

# Rhythms of the Gods: Music and Spirituality in Yoruba Culture

by

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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 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 the discussion on how ritual and musical material are composed, re-composed, organized and performed in Yoruba culture. The author posits that there is a conceptual engagement between the mediating role of Yoruba performers and the thematic and structural features of their performances. Also, Yoruba religious ritual performances are 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 *gelede* 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).

## Introduction: *Asa and Esin* 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 such mediatory roles. The masker, usually a male, physically relates to the human audiences who follow, tease, praise, observe, and perform with him. He must also relate to the divine presence of the ancestral forces that he embodies. The masker, just like the drummer, or the singer, performs within religious rituals, thereby navigating a balance between the two different modes of experience that he connects. 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 liminal agents 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, an expert on ritual performance, 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 *asa* (social reality and cultural practice) and *esin* (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 fixation of performance material as a symbol of religious belief on one hand, and the secular disembodiment of performance as a site for cultural expression and social dialogue, on the other.

The deployment of musical material to simultaneously enhance and demystify religious symbolism points to the ways in which religious rituals and performances resonate with social significance. References and allusions to mundane human situations even in the midst of the most serious and intense spiritual worship are not uncommon in Yoruba religious rituals. The musician or the performer and their 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 social conversation.

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 discussion on how ritual and musical material are composed, re-composed, organized and performed in Yoruba culture. There is a conceptual engagement 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 *gelede* 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 fieldwork conducted in Western Nigeria (Yorubaland) between 1990 and 2007. In addition to analyzing sacred drummed texts, two brief ethnographic accounts of two specific types of ritual performance--*oshun* and *egungun* festivals--as enacted in the Yoruba town of Oshogbo in 2007 are provided. The ethnographic descriptions are conceived to facilitate an understanding of how musical performance resonates with social and spiritual significance.

An extensive interaction with a group of Yoruba drummers who perform at the annual *oshun* festival is deployed to explain the deeper structure of musical performances. The two musical transcriptions and the translations of song texts that are analyzed derive from the performances by this group as rendered at the *oshun* sacred grove in Oshogbo in 2007. As a prelude to understanding the spiritual dimensions of Yoruba musical performances, it is instructive to briefly discuss the nature of Yoruba religious belief.

### **The Yoruba God (Olodumare) and His Deities (Orisha)**

Yoruba deities are numerous, numbering over a thousand.<sup>1</sup> The highly varied identities and the various roles of these deities are reflective of the dynamic nature of Yoruba religion itself and the ways in which it has evolved from time immemorial (see Barber, 1990: 313). New deities have been created over a long period of history during which important kings and leaders were deified as they died. The deification of humans draws attention to the Yoruba belief in the continuous roles of ancestral spirits. Departed ancestors, it is believed, merely pass on into another plane and phase of existence, and continue to participate, or interfere in the lives of mortals. The *egungun* cult, existing either as the collective spirit of the ancestors of a given community or as ancestral spirits of individual families, provides an important religious context for periodic veneration of, and interaction with, ancestral spirits by mortals who seek divine counsel to negotiate the human condition.

Ancestral spirits, deified gods, primordial gods and the Olodumare represent key agents within an elaborate belief system. As Alana (2004: 69) explains, the hierarchical nature of Yoruba gods may be broadly analyzed under three categories. First, among the deities are the primordial divinities that are “believed to have been with God from the time of creation of the world.” These “divinities of heaven” include *Orunmila*, the deity of knowledge and divination under whose jurisdiction is the Yoruba *Ifa*, a divination system through which people seek answers to confounding situations and seek solutions to challenging problems. Also in this category is *Esu*, the unpredictable god of human conduct, who can be both malevolent and benevolent, and who reports back to the Olodumare on matters relating to human activities. *Esu* acts as an intermediary between other gods and Olodumare, and indeed “receives a portion of the sacrifices offered to other divinities so that he might not stand in the way of the sacrifices.” Alana explains that “portions of both foods and drink are first of all offered to *Esu* before they are offered to whichever divinity that is being worshipped” (Alana, 2004: 71). In the second category are divinities that evolve through the deification of great humans. To this category belong *Sango*, the god of thunder and lightning, and *Ogun* the god of war, metallurgy, vengeance and justice. In the third category are gods that are associated with natural objects.

