Music for the Gods

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Yoruba Music in the Twentieth Century: Identity, Agency, and Performance Practice

by Bode Omojola

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During the 1980s, ethno-musicological literature focused extensively on the problematics of identity in the analysis of music and performance practice. In conceptual terms, Bode Omojola, in *Yoruba Music in the Twentieth Century: Identity, Agency, and Performance Practice*, does not entirely chart a new course diverging from the presuppositions of, for want of a better term,this paradigm. However, his deep and broad knowledge of Yoruba culture and music forms lends a resonance that can be considered to be a departure from, or even at other moments, a transcendence of, to employ an alternative designation, the framework. He is certainly an insider in relation to Yoruba culture and language and, as a trained ethnomusicologist with an anthropologist's outsider's eye, he is able to generate a welter of perspectives that grant his work a certain degree of magisterial authority.

Traditionally, the Yoruba ethnic group is found in southwestern Nigeria and in parts of the Benin Republic and Togo. Within the group, there are distinct sub-ethnicities such as the Ekiti, Ijesa, Igbomina, Egbado, Oyo, Ijebu, Okun, etc. In Nigeria, the Yoruba can be found in Lagos, Oyo, Osun, Ekiti, and Ondo states; they also reside in parts of Kwara, Kogi, Edo and Delta states. In the African diaspora, through the dispersal caused by the Atlantic slave trade, they thrive in Brazil, Cuba, Trinidad and Tobago, Haiti, Jamaica and other countries in the New World.

The Yoruba and West Africans in general created what scholars have labelled as 'the wonderful West African drum language' (p. 5), which among the Yoruba is evident in the mastery of the *dundun* (an hourglass-shaped drum) ensemble comprising the *iyailu* (the lead drum) and the *aguda* and *kanango* (support drums).

The *sekere* (gourd rattle) is another prominent musical instrument used by traditional Yoruba musicians. In Yoruba drumming, there is *enaanbata*, described as 'a form of coded speech used exclusively by *bata* drummers' (p.6); this further strengthens claims regarding the inimitability of West African drum language.

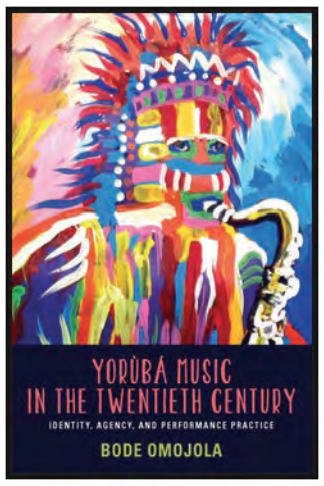
Historically speaking, Ayanagolu is known as the first Yoruba drummer and enjoys a lofty status as the patron-saint of all Yoruba drummers. Yoruba deities (*orisa*) have a powerful connection to music and indigenous Yoruba drums and the music they produce are deemed sacred. Each major deity such as Olodumare (master of the universe), Obatala (arch-divinity and deputy of Olodumare), Orunmila (god of divination and knowledge) and Esu (god of the crossroads) is usually honoured with distinct drum texts.

Originally, *bata* drummers played only sacred music meant for the exultation of the deities, unlike their *dundun* counterparts, who were more secular-minded and hence more closely associated with the concept of *alujo* (drumming for enjoyment), which in modern times has defined the trajectory of indigenous Yoruba drumming.

Yoruba drummers also perform at colourful *egungun* festivals (symbolic masquerades that exemplify the link between the living and the dead) as part of the rituals and responsibilities of sacred performance. Alaafin Ogbolu, the monarch of Oyo, relaxed the injunctions regarding sacred performance and music when he allowed musicians to play outside the palace in the first quarter of the seventeenth century. This in turn led to the emergence of the *alarinjo* (minstrelsy) tradition of performance.

In differentiating the contrasting styles of *bata* and *dundun* drummers, Omojola points out that

> 'the status of the bata as a source spiritual energy is often contrasted with the entertaining role of its sister drum, the dundun, which is viewed by many bata drummers as the instrument of *igbadun* (enjoyment), a reference to the prominence of the dundun in social ceremonies. This view also carries an implicit notion that dundun drumming is less difficult to master than bata drumming' (p. 22).



