

Akokoland Yam Festival: A Resource for African Musical Arts Education

Ologundudu, Rotimi Peters

The Polytechnic, Ibadan, Nigeria

&

Akperi, Yemi Andrew, Ph.D

Baptist College of Theology, Benin City, Nigeria

Abstract

Ijesu or Yam Festival is an annual event amongst the Akoko people who inhabit Akokoland, which is made up of four local government areas in Ondo State, in Southwestern Nigeria. The Ijesu festival which is similar to other African festivals, epitomizes the diverse components of African musical arts which key constituents are music, drama, dance, rituals, fine arts, and prose/poetry. The research objective is to highlight the pedagogic relevance of Ijesu festival, to the delivery of the musical arts curricula content of music programmes in Nigeria's tertiary institutions. The paper is qualitative in nature, employing the ethnographic research methodology of participant observation. The research finding is that Ijesu festival of Akokoland floats a historical medley of performances, art forms, and creative activities, which can be explored experientially and practically in African musical arts classes, for the benefit of music students in Nigerian tertiary institutions. The paper concludes that although exposure to audio-visual evidence of African musical art performances is a useful approach of learning at some level, such approach cannot sufficiently equip indigenous music students who are expected to be well-abreast of the concept of African musical arts. Therefore, the paper recommends experience/practical pathways of excursion and internship as means of musical arts pedagogy, relative to Ijesu festival in particular, and African musical arts in general.

Keywords: Akokoland, yam festival, resource, African musical arts
African musical arts education

Introduction

Amidst all culture exterminating influences of colonial prejudices, Western education, foreign religions, and the modern influences of globalisation, Nigeria still boasts of copious surviving and functional festivals today. In Western Nigeria, there are *Eyo* in Lagos, Osun-Osogbo grove festival in Osun state, and Global Drum Festival in Abeokuta (which attracts drummers from all over Africa, Brazil, the Caribbean and several countries that have people of African descent), among others. In Eastern Nigeria, there is *Ofala* of Ukpò/Abagana festival is well-known, among others. In the South southern Nigeria, there are the *Igue* festival of Benin, *Oye-Ekoro* boat regatta in Warri, among others. In Northern Nigeria is the Argungu festival, among many others.

The Yam festival in Akokoland, like festivals in other parts of Nigeria, are moments when every member of the community is active, forsaking their sadnesses, afflictions or any form of handicap

to celebrate the joy of the moment. Children, women and youths look forward to the festival as it is an opportunity for all members of the community to participate and celebrate with one another. Like the typical African festival which Okafor (2005) has observed, the yam festival consists of a chain of activities, celebrations, ceremonies foods, drinks and rituals which mark the continuity of culture, occurring at appointed times in the lunar calendar and marking the rhythm of life.

Among many other facets, the yam festival in Akokoland comes with the full compliment of the rich musical arts heritage of Akokoland origin, effectuated functionally as means to compliment the ceremonial gains and spiritual essence of the festival, and joyfully re-enacting the creative histories of Akokoland. Sadly, comprehensive scholarly works on the musical arts in Akokoland yam festival are scant, amidst the vague and abstract idea of the concept and constituents of African musical arts among music and creative art students in Nigerian tertiary institutions. This paper, therefore, examines the yam festivals in Akokoland and extracted historical facts along with elements contiguous and central to the concept of African musical arts.

African Musical Art Practices

African musical arts is inherent in nearly all facets of traditional African life, its profundity gleam in the cultural kaleidoscope of African festivals, through meteors of ritual, dance, drama, poetry, prose, costume and spirit manifest (masquerade), with music continually interjecting the milieu. Since music is usually interwoven with other creative arts and religion in traditional African contexts, it is not defined by a word as in the West; “the Okpe, for instance, do not have a word for music” (Idamoyibo, 2021: 5); “the Tiv have no equivalent word for music” (Agawu, 2003: 62); most African languages do not have a word for music. This dearth of words for music in several African languages invariably led music scholars to examine the nature of music in African context as opposed to Western perspective, discovering that music in traditional Africa is entangled with other social-religious occurrences, integrating music with other arts in ways that proves challenging to dismember.