*Oya*, for example, is the goddess of the river Niger, while *Oke'badan*, and is associated with a sacred hill in the city of Ibadan. All deities, no matter their status within the hierarchy, are answerable to *Olodumare*, the supreme ruler of heaven and earth. Music plays critical roles in defining the personality of these gods and the structure of the Yoruba religion.

## 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. Even though these two categories are not mutually exclusive, Yoruba sacred ensembles are dominated by uni-embranophonic (single-headed) membrane drums. Prominent examples include cylindrical drums like *igbin*, *ipese*, and *ogidan*, each of which, like most sacred drums, is associated with a specific spirit or deity (Euba, 1990: 93). This is because “appropriate drums must be used for particular *orisha*, otherwise they [the devotees] will incur the wrath of their tutelary deity” (Adegbite, 1988: 16) Thus *igbin* is associated with *Obatala*, the arch-divinity and deity of children; while *ipese* is performed in ritual activities devoted to *Orunmila*. *Ogidan* drums are performed to appease and venerate *Ogun*. While sacred rituals are dominated by the use of uni-embranophonic drums, the *bata* ensemble, whose principal drums are bi-embranophonic, is the principal musical instrument of *Sango* worship.<sup>2</sup>

The *dundun* hourglass drum, which originally was regarded primarily as 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 making it possible for the drummer to generate different pitches and imitate the inflectional contours of the Yoruba tonal 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 *kiriboto*), and from earthenware (such as *apinti*).

The social and religious functions of Yoruba musical instruments often change over time. Oral information, for example, has revealed that *igbin* drum was originally a secular instrument played to entertain *Obatala* in his lifetime. He loved the sound of the drum so much that he named the different instruments of the ensemble after his wives, namely-*iya-nla*, *iya-agan*, *keke* and *afere*. *Iya-nla* is the principal drum, while *iya-agan*, *keke* and *afere* are the three supporting drums, known collectively as *omele*. The use of *igbin* drums assumed a sacred significance when they were adapted by the devotees of *Obatala* to accompany sacred rites in honor of their deity. Two drums, *bata* and *dundun*, whose roles and functions have also changed in recent times provide interesting perspectives on the ways in which the sacred and the secular have continued to merge in Yoruba performances.

*Bata*, originally a sacred instrument, now also performs in social contexts, while *dundun*, regarded generally as a social ensemble, now features prominently in sacred contexts. In addition to its continuous use in social performances, the *dundun* drum, because of its ability to “talk,” is now commonly employed in sacred contexts that were originally associated exclusively with drums like *bata* and *igbin*.

The association of instrumental ensembles with specific deities and religious activities illustrates the centrality of music to Yoruba religious worship. As tools of worship, musical instruments and their sounds are culturally regarded as bearers and icons of specific religious cults such that many ensembles derive their sole functional significance only within the context of their sacred rites. As Adegbite (1988:16) has observed, for example, drums like the cylindrical uni-membranophonic *agba-obalufon* and *ipese* are performed only very occasionally, sometimes just once in a year at specific annual festivals. Such sacred drums are rarely used in other contexts and are usually kept in sacred groves to be used only for ritual purposes.

### **Cooking the Drum: Ayangalu-the Deity of Yoruba Drumming**

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

It is interesting to note that *ida* and *kusere* also serve purely acoustic functions. A metallic frame at the base of the instrument, *kusere* provides an anchor for the series of leather strings that help to hold the drum-head membrane firmly. *Kusere* 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 that helps to partition the drum head surface into a couple of pitch areas.

The characteristic two-tone melo-rhythm of the *gudugudu* drum derives from the acoustic function of *ida*. All the drummers that I discussed with in Ila-Orangun, Oshogbo, Ikirun and Ibadan were aware of the sacred and acoustic functions of *kusere* 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 Yoruba performances, thereby mirroring the intersection of the physical and the spiritual in Yoruba cosmology. The awareness of these two complementary functions by the musicians draws attention to how Yoruba musicians conceive their roles as performers and mediators who reconcile material and spiritual needs.

