

Chapter 4

RE-EXAMINING THE MUSICAL LEGACIES IN YORUBA /FA LITERARY CORPUS

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Abstract

Ifa literary corpus from time immemorial served as an invaluable 'warehouse' of the Yoruba indigenous belief-systems; including arts, science and technology, values and religion. Consequently, the practice of music as the most popular of the arts is preserved in *Ifa* literary corpus. In order to exhume the belief-systems and the authentic know-how of the traditional Yoruba music, *Ifa* literary corpus is therefore indispensable. This paper, using the literary analytical and biblio-musicological methods, highlights and interprets selected passages from *Ifa* literary corpus that bother on Yoruba musicianship. The objective is to reiterate the necessity of indigenous belief-systems for a more functionally and socio-culturally relevant music education and practice among the global Yoruba people. The paper reveals that the indigenous Yoruba musical elements as contained in *Ifa* literary corpus form the bedrock of original traditional Yoruba music. The paper therefore concludes on their radical inclusion and application to the contemporary Yoruba music theory and practice.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to highlight traditional musical practices preserved in the Yoruba *Ifa* literary corpus with the purpose of critical examination. The findings reveal the philosophical basis behind some of the Yoruba traditional musical arts. Clues as to the factors distinguishing Yoruba musical traditions from Western Musical aesthetics are also to be inferred from the assertions of this paper.

A lot has been written on *Ifa* literary corpus by Abimbola (1976, 1977a, 1977b) and others such as Ibie (1987), Armstrong et. al (n.d) and Babayemi & Adeola (1987a, 1987b, 1987c). These works featured the historical background, collections and analyses of *Ifa* oracles and *Ifa* chants. This paper is a literary-critical study of the *Ifa* texts that speak on musical arts in the Yoruba *Ifa* literary corpus. The approach is however ethno/biblio-musicological. One of the numerous literatures on *Ifa* written by Abimbola (1977a) is the resource text for this paper.

The Importance of Yoruba *Ifa* Literary Corpus

The *Ifa* literary corpus consists of the divination activities of Orunmila who himself is the Yoruba god of wisdom and divination (Adedeji, 1992). There are sixteen major divisions in the *Ifa* Corpus which are referred to as *Oju Odu* (the principal *Odus*) (Abimbola, 1976). These are similar to various book-units in the Holy Bible. The sixteen principal *Odus* are: *Eji ogbe*, *Oyeku meji*, *Iwori meji*, *Odi meji*, *Irosu meji*, *Owonrin meji*, *Okanran meji*, *Ogunda meji*, *Osa meji*, *Oturupon (Ologbon) meji*, *Otura meji*, *Irete meji*, *Ose meji* and *Ofun Orangun meji*.

These *Odus* are mathematically subdivided into another two hundred and forty minor *Odus* called *Omo Odu*, altogether making a totality of two hundred and fifty-six *Odus*. The minor *Odus* are similar to the chapterization of the Christian Bible. Each of the two hundred and fifty-six *Odus* has several lines called *ese* (verse) which grow from time to time in length.

According to Ibie (1986), Babayemi & Adekola (1987) and Abimbola (1976), the sixteen principal *Odus* are regarded as divinities in their own rights. They are believed to be the Apostles of Orunmila sent down from heaven after Orunmila's ascension. The other two hundred and forty minor *Odus* are also believed to be the children of the sixteen divinities. It is believed that these Apostles (sixteen divinities) worked while they were in heaven. Their works thus constitute the contents of the sixteen principal *Odus*. The divination works of their children also form the contents of the minor *Odus*.

While one may safely accept the deified positions of the sixteen principal *Odus*, the personification of other two hundred and forty sub-divisions may not be sensible. This is because they are mathematically sub-divided and composed. Since each of the principal *Odus* is merged with each of the rest fifteen so that each of the principal *Odus* is sub-divided into another fifteen, to personify them will not be logically explicable. (Adedeji, 1992).

Since the *Ifa* literary corpus consists of the past divination works of Orunmila and his Apostles, his divine words are inevitably found therein. The *Ifa* literary corpus therefore forms a major source of hearing from Orunmila and the other gods. It is the oracle of the gods. This is why each Babalawo (Diviner) has to memorise all the *Odus* and their verses. Whenever a client consults a Babalawo, he displays his *Ifa* paraphernalia which indicate the signatures of a particular *Odu*. It is from that particular *Odu* that the client will be guided. The content of any *Odu* always bothers on how previous similar problems were solved by Orunmila or his Apostles after he had divined for the client. Sometimes the *Odu* also consists of the doom or calamity that befell the client who might have been believed to have disobeyed or not to have faithfully carried out whatever was spelt out in the divination.

