

MORALISTIC AND EDUCATIONAL THEMES IN ÌJÁLÁ (ORAL POETRY) OF ÀLÀBÍ ÒGÚNDÉPÒ

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Abstract

Ìjálá, a form of oral poetry, is a ceremonial song for the hunters' guild and people in traditional Yorùbá society. It is used for different ceremonies such as yearly celebrations to commemorate Ògún, naming ceremonies among the hunters, housewarming, preparation for hunting expeditions, and celebration after hunting activities using different musical ensembles such as *Àgèrèrè*. Earlier studies have given attention to its literary narratives and description but silent about how the didactic import generated from some of its themes. This study was therefore designed to examine selected themes in Ìjálá music with a view to identifying its didactic import thereby advancing the earlier position with a new meaning for contemporary exigency. The study adopted ethnographic research design using qualitative method of data collection. The two major approaches commonly associated with musicological research were employed: field work and deskwork. Information and musical repertoires emanating from sessions of interview the authors personally conducted with Pa Alabi Ogundepo, one of the surviving exponents of Ìjálá in Yorùbá society, formed the data for the study. Observation and key informant interview were utilised as data were recorded on audio and video media. The data were contextually analysed. The findings revealed that themes in Ìjálá music, as performed by Alabi Ogundepo include educational, moralistic and philosophical themes. Analysis of these selected themes shows that Ìjálá music has some didactic imports which are beneficiary to the contemporary usages especially for the younger generation.

Introduction

Various professional guilds have different musical ensemble associated with them in traditional African society; Ìjálá is a ceremonial song for hunters' guild and for people in traditional Yorùbá society. It is used for different ceremonies such as yearly celebration to comemorate Ògún; aside this it is used for naming ceremony among the hunters, house warming, preparation for hunting expedition and celebration after hunting activities using different musical ensemble such as *Àgèrèrè*. Ìjálá and *Ìrèmojé* are both musical performances by the hunters'guild which have similaties but also differ in performance context. Scholars such as Belcher, (1999), Charry, (2000), Omojola, (2006) and Adekola (2017 & 2018) have noted the role of the traditional musicians in preserving the cultural memory and historiography of African societies for many centuries. Since music-making is an integral

part of Yorùbá ceremonial and ritual events, Ìjálá music performs great functions among the hunters' guild in Yorùbá land. Nketia (1974) earlier noted the significance of music among African people and posited that:

On ceremonial and ritual occasions, music making may similarly go hand in hand with set sequences of symbolic actions, performed with or without props by specified people playing given roles. These actions, which are dramatic in character, take place in the presence of some participants or spectators. Music may be integrated with the events, either to set the mood for the actions or to provide an outlet for expression of feelings they generate. It may also be used to continue or heighten the dramatic action; hence, it may punctuate statements or prayers, or provide a continuous background of ordered sounds (p. 29).

Deduction can be made from the above statement that music contributes essential to day to day activities of any African society; music may be vocal, instrumental or vocal with instrumental. Ìjálá is one of the poetic or vocal forms which were given prominence among the Yorùbá of Southwestern Nigeria and it belongs to the older indigenous Yorùbá genres usually referred to as "Ewì àdáyéba - indigenous poetry" (Adeduntan, 2024). Other poetic forms among the Yorùbá include *Ìyẹ̀rẹ̀ Ifá* (a form of Ifá poetry), *Èṣà* or *Iwì Egúngún* (ancestor worship cult poetry), *Oríkì* (panegyrics poetry), *Èkún iyàwó*, (short bridal lament found among the Oyo Yorùbá), *Ewì, Olele, Ràrà* (Olátúnjí, 1972; Olajubu, 1974; Babalola, 1973; Vidal, 2012; Adeduntan, 2024). Musicians, as master storytellers, have served as living archives, chronicling communal histories, genealogies and oral tradition through ingenuity in their composition and poetic recitations over the years. They maintain a large repertoire of epic narrative songs which describe major historical events in African traditional society. Alabi Ogundepo, an exponent of Ìjálá who utilises both old and new thematic forms in his poetic rendition provides certain didactic imports as this study analyses some of the themes.

