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The Essence of Drum Music in Napa Ritual Performance

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Introduction

Drum music among Nupe traditional performers of Niger and Kwara States of Nigeria is mainly used for ritual purposes. During the annual Nupe masquerade performance, for instance, the effect of music of the Nupe drum popularly known as the *gafee*, on the general ritual activities and dance of the people is enormous. *Gafee*, a crocodile-skin drum, is the biggest drum in size, out of the musical instruments used to cushion Nupe ritual drama. Its stand is a hallow tree trunk. As the talking drum of the people, it speaks the language that its users understand. *Gafee* artifact projects Nupe art and culture. It is the instrument behind the melody of Nupe ritual dance. Hence Nupe performers deliberately take the accurate steps that the rhythm of *gafee* drum produces and dictates. *Gafee* dancing steps portray the ancestral dignity and honour required for the people's ritual to be effective. Through various rhythmic movements, derived from *gafee* sound, ritual procedures are enhanced. Each unit of the performance episode is perfected by a different tone, produced by the *gafee*. The tones accentuate the theme depicted by each episode of the dramatic procedure and display. *Gafee* drum-beats therefore change according to the mood and intensity of performance at each ritual procedural stage.

The Nupe are a distinct group of people who dwell mainly in river-side areas surrounded with valleys and plains. S. F. Nadel (1935) and M. Manson (1975) have given extensive geographical and environmental descriptions in their researches on the Nupe. Some Nupes can be located along

the western area of Nigeria, such as in Lagos municipality and Badagry. However, the vast majority lives in Kogi State. This explains the reason for the specification of the Nupe examined in this article. All Nupe people speak Nupe language as their first language. Dialects of Nupe are Dibo, Chekpan and Bassa among others. This article discusses the function of *gafee*, a Nupe ritual drum, in the total realization of ritual practices among the Nupe in Nigeria.

The function of this ritual drum is deduced from series of collation of its music and dance style tape-recorded and visualized during some annual and arranged ritual performances across Nupe settlements. In addition to these, interviews, over time, in selected Nupe Kwara-Niger areas were collated and interpreted. One of the findings during a personal participation in the ritual dances of the people is that the *gafee* is a functional musical artifact of the Nupes used to accomplish cultural stability, progress and verification of unity in existence among the people.

Ritual in Nupe Performance Context

Generally, a ritual is a cultural symbolic performance that functions as a reinforcement agent of cultural values. G. D. Killam asserts that:

Rituals are created by man to explain the problems and mysteries of life and death-his attempt to make sense of the bewildering complexities of existence. (Killam, 1969:21)

Ritual in Nupeland harbours many other aspects of Nupe people's socio-religious life. From the rituals culturally defined propositions about the reality of Nupe life, the people's material existence, position on earth and in relationship with God and other forces, can be deduced. *Gafee* rhythm also reinforces the importance of Nupe

ancestral rhythm of dignity and honour. *Gatee* musical reinforcement is aided by a singer and actors who recite and act with the aim of invoking ancestral spirits in their midst. Rituals are the Nupe religious acts of worship meant to re-ascertain cultural values and continuity of the race. Thus, the performance involves the enactment of rites for the purpose of ensuring some control over the unseen forces that determine existence.

Nupe culture, like many other Nigerian cultures has an intrinsic system of ideas and world views. These ideas and views find agency in the *gatee* drum music and dance which together are indicators of the modes of perception and sensibility of the Nupe. Cultural ideas are expressed by the music produced from the drum. Nupe people's aspiration, vision and aesthetics are accentuated by the pronouncement of the *gatee* drums. The drums thus assume the essence of ritual which Turner (1998:157) appropriately defines as:

a prescribed formal behaviour for occasions, having reference to beliefs in mystical or non-imperial being or powers... a corpus of beliefs and practices performed by a specific cult association.