Drumming and singing are the closest to the word “music” in several African languages. *Ere* (play) in Itsekiri best illustrates the idea of African musical arts as it entails: singing, dancing, games and music making. Ekwueme cited in Idamoyibo (2021: 6), affirms the multidimensional context of African musical arts, which he conceptualizes as “kinetic and audio-visual arts”. Ekwueme’s assertion portray music in the African commune, not only as sounds (audio) but an amalgamation of music, dance (kinetic), drama, ritual and fine arts (visual arts).

Akin Euba was “probably the first [scholar] to promote the concept of African art music” (Ogisi, 2020). Meki thereafter evolved the idea of “The Musical Arts of Africa”, a term that “reminds us that in African cultures, the performance arts discipline of music, dance, drama, poetry and costume are hardly separated in the creative thinking and performance practice of the people” (Okafor, 2011: iii).

The People of Akokoland

Akokoland constitutes four local government areas of Ondo state namely: Akoko North-West, Akoko North-East, Akoko South-West and Akoko South-East, with about forty (40) towns and other smaller villages and hamlets. Some of the physical features in Akokoland include rocky areas, mountains, streams and rich soil for the cultivation of yam and other crops. The major settlements in Akoko include Oka, Ikare, Oba, Ikun, Arigidi, Ogbagi, Okeagbe, Ikaram, Ibaram,

Iyani, Akungba, Erusu, Ajowa, Akunu, Gedegede, Isua, Auga, Ikakumo, Supare, Epinmi, Ipe, Ifira, Ise, Iboropa, Irun, IyeAfin, Igashi, Sosan, Ipesi, Etioro, Ayegunle and Oyin Community.

There are many dialects in Akokoland such as Ekiti dialect (Ede Ekiti), Owo dialect (Ede Owo), Akoko Edo dialect (Ede Edo) and Nupe dialect (Ede Kabba). Despite the presence of multiple dialects, Yoruba is generally spoken in Akokoland and serves as a unifying factor across the lengths of the land. In spite of the diverse languages and dialects of Yoruba which exist in Akokoland, the lingua-franca in Akoko is Yoruba.



Map of Ondo State, Nigeria with Akokoland encircled (Map: www.google.com/map/Nigeria)

Akokoland Yam Festival (*Odon Isu / Ijesu*)

Akokoland Yam Festival which is named *Odon Isu* or *Ijesu* in Yoruba is celebrated during the months of June, July or August. The date is not fixed because like most events in traditional Africa, seasons, rainfall, lunar considerations, and most importantly, the decision of the gods are the determinants for the commemoration of events. A date is fixed for *Ijesu* after the chief priest has got approval from the gods. “Deities are consulted before, during and after the festival” (Ologundudu, 2020: 91). *Ijesu* is a festival celebrated by all the communities that constitute Akokoland. The festival attracts sons and daughters of Akokoland at home and abroad to converge and celebrate what is usually termed by Akoko’s as the beginning of the New Year. The subject of the festival is yam, informing the name of the festival. Being that yam is the staple food in Akokoland, the harvesting of new yams are occasions for joyous celebrations, and are opportunities for agricultural, social, and spiritual reflections.

Rituals and Religious Procession

Some rituals are carried out before the commencement of the actual event. For instance, three days before the commencement of the festival, rituals are performed by the high priest (*Aworos*)

between 1.00 a.m. and 3.00 a.m. to avoid being seen by the uninitiated, including women and children. This ritual is of great importance to the festival. Apart from appeasing the deity, issues relating to the town's social, economic, and political state, are prayed for.

Ijesu festival commences early in the morning with a religious procession led by the traditional chief priest, priests, accompanied by a retinue of religious adherents and musicians to pay homage to the king. Members of this joyous procession are costumed in white clothes with each of the priests clutching a long stick. The sticks are ritualistic-dramatic symbols that the priests wave intermittently and in unison, to wade-off evil spirits from the land. The white dress is a symbol of purification and identification of priesthood during the festival.



Fig. 1: The priests dancing/waving their sticks, after performing the first ritual at the Oba's palace.

After visiting the king, the procession becomes enlarged with other members of the community joining the procession, to the residence of the chief priests where other religious rituals including libation is poured to appease and gratify the gods.