Constructing a drum involves the enactment of rituals that are designed to appease the spirit of *Ayangalu* and to activate the spirits that are believed to dwell 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 *ilu sise* (the cooking of the drum). Items of appeasement used in this process often 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, who is also usually a drummer, would pray to *Ayangalu* to grant his drum *ofo*, potent speech utterance, and to protect the drummer 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. The sounds of the drums are performed to invoke the presence of deities, to break through the heavens and converse with the *orisha* (the deities).

Drummers also appease the spirit of *Ayangalu* before any major performance. This practice was enacted on many occasions during my field work. At Ibadan, for example, Musibau, a *bata* drummer that I have been working with for the past two years insisted on pouring libation and praying to the spirit of *Ayangalu* before performing and talking about his drums. Right in my presence, the two drummers took the dry gin that I had been told to bring, poured it on the drum, took a number of sips and splashed it from their mouths to the drums as a symbolic act of spiritual cleansing. On this particular occasion, the spirit of *Ayangalu* was invoked and appeased to enable drummers have a successful performance. The spiritual potency of drums and the interface of play and spirituality are most vividly illustrated within the physical and social context of musical and ritual performances. I shall now briefly discuss two such performances-*egungun* outing and *oshun* festival- as enacted in Oshogbo a Yoruba town in Western Nigeria in August 2007.

## **Yoruba Ritual Performance: Egungun Performance in Oshogbo and the *Oshun* Festival in Oshogbo**

On July 15, 2007, I watched a public “outing” (*ijade*) of *Labuata*, a masquerade in Oshogbo, Western Nigeria. *Labuata* is a family masquerade (*eegun idile*) of the Adegoke (sometimes pronounced Adeoke) family of Isale Oshun, Oshogbo. The July 15, 2007 “outing” is the first of its three annual performances. It is devoted largely to paying homage to the *Ataoja*, the king of Oshogbo. In its second appearance, the masquerade normally visits the homes of lesser chiefs to pay homage. He performs mainly to family members during its third and final appearance of the year. In spite of its status as a family masquerade, *Labuata*’s *ijade* is now regarded as a public performance, because it involves the participation of a large segment of the general public and enjoys the special blessing and interest of the *Ataoja*.<sup>3</sup> *Labuata*’s outing is accompanied by a *bata* ensemble consisting of a relatively large number of supporting drummers playing the *omele abo*, *omele ako* and *omele kudi*<sup>4</sup> (the three categories of supporting drums of the *bata* ensemble); and two master drummers who alternated on the *iyaalu bata*, the leading drum.

Given the rigorous nature of playing *iyaalu bata* drum 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. Strung across the two shoulders with the aid of a leather strap, the larger of the two drum heads of the *iyaalu* and *omele abo* drums (*oju ojo*) is usually played with the palm of the right hand, while the smaller drum head (*sasa*) is played with the left hand using a rubber or leather beater. The *omele ako* and *omele kudi*, both of which are usually tied together and played by a single drummer, are much smaller, and consist of only one drum head each. Since this is a public processional performance that attracts a relatively large audience, two additional *omele ako* and *omele kudi* are used. In describing the performance, the present tense is employed to convey the dynamics of its “ethnographic present.”

On the day of the outing of *labuata*, family members from far and near gather in the family compound together with friends, neighbors and members of the Oshogbo community. At about 12 NOON, the masquerade emerges from its chamber, a room inside the family house, and is immediately heralded by the sounds of *bata* drums. *Labuata*’s attire is a large tattered looking garment whose backside is covered by consists of a dry, unshaven animal skin-leather that hangs from the neck area down to the feet area. *Labuata*’s face mask is a carved wood consisting of three undulations, each of which represents the three children (two sons and a daughter) of the Adegoke family.



*Labuata* spends about twenty minutes by a small tree right in front of the house engaged in a sacred and private ritual. He prays for the Adegoke family and pours libations in honor of departed family members. The masquerade thereafter visits neighboring houses, before leading procession that must then go to the king's palace. We move together to the palace, where another crowd of people had gathered to await *labuata's* arrival. In addition to the sounds of *bata* drumming, female singers chant family epithets, while a male assistant continuously attends to the masquerade, adjusting its garments and engaging in quiet conversations with him.