Turner's definition of ritual seems more relevant to Nupe cultural situation. Ritual in Nupeland involves the rites of passage phenomenon. It necessitates the overall survival and transformation of the Nupe society. Hence, it has to be made ceremonial and therefore accompanied with drumming. Its performance has to involve the *gatee* musical dance used as a symbol and signifier of both socio-religious and collective movement of the people. Nupe ideology and myth are simply metaphorised and revealed in *gatee* production.

The practice of *gatee* and its status as ritual is further affirmed by the submission of Bolaji Idowu (1991:89) to the effect that:

There are two principal ways in which man tries to avail himself of the resources of a power "wholly other" than himself. And this is mainly for the fulfillment of his needs. He recognizes the power as a divine being with whom man may have communion and communication. His approach therefore becomes that of submission and appeal so as to tap and harness it and make it sub serve his own end.

Idowu's proposition above embraces *gatee* in its general thrust. It is however in Kirk (1970:9) and his categorization of rituals into 'rites de passage' and 'agrarian fertility' performance that *gatee* performance is better understood.

Gatee Origin, Form, Drumming Method and Functional Manipulation

As the nerve center of Nupe ritual performance, *gatee* should be viewed as the drum that controls the entire ritual performance and subsequent practices of the people. As members of the audience listen to the music of the drum, they take the right dance steps appropriate to the different rhythms which they understand and interpret along spiritual requests and expectations. *Gatee* is used for keeping orderliness during performance at the opening stage of the annual Nupe ritual drama. For a particular ritual performance to begin there is a certain *gatee* rhythm which must be performed. Other rhythms herald the complex atmosphere that is to follow.

Gatee is a drum used for communication among Kwara-Niger Nupe. It does not only produce music but also

prophesizes through the use of rhythms, sounds and proverbial sayings. The ritual-aesthetic essence of *gatee* drum can be realized through its divergence from what used to be referred to as local and native artifact to socio-political and cultural usage. The stories that surround the origin of *gatee* as deduced from oral interviews in the different Nupe towns used as sample areas are different, especially in terms of the subsequent development and use of the drum. Part of the findings here is the general belief that *gatee* was originally carved for the worship of a particular type of masquerade known by the people as *Ndakogboya*. The drum was improvised for a ritual process, produced to cleanse the land of Etsu Kolo Ta, a particular King's mother's witchcraft devices. Some oral accounts of *Ndakogboya* chief priests recount that King Kolo Ta's mother turned into a cat to be in attendance or to secretly hang around to spy and listen to deliberations during chieftaincy meetings, chaired by her son. She was said to later give counter advice to her son outside the decision of the ruling group. Her aim was to cause destruction to the land and affect a change of power of a particular gender (the male). Hence, the need for the rituals, for which the *gatee* drum was inaugurated, to invoke the good spirits of the land to be in attendance in decision taking matters that require collective agreement rather than disagreements, fights and disunity, devilishly invoked by King Kolo Ta's mother.

About three to four *gatee* drums of the same size are used in a single performance, all simultaneously beaten with the bare left palm on the surface, by a single drummer. The drummer uses a curved stick with a thick-knotted top to hit the drum surface at intervals. He requires a seat before he can effectively play the four drums. To achieve the required sound, at each stage and at intervals, the left fingers are placed at the edge of *gatee* and moved at random around the cover of the drum. The drummer reverses the order or

sequences of the beats when he wants to change the sound produced. The drumming technique further requires that he also hits his left palms heavily on *gatee* surface when drumming is coming to a final end, at the close of the occasion.

