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The Cultural Semantics of Yoruba Drum Poetry

Abstract: The inevitable incursion of modernity and technology in post-colonial African Yoruba societies is rendering the nobility and royalty attached to drum poetry among the ancient Yoruba people irrelevant, as understanding the meaning of drum poetry marks the nobility and royal inclination of the decipherer. This article reviews previous studies on drum poetry/literature with participant observation/field investigation used in the collection of data. It taxonomizes drum poetry into sacred and secular. It also draws comparisons to and finds similarities with how humans and drums communicate. This paper arrives at the conclusion that tone and tonal marks within situational contexts are the hallmarks of the semantic interpretation of drum poetry.

Keywords: humans; meaning; tonal marks

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1 Introduction

Drumming is an ancient art among the Yoruba of western Nigeria in particular and among Africans in general. In the ancient Yoruba towns, the nobility was attached to drumming because the art was not meant for "all-comers". Drumming and the understanding of what a drum "says" was, in ancient times, an indication of the social status of the drummer/interpreter. In those days, especially among the Yoruba, talking with the drum was an ascribed profession restricted to particular households. It is therefore for this reason that a level of social distinction was attached to whoever could talk with the drum. Drumming, then, required some considerable level of expertise because a drummer should be well trained in the art. This view is expressed by Bade Ajayi (1987: 40) thusly, "drumming is an art that requires skill and perfection that cannot be attained without an adequate training". It should be stated here that in ancient Yoruba societies, drumming was a family profession and thus the name "Ayan" family. This may account for the reason that a master-drummer from the Ayan family used to refuse training someone from a non-drummer family until more recent

times, provided the applicant could pay the required fees. A child born into the Ayan family began learning the art of drumming from childhood and this makes the training of a drummer a life-long process. In the ancient Yoruba societies, the professionalism of an oral artist was enhanced by birth, learning, and consistent performance.

The nobility attached to drum literature was enhanced by the insistence of the kings to have drummers within the palace. Drummers who are also known as court drummers played significant communicative roles in the palace. The palace drummer communicates with the king by means of his drum about the happenings at the palace's gate. Ruth Finnegan (1968: 118) says:

> Among many West African peoples, drummers at a king's gate play not only the king's praise names, but announce and honour important guests by drumming or piping their names as they enter the palace.

From Finnegan's observation, it can be inferred that palace drummers used their drums to sing the king's praises (oriki or panegyric) and to bring to the king's awareness the presence of certain visitors in the palace. Oba Adetoyese, Laoye I Timi of Ede (1959: 9) identifies four functions that drummers performed in the palace: (i) announcing the arrival of important visitor(s) to the palace, (ii) announcing the departure of important visitor(s) from the palace, (iii) sending messages to announce the arrival of important visitors at social ceremonies, and (iv) reciting oriki. Finnegan's observation thus supports Oba Laoye's observation. The latter, however, adds that palace drumming is used to announce the arrival of the king from the inner room into the court, especially in a responsorial mode as shown below:

Drum leader: *Eru Obani mo ba Oba to!*

The palace audience: *Kabiyesi o! (prostrating or kneeling as applicable)*

Drum leader: *It is the king I hold with awe, the dreaded being!*

The palace audience: *Kabiyesi o! (curtseying)*

Of all the drum functions in the palace listed previously, Oba Laoye is of the opinion that the use of the drum in reciting *oriki* is the most important of the functions. Despite the inexhaustiveness of drum functions in the palace, drums have often been a symbol of the power of a traditional political leader, and expert drummers (*ayan*, in Yoruba) had considerable social status in ancient Yoruba communities.

2 Forms of Drum Poetry

Western scholars cannot say with precision where the drum literature came from, when it was invented, or why it was invented, but one certain thing is that the art of drumming among the Yoruba is an indispensable cultural trait reflecting their cultural identity. It is therefore observed in this paper that despite the myth and mythology that surround the origin of drum poetry among the Yoruba, the art has been able to stand the test of time, as its expressive power has been acknowledged and adapted by different cultures of the world. This primordial literature among the ancient Yoruba did not primarily function as musical accompaniment but rather it was used as a means of communication.