Academic work on African music is inexhaustible and increasingly growing. However, there are still gaps in knowledge in many areas as far as music is concerned. For instance, Yorùbá traditional popular music such as Ìjálá provides avenue through which the Yorùbá philosophy is expressed and also serves as a repository of knowledge from where contemporary musicians draw their repertoires. However, little has been done on Ìjálá music in relation to its didactic import especially for contemporary usages. Music and language scholars (such as Babalola, 1966; Ajuwon, 2018 among others) have centred more on its description and classificatory modes. Although recent work by Adeduntan (2024) on Ìjálá, titled "performative agency and transition in Àlàbí Ògúndépò's Ìjálá and Yemí Èlébuìbon's Ifá chants" provides an insight into how Ìjálá practice of Àlàbí Ògúndépò "instantiates one pattern of transition in which performance gradually yields ground from affirming conservative patriarchal and communal values to sometimes admitting the ascendancy of the modern or often affirming it outright", the work did not engage didactic themes which this study examined. Omolasoye (1998) had even suggested that there was need to extend or broaden the scope of Ìjálá and that the University of Ibadan should take it as a duty to involve artistes like Àlàbí Ògúndépò for a performance of which its audio-visual recording of such occasion or performance could be kept in the institute of African studies or archives for culture preservation and development. This clarion call is one of the motivations for this study so as to contribute in preserving an aspect of African culture complementing the efforts of archives and sound- a new vision of the Institute of African Studies,

University of Ibadan thereby collecting recent recorded audio and audio-visual materials used in different context by Alabi Ogundepo.

Tradition and Culture of the Yorùbá people as encoded in their Performance Arts

Study of the musical tradition of a people serves as a material for educational purpose. A lot of folk music practices among the Yorùbá and other African cultures have gone into extinction as a result of many factors such as religion and urbanization as Western values and modern forms of leisure have eroded the educational, social, and recreational roles of practices with its attendant impact on socio-cultural lifestyle of the people. One of the reasons for extinction is the death of the older members of the society who used to be versatile and skillful in the traditional musical practices usually without successors (Adekola, 2018). There is therefore a need to engage in study of some of the performance art such as Ìjálá to especially with the aim of examining their new context and materials; this will enhance survival and promotion.

There are various performances among the Yorùbá of Southwestern Nigeria which include *Oríki*, *Ewì*, *Rárà*, *Olele*, *Ìrèmojé*, and *Ìjálá*. *Oríki* are one of the popular performance forms in Yorùbá oral tradition and they are composed for subject of all types including human being, animals, and family lineage. They are performed "to evoke historical and essential qualities of the subject and they are central to memorializing the significant events" in the life of an individual "with the purpose of eulogizing the subject or providing moral view in an educational and entertainment setting" (Adeyemi, 2017:250). *Ewì* are poems based on history, political and social observations on a particular person or issue. *Iwì* is usually a poem linked to *Egúngún* (spirit manifest) and is used to extol the virtues of the particular *Egúngún* and the related ancestors. *Rárà* is used to praise the reigning monarch and the past kings. *Oníràrà* is a griot who uses his/her medium of chanting to proclaim the historical exploits and to chronicle the achievements and errors on the throne for the benefits and admonition of the reigning king. Both *Ìjálá* and *Ìrèmojé* are hunters' guild musical practices but their contexts differ. Ajuwon (2018) explains *Ìrèmojé- eré ìsípà oḍe* as a funeral dirge of the hunters, Yorùbá lament poetry for deceased hunters. Funeral rites are post-death ceremonial activities meant to mark the passage and celebrate the life of the deceased which is usually in form of music-making, dancing and other non-musical activities. The activities are believed to assist the spirit of the deceased in its after-life existence either in heaven, as an ancestor, or with the ancestors. Type of music performed at funerals is determined by age, sex, status and religion of the deceased as funeral music serves both the living and the dead. For the living, funeral music serves as entertainment, consolation, sympathy, admonition and solidarity; while to the dead, it serves both the celebration of life well lived as pre-requisite rite critical for well-being in the after-life of which music is of a great significant (Ogli, 2010).

