001. "Overflowing with Beauty: The Ochun Alter in Lucumi Aesthetic Tradition" in Murphy, Joseph. M and Sanford, Mei-Mei (editors). *Oshun Across the Waters: A Yoruba Goddess in Africa and the Americas* Bloomington: Indian University Press. pp. 113-127; Brandon, George. 2001. "Ochun in Bronx" in Murphy, Joseph. M and Sanford, Mei-Mei (editors). *Oshun Across the Waters: A Yoruba Goddess in Africa and the Americas* Bloomington: Indian University Press. pp. 155-164.

⁷ For a description of the festival see Olajubu, Oyeronke. 2003. *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere*. New York: State University of New York. Pg. 105-107.

⁸ The origin of the hourglass tension drum variety has been traced to the north of Africa and even the Middle East by scholars like Euba and Adegbite. See Adegbite, Ademola. 1988. "The Drum and its Role in Yoruba Religion" *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 18, Fasc. 1 (Feb., 1988), p. 17; Euba, Akin. 1990. *Yoruba Drumming: The Yoruba Tradition*. Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies. 37-60.

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Fig. I: Omele Parts for Egungun

The image displays four musical staves for the Omele parts of Egungun. Each staff begins with a double bar line and ends with a double bar line.

- Kanran Isaaju:** A single-line staff with a sequence of notes: quarter, quarter, eighth, quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter, eighth, quarter.
- Kanran Atele:** A single-line staff with notes: quarter, quarter, eighth, quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter, eighth, quarter. It includes a fermata over the eighth note and a slur under the final quarter note.
- Gudugudu:** A five-line staff with a sequence of notes: quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter.
- Aguda:** A single-line staff with notes: quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter, quarter. It features four slurs, each labeled with an 'H' underneath, covering pairs of notes: (1,2), (3,4), (5,6), and (7,8).

Figure 2: Omele Parts for Oshun

The figure displays four staves of musical notation, each representing a different part of the Omele for Oshun. The staves are labeled on the left as Kanran Isaaju, Kanran Atele, Gudugudu, and Aguda. Each staff begins with a double bar line and a common time signature (C). The notation consists of rhythmic patterns of notes and rests, with some notes beamed together. The Kanran Isaaju staff features a sequence of eighth notes and rests. The Kanran Atele staff shows a pattern of eighth notes with occasional rests. The Gudugudu staff consists of continuous eighth notes. The Aguda staff features a steady sequence of eighth notes.

Page 248: Fig.I: Omele Parts for Egungun
Page 249: Fig.2: Omele Parts for Oshun