Despite the mystery of the origin of drum poetry, there is a concession, according to oral history, that the Dundun ensemble came from the Oyo people. The Oyos of the ancient time, according to oral tradition, were the first to use the Dundun ensemble as communicative and entertainment tools. Oba Laoye (1966: 35) describes all the drums "in the western Nigeria as being in sets consisting of two or more drums of various sizes and shapes and one of them is usually called iya (mother) of the set. The role of talking is usually assigned to iya (mother) in any ensemble".

In a recent study Mobolanle Sotunsa (2005: 34) observed "some of the drum sets are used for purely religious and traditional ceremonies while others are used for both religious and secular functions". As a ready taxonomy of drum poetry, this paper classifies drums into sacred drums and secular drums. Sacred drums are used during ancestral worship and other ritualistic performances while secular drums are used during social events such as naming and burial ceremonies, the coronation of a new king, and a host of other social functions.

Each drum has its own peculiar performance occasion according to the dictate of the people's culture and custom. Olu Daramola and Adebayo Jeje (1975: 171) contribute to this by saying:

> The drums we use during the ritualistic performances differ considerably from the drums we use during secular performances. The drumming during the coronation of a new Oba or during the marriage ceremony differs from the drumming during an egungun festival, ifa divination, or the worship of Obatala.

Different deities in Yoruba land have their respective drums. It is therefore inappropriate to use the drum ensemble meant for Ifa for Orisa-nla. The major reason may be in the form of the message to be relayed. In the ancient Yoruba land, Bata is the drum for the Sango worshippers. The style of drumming Bata ensembles is different from that of Dundun ensembles. The beat of a Bata en-

semble is fast and its choice for Sango worshipers may be due to the temperament of this god of thunder and rain – irascibility. Oral history had it that Bata snatched Roro, Sango's wife. After some sacrifice, Sango was able to get his wife back and Bata eventually became one of the servants of Sango. Bata was used to pacify Sango anytime he was angry and this is why even today, Bata is used during the worship of Sango. Apart from the use of Bata drums among Sango worshippers, the drum ensemble is used by masquerades among the Yoruba and it is generally observed that a Bata ensemble is the appropriate drum when a masque is leaving "igbale" (the sacred groove) for a public performance. Specifically, a Bata drum ensemble is the most appropriate of all drum ensembles to be beaten for the masquerades that engage in acrobatic displays during their outings. Among the Yoruba of Ibadan, there is a set of masquerades *(ailabola)* that engage in acrobatic displays mainly for the purpose of entertainment. These sets of masquerades attend social events to entertain the guests. This is the major reason for the axiomatic expression among the Yoruba that "Ailabola lo ni okiti" ('acrobatic display is that sole reserve of the Ailabola masquerade'). The inextricable attachment of a Bata drum ensemble to the worship of Sango is buttressed by Ulli Beier (1950):

> The Yoruba have many other drums besides Dundun, and to some extent all those can talk. Most notable, among them is 'Bata', the special drum of sango, the thunder god. {culled from www.batadrums.com}

It is established from the submission of Beier above that the Bata drum is a sole preserve for the worship of Sango.

It is a cultural assault to the ancestral spirits when an improper drum ensemble is used during a ritualistic performance for particular deities. Sango is known with a Bata ensemble and it is improper to use this drum ensemble during an Ifa divination. During the Ifa festival, Ipese is the drum ensemble commonly used. Any other drum ensemble during the Ifa festival is inappropriate. Ipese or Ipesi is also used at the burial of an Ifa priest. The main purpose of using Ipese is to pay last respects to the departed soul and at the same time to draw a line between the living and dead. Only the initiate can beat Ipese and the meaning of what Ipese is saying is decipherable by the initiates. Daramola and Jeje (1975: 172) give the four sets of "Ipese as Ipese (itself), which is the biggest of the ensemble. Afere, Aran, and Agogo (which is made of metal)".