Ifa literary corpus remains the earliest of all Yoruba oral literatures. In it are found the wisdom and knowledge of Orunmila. Not only that, but most of the Yoruba philosophical thoughts are largely drawn from *Ifa* literary Corpus. The Yoruba believe that *Ifa* has the key to the knowledge of the past, present and future. Orunmila knows all things and reveals them in the *Ifa* corpus. Chapter two of *Ogunda meji* in *Ifa* corpus buttresses this claim:

Ifa lo lonii;
Ifa lo lola
Ifa lo lotunla pelu e
Orunmila lo nijo mereerin Oosa daaye...
(Abimbola, 1977a:10).

(*Ifa* has today
Ifa has tomorrow
Ifa has the next day with it
Orunmila has the four creative days...)

Most of the cultural traditions and religious values of the Yoruba are preserved in the *Ifa* literary corpus. This assertion was buttressed by Abimbola (1977b) when he wrote:

Ifa is the means through which Yoruba Culture informs and regulates itself and preserves all that is considered good and memorable in that society. *Ifa* is Yoruba culture in its true dynamic and traditional sense. *Ifa* is a means whereby a non-literate society attempts to keep and disseminate its own philosophy and values despite the lapses and imperfections of human memory on which the system is based (Abimbola, 14)

Having clarified the above fundamental issues, it is implied that *Ifa* literary corpus remains one of the few oral literatures that serve as a treasure house or a custodian of all traditional customs and practices of the Yoruba: Ethics, History, Science, Technology and various Arts, Music inclusive. This is why the traditional musical practices of the Yoruba could trace their origin and the principles underlying them to *Ifa* literary corpus.

The Legacies

One of the musical legacies found in the *Ifa* literary corpus is the role of singing in the Yoruba culture. Though there are several other roles, *Ifa* literary corpus reveals that the traditional Yoruba people sing whenever they are happy. In other words they do sing for the purpose of expressing happiness and joy. There are two excerpts from *Ifa* literary corpus to illustrate this assertion. *Ejiogbe* Chapter six has the followings:

Igba ti inuu won dun tan

Orin ni won n ko (Abimbola, 1977a:7);

(When they became happy,
they burst into songs).

Igba ti inu re e dun tan,
Orin awo ni n ko (Abimbola, 1977a:9)

(When he became so happy
he started singing cult songs).

These quotations from *Ifa* literary corpus imply that the traditional Yoruba man whenever he is happy bursts into songs.

The theological relationship between happiness and music is also shared in the Judaeo-Christian beliefs and practices. It forms one of the basic similarities between the traditional Yoruba musical practices and the Judaeo-Christian musical culture. This is inferred from the statement of James in the book of James Chapter 5 verse 13 of the Holy Bible when he said:

Is anyone among you suffering?
Let him pray
Is any cheerful?
Let him sing praise (R.S.V.)

This quotation teaches that just as a suffering Christian should find solace in prayer, a cheerful Christian should express his happiness through singing praises unto Jehovah. Today, among the traditional Yoruba society, this belief is still practised at large and it takes its legacy from the *Ifa* literary corpus.

Apart from the above, as implied in *Ifa* literary corpus, music also performs other functional roles such as sacred, educative, historical, therapeutic and communicative. It also serves as an instrument of social control by admonishing and warning people to desist from evil. (Also see Adedeji, 1997).

The second musical legacy found in the *Ifa* literary corpus is the relationship of music making and mood among the traditional Yoruba societies. Mood is indispensable in traditional Yoruba musical compositions. As revealed in the *Ifa* literary corpus, the source of musical compositions of the traditional Yoruba man/woman is mainly inspirational. He/She does not sit down to compose music like the white man/woman. The music is dictated by the level of

inspiration which has come from a happy mood. This kind of a spontaneous musical composition is found throughout the *Ifa* literary corpus.

Owonrin meji Chapter 3 records that when *Mofeeni* became rich and prosperous, he burst into singing.

Ni Mofeeni ba d'oloro, o d'alaje
O ya enu koto,
Orin awo ni n ko. (Abimbola, 1977:34)

Mofeeni became rich and prosperous
He opened his mouth spontaneously,
He started singing cult songs).

This same experience was recorded about a group of people that installed *Owonrin* as a Chief in *Owonrin meji* Chapter 7.

Won ya enu koto,
Orin awo ni won n ko. (Abimbola, 1977a:37)

(They opened their mouth suddenly,
they started singing cult songs).