However, it is also explained that *bata* drums lack the 'tone-producing mechanism and are therefore unable to properly imitate the inflectional patterns of the Yoruba language. Yoruba people often distinguish between these two performance qualities by referring to the bata as a stammering instrument (*akalolo*)" (p. 23). On the other hand, the *iyailu* of the dundun is able to speak intelligibly without stuttering or emitting a staccato effect. In spite of its reputed stutter and rarified status, the *bata* is regarded as king among other instruments such as *koso, dundun* and *sekere*. Nonetheless, Omojola concludes that 'the marginalization of the religious contexts of bata performances in modern Yoruba society, and the limited tonal capability of the instrument have posed a considerable challenge to the practice of bata drumming in the past century' (p. 31).

Christopher Waterman has been quite significant in studying the connections between the social function of music and the gradations and contours of identity. In this regard, his instructive essay, 'Big Man, Black President, Masked One: Models of the Celebrity Self in Yoruba Popular Music in Nigeria' (2002) provides a crucial angle for reading, understanding and debating Omojola's work. For instance, both Waterman and Omojola devote considerable attention to Lagbaja, the eclectic masked Nigerian musician whom Waterman eulogises for his creative syncretism and artistic versatility. But Lagbaja's *gbedu* (the nearest translation would be 'groove') is, to say the least, a trifle contrived and appears to surface from a place of artifice rather than from a well of genuine feeling or perhaps even potent inspiration. It is difficult to escape the nagging thought that the musicological studies devoted to his work might have been more appropriate for musicians of the calibre of Rex Jim Lawson, the great Yusuf Olatunji or Orlando Owoh.

Lagbaja undoubtedly draws copiously from diverse music forms: highlife, Afrobeat, fuji, juju and bits of African American funk, but the point is the degree of digestion of these various forms to create a compelling and authentic musical identity- rather than an unconvincing or half-done brew. Indeed, Lagbaja's *gbedu* does not seem well-done and it often feels dilettantish. He may have all the right ideas but his groove does not attain the level of depth and conviction to produce the necessary blend.

Two major drawbacks can be discerned in Lagbaja's art. The first relates to the off-putting clownishness of his voice, which is mostly counter-productive rather than acting as a farcical or comic relief. The second, which has already been noted, is his inability to make the diverse elements of his music meld into an organic *gbedu*. And so we are left with a sense of incompleteness and are forced to ponder a question: is this really serious? Lagbaja's perennial jokiness glosses over this fundamental dilemma.

Time and again, one finds that Lagbaja's work, in spite of its impressive aesthetic accoutrements, seldom succeeds in proving his authenticity. For instance, the employment of *egungun* masks is merely a pretense to art instead of the heart-felt realisation of its cultural and spiritual potentials.

Although he does not openly admit to it, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti is the sort of artist Lagbaja would have liked to be but obviously can't be, and it is difficult to imagine why he is given such elaborate academic attention. Omojola could have better directed his attention to such artists as Ebenezer Fabiyi Obey (aka Chief Commander Ebenezer Obey), Sunday Aladeniyi (aka King Sunny Ade) and Sikiru Ayinde Barrister and the aforementioned Yusuf Olatunji.

However, Omojola devotes well-deserved attention to *waka*, a Yoruba indigenous genre, due to its relevance to Islamic traditions and community leadership structures and figures. *Waka* has arguably limited revolutionary potentials both in terms of form and content as dispensing eulogy is a notable generic trademark. By extension, it is also easy to understand why indigenous Yoruba genres such as *fuji* and *juju* which also trade in panegyrics undercut their potential for social and aesthetic reform in a manner that is evident in, for instance, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti's Afrobeat. Such musical forms (*fuji* and *juju*) derive their strength, appeal and longevity from the stability of the socio-economic order established by the Yoruba elites. The relationship maintained with social and economic elites by topnotch *fuji* and *juju* musicians may also be a cause of cultural stasis and may indeed prevent radical aesthetic transformation.

Omojola devotes only a few brief paragraphs to the genius of Haruna Ishola, who was undoubtedly a master of his art. Ishola certainly deserves more posthumous recognition than his work currently enjoys after he passed away in 1983. Indeed, his work would typify what fully realised indigenous Yoruba would be: rich, intricate and magisterial in a way that deeply connects with the history, culture, language and aspirations of the Yoruba people.