The sacred drums of the Yoruba also include *Igbin* and *Agere*. Igbin belongs to Olorisa – oko worshippers. This drum ensemble is stationary and this enhances its sacredness as the non-initiates cannot enter the sacred groove where the drum is stationed. Agere, on the other hand is the sole preserve of the hunt-

ers. This drum ensemble is used when the hunters celebrate certain events or activities. Apart from this, during Isipa for the deceased hunter, Agere is drummed. The hunters hear the "voice" of Agere and subsequently hearken to it. In the words of Daramola and Jeje (1975: 173), Agere can be classified into three: viz, Agere (itself), Feere, and Afere. In her own contribution, Sotunsa (2005: 34) says, "Agba Obalufon is a set used by obalufon worshippers and the Gbedu is used by the Ogbonis – a religious cult – and kept in their 'iledi' (sacred groove) or shrine".

Apart from the sacred use of drums for ritualistic performances, drums among the Yoruba are used for ceremonial purposes. Today, in contemporary society, itinerant drummers are seen as gatecrashers at any social event just to entertain people (through their art) for material reward. At a naming ceremony, house warming, chieftaincy ceremony, and other social functions, Dundun drummers of different ranks and files swarm the occasion to practice their art. What is observed today is that the Dundun ensemble is usurping the function and relevance of other drum ensembles. The reason might be due to its easy transportability and the ease with which it may be used to imitate human speech. A keen listening ear that is well groomed in Yoruba tonal marks can hear and decipher (with relative fairness) the message of a Dundun ensemble when it "talks" because of its close approximation of the human voice. The next part of this paper examines this use of drum poetry among the Yoruba.

2.1 Yoruba Drum Poetry

Drums of various types that are present among the Yoruba are used for various aesthetic and communicative functions. These drums however, may be used in conventional and unconventional ways. Like court historians and palace griots, palace drummers also keep and record the history of his race and tribe. While using a drum to narrate history, a palace drummer may recount a story to serve the purpose of narration. This paper therefore observes that a talking drum in the hands of the palace historians is a political instrument used for the legitimization of certain mythic discourses and thus talking drums become historical channels.

Apart from this, the drum may be used as a political instrument in that it may be used to legitimize a myth, which itself is a kind of political instrument. Among the Yoruba of Oyo and Ile Ife, there remains a controversy regarding superiority as a result of different myths of creation. Different histories have therefore emerged as to the myth about the origin of Yoruba people. A palace drummer who is versed in the history of his people and tribe may twist and re-

create this myth to please his people. This is possible because not everybody understands what a drum says. It is therefore proposed in this paper that a drum in the hands of expert palace drummer(s) is a viable weapon of imposing the political hegemony of one set of people on another. The same opinion has been previously shared by Andrew Apter (2002:14), who observes that the Yoruba often:

> Reenact founding myths of lineages, quarters, towns, and entire kingdoms in installation ceremonies and annual *orisa festivals, using talking drums and songs to communicate textual* fragments in extremely formalized modes of transmission.

In his book, *The History of the Yorubas*, Samuel Johnson (1921: 3) says that the arokin, or official Oyo historians who figured prominently among his primary sources, were also the Alaafin's (Oyo king's) "bards", drummers, and cymbalists. Apter (2002: 14) observes that these historians were court functionaries who performed historical narratives in the formalized languages of *oriki* (praises), songs and ***talking drums*** during royal and religious ritual (emphasis mine).

In contemporary Yoruba society, politicians make use of drum poetry for political campaigns and political socialization. Ajayi (1992: 7) observes:

> The Yoruba talking drum is a powerful weapon in the hands of our political leaders, especially when they go out to campaign. It also plays a great and significant role in the social mobilization of the Yoruba society even in spite of the invasion of the society by European standards.

Most political campaigns in Yoruba land specifically and Nigeria in general end up in violence partly because of the inactions of the drummers and political intolerance of candidates and their supporters. Drummers during a political campaign use their drums to sing invectives. Based on stimulus – response theory, the supporters of the opponent candidate that can interpret meaningfully the drum message start fomenting trouble.