Obara Meji Chapter 8 presents this fact in a more lucid form when it reads:

O ya enu koto,
Orin awo ni n ko. (Abimbola, 1977a:45)

(As he opened his mouth spontaneously,
a cult song 'entered' into his mouth).

Ogunda Meji Chapter 8 has also recorded this same practice of spontaneous musical composition. (Abimbola, 1977a:55).

In all the above quotations, a particular formula is common – *ya enu koto* (opened the mouth spontaneously). Opening the mouth this way and bursting into singing may depict the formation of a new musical piece, since it is implied that the singer did not know when and what he was singing. It therefore means that the musical composition which itself is born out of inspiration is spontaneous and new.

The third musical legacy in the *Ifa* literary corpus is the preservation of two musical types: panegyric type and cult (sacred) type. While the songs may look alike, the two musical types

are distinguishable. For instance, there is a statement found throughout the *Ifa* literary corpus to show that the music under discussion is panegyric. The statement in *Oyeku Meji* Chapter 8 reads:

O n yin awon awo re,
Awon awo re n yin *Ifa*. (Abimbola, 1977:15)

(He was praising his diviners,
His diviners were praising *Ifa*)

Similar statements are also found in *Iwori Meji* Chapter 3 and *Obara Meji* Chapter 1 (Abimbola, 1977a: 17, 39).

The person or a group of persons singing were recipients of miracles and blessings from *Orunmila*. What they then sang was praise unto god and appreciation for his oracles.

The term 'cult song' implies *Orunmila's* or *Ifa's* sacred song. It became so because the song was composed and sung to praise *Orunmila* or his sacred agents. One can infer from this conceptualization that the traditional Yoruba societies do have secular music also. This kind of distinction is also found in the Judaeo-Christian musical practices. References to '*Orin awo*' (cult song) are found throughout the *Ifa* literary corpus: *Irosun Meji* Chapter 5, *Obara Meji* Chapter 8, *Okanran Meji* Chapter 7 and *Ogunda Meji* Chapter 8. (Abimbola, 1977a: 29, 45, 50, 55).

Another musical legacy preserved in the Yoruba *Ifa* literary corpus is the art of dancing as a means of musical expression. The traditional Yoruba musical tradition is thus found to be a dancing one. It is an established fact today through daily experiences and researches that the Western aesthetic art of merely listening to music is foreign to Africans. Africans would always want to respond to musical performances by active participation, such as in dance. In *Ifa* literary corpus, dancing is seen as part of the musical art. *Oyeku Meji* Chapter 8 records that *Akapo* was dancing and rejoicing as he sang.

Ijo ni Akapo n jo
Ayo ni n yo (Abimbola, 1977a:15).

(Akapo was dancing as he was rejoicing...).

Iwori Meji Chapter 3 records another dancing scenario as it reads:

Ijo ni awon omo araye n jo
Ayo ni won n yo... (Abimbola, 1977a:17).

(The people on earth started dancing

as they were also rejoicing).

In *Odi Meji* Chapter 4, the traditional Ife people were seen dancing. It reads:

Ijo ni awon ara lfe n jo
Ayo ni won n yo... (Abimbola, 1977a:24).

(The Ife people were dancing
As they were also rejoicing).

Obara Meji Chapter 8 presents the dancing of the traditional King of *Ado* more figuratively when it reads:

Ese ti o na
Ijo fa a... (Abimbola, 1977a:45).

(As he reached out his leg,
dance drew it).

The figurative presentation in *Obara Meji* implies that just as it is in song composition, the dancing is also spontaneous. It implies that the King of *Ado* did not know when he started dancing. The dance there is born out of inspiration or supernatural motivated instincts.

Another very important musical legacy found in the *Ifa* literary corpus is the employment of musical instruments in traditional Yoruba music. Two categories of musical instruments are found to be used in the traditional *Ifa* music (using the taxonomic classification of Sachs Hornbostel). These are idiophones and membranophones. Of the idiophones, the most prominent is the *Agogo* (gong).

Under the membranophones, different types of drum-ensembles are mentioned in the *Ifa* Literary corpus. The *Ipese* or *Aran* drum ensemble is the traditional sacred ensemble of *Ifa*. This has been confirmed by Daramola and Jeje, Afolabi Olabimtan et. al., Abimbola Wande, Mosunmola Omibiyi and Adedeji (See Adedeji, 1992: 70).