The performance at the king's palace, about a kilometer from the masker's family house, lasts for about 90 minutes. The king and some of his chiefs emerge from inside the old palace and sit in the veranda, 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 between the masquerade party and the veranda of the *Ataoja*. Some of the pilots of the *egungun* 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.<sup>5</sup>

The performance of *Labuata*, drummers and chanters 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 ancestral veneration, and although a section-the opening part of the event- is a private ritual offering to ancestral spirits, the procession through the town and the performance at the king's palace represent an entertaining performance in which *Labuata* relates to and performs for the crowd around him. The arena of performance itself is dynamic and interactive as audience members sang, teased the ferocious masquerade.

*Oshun* festival is held annually in the town of Oshogbo as in many other Yoruba communities in Nigeria.<sup>6</sup> *Oshun* 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 oshun Oshogbo (oshun festival of Oshogbo), which is the most spectacular of oshun festivals anywhere in the world. Although a religious event to appease and venerate *oshun*--the Yoruba female deity goddess of beauty, who is also 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 modern leaders, notably the state governor and the Nigerian president, promote their political interests.

The annual *oshun* festival comes after series of rituals, many of which are restricted to a limited set of people. The first of these is known as *iwopopo* (street cleansing procession) performed to spiritually and physically cleanse the town. The procession consists of *oshun* chief priestess (*iya oshun*), chiefs, and members of the royal family. This marks the official commencement of the series of events that will culminate in the festival.

Of particular significance are the many events leading up to the *oshun* festival. These are designed to acknowledge the importance of other prominent Yoruba deities, although the festival itself is dedicated largely to *oshun*. On the fourth day, for example, the appearance of masquerades serves to venerate *Sango*, the god of thunder as well as the spirits of other ancestors. The ritual lightening of the 16-burner lamp (*atupa olojumerindinlogun*) on the sixth night is also of great spiritual importance. During this ritual, the king of Oshogbo, his wives dance round the lamp three times before dawn. This is a ritual event that is performed to venerate and connect with *Osanyin*, the Yoruba deity of herbal healing to which the lamp belongs. On the seventh day, *ifa* (divination) rites are held, while the eighth day is dedicated to honoring *Oya*, former wife of *Sango* (god of thunder) and deified female deity of the River Niger. Also celebrated on the eighth day is *Oro*, the god of the wind.

The final day, the ninth day of the festival, is dedicated to *Oshun*. On this day, a votary maid (*arugba*), a virgin girl from the royal family chosen through *ifa* divination, carries a calabash of items of sacrifice from the king's palace to the *oshun* grove, the venue of the festival. The procession is led by the chief priestess, the king, his royal household, chiefs, and members of Oshogbo community.<sup>7</sup> The procession is accompanied by a powerful ensemble of *Dundun*, or hourglass-shaped drums, singing and dancing. On arrival at the grove, the votary is greeted by thousands of participants and visitors who had waited for her to come before retiring to the shrine. The king later addresses the people after which he proceeds to the shrine to pray for his people. The votary returns to the palace, marking the official end to the festival. Powerful drumming, exuberant dancing and singing accompany every major procession within 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 and spiritual powers. In the *egungun* performance, *bata* drums function as symbolic representations of the ancestral powers of the *Labuata* masquerade. The drums as well as the sounds produced on them are central to the understanding and conveyance of the spiritual powers of the masquerade. The instruments as well as the unique sounds that are produced on them are iconic of the spiritual and ancestral forces represented by the masquerade. But the drums are not just tools of ritual worship. They are also musical instruments, functioning as integral units of a performance that is given full and unique animation each time the masquerade comes out.

Their roles as instruments of musical performance thus add another dimension to their significance within the event, since they function as a medium through which the masquerade relates to the immediate physical and social environment of the event. The drums for example help to facilitate an interaction between the masquerade and the teasing audience. The masquerade, in spite of the burden that he carries-physically (because of the heavy attire and mask that he wears), and spiritually (because of his exalted state of mind as facilitated by days of praying and fasting prior to his outing)-sporadically responds to the music, generating cheers from the audience. The procession of the masquerade to the king's palace and the demarcation of space between the masquerade party and the royal dignitaries also illustrate the ways in which spiritual forces are reconciled with social and political authority. Musical performance on *bata* drums helps to bridge the physical gap and effect interaction between royal and spiritual powers as well as facilitating communal interaction between spiritual, political forces and the ordinary citizens of the community that they serve to protect.