On another level, Omojola dwells more extensively on Fela Anikulapo-Kuti. However, the question of Kuti's status as an exemplar of Yoruba music is quite problematic. True enough, Kuti's music employs facets of indigenous Yoruba drumming to lend Afrobeat – the genre he single-handedly created – its inimitable cadences, textures and character. But the form also draws generously from African-American jazz and funk which ultimately inflect it with an unmistakable cosmopolitanism as opposed to the self-contained cultural microcosms of, say, *juju, sakara, fuji* or *apala*. Indeed, it can be argued that it is this distinctive cosmopolitanism that primarily accounts for his current popularity as a veritable icon of world music.

Coupled with this is his powerful iconoclasm, which rather than reinforce traditional Yoruba cultural values departs from them. This is why I would argue that Kuti can be rather problematic as an unquestionable beacon of Yoruba music in the narrow understanding of the term. However, this is a point Omojola hardly contemplates.

Also, Kuti alienated the political and military establishments through constant verbal abuse and direct confrontation. His approach could not have led to the transformation of decayed and malfunctioning sociopolitical order due to its often unduly vituperative manner.

Instead, Kuti's methods could only have courted violent reprisals in the way they did. Inherent in indigenous Yoruba culture are powerful resources of satire, conceit, doublespeak and chameleonic invective which could be deployed for subversive political activity. But Kuti chose to ignore them and instead adopted what may, in many instances, be regarded as the rights-based conception of Western democracy and traditions of social activism.

Kuti may also have been a staunch pan-Africanist but he appeared to be a less than faithful adherent of Yoruba culture. So it is sometimes difficult to think of him as a worthy proponent of it. First of all, from the early 1970s onwards, he used Yoruba language only sparingly in his increasingly complex compositions and opted instead for Nigerian/West African pidgin. However, the Yoruba language is probably the most suitable medium in which to explore and imbibe the rich cultural lore, history, mores and various traditions of the people.

True, Kuti's singing was largely informed by the call-and-response format of age-old African traditions of song but there are other equally powerful characteristics that Kuti failed to explore fully or even at all, such as indigenous Yoruba chanting, aphorisms, proverbs, incantations, the *oriki* (praise songs) and the general construction of community through artistic consensus-building. Kuti's approach to consensus-building was marked by a strident individualism and eccentricity that were also evidently selective in favouring the socioeconomic dropouts and cultural renegades that converged around him, often to his enormous detriment. [For a more extended treatment of this subject, see: Sanya Osha, 'Fela Anikulapo-Kuti: Musician or Ideologue?', *Africa Review of Books*, Volume 9, Number 1 (March 2013).]

Pidgin, Kuti's chosen medium of expression is also not the best site to search for the richness of Yoruba culture as it is arguably a product of the odious colonialism Kuti denounced. While pidgin serves as a dialect of linguistic resistance to European colonisation, and is also a modern adaptation to it, more importantly, it can also be regarded as a direct reflection of it: an often well-aimed vulgarisation of European languages – primarily English and Portuguese – and Nigerian languages through a continual re-configuration of (de)colonised linguistic subjectivity. The speaker of pidgin thus becomes a new subject of both modernity and colonialism while at the same time grappling for treasured fragments of a supposedly unalloyed precolonial heritage.

Tropes of hybridity, mimesis and re-invention are what mediate the consciousness of the speaker of pidgin. So, rather than a nostalgic return to one's cultural roots, what can be accomplished is a new subjectivity that draws more from the new rather than the old. And perhaps without fully understanding the gravity of his language choice, Kuti was departing from an authentic African ethos in which linguistic resistance coupled with personal idiosyncrasy led to the creation of a new subjectivity that would always be difficult to replicate due to its extreme iconoclasm.

Both Waterman and Omojola use the terms 'bourgeois' and'radical' to describe Kuti and both descriptions paradoxically ring true. However it is sometimes difficult to imagine him being purely 'bourgeois' as he consistently articulated the interests, experiences and aspirations of the downtrodden, the caveat being that his charismatic heroism also set him apart. His radicalism, on the other hand, is quite self-explanatory as it evidently stems from his trenchant sociopolitical critique.

It is quite remarkable that the Yoruba have been able to develop powerful music genres drawing from indigenous, Islamic and Christian/modern influences. These forms, notably *sakara, apala, fuji, juju, waka* and Aladura church music, are marked by distinct histories, patterns, accents and tendencies and together display a heterogeneous musical palette. Apart from attesting to a diverse cultural background, they also provide eloquent testimonies of historical, political and sociocultural evolution. And for aspiring musicians who are also keen students of Yoruba cultural history, there are always more than enough resources from which to draw sustenance and inspiration. This much can be gleaned from Omojola's thought-provoking book.