Like every human speech, drum poetry has the tendency of intentional misinterpretation owing to some personal and social prejudices. This may account for why drum poetry during the political campaign and Egungun festival often results in violence and arson.

Apart from serving as a tool of re-narrating the myth or history, a drum is used for ambivalent purposes in life outside the palace. The ancestral worship of Egungun among the Yoruba was known to be entertaining and peaceful as this was the time when the living were believed able to commune with dead ancestors. Today, there is a new song during the worship of Egungun. The radi-

cal drumming has changed the tempo of the festival. The rhythm and orderliness that used to accompany the festival are now living in the forgotten memories of the past. In our contemporary societies, radicalism has accompanied the Egungun festival because of the ruptured effects drumming and "drummatology" have on the psyche of the masque (himself) and his veterans. A drummer may drum to foment trouble or to incite rebellion against another masque. During one of the fieldworks for the present study, it was observed that the drummers changed the rhythm and the message of their drumming to incite rebellion, as shown in the following example:

O o le, o o le

Bi I baba re

You are a coward, a coward you are

Unlike your father (who is courageous)

This was drummed when one masque met with another and as the trouble was about to start, the drummers changed the message of the drum in order to warn the irate masques, but the harm had already been done. The text is given with a free translation below:

Iwo nikan ni o ku

Bi o kan lapa

Ti o kan nitan

Iwo nikan ni o ku

You shall bear the pain alone

If you suffer broken arms

And broken legs

You shall bear the pain alone

The amazing thing was that by the time the two groups began fighting, the drummers hid their drums under their flowing garments (*agbada*) and picked a race. A drum, which is intended to have a therapeutic effect on the psyche of individuals in the society, is now being used to rupture their emotion and eventually put them on the track of hooliganism and thuggery during a masquerade festival.

Despite this abuse of drum poetry, it has been helpful in transmitting culturally coded messages (*aroko*). Ancient Yoruba towns formerly communicated through coded messages decipherable within the cultural context. This can also be done through drumming. An illustration of this is seen in *Saworo Ide*, a video film by Mainframe. In this film, Ayangalu sends a message via his drum to his son (Ayanniyi), living in another community, to come back home. This is achieved when certain things have been done. For instance, Ayangalu uses a feather to pick his right ear and then puts the same feather within the membrane holding the brass bells. After this ritual has been performed, he then talks with his drum thusly:

Ayanniyi, sare tete wa

Ayanniyi, run quickly,

Quickly run back home

The son receives the message and subsequently returns home. It is thus observed in this paper that this might be equated to G.S.M, i.e. Global System for Mobile Communications developed in the Western world. It is observed in this paper that the drum performs different sociological and cultural functions depending on the need and circumstance of the moment.

2.2 Human Voice, 'Drum Voice': A Linguistic Perspective

Do drums actually speak? If they do, how do they talk? This section of the paper is therefore set to determine the overlapping relationship that exists in the production of human speech sounds and that of the drum (with an emphasis on the Dundun ensemble).

In human anatomy, different organs of the human body have different biological functions to perform. These organs, however, perform some secondary functions during speech sound production. These organs, used (secondarily) in speech sound production include the lungs, the trachea (wind pipe), soft palate,

pharynx, vocal cords, larynx, nose, lips, and teeth to mention but a few. Phonologists and phoneticians, for easy description classify all these organs into the oral cavity, nasal cavity, and pharyngeal cavity.

Speech sounds are produced with the pulmonic eggressive airstream mechanism – the air coming out from the lungs (see Clark and Yallop 2006: 16 – 17, Akinjobi, 2000: 8). When the air leaves the lungs, it interacts with other organs of speech before speech sounds are realized. Clark and Yallop (2006: 11) describe the process involved in the speech sounds production. They say:

> To produce sound of any kind, a source of energy is needed. For speech, a flow of air makes it possible to generate sounds, and the volume and pressure of the air supply determine the duration and loudness of sound produced. The majority of sounds (in fact in all English and Western European Languages), use airflow from the lungs for this purpose. ..., the respiratory system therefore counts as the energy source, and the lungs form an air reservoir ...