Other drum ensembles mentioned in the *Ifa* literary corpus are the *Agba*, the *Gbedu*, the *Ogidan* and the *Dundun*. While the *Agba* drum ensemble consisting of three drums is considered to be another *Ifa* drum ensemble according to Abimbola (1976), Omibiyi (1978) associated the ensemble with the *Ogboni* cult and the *Obalufon* worshippers. Vidal (1987) has also identified the *Agba* of the Yoruba Chiefs. But according to Adedeji (1992), the *Ipese/Aran* ensemble is called the *Agba* at Ilisan by the Orunmila worshippers.

The *Gbedu* and *Ogidan* were described by Abimbola (1976) as the *Ifa* diviners' drum ensembles. The *gangan* mentioned in *Ifa* Corpus refers to the *dundun* ensemble. The *dundun* drum ensemble unlike others which are upright consists of hourglass tensioned drums, *gudududu*, (a cylindrical drum), the *agogo* (gong) and sometimes the *sekere* – (rattle, and idiophone). The *dundun* ensemble is the traditional Yoruba ceremonial ensemble used in both secular and religious functions. In *Irosun meji* Chapter 8, the people of *Enpe* are found to be dancing to *gangan* drumming. Not only that, the *gangan* was used to 'talk'. This is why it is called the 'talking' drum.

Won wa bere si i jo gangan
 Onigangan n wi pe:
 'Ope n fo Tapa,
 E o gbo ni?
 Edu mo mo n fo Tapa
 E o gbo ni?
 Ope n fo Tapa
 E o gbo ni? (Abimbola, 1997a:81).

(They started to dance to gangan's drumming
 The drummer was saying (on his drum)
Ope is speaking *Tapa* (language of the Nupes)
 Don't you hear?
Edu is speaking *Tapa* language
 Don't you hear?
Ope is speaking *Tapa* language
 Don't you hear?)

The *Irete Meji* in its Chapter 5 mentions three of the above-named ensembles as shown below:

Agba n subu lagba
 Ogidan n subu logidan
 Ipese n subu lupese (Abimbola, 1977a:ix, 37).

(Many *Agba* drums were sounding together
Ogidan drums were sounding together
Ipese drums were also sounding together).

The *Ifa* drum ensembles were praised in *Ifa* poems as revealed by Abimbola (1977a).

Agogo n ii poro
 Aran ni ikija

Opa kugukugu lojule Iserimogbe
Won s'opa s'aran
O mu ti'nu u re jade
Won yi Agba si morun aiku (Abimbola, ibid).

(The gong neutralizes,
The *Aran* settles crisis
Drumming sticks are found at *Iserimogbe's* house
Aran is beaten with sticks
The *Aran* 'voices' out
The *Agba* is beaten to sound to eternity).

Also according to Abimbola (1977a), both the *Agba* and the *Ipese* are praised thus:
Agba b'ori pete
Ipese ab'agbari jinjin kunjin (Abimbola, ibid).

(*Agba* is of a flat cover
Ipese is of a heavy sounding cover).

The above praise-poems refer to the description of the physical properties and the sound qualities emanating from the *Ifa* musical instruments

The Ika Meji in its chapter 3 describes how the *Gbedu* drum is beaten and also the importance of *Ifa* drums, when it says:

Omo fofo t ii fo didun l'Egun
Ojo a kolu sile la o reegun
A ko ape sinu ile fun omo Elebora
Se bi opa nla nla
Ni won fii lu gbedu aran fun ayaba
Olorun n lu pese
Enikan o bo si'jo (Abimbola, 1977a:62).

(A speaking child that speaks nice things at *Egun*
The Egungun was not seen on the day the drums were brought out.
Earthen pots were kept in the house for the genie
It is with the big sticks
the *Gbedu aran* was played for the queen
God is beating the *Ipese* drum
Who will not want to dance?

The most important musical legacy found in the *Ifa* literary corpus is the preservation of traditional Yoruba songs or hymns. In *Ifa* corpus is contained an anthology of traditional Yoruba song forms. The poetic forms found in the *Ifa* literary corpus have been retained in the traditional Yoruba music till today.

According to Vidal (1981), the poetic forms of traditional Yoruba songs can be divided into major categories, viz; the short verse form and the long verse or litany form, with the short verse form sub-divided into binary, ternary, quaternary, quinary, hexanary, septenary, octenary and nonary line constructions. Looking at the structures of the songs in *Ifa* literary corpus, one could identify all the above forms there. The texts of some of these songs and their translations are found in the appendix at the end of this paper.