As observed during investigation, *gatee* drumming among Nupe performers began to vary in terms of rhythm, pattering and style from one Nupe area to the other in recent times. This is because each Nupe sub-region wanted to be independent of one another and to gain local fame based on their individual aesthetic ritual devices. Each Nupe-region, such as Kwara, consisting of sub-regions of the Binis, *Kyadya*, *Batachidzi*, *Chekpan*, *Ebangi*, *Kusochi*, *Kitichi*, *Gbedegi*, *Ebe* and *Dibo* as grouped by A.A. Idrees, adopted an independent style to carve their own styles of the *gatee* musical instrument to use for rituals based on the same common belief. Nupe sub-groups are named according to their geographical and economic features. Because the Nupe predominantly dwell at the river-side it is a crocodile skin that is used to construct the *gatee* drum. The carving of the drums in various attractive styles enhanced indigenous crafts among the Nupe. Hence, music and dance becomes inevitable in Nupe culture and religion. The vigorous shaking of the scapular muscles by the male Nupe dancers and the wriggling of the waist by their female counterpart dancers indicate the perfection of the *gatee* drummer whose art stimulates the authoritative voice of the ancestors. The drummer beats the drum with the praises and epithets of the deities and ancestors of the land, and skillfully advances by jerking his body, as the rhythm gets intense. *Gatee* makes the initial one line sound to call the attention of the audience to the opening of the show. The sound becomes deeper and quite explicit, heralding the arrival of the mystical in the midst of the ordinary. The rhythms now combine, suggesting the mode of dance, and echoed along and aloud by the

of a non-vocalized drumming dance rhythm, known by the people as 'tsankan' (earning declarance). Dancers dance the *tsankan* rhythm by bending their knees in cushioning fashion. They shuffle their feet and gracefully extend the palms of their hands, in fast succession, with the right leg slightly raised in quick movements. This is different from the shaking of the scapular shoulder muscles observed when the dancers are about to go into a trance.

Douglas Davies (1997:46) for instance observes that:

The idea of soul or spirit has helped many different societies to express their conviction that life does not end with physical death. Death rites should be seen as an adaptation underlying local religious practices

The proclamation of unity of the Nupe by the *gatee* drums are put in brevity, sarcasm and plea forms. For example, the drum could rhythmically produce the following non-vocal words:

Elugua nkpara nda yi 'Gboya?
 Chorus *Kpra da yi 'Gboya*
Let me rush to call in 'Gboya?
 Chorus : *A rush call for 'Gboya*

And this is similar to the icon of call- and- response in any African total theatre idiom.

The dancer listening to the instruction of the *gatee* drums stands still initially as if seeking for the audience's permission to rush and display ritual steps. Some of *gatee* rhythmic steps therefore, involve the use of rhetoric and hocked techniques for emphasis and foreground purposes. For further example, listen to this:

Afo yawo da

Yawo a mangi eba
konba

Ye wole?

On announcement of marriage date

The bridge gave birth to twins

Have you ever heard

Rhythmic echoes such as these satirise the foolishness of mankind. Hence, historic resources and iconic materials are reinforced by the drum beats. The fame and dynamism of the Nupe *gatee* drum can therefore be linked to its functional effectiveness. It serves as a perfect and stabilizing medium of communication for the Nupe audience. Thus, the *Gatee* drum speaks the language that both its people and ancestors understand.

Conclusion

The Nupe *gatee* ritual drum does not merely express emotion and feelings, it is a drum well connected with the rhythm and events of Nupe life, vision and worldview, all of which are numerated by the drum beats discussed above. Through *gatee* drumming, cultural elements and history are put in shape. *Gatee* drum serves as a social regulator, as it proclaims societal regulations and modifies deviances from them in suitable rhythms. Though a worship drum, *Gatee* creates a mental atmospheric condition for its audience in the process of ritualization. *Gatee* is in essence, a symbolic cultural artifact with organized rhythmic patterns used for the attainment of union with the supernatural. It also heralds the Nupe people's aspiration and belief system as well as their self sustenance and communal success. The drum and the ritual details it entails as presented above affirm the submission of George Frazer (1912:V) about man's sensitivity to "the sharp line that divides the known from the unknown" in matters of religion and ritual especially in agrarian communities. In the final analysis, *Gatee* performance and its significance in the life of the Nupe constitutes an attestation of the symbiosis of magic, myth and rituals as observed by Okpewho (1983).

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