In the *oshun* event, *dundun* music helps to navigate the various "journeys" that take place before and during the festival. These include the transformative dance of the royal family during the lighting of the 16-burner lamp; the procession of the votary maid to and within the grove; and the movements of the king back and forth between the political pavilion and the shrine--the two preeminent physical spaces at the arena of the festival. While the king and modern political leaders occupy the pavilion, the devotees as well as the *arugba* stay inside and around the shrine, located just a few yards away from the pavilion. *Dundun* drums thus function as iconic representation of the spiritual identity of the *oshun* deity; facilitate communication between *oshun* deity and worshippers; act simultaneously to help demarcate and integrate spiritual and political spaces and powers through musical renditions that identify and help to connect the personalities that define such spaces.

As the two examples illustrate, Yoruba music, in addition to its role in enhancing the spiritual significance of ritual performance, plays vitals roles in generating the processional and performative (Drewal, 1991: 2-3) dimensions of such rituals. Music thus plays a critical role in activating a performance-oriented contemplation that draws attention to the social and physical environment of Yoruba religious events, elevates the status of the audience by drawing on the elements of "play and the improvisational" (Kasfir, 1998: 20), which compliment the spiritual significance of the ritual event. As illustrated by the *Labuata* event, the masker, though an embodiment of ancestral and spiritual forces, is a performer who mediates temporal and spiritual spaces. To further demonstrate the ways in which spirituality, materiality and performativity complement one another and are reconciled in Yoruba religious events, I shall now analyze musical and liturgical excerpts from *oshun* and *egungun* drum performances that I recorded in Oshogbo in 2007.

## Ilu Orisha: Rhythms of the Gods

As discussed earlier, every major Yoruba deity is associated with a specific instrumental ensemble. The musical delineation of the identity of Yoruba gods however goes even beyond this. Musical content, in form of rhythmic performances and chants, plays a profound role in the identification of deities, since every main Yoruba god is associated with specific rhythmic patterns and drummed chants. Amongst the many instrumental ensembles that perform at the 2007 *oshun* festival is a *dundun* ensemble led by a man called Sule Ayantunde. Ayantunde is a member of the family that has the responsibility of drumming for the more sacred aspects of *oshun* festival. The family holds the chieftaincy title of *are ilu* (chief of drummers) in Oshogbo. Ayantunde has been standing in for his uncle, the current holder of this title, who has been incapacitated for many years due to illness. Ayantunde's ensemble accompanies the votary maid's procession from the palace to the grove and within the grove; and the movement of the king back and forth between the pavilion and the shrine within the grove during the festival. He also performs for the various sacred rituals leading up to the final day as enumerated earlier. This ensemble's performances are drawn from repertoires that are exclusively associated with *oshun*, and with each of the deities that are venerated in the course of the 12-day series of rituals that precede the festival. The material that analyzed below is drawn from these repertoires as rendered in a special performance at the *oshun* grove in Oshogbo in July 2007. Although Ayantunde's ensemble was not the one that performed during the *egungun* event discussed earlier, my transcription and discussion of *egungun* drumming below is based on his performance for two reasons. Firstly, I was not allowed to record the *Labuata* performance to protect its highly sacred and esoteric components. Secondly, although the sounds of *dundun* are different from those of *bata*, the material content of the music that the two types of ensembles play for all the major Yoruba deities are essentially the same.

The unique position of the *gudugudu* as a sacred instrument within the *dundun* ensemble is complemented by its musical role. In most categories of ritual performances, the *gudugudu* plays unique melo-rhythmic patterns that set it apart from other instruments of the ensemble. The transformations that have taken place in the role of the *dundun* hourglass ensemble as a result of which the instrument may now perform sacred music, in addition to its continuous domination of secular social performances, relies significantly on the functions of *gudugudu*. The *gudugudu* was originally not a member of the Yoruba *dundun* ensemble. It is also not used similar hourglass ensembles from other West African ethnic groups like the Hausa of Nigeria and the Dagomba of Ghana. Furthermore, the *gudugudu* is often not included in Yoruba *dundun* social, non-sacred performances. The *gudugudu* is thus to exclusive Yoruba *dundun* ensembles, and used mostly for sacred purposes.<sup>8</sup>

