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Gender Dialectics of Yoruba Drum Poetry

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Abstract

The analytical and dialectical nature of Yoruba oral art with the inclusion of drum poetry facilitates its unending discourses. In the past and contemporary African society, gender issues have attracted critical attentions of scholars and researchers using different subject areas. In the past Yoruba societies, women were acknowledged as the performers of oral art, particularly in the genres of poetry and prose but with the exemption of drum poetry. It is on this understanding that this paper examines the impact of gender dialectics on the discourse of Yoruba drum poetry. The paper draws inferences from Ifa literary corpus for mythico-historical origin of Yoruba drums. Data are gathered through primary source (field investigations) and secondary sources (books, journals and periodicals). As a verbal art, Yoruba drum poetry has some masculinity attached to it and until recently, women are passive participants in drum poetry performance. It is established that gender dialectics has made a score as there are now the emergence of female professional drummers.

[**Keywords:** Gender, Yoruba Drum poetry; Ifa literary corpus; Meaning, Drum ensemble]

Introduction

The present writer is not unaware that there has been conflation of ideas on Yoruba drum poetry and gender studies. The claim of Sotunsa (Vii) that “although globally known as an African unique cultural asset, few literatures have been written on the art of the talking drum poetry” is rather bogus and baseless. In journals, books and dissertations, many scholarly contributions have been made on the nature, performance and art of drumming in Africa.

It is also acknowledged that gender studies has gained prominence among the academics, sociologists, social critics and media practitioners because “gender is a concept and process imbued with multifarious complexities in content and structure (Olademo,9). In Africa, the walls built against women visibility are being destroyed through various means – concretization of the phallocentric society on the need to give women chance to enjoy their civic and human rights, media campaign against dehumanization of women and deconstruction of phallocratic socialization that maintains the myth of male superiority.

This paper wants to bring out a point of intersection between Yoruba drum poetry and gender (dialectics). This is necessitated by the gaps in knowledge observed in the publication of Sotunsa’s (2009) *Yoruba Drum Poetry*, Olademo’s (2009) *Gender in Yoruba Oral Traditions* and Opefeyintimi’s (2009) *Women of*

Yoruba Culture: A Dozen of Academic Articles. Despite the comprehensiveness of Sotunsa's *Yoruba Drum Poetry*, the book does not focus on gender dialectics in the art of drumming. The two other books – *Gender in Yoruba Oral Traditions* and *Women of Yoruba Culture: A Dozen of Academic Articles* do not make comments on drum poetry among the women in Yoruba land. In his study, Opefeyitimi observes occupations of Female humans as hairdressing, hawking business, bean-making, kernel-oil making, cloth weaving, sales of medicinal ingredients, sales of palm-oil and Sales of bean-cakes. Throughout the book, the writer (Opefeyitimi) does not make any reference to women engagement in the art of drumming. Olademo, in her book, *Gender in Yoruba Oral Traditions* devoted three chapters to “Ifa and Gender”, “Oriki and Gender” and “Ijala and gender”. There is no place in the text where reference is made to “Gender and Drum”. It is the shortfall in these well researched books that this paper wants to address.

Yoruba Drum Poetry

The systemic functions of Yoruba drum poetry for psycho-cultural interactions within a community justify its relevance in religio-cultural, social and political milieus. Different scholars (Ajayi, 1987 and 1990; Euba, 1986 and 1994; Laoye, 1959 and 1966; Sotunsa, 2005 and 2009; Finnegan, 1968 and Sesan, 2007) have discussed the forms nature, functions and total practice of Yoruba drum poetry.

This paper shall start with mythico-historical source of drum art/poetry in Yoruba land through Ifa literary corpus. In Yoruba cosmology, Ifa is believed to be “encyclopedia” of knowledge. During divination, Ifa literary corpus makes use of symbolism and cultural pre-figuration to explain mythico-historical origin of a phenomenon. As there are symbolic objects, number, places and sign, etc., so also are there symbolic deities, persons and significant period (Adekola 258).

The mythico-historical source of Yoruba drum Poetry in Ifa literary corpus points to its totemistic nature through close attachment to the worship of some Yoruba mortal gods, deified human beings and Yoruba kings. There are so many Yoruba drums as recorded in Ifa literary corpus. Different Odus (Literary verses) have pointed out the mythico-historical source of Yoruba society. For our purpose, two literary verses that point to the mythico-historical sources of two Yoruba drums (Dundun and Bata) are discussed for critical analysis and discussion.

