

# A DISCOURSE ON THE MASTER MUSICIAN AND INFORMAL MUSIC EDUCATION IN YORUBA TRADITIONAL CULTURE

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper discusses issues relating to informal education in Yoruba traditional music using the master musician as an important agent for propagating traditional knowledge and values. The study is an ethnographic research and uses oral interviews and other qualitative techniques for eliciting information. As part of its findings, the study found out that informal education in Yoruba culture follows a typical pattern of instruction which is acquired through heredity, apprentice under a well-known artist, observation and participation in communal activities. In the case of music, which is the focus of the study, it is promoted by the master musician, a position that could be occupied by men or women depending on the nature of the ensemble and the societal norms approved for such groups. In conclusion, it was suggested in the study that contemporary music educators and curriculum planners should tailor their curriculum to reflect the traditional values and practices of their people.*

**Keywords:** Master musician, informal education, traditional music, heredity, apprenticeship and observation.

## INTRODUCTION

The master musician is a musical phenomenon that cuts across many African countries i.e. it is practiced in Ghana, Zimbabwe, Nigeria and others. It is sometimes, closely associated with the master drum and its player or other important roles or part played by musicians due to peculiarities, nature, design and functions in a group. Akpabot (1986) states that:

“In its traditional setting, African Music is not written down. In conception and performance, it is an oral tradition handed down from generation to generation and jealously preserved by those who have come to be known as master musicians (Akpabot, 1986:1). “

Music of an ensemble revolves round the master musician, he/she is the role model, engine room, live wire of the group who controls, dictate pace, direct and conduct other musicians, he or she can be likened to the conductor in classical music, who assumes an enigmatic personality worshipped and adored by his admirers.

The master musician, who must be well versed in the folk history, oral literature of his people, must also attune himself to the nuances and medium available in his tradition, a custodian of their culture and a master of his trade be it vocal or instrumental music.

His/Her improvisatory skills must not be in doubt or faulted, his/her managerial acumen and musical skills must be above per and above all his/her mode of leadership and qualities must be endorsed and accepted by members of his group (Bankole et. al. 1975).

In Yoruba traditional music, this attributes mentioned above can be vividly observed in this musical generalissimo who has so many designations according to the musical medium and function in a particular group or ensemble. In instrumental music he could be called ‘*AreOnilu*’ (Chief drummer) or *Oludarin* (song leader) in vocal music. We shall take a look at his mode of training, acquisition and transferring of musical skills to his members. According to Olaniyan (1999);

“There is however professionalism in music in Africa. Ability to perform Yoruba dundun music, bata, music or even rara chanting is a specialized art that requires long period of training according to the traditional apprenticeship method. A professional traditional musician is one whose creativity is based on a thorough acquisition of performance skills (Olaniyan, 1999).

However mode of training to be discussed in this paper includes (a) Heredity (b) Apprenticeship under a well known musician (c) Observation, Imitation and Participation in Musical Activities.

## HEREDITY

Heredity is an important medium of passing and acquiring skills, methods, and imparting knowledge in Africa. Hence, it is not a novel to find older generation bequeathing ‘powers’ and other esoteric and knowledge to their younger ones which is in turn circulated within the family lineage from the one generation to another and hidden away from the un-initiated, an example are the *Babalawos* (traditional healers), the Ifa priest and so on. Also there are families in Yoruba land who are professional musicians and entertainers: We have the *Ayans* (the drummers’ family).

Adeola (1997) opined that;

“Among the Yoruba, there are families known for their musical arts. An example is the “*Ayan*” drummers’ family. The *Ayan* family is known for *dundun*. This is seen in a statement made by Madam *Omoladun* “*Kikoyatosiajogunba*” meaning “learning the art of drumming is different from inheriting it”. No one outside the *Ayan* family is believed to possess the ability to drum like somebody from the family (Adeola, 1997).“

These families are the sole custodian, preserver and are saddled with the responsibility of training, grooming and initiating younger member into the family traditions. Omojola (1999) has observed that:

“Heredity membership dependence on aristocratic and low social status are features that also underline the societal view of musicians in Yoruba communities. (Omojola,1999:47).“

Heredity ensures continuity and is an important agent for informal education in Yoruba traditional music and other spheres of the people’s life. Here, children are initiated from birth into a particular family profession, where they are taught the art, skills, nuances, temperament that are necessary to achieve success in that field combining cognitive, affective and psychomotor domain in education. This art is passed from one generation to the other. From my personal investigation and interaction with two traditional drummers; Mr. Demola Olayiwola and Amos Olutokun in the course of this study I was reliably informed that heredity is an important mode of transferring musical arts especially drumming in Yorubaland from one generation to another using informal educational method.

## APPRENTICESHIP UNDER A WELL KNOWN TRADITIONAL MUSICIAN

From the lowest to the highest echelons of traditional artistry: apprenticeship is encouraged, enforced, highly recognized, and accorded an enviable position in the people’s culture and ways of life.