The structural similarity between *gudugudu* and *bata* drums (through the use of *ida* and leather beaters) is indicative of its antiquated and sacred Yoruba origins. It is therefore not surprising that it is the only member of the *dundun* ensemble that is ascribed a spiritual significance as I have earlier explained. What is perhaps more important is the fact that the rhythms played on *gudugudu* often help to define the identity of the deity to which a particular musical style is attached. In the next sections I will discuss the music of *egungun* and *oshun* with an analytical focus on the roles of each instrument as well as the liturgical themes of drummed texts.

### **Drumming for *Egungun***

Two religious contexts provide the medium for the appeasement of ancestral spirits in Yoruba land: these are the family and the village sacred grounds, located within family homes and village/town groves respectively. The parallel existence of private and sacred spaces of worship is uniquely embodied in the Yoruba cult of *egungun*, the most visible symbol of Yoruba ancestral veneration. As shown in the discussion of *Labuata* masquerade individual families do have family masquerades, which are regarded as embodiment of departed ancestors. Such familial symbols and totems are however part of a wider religious belief, which manifests in the activities of powerful masquerades that symbolize collective ancestry of towns and villages. In both cases religious ceremonies are organized in two parts. The first of these is the private rituals involving elders within the family, followed by an open ceremony during which the masquerades process round the city. The public display of family masquerade illustrates the intersection of public and private spheres in the celebration of the Yoruba *egungun*. *Egungun* events illustrate the centrality of music and dance performance to Yoruba religious practice.

My notation of a typical standard drum patterns for *egungun*, as performed by Ayantunde and his group, is shown in Ex. 1, a polyrhythmic structure that may also be performed for *sango*, the god of thunder and lightning. The patterns shown in Ex. 1 are performed by four supporting drums of the *dundun* ensemble, namely *kanran isaaaju*, *kanran atele*, *gudugudu* and *kerikeri*. The patterns are defined within a 12-pulse cycle within which the *gudugudu* and *kerikeri* provided the smallest units of durational movement, which I have represented as eighth note patterns. Unlike the *gudugudu*, which supplies a two-pitch pattern, the *kerikeri* supplies a pattern whose every third stroke is played by the palm of the left hand. This muffled sound contrasts with the remaining strokes, which are produced through the use of the wooden beater of the right hand. The cycles generated by the *gudugudu* and the *kerikeri* are in alignment with each other, while interlocking with that *kanran isaaaju* and *kanran atele*, both of which start and end together. The tension that is generated within these interlocking cycles has come to symbolize *sango*'s ferocious personality and its invocations by *egungun* performers. The standard rhythmic patterns provided here constitute a typical example of the rhythmic grove that supports the dances and the chants that accompany an *egungun* performance.

Although each *egungun* is ascribed individual liturgical chants as defined specifically by familial and ancestral identities, some chants have become permanently inscribed into a common repertoire of materials from which excerpts may be performed for any *egungun* ceremony. According to Sule Ayantunde, the musical rendition for the public performance for *egungun* in Oshogbo often begins with a short vocal prelude known as *akija*-(motivating chant). *Akija* is chanted to rally a masquerade into action: to make him engage in a dance through which his spiritual powers may be brought into full force. *Akija* is chanted for the category of *egungun* that is known as *eegun alagbo*, charm-potent masquerades, which are believed to have unlimited capacity to cause spiritual harm to detractors or to any one considered an obstacle to the good of the society. *Labuata*, whose performance was earlier described, is an example of *egungun alagbo*.

In the liturgical texts transcribed below, the drummer performs a chant that is conceived to motivate a masquerade into action. The sort of action might range from a dance display, or a demonstration of its magical powers, depending on the category of masquerade performing. A masquerade might also be encouraged to bless since their words are regarded as powerful. In the drummed chant, 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 used as offering to the *egungun*. Unless the appropriate food offering is provided, the masquerade will neither dance nor respond to the needs and prayers of his devotees. It is striking how the drummer alternates between a conversation with the masquerade, which he describes as “my father,” and audience members. The drummer shifts from playing epithets loaded with imageries that convey the power and the awe of the masquerade to a direct communication with audience members who are admonished 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 also serve to demystify the spiritual 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 audiences. The drummer thus reminds the masker that although he is an embodiment of ancestral spirits, he must also relate to his immediate physical environment and serve the social needs of the people around him. The infusion of the element of play into an intensely religious event as illustrated here draws attention once again to the constant interplay between religious experience and aesthetic interaction in Yoruba performance.