The processional song texts give an idea about the direction or next port of call, after the ceremony in the Oba's (king) palace. The lead singer raises a song which is an indicator and cue to the next destination by the processionalists. Usually, after leaving the chief priests abode, they proceed to the public field. This is where the Oba hosts different age groups who perform to the admiration and entertainment of those gathered at the field, including tourists and invited dignitaries. Homage is equally paid to the King by all, which is usually characterized by the congregants saying; *kabiyesi-o*, while prostrating. Homage to the king occurs immediately after the chief priests have finished the rituals at the palace. These simple texts are accompanied with instruments (drum and rattle gourd) fig 4.

The male priests file out of the king's house and move straight to a house built at the city's outskirts named *igbale*. This house is where all sacred/ritualistic objects such as the regalia of the masquerades (*egungun*) are kept, while the king moves to the field where the dignitaries are seated. The people accompany him with amusing and invigorating body movements. Songs are rendered at this point of the festival, an example of one of which include:

Title of the Song: *O-popoloro Ire*

Song Text in Yoruba Language	Song Text in English Language
1. <i>O- popoloro ire.</i> (Cantor)	- Straight ahead we are moving.
<i>O- popoloro ire.</i> (Chorus)	- Straight ahead we are moving.
<i>O- popo Oba loromemu o</i> (cantor)	- The ceremony is moving to the king's house.
<i>O- popoloro ire.</i> (Chorus)	- Straight ahead we are moving
<i>O- popo Oba loromemu o</i> (cantor)	- The ceremony is moving to the King's house.
<i>O popoloro ire.</i> (Cantor)	- Straight ahead we are moving
<i>O- popoloro ire.</i> (Chorus)	- Straight ahead we are moving

The alligator pepper (*atare*), is a common feature in the rites, used in combination with kola nut. This combination is one that humans enjoy, therefore, it is believed that divinities equally cherish it. Palm wine (*oguro*) is a soothing drink used to quench the spiciness of the alligator. Snails (*Igbin*), fowl, pigeon and fish are the animal proteins that are also sacrificed.

Despite that these food items are being used amongst the people, during the *Ijesu*, the items are symbolic, each representing something specific. For instance, the alligator pepper is chewed and spat to the ground, a ritual which symbolises unity amongst every member of the community. The palm wine (*oguro*) is sprinkled on the ground as libation to appease the gods. The snail, symbolises (*Igbin*) calmness and peace (*Ero*) during the ceremony. The fowl and kola nuts are for appeasement, while fish symbolises good health. Prayers are offered for protection, against diseases/sicknesses, for prosperity and abundant harvest of farm produce, especially yam, which is the essence of the festival.

The high priest performs the rituals with other *Aworos*, while this is ongoing, the big *igbin* drum which is stationed at the corner of the *igbale* is struck intermittently to create awareness and to scare women and children away from the vicinity. This aspect of the ceremony is for males. Females and children are banned from witnessing sacred rituals, except the *Yeye /Iya Aworo* (Chief female priest). The *Aworo* resides in the *Igbale* for five mandatory days, as required by tradition. The rituals and sacrifices are punctuated with music, dancing and various types of artistic displays.



Fig. 2: Two young ladies accompanied by chiefs, displaying the newly harvested yam as they walk towards the King

Taboos

The word, taboo, is called *eewo* (forbidden). There are several taboos that serve as code of conduct to the initiates of cults, and as means of social control at the festival and within the community. Failure to adhere to such prohibitions attract serious penalties, while some attract curses, ailments such as barrenness that may be irreversible to themselves, and sometimes, to the entire community. To reverse curses due to the commition of a taboo, the offender has the option to appease the gods through the *Aworo* (Chief Priest), who prescribes animal sacrifices for appeasement of the gods.

At the event for instance, photographs are not freely allowed for some spiritual reasons. Songs rendered during the festival are generally permitted to be sung on days other than non-festive periods, some songs are however classified as taboo. The text of such songs evidences its uniqueness and sacredness and its unsuitability for other occasions. For instance, a song that talks about the secrets that cult members keep amongst themselves should never be revealed to outsiders. Any member that violates this order receives some form of punishment. Songs that send signals to parents to warn their wards from misbehaving are never to be taken lightly. When the non-initiates of a cult within the community hears such a song of warning, they have to heed the warning of such song and be of a good behaviour.