In Idinguda (Idin Ilu) verse, the mythico-historical source of Dundun as the drum that enjoys royal patronage in Oyo town till now is given. The verse goes thus:

Dindinguda Dindinguda
 Adifa fun enlojo ilu
 Ti won n sawo lo sode Oyo
 Dundun nikan lo n be leyin to n sebo
 Dundun wa ni mo yin Dindinguda Dindinguda

Dundun pele o, Ayo Oba

Dindinguda Dindinguda (the Ifa priest)
 Divined for drum ensembles
 That were going for performance in Oyo town
 Only Dundun remained behind to make a sacrifice
 Dundun said that I praised my Ifa Priest Dindinguda Dindinguda
 Dundun walk gently, the favorite of (Oyo) King.

In the mythico-historical story that gave impetus to the Dindinguda verse, it was reported that all the drummers (Dundun, bata, etc.) were going for a competition in Oyo town. Earlier before then, the king of Oyo had wanted to select a royal drum and thus he sent for all the drums. For their outage the drummers consulted an Ifa priest, Dindinguda to divine for them. The priest divined for them that they should have a sacrifice but all the drummers refused except Dundun. At the Occasion, Dundun excelled and he was later chosen as the royal drum of Oyo king. The Popularity of Dundun drum goes beyond the palace as it has become a drum for nearly all social and political occasions. It has been observed elsewhere that:

Today, in our major cities and town, itinerant drummers gatecrash at various social events to practice their trade for monetary reward. They drum and interpret the message to the audience (Sesan 27).

The popularity of Dundun drum is also made possible because it can easily approximate human speech (See Euba 1986 and 1990; Sotunsa, 2005 and 2009; Ajayi, 1990 and Sesan 2007).

Another drum of significant mention is Bata. In the mythico-historical origin of this drum as given in “Okaran Obara” verse in Ifa literary corpus, bata snatched Roro (Sango’s wife). This is shown in the verse below:

Okan Pa Okan Po
 Adifa fun bata
 Tin lo gba Roro, Obinrin Sango
 Won ni ki Sango O rubo
 Sugbon Sango ko O gbekele agbara
 Bata gba Roro aya Sango
 Sango ba pada pe awon awo
 Wipe n je on le gba aya oun pada
 Awon awo ni ko ni etutu
 Sango gbo riru ebo o ru
 Sango gbo atete ko esu o se etutu
 Ati Bata ati Roro Pada sodo Sango

Okan Pa Okan Po (part of the prosodic sounds of Bata drum)
 Divined for Bata (the dummer)
 That wants to snatch Roro (Sango’s wife)

The priests told Sango to have a sacrifice
 But Sango refused because he believed in his might
 Thus, Bata was able to snatch Roro from Sango
 Therefore, Sango re invited the Ifa priests
 To know whether he would be able to get his wife back (from Bata)
 The Ifa priests said he should have propitiation
 Sango hearkened and he made a sacrifice
 Sango heard and he made the propitiation for Esu
 And both Bata and Roro went back to Sango's house

Thereafter, Bata became the official drummer of Sango. Any time Sango is annoyed, Bata pacified him. In the semantic interpretation of drum poetry, it is believed that the basic message of Bata drum is:

Okan Pa, Okan Po
 Mogba roro na.

Okan Pa, Okan Po
 I have snatched Roro (the wife of Sango)

Other Yoruba drums also have their mythico-historical origin but that is not the primary concern of the present study.

Culture critics have examined forms, functions and semantic interpretation of drum poetry. Sotunsa (34) classified the use Yoruba drums into two forms – religious and secular. She writes: “Some of the drum sets are used for purely religious and traditional ceremonies while others are used for both religious and secular function”. Sotunsa’s observation points to the fact that Yoruba drums have different performance occasions.

It is no doubt that different deities in Yoruba land have their respective drums. It is therefore inappropriate to use the drum ensemble meant for Ifa for Orisa-nla (Sesan 22). Sango is known with Bata ensemble and it is improper to use this drum ensemble during Ifa divination. During Ifa festival, Ipese is the drum ensemble commonly used. Any other drum ensemble during 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 give the last respect to the departed soul and at the same time to draw a line between the living and the dead. Only the initiate can beat Ipese and the meaning of what Ipese is saying can only be understood by the initiates.

Olorisa-Oko worshippers normally use Igbin drum ensemble. This drum is stationed in the sacred grove and this enhances the sacredness of the drum as the non - initiate cannot enter the grove. Hunters, on the other hand make use of Agere. This drum ensemble is used when the hunters celebrate certain events or activities. Apart from this, Agere is drummed during “Isipa” (a ceremony to separate the dead hunter from his colleagues). Obalufon worshippers make use of

Agba Obalufon for various religious and sacred purposes while the Ogbonis - a Yoruba religious cult make use of Gbedu which is kept in their “Iledi” or Shrine.