In blacksmithing, cloth weaving, pottery, mat weaving, meat butchery, carpentry, plaiting of hair, tribal mark incision etc. it is not out of place to hear such terms as *Omo-Ikose* (apprentice), *Gba-aye Ikose* (To do freedom) the pastiche of the various traditional arts and crafts in Yoruba land in its divergent configurations encourages apprenticeship under a well known specialist, master and music cannot be separate from this apprenticeship scheme.

Would be musician are taken through an intensive training whose scope, duration, syllabus, philosophy, content and curriculum are determined by the masters. In the case of instrumental music, apprentice are taught to carry the instruments, how to tap rhythm, how to accompany songs and probably improvisation and repairs etc. A pupil understudying a *Dundun* ensemble will be first given *Gudu-gudu*, after a mastery of this, he will then proceed to other drums before being allowed to handle *Iya-ilu* (the mother drum), and mistakes on any of the drums are highly punishable with harsh and stringent measures attached to it.



Some Instruments of the Bata and Dundun Ensemble

**Table Showing Informal Apprentice Scheme for Learning Dundun/Bata Drumming**

Stage (s)	Objectives	Scope And Duration	Content	philosophy	Evaluastion
1	Familiarity with instruments and ensemble	May last from ages 2-6 when cognitive and psychomotor ability are well-developed	-learning names of instrument, getting attuned to sound made on the instrument -Learning simple rhythms on the instrument	To develop and engenders pupils interest in the family art.	Pupils/apprentice asked to name instruments at random or through music appreciation.
2	Exposition to simple rhythms and idioms that are used in the community .	May learn from age 6 to maturity or depending on adulthood cognitive ability of the learner.	-Tapping of rhythms based on established models in an ensemble/community. -In Dundun/Bata ensemble learning basic accompaniment rhythm of the ensemble.	To develop and establish a sound musicianship for ensemble music.	Same as above
3	Introduction to more complex rhythms	This is a continuous exercise done to firmly establish the learners musical foundation	Accompaniment rhythm -Ostinato rhythm -Cross rhythm -Polyrhythm -Interlocking rhythm Nuances and modes of community etc.	To inculcate a strong sense of rhythm	Drummers asked to take leading roles in an ensemble session
4	Improvisation	Usually thought to would- be band leaders or master drummers or musicians	-art of generating themes -familiarity with community idioms/history -familiarity with the different occasions the calendar of the community	General musicianship, and band masters leadership ability.	Drummers asked to improvised within an established thematic framework
5	Basic repairs	Specialized training for all members of the group to effect minor repairs on their instruments	-getting used to the structure of instruments -simple maintenance -handling of repairs tools -sourcing for materials etc	To develop a comprehensive and all embracing knowledge of the ensemble and its workings.	Drummers asked to effect repairs on damaged instruments.

The table above shows a suggested curriculum used in the learning of *Bata* and *Dundun* ensembles of the Yoruba through informal process. I got the information above through my contact with Mr. Demola Olayiwola and Amos Olutokun (both are master musicians and traditional music instructors at the Department of Creative Arts, University of Lagos, Akoka). It should be noted that the stages as stated above are not rigid or regimental as some of the stages can be collapsed and run concurrently especially from two downwards as total education is emphasized in the informal traditional apprenticeship scheme.

Nketia (1997) opined that “since musical specialists are required for group leadership and for performance in different contexts some kind of institutional arrangement that enables musicians to acquire their technical training or that provides them with the source of their artistic experience would seem to be of paramount importance”. The aforementioned seems to corroborate the importance of the apprenticeship scheme in Yoruba traditional music and role of the specialist or master musician.

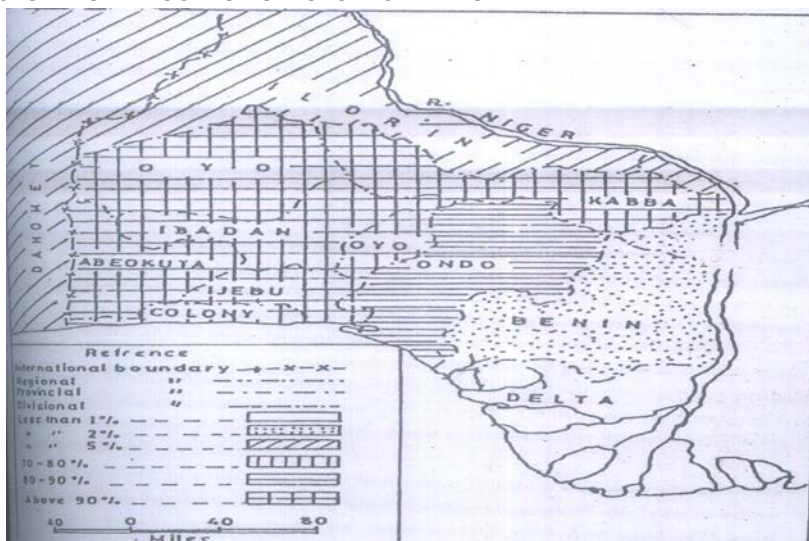
### OBSERVATION, IMITATION AND PARTICIPATION IN MUSICAL ACTIVITIES

Music is said to accompany an African “from the cradle to the grave”. The tripartite agents of musical contacts; observation, imitation and participation best sum up how the young Africans is educated, initiated and got entangled into the musical cobwebs from his youth through informal methods, interaction and socialization with others.

