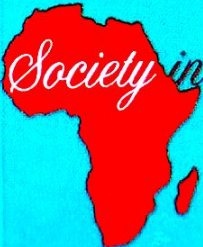


Music and Social Dynamics in Nigeria

Edited by

BODE OMOJOLA

Religion & Society in Africa





Knut Holter
General Editor

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Aesthetics in Yoruba Music

Case Study of the People of Igboho

TAIYE ADEOLA

INTRODUCTION

Cultural notions of beauty as well as the form and significance of the creative act must be understood within the context of specific societies as well as their social and philosophical values. This chapter discusses the concept of aesthetics with a special focus on the cultural perspectives of the Yoruba people of Igboho, in south western Nigeria. The essay derives from a fieldwork that I carried out in Igboho during which I participated in and observed musical performances, and interviewed musicians and non-musicians in the town. My discussion here relies significantly on indigenous Yoruba terminologies for, as well as Western perspectives on, the concept of aesthetics. I also rely on my personal knowledge of the music of Igboho, being an indigene and a product of the town.

Igboho, an ancient town in the north of Oyo State in Western Nigeria, occupies a large surface area, and once served as a refuge for Oyo exiles in the sixteenth century. It was known then as Oyo Igboho (Igboho of the Oyo people) and at the earlier part of the sixteenth century, it was the political center of the towns composing the Oyo Empire. Rapidly developing into a considerably big town of about fifty-five thousand people, according to the 1963 census figures, Igboho is now located in the present Orelope Local Government Area of Oyo State. Farming and cattle-rearing are the main occupations of the people. Igboho is known to have Christians, Muslims and a minority of traditional religionists. Like every other Yoruba society, indeed, as it is in virtually every African community, music

making is a major way of life of the people. Thus, as expected, a number of distinct traditional musical practices exist among the people of Igboho.

DEFINING MUSICAL AESTHETICS

The term "musical aesthetics" "designates attempts to explain what music means; the difference between what is and what is not music, the place of music in human life and its relevance to an understanding of human nature and history, the fundamental principles of the interpretation and appreciation of music, the nature and ground of excellence and greatness in music" (Saide 1980: 120). But while the concept of aesthetics is a global phenomenon, specific cultural contexts must provide the basis for defining aesthetic parameters. According to Daphne D. Harrison (1985: 49),

Aesthetics is a term that often arouses controversy in intellectual discourse because discussion tends to overlook certain salient factors. One factor in particular is that the definition of aesthetics depends heavily upon a cultural frame of reference. Thus a dialogue on the aesthetic merit of a specific object or of a particular group of creative arts will be productive only when cultural considerations are taken into account.

Aloysius Lugira (1973: 52–57) describes aesthetics as art's representation of beauty and explains that the term represents "the answer to the twofold question, 'what is beauty? What is art?' Beauty is multidimensional, that is, it may be physical, intellectual, moral, or literary. It is multi-level in that one may consider the beautiful as merely pretty, as graceful, or as sublime."

INDIGENOUS TERMINOLOGIES

In traditional African societies, if the Igboho community is indicative, works of art are evaluated in functional and contemplative perspectives. The people of Igboho draw on a number of vocabularies to reflect on the significance of artistic expressions. The word for beauty is *ewa*, which could be used to refer to the qualities of art as well as to human attributes.¹ According to Justine Cardwell (1959), the vocabulary regarding what is beautiful encompasses such factors as wealth, prestige, status and political symbolism. Beauty among the Yoruba, whether associated with human beings, nature or works of art, is multifaceted. The concept of aesthetics in the music of the Yoruba is not expressed in absolute, purely artistic terms, as seems to be the case in Western society.

The word *ewa*, according to Madam Omoladun, cannot be used to describe vocal or instrumental music in absolute perspectives.² According to her, "Eniyan lo

n lewa" (beauty is an attribute of human beings). Beauty, she expatiates, is an attribute of music only when a beautiful human being is connected with the performance or responses to it. Beauty, in this case, ties artistic quality to the personality of the performers and the entire human and social context within which musical performance takes place. It is thus expressed in relative terms, in ways that cover extra-artistic qualities. Music is generally called *orin* among the Yoruba. Specifically, however, *orin* means "song," as distinct from *ilu*, which refers to instrumental music. More precisely, though, *ilu* means drum. *Ere* is another term that is sometimes used to refer to music. This is, however, inadequate, because *ere* literally means "play"—that is, acts of performance that may or may not include a musical rendition. The word is therefore often used with reference to the concept of performance in a more general sense as captured in the phrase *s'ere*, which could be interpreted as "to act" or "to play." In its wider semantic meaning—covering, for example, dramatic performance, jocular entertainment/comedy, dance, and playful tricks—*ere* is less specific in capturing the art of musical performance.