As the lungs are compressed, air flows out, and it is the periodic interruption, construction and blockage of this airflow which result in the more or less continuous flow of sound which we identify as a sequence of speech sounds. (Emphasis mine)

As speech sounds undergo some process during their articulation, the case is the same with the drum. In the anatomy of drum, there is the wood, the leather, the brass bells (in the case of iya-ilu-dundun) the tension strings and the curved stick. Now we may ask: What is the process involved in producing a "drum voice"? Before attempting an answer, there is a need to do a simple analogy of the correlation between human speech production mechanisms and drum speech mechanisms. The tension strings are analogous to the lungs in human speech sound production while the curved stick (kongo) and the fingers of the drummer (while squeezing) the tension strings are analogous to the air stream mechanism. The process of drumming iya-ilu- dundun (though with no phonological implication) is described by Laoye (1966: 36). He says:

> The iya-ilu is made out of a piece of Apa wood carved in the shape of an hourglass with open ends to which two membranes of kid skin are attacked by means of strings made of goat skin. The drum is beaten or played with a curved stick**. To play iya-dundun, the leather strings with which the two membranes and bells around the two edges are connected and gripped by the drummer's left hand and by tightening them, he is able to raise the Pitch of the drum to produce the required tones.** (Emphasis mine)

Taking this description by Laoye of how a drum "talks", it will be seen that the mechanisms of speech sound production in human beings is very close to that of the drum. This can be seen in the highlighted expressions in the submis-

sion of Clark and Yallop and Laoye as quoted above. The compression of the lungs in human speech sound production is analogous to the tightening of the leather strings (tension strings) in drumming. It can thus be said that there is a linguistic correlation between how human speech sounds are generated and how drum "speech sounds" are generated.

2.3 Tone and Meaning in Drum Language

It is true that a drum communicates meaning but whose meaning? Is it the drummer's meaning, the audience's meaning or the cultural meaning of a people? If it is neither the drummer's meaning nor the audience's meaning, but cultural meaning, what are the tools that can be used to get the "actual" meaning the drum is communicating?

It has been recorded by scholars that the meaning of what a drum "says" can be understood through the mastery of tone as inherent in human speech (see Euba 1986, Ajayi 1990, and Sotunsa 2005 and 2009). The fact is well known that Yoruba is a tonal language and the (im) proper use of these tones affects the interpretation of the drum language. The tones of Yoruba language are high (mi), middle (re) and low (do).

Despite the fact that one is well groomed in the tonal mark interpretation in the Yoruba language, there might still be a misinterpretation of what a drum says because different words can attract the same tonal marks, and thus there is room for polysemous interpretations of a drum message. For instance, the words *owo* (wealth), *ile* (house), *ade* (crown), *aye* (life/world), and *eni* (mat) share the same tonal interpretation. When a drummer thus beats any of these words on his drum, there is a possibility for ambiguity. This might be what Ajayi (1990: 31–2) has in mind when he observes that:

> One who interprets must have a common semantic dialogue with the drummer over a conventional meaning attributed to the drummer. In other words both the drummer and he who is to decipher the drummer's message must have the same semantic universe which thrives on conventional usage.

This paper observes that Ajayi is not more explicit with the words "conventional meaning" and "conventional usage". Whose convention is Ajayi referring to? The drummer's or the audience's? For what purpose is the convention? It is therefore proposed in this paper that there is no conventional meaning in the interpretation of drum language because of the fluidity involved in the semantic interpretation of drum tonal expressions. What is however at disposal of the

audience is cultural codification and hermeneutic interpretation of drum poetry. Psycho-cultural factors therefore assist in decoding the semantics of drum poetry especially by those schooled in drum poetry interpretation/analysis or those who are biological members of a drummer's family. This is counter to what Ajayi (1987: 44) says, i.e., "there can be misinterpretation of drum language even by people schooled in drum language". It is suggested here that comprehensive research should be undertaken on the psycho-cultural links among members of a drummer's family (ayan family). The author of this paper, like previous scholars, e.g. Finnegan (1968), Euba (1986, 1990), and Sotunsa (2005), suggests the use of stock phrases, and a close consideration of the situational context where drum language is used while doing the semantic interpretation of drum poetic codes.