A crying baby is appeased by the mother with lullabies, he is exposed to folktales and folksongs at moonlight and goes with peers to hunting expedition, other communal activities where he come in contact with his immediate environment and interacts with the traditions, norms, practices and other cultural heritage in his society. Nketia (1979) stressed the importance of social interaction when he opined that; “African mothers often carry their children on their back to public ceremonies rites, and traditional dance arenas, where they are exposed to music performed by adult groups”. Other scholars (Olaniyan, 2005; Gregory, 1998; Russell, 1998 and Vidal, 1987) also discussed the role of music in the society.

In Yoruba land, traditional festivals are a scene to behold and depending on the time of the year which they are always well prepared for and people always look forward to them.

### MAP SHOWING THE LOCATION OF YORUBÁ SPEAKING



### PEOPLE

G.J. AFOLÁBÍ ÒJÓ (1966)

However, no traditional festival is complete without music; it serves as the ingredient with which to spice up the whole show. It is an opportunity for the musicians to showcase their skills, their virtuosity, introduce new forms (steps and dances), dexterity and improvisatory skill on an instrument and overall to compete with each others. An event like this affords both young and old to come in contact with the musicians, their acts and arts.

A spectacle like the Osun Oshogo festival rich in traditional flavour and culturally endowed is a discursive way of passing traditional information especially music from one generation to another. A child that has observed will like to imitate and thereafter participate in a musical activity. He thereafter gets attuned to his tradition and passes through its native education.

This researcher once interviewed Queen SalawaAbeni, a female *Waka* musician, (*wakais* a Yoruba traditional social-religious music) and inquired from her on how she co-ordinates and directs her band. According to her members especially the chorus sections are taught to imitate and repeat their parts several times for proper memorization and repetition. The parts are distributed as follows:

S/N	TYPE OF VOICE IN YORUBA	ENGLISH MEANING
1	OhunTinrin	High tone
2	OhunAredodo	Medium voice
3	OhunGedegbe	Low, thick tone

**A Typical rhythm of *Waka***

The image displays four musical staves, each representing a different rhythmic pattern for Waka. All staves are in 4/4 time. RHYTHM I consists of two measures: the first has a quarter note, an eighth note, a quarter note, and a quarter note, followed by a quarter rest; the second has a quarter note, an eighth note, a quarter note, and a quarter note, followed by a quarter rest. RHYTHM II consists of two measures: the first is a whole rest; the second has a quarter note, an eighth note, a quarter note, and a quarter note. RHYTHM III consists of two measures: the first has a quarter rest, an eighth note, a quarter note, and a quarter note; the second has a quarter rest, an eighth note, a quarter note, and a quarter note. RHYTHM IV consists of two measures: the first has a quarter note, an eighth note, a quarter note, and a quarter note; the second has a quarter note, an eighth note, a quarter note, and a quarter note.

Aside from the aforementioned nasal and throaty vocal techniques are some time employed. She opined that continuous memorization through serious participation, observation at rehearsals and performances spanning several years under a well-know musicians is the informal curriculum for *waka* as other musical genres in Africa.

**MUSICAL COMPOSITION**

The traditional musician got his music through his interaction and contact with his environment, he taps artistic and creative properties that are available in his immediate environment and utilize resources embedded in them to form his composition in order words, the traditional musician is not isolated and alienated from developments and happenings in his surroundings. His music is a by-product of events in his vicinity be it social, sacred, secular and others.

A traditional musician who doubles as a composer-performer uses resources from folk history, myths, legends, oral tradition and others as materials for repertoire. Olaniyan (1997) identifies nine resource avenue for the creative performance of *Dundun* music in Yoruba land which includes (a) *Oriki* (a descriptive song) (b) *Owe* (proverbs) (c) *Orin ibile* (Traditional songs) (d) *Adunjoohun* (derivation from imitation of sound: onomatopia) (e) *Alujo* (Rhythm of dance gesture), (f) *Itanbile* (Traditional History) (g) *Iseleju ere* (contextual occurrence) (h) *Ohunt'onlo* (current affairs), (i) *Afojuinuwo* (imagination: seeing things through the inner eye).

The totality of the musicians' experiences in constant interplay with his art and creative ingenuity utilized to form basis for his compositions and collections are regarded as the parameter for assessing his artistic outputs and contributions to his immediate environment in the traditional society.

## CONCLUSION

This paper is an exposition of the various ways, methods of imparting, and transferring knowledge and skills from one generation to another using Yoruba traditional music as an example.

Music is an important aspect of culture and a people without cultures can be regarded as a lost generation or race. Propagation of our traditional values in its entirety is a crucial point to be considered by our curriculum planners in order to protect it from the encroachment of western values that are being imbibed by our society as the ideal and real thing.

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