Whether expressed as *orin* or *ilu* (vocal or instrumental performance), the quality of a musical performance could be evaluated with the words *dara* or *dun* (good or sweet). The word *dara* (good) is used to express the manner in which a performer presents his or her material, while the word *dun* (good or sweet) is an expression about the outcome of the performance. One may ask the question: what qualifies a piece of music to be good or sweet? This question raises many answers that reveal the ways the Yoruba people conceptualize the notion of aesthetics. Baba Dogo explained to me that a good piece of music should have a great affective power. It should touch the listener's emotions. In Yoruba parlance, it should cause the listener's head to "swell." The listener may even in return bestow some form of reward, like a monetary gift, on the musicians.³

Other factors that make for beauty in music are associated with the art of performance and the virtuosity of the performer. Virtuosity and the art of combining contrasting instrumental colors and roles are also important. The regular flow of ideas, good coordination between instruments and voices and a logical presentation of material are equally important. This the people express in these words: "O dara ki orin ati ilu ma a lo tara lai tase" (It is good for songs and drumming to go smoothly without conflicting with one another).⁴

Vocal improvisation is described as *wiwa ohun* (searching for voice).⁵ Voice in this case refers to words. The ability of the singer to choose or select the right words at the right time in performance contributes to the overall beauty of a performance. The human voice is described and associated with things that the Yoruba people use regularly, or is associated with their environment. These include birds (*eye*), salt (*iyó*), banana (*ogede*) and gong (*agogo*). The voice of a singer is described in relation to the aforementioned, as in *olohun iyo* (the one with the voice of salt).⁶ Here, the "sweetness" of a singing voice is compared to the transforming

taste of salt. It is common for people to rejoice at the sound of the voice of a particular singer who appeals to them. The voice of such a singer soothes them and makes them happy. *Olobun iyo* in this case therefore means one whose voice brings happiness or rejoicing.⁷ It is an expression of the resultant effect of the singer's voice on the hearer.

Olobun ogede is used to describe one whose voice is "soft." It refers to a singer with the voice of a banana. Banana, in this case, is not seen as a musical instrument. Rather, the voice is likened to a ripe banana, which is very soft to touch. It is therefore not uncommon to find singers actually always eating bananas because they believe that doing so softens the voice. This belief is shown in an adage that says, "Mo jorogbo kohun mi le gbo, mo j'ogede k'ohun mi le de" (I ate bitter kola so that my voice will be strong, I ate banana so that my voice will be soft). Similarly, the phrase *olobun ago* refers to a person with a sonorous voice, as sonorous as the Yoruba traditional gong.

Like birds, each person has a distinct voice, recognizable even when that person is not seen physically.⁸ Likewise, an instrumentalist is identified when he or she plays. A *dundun* drummer is recognized as a good performer by the way he or she handles the drum stick, which is often referred to as *kokoro* (key).⁹ The drum stick is described as a "key" because it "unlocks" the process of musical improvisation. In the same vein, the performance of a drum ensemble is considered incomplete without the improvisation of the master drummer, who must use his or her drum to "talk." The *iyaalu*, the instrument played by the master drummer, is used to play patterns that imitate speech.¹⁰ The typical "iyaalu" drummer is regarded as a master rhetorician who must also possess the ability to generate an engaging improvisation.

Among the Yoruba, there are families known for their musical arts simply by the name they bear. An example is the name *Ayan*, which designates drumming families. Most traditional drummers hail from an 'Ayan' family. As Madam Omoladun explained to me, "kiko yato si ajogun ba" (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.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The concept of aesthetics in Yoruba music among the people of Igboho could be summarized in the words of Lugira (1973) as follows:

Art can become beautiful through human endorsement. However, for art to reflect beauty, it must encompass integrity (a sense of totality or wholeness aiming toward perfection); proportion (the unity through which the individual parts come together and are directed toward the same end); and splendor (a clarity that moves one to experience pleasure upon observing it).

The extra-musical dimension to the conceptualization of the notion of aesthetics, as explained earlier, is also well captured in the words of Kwabena Nketia (1974): the "value of art is governed by social values."¹¹ This implies that art is considered beautiful only if it matches social expectations. Among the Yoruba, there are established societal views of what is beautiful and what is not beautiful. As shown in my discussion and in the separate comments of Lugira and Nketia, the notion of "beauty" is, in Yoruba culture, not fully captured through an abstract concept of aesthetics. The notion of beauty in Yoruba music is expressed with reference to the humanity that produces the music and the social significance of the performance. Individual virtuosity makes for beauty, as seen in the emphasis on the ability to improvise, the ability to "talk" with the drum, the capability to produce a sound that is considered acceptable and effective by the society, and the ability to appeal through the emotive power of music.

NOTES

1. The Yoruba word *ewa* is often used in connection with male or female physical attractiveness.
2. Madam Omoladun, one of the people whom I interviewed in the course of conducting this research, is a prominent vocalist/chanter in Igboho town.
3. Baba Dogo is a well-known local historian in Igboho.
4. This is a generally accepted quality of a good performance.
5. This is expressed through the word "wiwa" (to look for).
6. This is symbolically conveyed in the use of salt to make soup tasty.
7. This derives from the word "ayo" (joy).
8. Birds are associated with sonorous singing in Yoruba culture. The "awoko" is regarded as an inspirational type of music.
9. *Dundun* music is a prominent Yoruba instrumental performance. It is performed in both religious and social events.
10. The term *iyaalu* denotes a musical role. An *iyaalu* drum is the leading member in a Yoruba instrumental ensemble.
11. See also the following: Blacking (1973), Siegmater (1975) and Akpabot (1986).

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