It has been pointed our earlier in this paper that there is the potential for polysemous semantic interpretations of words "uttered" by a drum. What can be done by the drummer is to use stock phrases that may signify the exact word "said" by the drum. For instance, the word *ahon* (tongue) shares the same tonal interpretation with words such as *ori* (head), *owo* (money), *ere* (play), and a host of other words. To reduce the possibility of ambiguity, a drummer may add some stock phrases that are peculiar to any of the words within the culture. It is observed here that a large number of stock phrases are conventional within a given culture. Among the Yoruba, the phrase *a pe kanu ko* (not pronounceable with full mouth) can only accompany the word *owo* (money). When a drummer therefore drums *owo, a pe kanu ko* (money, the word that is not pronounced with full mouth), the keen and discerning listeners will know that the drummer is not saying *ile* (house) or *ere* (play) but rather, they (listeners) will understand that the drummer is saying *owo* (money).

Apart from the use of stock phrases in deciphering the meaning of what a drum says, the semantics of drum poetry can also be understood by considering the situational context of the performance. Like every other oral art, the meaning of drum poetry can be understood when there is a full consideration for text and context. For instance, a drummer that drums in a war situation, no doubt, will use more war registers in the art of drumming. A drummer that also drums at funerals is expected to use more registers associated with bereavement. It is thus pertinent to say here that the situational context enhances the understanding of the meaning of drum poetry.

3 Drum Poetry: The Art Today and Hope for Future

There is an aphorism that nothing is as permanent as change itself. The art of African drumming over the years has undergone some change. It is observed here that drumming currently performs more entertaining functions than communicative functions in contemporary Yoruba society. This might be a result of the exodus of people from rural areas to cities and towns. Today, in our major cities and towns, itinerant drummers gatecrash at various social events to practice their trade for monetary rewards. They drum and interpret the message to the audience. With this modern practice, the noble quality attached to the ability to understand the meaning of what a drum says is gone. The loss of this noble character attached to understanding the meanings of drum messages has been foreseen by the drummer cum musician, Ayanyemi Ayinla (*atoko wa gbowonle*) who produced many albums of drum poetry. In all of his albums, this artiste drums and interprets the messages. It is observed that Ayanyemi was doing this to ensure the survival of the art of drum poetry and to bring the art to the doorstep of modern people of the city. This effort has not been supported by other traditional oral performances. "Modern" musicians of Afrobeat (Lagbaja, Femi Kuti and the late Fela Anikulapo) and hip – hop make use of drum poetry in their performances. Drum poetry is becoming institutionalized in most Nigerian tertiary institutions, particularly in departments of theater, arts, and music, with the inclusion of the Institute of African and Cultural Studies.

There is still some degree of hope that the art of drum poetry among the Yoruba may not go into complete extinction. Drum poetry across the African continent has undergone re-interpretation because of the encroaching influence of modernity/civilization. In this present age of the revolution in digital information, drum language has been adopted and adapted by users of various western musical instruments such as the guitar, piano, and saxophone among others. These instruments now "speak" through the programmed tones with some level of closeness to the tone of drum language among Africans, the Yoruba especially. How this is possible raises intriguing additional research questions because the Yoruba language is tonal while the English language is not.

4 Conclusion

Drum Africa, in Africa at large and among the Yoruba specifically has evolved through different stages. The way the art is being practiced today is quite different from the way it was practiced in ancient times. In primordial Yoruba society,

there was some level of nobility attached to the art of drumming but today such nobility is in the dustbin of history because most Africans suffer from cultural imperialism, relegating their primordial cultural art to the background. The survival of drum poetry and other forms of literature in Africa can be enhanced where there is a cultural renewal with a new found interest in what belongs to Africa for the sake of posterity. With the re-interpretation of our culture and cultural heritage, nothing is likely to pass to posterity except an adulterated culture.

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