Masquerades

African masquerades are believed to be spirits, who are representatives of deities and ancestors. Hence, Nigerian music scholars have devised the term “spirit manifest” for traditional African masquerades (Fig 3). The festival features masquerade parade, with other side attractions around the town market location where people converge. The chief masquerade usually emerges at the market arena dancing, praying and prophesying to individuals, groups and sometimes, making proclamations that affect the entire community. In response to such prayers, the people present the masquerade with gifts items including money, chickens, cloths, etc.



Fig.3: Masquerade emerging from the perceived “spirit world”

Presentation of New Yam

At about 10 am, after all the requisite priestly rituals are concluded, the Oba is led to the open field to conduct the final ritual, at this juncture, the ceremony is no longer a secret one. Two young ladies not more than the age of puberty, display the new yam by carrying some sizeable yams on their heads to the presence of the Oba's and chiefs. Thereafter, the high chief presents the new yam to the Oba, to the admiration of the public congregation. The significance of this ceremony is that the Oba who is the chief custodian of culture and authority has in the public view declared the acceptance and consecration of the new as edible for the people of Akokoland. This last ritual officially marks the beginning of the eating of the new yam and other forms of entertainment, which sometimes include march/filling past of different age grades dancing with banners announcing the name of their associations and groups.

Dance

Ijesu festival is an event of joy. Dance is a means by which the people express themselves althrough the event. Different age groups (both male and female), are involved in the dances with various forms of dance styles and acrobatic displays, as illustrated by the female group apparelled in *Aso'oke*. See fig, 4.



Fig 4: Young girls (students) dancing to music (displaying musical art)

During the festival, instrumental ensembles accompany the singing and dancing troupes. The audience is permitted culturally to join the performers in singing and dancing. The troupe choreograph to entertain the audience with different dance styles congruent with the instrumentation.

As the yam presentation ceremony is ongoing, the field is agog with people dancing to different forms of music that replete the arena. The last day of the festival is the most significant. On the last day, the *Aworos* and the priests pay homage to the king and the chiefs at about 8am in his palace (fig. 1). Its importance is based on the series of activities that occur on the last day. The various aspects of African musical arts tradition are copiously displayed. On the last day, while the ceremonies at the king's palace are on-going, simultaneously, the people are already in a festive mood, only waiting for the cue. The priests filing out of the king's palace with their white robes

and sticks accompanied by music and dancing, is the prompt that moves the whole community into frenzy of celebration, marking the climax of the seven day event.

Singing

Singing is a major component of the rites, rituals, processions and socialization at the festival. The following songs are rendered when the procession gets to the field in front of the king's house. It is to pay homage to the gods, thanking him for the past festivals and also imploring his guidance for the coming year.

1. Title of Song: *Baba Omo*

Yoruba

*Baba omo,
Sogungunfomo o.*

English Translation

Father of children
Prepare medicine for the children.

2. Title of Song: *Oni Labiku o Lo Nileyi o*

*Oni labiku o lo nileyi o
Oni lolomo o jereomo won.*

Today, born-to-die will disappear from the land
Today, parents will witness the joy of their Children

3. Title of Song: *Orisanimaa sin*

*Enisojuse' mu,
Orisanimaa sin
A danibotiri,
Orisanimaa sin.
Eni ran niwaye,
Orisanimaa sin.*

He who makes eyes makes nose,
It is god I will serve.
He who makes one as he chooses
It is god I will serve
He who sent me here on earth,
It is god I will serve.

4. Title of Song: *Orisagba mi*

*. Orisagba mi,
mi o lenikan,
yeyeomoniigbomo.
Orisagba mi o ra mi,
Orisagbe mi leke.
IrukereniigbomoOrunmila,
Orisagba mi o ra mi. Orisa*

God accept me,
I have nobody
Mothers accept their children.
God accept me wholly,
God make me triumph.
Horsewhip rescue god child,
Accept me wholly.