Drums are also used for ceremonial and social functions in Yoruba land. The commonly used drum ensemble for ceremonial and social functions is Dundun. 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 trade. What is observed today is that Dundun ensemble is usurping the function and relevance of other drum ensembles. The reason might be its easy mobility and its proximity to imitate human speech as speech surrogate. A keen listening ear that is well groomed in Yoruba tonal marks can hear and decipher (with relative fairness) the message of Dundun ensemble when it “talks” because of its proximity to human voice.

Understanding Meaning Of Yoruba Drums

It is a known fact that meaning is central to communication. For drum poetry to achieve its communicative potentials, its meaning must be mutually intelligible to the drummers and the audience.

Scholars and culture critics have observed that the mastery and understanding of what a drum says can be attained through the mastery of tone as inherent in human speech (See Euba, 1986; Ajayi, 1990 and Sotunsa 2005 and 2009). Dundun drum utilizes Yoruba tonal marks for its communicative potentials. It is a well known fact that Yoruba is a tonal language and the (im) proper use of the tones affects the interpretation of drum language. The tones of Yoruba language are classified as high (mi), middle (re) and low (do).

The sound knowledge of the tonal marks alone cannot guarantee effective interpretation of drum poetry. There can still be mis-interpretation of drum poetry because different Yoruba words can attract the same tonal marks and thus, there is a room for polysemous interpretation of drum poetry. Some Yoruba words such as owo (wealth), ile (house), ade (crown), aye (life/world) and ina (fire/light) share the same tonal interpretation. There is therefore a possibility of ambiguity when a drummer beats any of these words. In order to get the “exact” semantic interpretation of drum poetry, this paper, like previous scholars, suggests the use of sock phrases and consideration for the situational context of performance (See Finnegan, 1968; Euba, 1986 and 1990, Sesan, 2007 and Sotunsa, 2005 and 2009).

In this paper, the semantic interpretations of drum poetry are classified into three: intended meaning (IM); communicated meaning; (CM) and shared meaning (SM). The intended meaning (IM) is the message that the drummer has in mind before drumming. The meaning is personal and it also relies on the individual interpretation of the drummer. In Yoruba cultural belief, it is often said that no one can adequately interpret what a drum says except the drummer himself.

Communicated meaning is what the drum “actually says”. This is what is the audience can deduce from the drum poetry. Often times, communicated meaning is under the manipulation of the drummer. This simply means that the communicated meaning may have dual interpretations from the drummer’s perception and the audience’s perception. The case of the gate keeper of Lalupon shows the relationship between the intended meaning and the communicated meaning, and intended meaning and shared meaning. The story stated that there was an ugly gatekeeper that was kind to a particular drummer by giving the latter some gifts. To show appreciation, the drummer usually referred to the gatekeeper’s kindness through his drum thus:

Mo Jeun Ejigbo
 Mo Jeun Iwo
 Mo Jeun Onibode Lalupon

I was fed at Ejigbo
 I was fed at Iwo
 I was fed by the gatekeeper of Lalupon

There above message was the intended meaning of the drummer. On the other hand, the drummer’s detractors informed the gatekeeper that the drummer was abusing him with his drum. They reported that the drummer was saying:

E wenu imado
 E wenu isin
 E wenu onibode Lalupon

See the mouth of wart-hog
 See the mouth of willows
 See the mouth of gatekeeper of Lalupon

When he heard this, the gatekeeper was annoyed but his anger was pacified when the drummer explained the intended meaning.

Shared meaning (SM) takes place when the drummer and the drum audience have the same semantic interpretation of what the drum says. This occurs when the intended meaning and communicated meaning of what the drum says have the same semantic interpretation in the linguistic repertoire of the audience and that of the drummer. Ajayi (31-2) gives conditions that can be met before shared meaning can be possible. He writes:

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.

The only issue that can be raised against Ajayi’s observation is that what constitutes conventional usage and meaning, and even whose convention? The

shared meaning can be made possible when there is consideration for situational contexts, the use of stock phrases and practical interpretation of tonal marks.

Gender and Yoruba Drum Poetry

Since man control the public space, tradition has empowered them to define and restrict women (Emenyi 28). In traditional Yoruba society, women have had their discursive and interpretive powers influenced by the phallogocentric society until recently when there has been emergence of women voices in arts, politics, administration and social activities. Menial jobs, as well as selling of wares such as pap paste, locust beans, palm-oil and pepper are the basic economic activities of women in traditional Yoruba society. The Iwori Igosun of Ifa Literary Corpus points to this:

Iwori gosun gosun
 Gogi gogi aya oni goosun
 O looko nile oba
 Oun gun ogi o si n rise
 Oko ko ri oju gogi gogi mo
 Nitori o ti lowo lowo
 Oko re ba bere si gun ogi bi ti iyawo
 Pe ki oun naa o le lowo
 Sugbon ko ri se
 Igba to pe, o di fa
 Won ni a o fi ise ton se ran an
 Nitori owo obinrin ni