Finally, the *Ifa* literary corpus has been very instrumental to the development of Yoruba music generally because the contents have served as one of the sources of Yoruba textual musical compositions. Under traditional Yoruba classical music, chants such as *Iyere Ifa*, *Oferere*, and *Ifa Ibule* have evolved, all of which are based on the texts of *Ifa* literary corpus. Also, some of the current Yoruba folk songs are based on *Ifa* texts. Where direct retention has not taken place, both the musical and poetic structural forms have been retained till today. This is why one can easily find these forms in both traditional Yoruba folk and popular genres and even in Yoruba Church music. Of all the poetic forms, the quaternary is prevalent today, thus confirming Vidal's assertion that the most common construction in the short-verse form is the quaternary line.

Examples of songs in quaternary line constructions are:

Oba o Oba alase, Oba
Oba o Oba alase, Oba
Ki la n f'Oba pe?
Oba o Oba alase, Oba (anonymous).

(King, Oh the authoritative King
King, Oh the authoritative King

O fee kan o ran
O jiyan tan o
O jiyan tan, o keba s'apo
O fe e kan o ran o, eh

(It will soon be your turn
You ate pounded yam

You then smuggled pounded cassava into your bag
It will soon be your turn).

Oni ba e mu 'kara k'omo o ko na 'wo soke
Emi rian
Emi rian lee mu 'kara komo o,
Mo na 'wo soke
(Those who desire to bless their children should raise up their hands
Yes, I am one of them
I am one of those who will bless their children
I raise up my hand)

Conclusion

This paper has been able to highlight the importance and relevance of *Ifa* literary corpus to the contemporary practices and study of Yoruba Music. In it is preserved the traditional Yoruba musical arts and legacies, just as it has preserved other Yoruba cultural patterns. Considering the bulk of musical materials inherent in *Ifa* corpus and its inseparable interrelationship with music, it can therefore be concluded that the *Ifa* literary corpus is in itself musical.

Secondly, the Yoruba could be seen as a highly musical people. There is a close fusion of religion and music in the culture. It could be said that the Yoruba culture is musical just as its music is also cultural. In the same way, Yoruba religion is musical while Yoruba music is also equally religious. This interrelationship also exists between Yoruba culture and its religion, thus the three are inseparable.

Finally, the *Ifa* literary corpus serves as an unlimited compositional resource to art and popular music composers and also constitutes a valuable source of information to researchers in traditional Yoruba music. Based on the above conclusion, it is recommended that authentic Yoruba music should derive its aesthetic philosophy, composition, instrumentation, performance practices, technology and functionality from the Yoruba indigenous belief system as preserved in *Ifa* literary corpus.

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Appendix I

Words and Meaning

Akapo	A diviner that kept the <i>lfa</i> bag which contained <i>lfa</i> paraphernalia.
Babalawo	An <i>lfa</i> priest and a diviner.
Egungun	Ancestral spirit that appears in a masked human form.
Enpe	The name of an ancient town in the middle belt area of Nigeria.
Erigi Alo	A praise-name of Orunmila.
Iyere	The name of an <i>lfa</i> chant.
Mofeeni	The name of a mythical person.
Odi	The name of a mythical Apostle of Orunmila.
Owonrin	The name of a mythical Apostle of Orunmila.
Yegede	Another Yoruba equivalent of the English 'Hurrah'.

Appendix II

Some *lfa* Song-Texts

Below are few excerpts of song-texts from *lfa* literary corpus. There are still several others (see Abimbola, 1977a: 7, 15, 18, 40, 45, 55, 63, 82).

1. Ro rere O
Ika, ro rere
Ohun ti Ogede se f'agbe lo po,
Ro rere
Ika, ro rere (Ejiogbe Chapter 8 in Abimbola, 1977a:9)

(Think twice
Cruel man, think twice
The plantain tree is so precious to the farmer,
Think twice
Cruel man, twice).

2. Odi O
 Agbalagba lfe
 Odi O
 Agbalagba lfe (Ode Meji Chapter 4 in Abimbola, 1977a:24)
 (Odi
 An aged man of lfe
 Odi
 An aged man of lfe

3. Kini yoo ba mi tunwaa temi se?
 Orunmila, ibaa mi, Eriji Alo
 Ni yoo ba mi tunwaa temi se (Irosun Meji Chapter 5 in Abimbola, 1977a:29)

 (Who will help me reform my behaviour?
 Orunmila, *Eriji Alo* my father,
 He is the one that will reconstruct my behaviour).

4. A f'Owonrin joye loni o
 Ire de
 Yegede
 A f'Owonrin joye loni o
 Aje
 Yegede
 Eni bimo biye lo bimo
 Yegede (Owonrin Meji Chapter 7 in Abimbola, 1977a:37)

 We have coronated Owonrin today
 Blessing is here
Yegede
 We have coronated Owonrin today
 Prosperity is here
Yegede
 It is when your child lives that you could say you have a child
Yegede).