Ode mojuba (opening song)

Ode mo juba



O de mo ju ba e a la wo, — I le mo ju ba e a te pe. — O de mo ju ba e
6 a la wo, — a ki tan mo ju ba e a ko si. — E we ko ma a je o o, I ba a
11 la wo mo ju ba a won a ju ni lo.

The text of the preceding song suggests procession from the king's palace after sacrifices were offered to the gods; the song text denotes appeal and prayers to the gods for protection as they move from the *igbale* (residence outside town).

The next song is the closing song of Ijesu festival and it is entitled: *Iwoyi Amodun Tawa Tomo*. It means, the goodness of the coming year shall overtake us.

Iwoyi amodun t'awa t'omo



I wo yi a mo dun t'a wa t'o mo l'a jo wa yo I wo yi a mo dun o
4 t'a wa t'o mo l'a jo wa yo. O ba nta re ni ije bu o a je ko san wa. I wo yi a mo dun
8 t'a wa t'o mo l'a jo wa yo. I wo ti a mo dun o t'a wa t'o mo l'a jo wa yo. O ba nta re ni ije bu o
12 t'a wa ma mi yayo I wo yi a mo dun t'a wa t'o mo l'a jo wa yo. I wo ti a mo dun o
16 t'a wa t'o mo l'a jo wa yo. O ba nta re ni ije bu o t'a wa ma mi yayo

This is a song of petition to the gods for the provision of a child and assurances of its fulfilment. It is rendered towards the close of the festival. It similarly solicits God's favour through prayers to allow them to witness another festival in the coming year in prosperity.

Music Instruments

Different types of Musical instruments are utilised during the celebration of the festival and they consist of the Idiophones and Membranophones families. The following are some of the musical instruments that are employed during the *Ijesu* festival.

- a) Agidigbo = Wooden Slit drum
- b) Agogo = Iron gong

- c) Omele = One sided pot drum
- d) Sekere = Rattles tied on gourd
- e) Konga = Master Drum
- f) Ogbele = Earthen Pot Drum



Fig.5: The chief cantor (with Mega phone) and female musician playing gourds rattle (sekere) and drum during the festival.

Idiophones

Idiophones are common musical instruments in Africa, Idiophones are self-sounding instruments when struck, scrubbed, shaken or hit with hand or any other objects on their bodies. The ‘*Agogo*’ (Iron gong) is used during the festival to announce and warn people about the commencement of the festival. Since it is forbidden for women to see the masquerade in the first night, the iron gong is played loud enough for people within a radius of about kilometre proximity to hear and get into their rooms because anyone that comes in contact with it could be spiritually harmed. The *Agidigbo* is made of carved wood with a hollow opening in the centre. It is played in concert with the other musical instruments during the festival’s opening ceremony. The men are informed to get ready for the festival while women are warned to be indoors. The *agogo* (iron metal joined together with an opening) is used to arrest the audience’s attention to the performing masquerades. It also plays a rhythmic role in the ensemble. Similarly, the *sekere* (rattle gourd) plays a rhythmic role. All these instruments; *ogbele*, *gongo*, *sekere* and *omele* emphasises the rhythmic pattern hierarchically.



Fig.6: Some of the drums (*Ukoko*, *Bembe*, *omelebata*, and *sekere*)

Membranophones

The Membrane instruments are made from animal skin, treated, dried and stretched over the hollows of a carved woods, metals or earthen pots. Three types of membrane instruments are used in the *Ijesu* festival. They are *Omele*, (one sided ringed drum) *gongo*, (two sided hourglass drum). *konga* (long wooden drum) and *ogbele*, (One- sided pot drum).

The *konga* is the master drum; it is also known as male drum. It is played by the master – drummer and it dictates the dance steps taken by the masquerades. The *gongo* (talking drum) is used as a speech surrogate. It is made of wood with an opening for the animal skin stretched over it. The *Konga* also gives rhythmic sounds as the Masquerade dances to entertain the audience.



Fig. 7: Konga Drum

Findings and Recommendations

Findings shows that the *Ijesu* festival of Akokoland is a virtual compendium of African musical arts. The following diagram succinctly explains some of the constituents of musical art practices of *Ijesu* festival of Akokoland, which can be adopted as a pedagogic model of African musical arts.