The Iwori that pounds camwood
 The one tha makes pap paste, the wife of Onigoosun
 She married a husband from the ruler's lineage
 She produced pap paste and became prosperous
 The husband did not enjoy her anymore
 Because of her new wealth
 The husband began to make pap paste like his wife
 In order for him to be rich like his wife
 But he was not rich
 After some time, he consulted Ifa priests
 They told him that he was not destined to do the job he was doing
 Because making of pap paste belongs to women

The above Ifa literary poetry shows the phallogocentric belief of Yoruba society that less stressful economic activities belong to the women folk. Rigorous and stressful economic activities are believed to be the sole preserve of men. It is even in the recent times that women engineers and architects are emerging in the contemporary Nigerian society.

The passivity and docility of women in socio-economic activities have been traced to their anatomical and physiological composition. It has been recorded in Okanran-Meji of Ifa literary corpus that breast was originally in the chest of men but because of their rigorous socio-economic activities, the breast could not produce milk and thus it consulted Ifa priests. The verse (Okanran-Meji) is reproduced below:

Okanran kan nihin-in
 Okanran kan l'ohun-un
 Okanran di meji odo oduro l'ododo
 A difa fun Omu nigba ti n lo isaluaye
 Won ni ko'rubo
 Ko korubo
 O dele aye, o so si aya Okunrin
 Okunrin a gun igi, won a lo jagun
 Omu ko ni isinmi
 O n wa ifokanbale
 O gba oko awo lo
 Babalawo ni ki o rubo
 O gbo riru ebo o ru
 Obinrin o ni igi gun, beni ko ni ogun ja
 Ni omu ba ri ifokanbale
 Nigbeyin, omu ri aponle ati iyi

One Okanran here
 One Okanran there
 Okanran becomes two
 It became droppings in the truth
 Divined for breast when coming to earth
 Breast was told to offer a sacrifice
 Breast refused to offer the sacrifice
 On the earth, Breast went to chest of men
 Men climb trees and fight wars
 Thus, breast found no rest
 Breast consulted Ifa priests
 It was divined that Breast should offer a sacrifice
 Breast hearkened to the divination and offer the sacrifice
 Breast now moved to the chest of women
 Women do not climb trees nor fight wars
 Breast found peace
 Eventually, breast found honour and respect

From the verse, it can be deduced that men are noted for rigorous activities that may not allow the survival of breast. It is a known fact today that breast is one of the attractions of women.

In traditional and even the contemporary Yoruba society, it is very common to hear “baba onilu” (the drummer man) but very uncommon to hear Iya onilu (the drummer woman). This shows that drumming is seen as a phallogocentric profession. In the entourage of drummers, no woman is found and even there has not been women apprentice for drumming. The mythico-historical source of Yoruba drums as recorded in the Ifa literary corpus point to the fact that Yoruba drums cum drummers are predominantly males.

The phallogocentric Yoruba society has set a double standard for the description of the drum ensembles. The lead drum is called “Iya Ilu” (mother of the drums). We suspect a sort of posturing in the classification. A woman is forbidden to engage in drumming as profession but she can only be the object of battery. By extension, the beating of drum, particularly iya-ilu can be equated with wife battery of the contemporary Yoruba society.

With modernization and globalization, there has been emergence of women drummers who have been trained in the formal situations. In the contemporary Nigerian society, many schools and institutes of performing arts and cultural studies have been established to offer gender-sensitive training in performing and cultural arts (including drumming) to interested participants. This practice has encouraged the emergence of some women drummers. Examples of such institutes and schools include Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan and Department of Dramatic Arts, Obafemi Awolowo University.

The current implementation of gender-sensitive training in performing and cultural arts encourages the emergence of female drummers cum performers. One of the renowned female drummers is Ara. Owing to her dexterity in drumming, some people refer to her as “the enigma of the African race”. Based on her outstanding performance in drumming, Ara has broken the jinx surrounding the male hegemony of drum art. This ‘enigma of African race’ (Ara 38) has been able to combine conveniently drumming, singing and dancing. She affirms this in an interview with V- World that:

My drumming is about just 30 - 40% of my performance, depending on the song, because it’s not all my songs that I drum. Singing and dancing take a major part.

There are so many Aras that history has not discovered. What is however certain is that myth of male hegemony in the art of drumming is gradually fading away.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the mythico-historical origin of Yoruba drums using Ifa literary corpus as a paradigm. From the Ifa literary paradigms, male origin of Yoruba drums are deduced. Functions and forms of Yoruba people towards drumming is also examined. The paper observed that modernization and

globalization have encouraged the modification and/or re-modification of some cultural practices. Drumming has also benefited from this through the emergence of women drummers.

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