Ìrèmojé is a rite of passage and poetry, an open rite or music performance for the deceased hunter by the hunters which usually takes place from the night to the morning. *Ìrèmojé* is a compulsory rite that must be performed for a departed hunter as it is believed that until a funeral dirge is performed, there cannot be peace of mind for such a departed soul and not rest of mind for the children of the deceased. Difference between *Ìjálá* and *Ìrèmojé* is emphasised by Ajuwon (2018) when he states that:

Ìrèmojé is not a song for anytime, it is not a song you stay in your home and sing. It is also not a song you can sing whenever you feel like singing. It is a song for hunters' difficult times. It is

not a song for anytime, not a song for the day but a song for the middle of the night (p. 4).

Performance of *Ìrèmọ̀jé* after the death of a hunter grants access to such deceased to be with *Ògun* and other hunters in heaven. It confers on the deceased children boldness to call their fathers on any issue they seek his intervention and until then the family could go to the burial ground to settle any quarrel among them with assurance that whatever judgment they give to anyone is final. There is no time one cannot perform *Ìjálá*, it is suitable any time of the day- morning, afternoon or the evening and it is suitable for all occasions pertaining to hunters unlike the *Ìrèmọ̀jé* that cannot be sung anytime of the day, not just any event and by just anybody. *Ìjálá* is flexible in nature, content and context, it is this flexibility that contemporary *Ìjálá* chanters such as *Àlàbí Ògúndépo* capitalises and leverages on to form their new form of *Ìjálá* whereby various events, ceremonies and electronic media are avenues through which *Ìjálá* is performed and promoted in post colonial era.

Formerly, the themes of *Ìjálá* music centered on *oríkì* (praise poem) which included the singing of the praises of *Ogun*, animals, birds, food, and personalities in the society. However, as a result of changes, the dominant themes in new *Ìjálá* music transcend singing praises of people but have included jingles for advertisement for political campaign, advertisement of herbal products, and publicity for religious organisations, public enlightenment, correction, counseling, and condemnation of anti-social behaviours among others. *Ìjálá* music is performed within a wide-range of social, economic, political and secular contexts among the Yorùbá. Therefore, new themes can be grouped under the following themes: social-economic, philosophical, socio-religious, political, moralistic, and educational themes. This current endeavour examined three major themes as identified in *Alabi Ogundepo's* *Ìjálá* music.

Moralistic theme: robbery and other vices condemned

Ìjálá music performs social roles in which the societal core values, norms, traditions and beliefs are well articulated in the performance. Societal values and beliefs such as quality education, hardwork, chastity, loyalty and hospitality are usually adumbrated by the chanters and vices such as robbery, untidiness and immoral acts are vilified as unacceptable practices in Yorùbá society. Many of these vices were criticized and condemned by *Àlàbí Ògúndépo* in some of his performances. Society's displeasure and stands on them were well elucidated and articulated. For instance, in one of his performances, he condemned robbery and reiterated untimely death as a sure judgment for robbers:

<i>Ògún ní ń dájọ̀ fọ̀mọ̀ olè,</i>	<i>Ògún</i> is pronouncing judgment for the robbers
<i>Ògún ní ń dájọ̀ fọ̀mọ̀ olè</i>	<i>Ògún</i> is pronouncing judgment for the thieves
<i>Bẹ̀ ẹ̀ bá ń gbọ̀ tẹ̀ kí tẹ̀ kí l'etí Òkun</i>	if you hear gunshot beside the river
<i>Ògún ní ń dájọ̀</i>	<i>Ògún</i> is pronouncing judgment

The song above was composed by *Alabi Ogundepo* in 1980s to condemn robbery activities that were rampant in *Ibadan, Oyo state* during that time. *Ogundepo*, with the company of others that were working with radio station, *Nigerian Broadcasting Service Ibadan*, was asked to capture the incidence of killing of robbers at that time. The arrested robbers were killed at the bank of *ẹ̀lẹ̀yẹ̀lé Rivers* in *Ibadan* in 1980s and he used his song to discourage people from robbery as a result of untimely death. The song was later recorded and produced by *Alawada Records, Ibadan* titled *Jàgùdà sòfò l'ẹ̀lẹ̀yẹ̀lé vol 1*. The song was used to dissuade younger generation from vices such as robbery that are capable