## An Egungun Chant: “Baba Mi Jijo (My Father, Please Dance)

- i. Baba mi jijo  
My father, please dance
- ii. Ijo leegun n jo  
A masquerade should dance
- iii. Baba mi ma jege, oka y’oka  
My father will only eat yam porridge, not cassava
- iv. At’ege at’oka, ewo le fun baba  
But have you given him anything?
- v. Idi abere okule s’aso ara  
The tail of the needle goes with the dress
- vii. Idi opolo okule si konko  
The tail of the frog goes with that of a toad
- viii. Bo loo dara, oro asimo  
Punishment awaits those who refuse to honor a masquerade,

## Drumming for Oshun

The discussion here does not attempt to capture the spectacular musical displays at the festival, but rather to discuss signaling rhythmic patterns that are representative of the spiritual identity of oshun deity. Two principal *dundun* drumming modes are featured at the festival. These are the sacred and the social modes of drumming, *ilu oshun* and *alujo* respectively. Social drumming refers to non-ritual drum rhythms and drummed epithets that may be performed in a variety of contexts, and are not rigidly tied to any specific occasion. However, *ilu oshun* refers to rhythmic phrases and drummed-chants that are exclusively associated with *oshun*. *Ilu oshun* comprises of two categories: the drummed texts of *iyaalu*-the leading drum-and the rhythmic cycles of *omele* (supporting) instruments such as *karan isaaaju*, *kanran atele* and *gudugudu*.

Again, the sacred significance of *gudugudu* is particularly visible because it is the one instrument that plays in full the rhythmic pattern that is associated with *oshun*. As shown in Ex 2, the *gudugudu* part is defined by two tonally differentiated but complementary patterns, each of which is played on a different part of the drum head. To underscore the importance of this melo-rhythmic pattern, its two constituent phrases are also performed separately by the two other *omele* in the ensemble-*omele isaaaju* and *omele atele* as shown in Ex.2. These two different configurations of *oshun* pattern combine set up the distinctive groove that constitutes the sonic symbol of *oshun*. The groove provides the cyclic foundation for the improvisations of *iyaalu*, which is text-based, existing as instrumental renderings of the chants and songs that praise or supplicate the goddess. An excerpt from *iyaalu*’s drummed chant for *oshun*, *oriki oshun* (*oshun* praise chant) is provided below:

## **Aisha Ban Se (Help Me, Aisha)**

- i. Aasa ban se, aasa ban se  
Help me, aisha (one of oshun's praise names)
- ii. Aasa ban se, oshun ban se; pamurogoso s  
Help me aasa; pamurogoso (a praise name for oshun)
- iii. Ki ni njo? Omi ni njo  
What is it that is dancing? It is water that is dancing
- iv. Ki ni mbo? Omi ni mbo  
What is that is coming? It is water that is coming
- v. Iya ijsha, omi ni mbo  
The mother from Ijsha; it is water is coming
- vi. Omi irorun ni mo fi sin  
Water of peace, goodness and comfort, I worship you
- vii. Omi irorun la fi sin  
Water of peace, goodness and comfort, I worship you
- viii. Omi irorun la fi sin  
Water of peace, goodness and comfort, I worship you
- ix. Ladekoju oshun Oshogbo  
Wealth that is complete, oshun of Oshogbo
- x. Iya Ijsha, alomi lodu,  
The mother from Ijsha, big storage of water
- xi. Ogbudu gbada agbada gbarawo

[Onomatopoeic epithet phrases describing the movement and sounds of Oshun River]