Ijesu festival of Akokoland is a typical example of a traditional festival, floating a medley of performances, art forms and creative activities. The musical arts of Ijesu festival showcases in most events, activities and creative items at the festival such as fine arts/artefacts, dance, merriments, drama, ritual/worship, storytelling, masquerades and cultural displays of costumes, with music as the persistent lever.

This paper proposes two main pathways towards achieving practical pedagogic experiences of the concept of African musical arts, effective knowledge of which is contemplated in the curricular of music education in all Nigerian tertiary institutions, such as the music curriculum of the Department of Music, University of Nsukka, Nsukka, Nigeria – (UNN, 2014).

Excursion

An excursion by institutions/students to the festival provides the opportunity for enthusiasts to be participant observers. This affords students the chance to have a first-hand knowledge of musical art practices, and be physically enmeshed in the culture. This would help the students to be better equipped to recreate the experience in practical terms.

Internship

Students at tertiary levels of music education in the case of Ijesu festival, may serve as interns under the priests (*Aworos/Yeye*) so as to gain greater insights of the culture and other cultural artefacts and narratives that are hidden from the lenses of those not initiated into the priestly class. Students of African sacred musicology, especially post-graduate may find such internship beneficial. For instance what are the things that take place in the *igbale* which is the residence of the *Aworos* (priests) and the *Yeye* (priestess) for seven days? Whatever is reported about the *igbale* is conjecture. It would take a participant who resides with them to actually make an academic claim. Reason being that for instance, there are usually sacred songs that are not rendered in the public, which are done in seclusion.

Conclusion

African musical arts is a concept that seems unclear to many. It however, has “been realistically preserved since human existence in Africa and the world at large” (Nzewi, 2020: 419). African musical arts is a cultural tapestry knit with dance, drama, fine arts, rituals and intermittently studded with music. Africans perceive the creative/performing arts as part of their socio-cultural milieu. A song may be a prompter to a series of events in a cyclic form that embodies storytelling, dance, drama, poetry, wrestling, and drumming, whose essence is indiscernible to a stranger.

The *Ijesu* festival is more than the celebration of the harvest of new yams. It is an opportunity for the people to replay those things that exemplify their unique essence as a people and express the joy of living. The annual event should therefore be properly documented yearly by organisers, historians, ethnomusicologist, and researchers. Audio-visual documentation of this unique African event is expedient for reference purposes in the classroom. However, although exposure to audio-visual evidence of African musical art performances is a useful approach towards learning at some level, such approach cannot sufficiently equip indigenous music students who are expected to be well-abreast of the concept of African musical arts.

References

- Agawu, K. (2003) *Representing African Music: Postcolonial Notes. Queries, Positions*. New York: Routledge.
- Awolalu, O. & Dopamu, P. A. (2005). *West African Traditional Religion*, Ibadan: Macmillan Co.
- Idamoyibo, A. (2011). Esa music and the struggle for relevance in the 21ST Century. *Abraka Studies in African Arts II: The Humanities and Human Capital Development*. Ed. Osa D. Egonwa. The Humanities, Delta State University, Abraka. 159 - 171.
- Idamoyibo, O. (2021). *Music How Relevant is it to Spirits, Humans and National Development?* 84th in the Series of Inaugural Lectures of Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria.
- Nketia, J. H. K. (1984). *The Music of Africa*. London: Mgbo Publications.
- Nzewi, Meki. (2020) Active or dormant crucial knowledge: Which generates enduring humanning benefits? *JANIM: Journal of the Association of Nigerian Musicologists*, 14. 418 - 427.
- Okafor, R. C. (2005). Music in Nigerian festivals. *A Journal of the Association of Nigerian Musicologists JANIM*, 1 (2).
- Okafor, R. (2011) Foreword. *Mekism and Knowledge Sharing of the Musical Arts of Africa: A Book of General Reading in Honour of Professor Meki Nzewi*. Department of Music. Faculty of Arts, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. iii.
- UNN (2014). University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Faculty of Arts, Department of Music Student Handbook.