of terminating life untimely. Musicians are saddled with the responsibility of social prophet to warn people of behaviours that injurious to their well-being and inimical to the society. This is corroborated by Omojola (2017) that music in Yorùbá culture has a wide and inclusive participation of the norms and this is usually guided by the crucial roles of professional musicians as performance leaders. Alibi Ogundepo did not only discourage people from vices but also encouraged them on good behaviour as contained in the excerpt below- *Ìwà rere* which is one of the major attributes of Omolúàbí (see Samuel and Adekola, 2018 on music and concept of Omolúàbí) in Yorùbá worldview:

<i>Ìwà rere ní á jọ má a hù</i>	good behaviour/character is the best
<i>Ìwà rere ní á jọ má a hù</i>	let us embrace good behaviour

Education and its imperativeness: "read far, go far without fear"

Musical content in Àlàbí Ògúndépò's *Ìjálá* music reveals importance and imperatives of education in contemporary world. It is believed that a person who "reads far is bound to go far in life and will leave without fear" as deduced in his music. According to him, a literate individual will become a great person in the society while illiterate will eventually become a slave to the educated fellow. The excerpt below explains this further:

<i>Èyàn tó kàwé jìnnà</i>	a man who is vast in education
<i>Bó bá yá a ní pò, a d'òṣgá</i>	will later be a leader and hold an important position
<i>Bó bá yá a d'olóri oko</i>	and later become a leader and successful person
<i>Ọmọwé legbe re o mà mà sìn</i>	an educated person would be served by his peers

The excerpts below also confirm that education is a *sin qua non* to upward mobility in social reality especially in contemporary world. The educated fellows are accorded respect and honour as the youths are encouraged to get education so as to become someone to reckon with in the society.

<i>Ìgbé a gb'álákọwé gẹgẹ</i>	the way an educated person is held in honour
<i>Alákọrí ò gbọdọ mí</i>	illiterate must not breath (talk)
<i>Ayé n yera f'álákọra</i>	everyone is avoiding illiterate
<i>Ẹwù tó ya t'álákọwé ò lè wọ</i>	a cloth that an educated cannot wear
<i>Lalákọrí n wọ yan kángbán kán gbán</i>	it's the one an illiterate wear and parade himself

<i>Ẹkọ ló layé, ẹkọ làgbà</i>	education is important, it is the in thing
<i>Ẹyin ọdọ ẹ dábọ ẹ kàwé</i>	youths, please be educated
<i>A fẹ ẹ kẹ d'olóriire</i>	we want you be successful
<i>Ìfà n bẹ f'álákọwé tàrà</i>	fortune are sure for the educated person
<i>Ọmọwé l'ọgá àwọn ló káyé já</i>	educated are the leaders and are al in all

The above excerpts were rendered in prose-like manner while the music below was sung with instrumental accompaniment. The song text below reiterates the importance of education in African society. The music encourages every child to go to school but also learn one skill or the other through apprenticeship because those who learn through apprenticeship are vast in the skills they acquired which points to the fact that the instructorship system of teaching should be encouraged in schools. It must be noted that every form of education is important; both formal education and apprenticeship system have been known to be effective, accurate, financially rewarding and technologically relevant to contemporary time.

Eko lagba

Lead Voice

Alabi Ogundepo

8 Ba-ba j'o-mo o ka-we o e-ko lo la-ye o - ni o to-ri

9 pe bee-yan o do-ni-po lo-la bee-yano di law-yer lo-la

17 bee-yano di do-ki-ta lo-la bee-yano di ti-sa lo - la bee

25 yano di en-gi-ne-er lo-la bee-yano di se-na-tor lo-la

31 bee-yano di o-ni-po lo-la e - ko lo la-ye o-ni o

38 o - mo ti-o ba ka-we o ba-

45 ba jo - mo o ka - we o ba -

49 ba j'o - mo o ka - we o

2

19

Voice  bee-yano di ti-sa lo - la

Voice  o si ju pe ko ka - we gbo-ye a-bu-ja o si ju pe ko ka-we

24

Voice  bee yano di en-gi-ne-er lo-la bee

Voice  gbo ye o - na kan o si ju pe ko ka-we gbo-ye

29

Voice  yano di se-na-tor lo-la bee

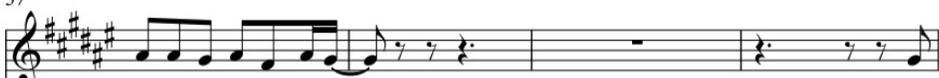
Voice  o - na kan o si ju pe ko ka-we gbo - ye