The sacred rhythmic patterns and chants described above are conceived of as ritual offerings to oshun. The texts of the drummed chant as well as the drumming patterns are channeled as prayers or praise to Oshun. In the opening two lines of the chant, for example, the drummer offers prayers for solutions to problems and for guidance from oshun. In the next four lines, he drums a variety of epithet words for oshun. Phrases like “omi,” (water); “Iya Ijsha,” (the mother from Ijsha); “omi irorun” (water of goodness and comfort) are part of a variety of epithet images by which oshun may be addressed. In the very last line, the onomatopoeic phrase “ogbudu gbada agbada gbarawu” is descriptive of the sounds that accompany the movement of Oshun River as it traverses the undulating topography of its course. The recurring word “Ijsha” is historically significant as a reference to the cultural origins of Oshogbo town and its people. Oshogbo people trace their ancestral origins to the Ijsha people, a Yoruba sub-ethnic group who live in Ilesha, a town just about 30 kilometers from Oshogbo. 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 oshun.



Whereas he personalizes this act of worship in lines six and seven by drumming the phrase “omi irorun ni mo fi sin/I salute and worship with the water of peace and comfort, he collectivizes it in lines seven and eight by performing the phrase “omi irorun la fi sin/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 Oshun. The interchange between the personal and the collective helps to draw attention once again to the role of drummers and leading musicians as mediators whose voice and performance stand for the entire community.

Not all performances are conceived of as ritual offerings. During oshun festival I observed that drummers often perform for the purpose of celebration. I mentioned earlier, for example, that some drum rhythms played during Oshun festival are secular, conceived essentially as social dance rhythms. Such performances are deployed to engender interaction and communal celebration. Compared with the sacred and solemn character of drummed chants, celebrative performances are dynamic in tone and movement. The performance is highly interactive, motivating participants to join in the singing and the dancing. In such cases, the drummers focus more on the immediate, physical environment of the ritual event with a greater sense of interactive engagement amongst all participants. The drummers might for example move closer to a particular member of the audience and engage in a one-to-one interaction for a sustained period of time. The aim in such situations is to generate an atmosphere of celebration in which drumming, song, and dance are performed for heightened communal interaction.

## **Conclusions**

In discussing the relationship between music and spirituality in Yoruba culture, 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 spiritual forces and humans. Drums and rhythms function as a means of delineating the character of individual gods, of invoking their presence as well as of performing sacred texts associated with their worship. Furthermore, themes and structures of song texts and sonic textures are heavily influenced by the nature of Yoruba religion, typified by a hierarchical and complementary relationship between ancestral spirits, primordial deities and the all-knowing God of heaven and earth, the Olodumare. The bifurcation of religious worship into public and private spaces exerts significant impact on the organization of musical events, the role of musicians, the musical and spiritual functions of musical instruments, and the material content of instrumental and vocal narratives. It also illustrates the ways in which musical performances are organized and mediated.

For example, sacred ritual offerings are accompanied by solemn chants, often with minimal or without instrumental accompaniment, while public performances, which often follow immediately are enacted in the more visible public festivals at which community members celebrate a common ancestry, affirm group solidarity, and offer thanks to a deity. In the latter, the tone of performance is loud, celebrative and communal. As in the oshun festival, which is celebrated annually in the Oshogbo, such festivals often constitute a thanksgiving performance that provides a closure to weeks and days of appeasements, cleansing and corporate regeneration.

The intersection of the social and the spiritual both within the structural content of liturgical texts and specific performances as well as within the much wider context of festivals and religious ceremonies speaks to the ways in which Yoruba religious cosmology is inscribed with social significance. 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.

There is therefore no disjuncture between the iconic function of objects as tools of worship and the processional nature of religious rituals as a mode of social and cultural performance that is given contingent meaning through the behavior and action of performers and members of their communities at specific physical and social spaces as well as at specific historical moments. Religious rituals are performances, which are actor-mediated by drummers, singers and maskers whose actions contribute to the process of understanding the interactive relationship between spiritual forces and social experience. Music (in form of chants, songs, drumming and dance) serves as the principal means of communication between the Yoruba people and their deities. It also constitutes the avenue for intra-group cultural dialogue and for the strengthening of social bonds.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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 quite seriously.

<sup>4</sup> Members of this ensemble are drawn from within the town as well as from the neighboring town of Ikirun, just about twenty kilometers from Oshogbo.

<sup>5</sup> I later found out why the masquerade did not move close to the king. 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.

<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> 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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