33

Voice  yano di o-ni-po lo-la e -

Voice  a - bu - ja o si ju pe ko ka - we gbo. ye

37

Voice  ko lo la - ye o - ni o o -

Voice  i - moe - ko lon gbe - ni d'e - po gi - ga o

41

Voice  mo ti - o ba ka-we o ba-

Voice  a - fe - si ko ma s'e-ru e - gbe re

45

Voice  ba jo-mo o ka-we o ba-

Voice  k'o-mo re ko ma s'e-ru e - gbe re

49

Voice  ba j'o-mo o ka-we o

Voice  k'o-mo re ko ma s'e-ru e - gbe re

Another music excerpt that discusses the role and significance of education is given below:

<i>Taló sọ wípe t'ẹ̀kọ̀ kò sòro/2x</i>	who says education does not matter?
<i>Taló sọ wípe t'ẹ̀kọ̀ kò sòro/2x</i>	who says education is not important?
<i>Ẹ̀kọ̀ l'ọ̀nà t'ó ní gbé ni dé pò nílá</i>	education is a sure way to greatness
<i>Béyàn ò k'àwé yí o s'ẹ̀rú ọ̀mọ̀ wé</i>	an illiterate will be a servant to an intellectual
<i>Wèrè èyàn ló ní pe t'ẹ̀kọ̀ ò mà sí o</i>	only the fool will undermine the importance of education
<i>Taló sọ wípe t'ẹ̀kọ̀ kò sòro</i>	who says education does not matter

The song above emphasizes the importance and indispensability of quality education in human development and status upgrading in life. The song, having started with a rhetorical question- "who says education does not matter" reiterates the fact that education is a must for upward movement in human status especially in post-colonial era. The repetition of the phrase- *Taló sọ wípe t'ẹ̀kọ̀ kò sòro* (who says education does not matter) in lines 1 and 2 and the last line of the song testifies to the emphasis the statement requires. The body of the song explains the fact that education is a sure

path to success and a sure way to a greater height in life as uneducated will later become a servant to an intellectual; as a result of this, only the fool trivializes the necessity of education in post-colonial era. Although the exalted position is a common desire for both men and women but it is reserved for only the intellectuals. No one really wants to be a servant to other, everybody in the society usually aspires to belong to upper echelon but this can only be through hard work and going through the required training. Therefore, education which is the sure path to greatness is usually advocated for among the people. It must be clearly stated that though the type of education the musician was referring to in this song is essentially a Western education type in which various discoveries are made and solution are brought to human problems through the aid of technology, however, it must also be noted here that education in Yoruba traditional setting is more comprehensive than Western education. Holistic education is usually canvassed for especially for a better future of the youths. The issue of holistic education has been extensively discussed by scholars such as Awoniyi, (1975), Samuel and Adekola, (2018). The main point here is that education is the best legacy a man can give to his or her child for future achievement and rest of mind.

Conclusion

Ìjálá music by Alabi Ogundepo has a lot of didactic imports especially for the younger generation as revealed by the analysis of his selected themes. The thematic analysis of the song indicates the underlying idea of the song is the power of good counsel and expository capacity of the musician. The song explains the crucial role of moral values and education in traditional Yoruba setting which is still valid in modern era as it emphasis the fact that it is either you get educated and be exalted or you despise it and get lost in the society. Every form of education is important, especially education that contributes to moral development of a child is said to be effective, accurate, financially rewarding and technologically relevant to our time. The study provides a broad application of traditional songs and language in Yoruba cultural and historical contexts and their didactic imports. More is expected from researchers in the area of music and language so as to create special interest of African music and language in younger generation.

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