

Socio-cultural functions of Sato traditional music among the Egun people of Badagry

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Abstract

Existing studies have focused on different aspects of traditional drum music among the people of south-western Nigeria. These include studies on bata, dundun, agere and igbin ensembles. However, little has been done on the socio-cultural functions of Sato music among the Egun people of Badagry. This study adopted the ethnographic method, with the use of primary and secondary sources of data. The primary sources include in-depth interviews, which were conducted with five each of purposively selected Sato drummers and prominent traditional chiefs in the Badagry community. Furthermore, there was participant observation of Sato music performances during which audio and video recordings were made. In addition, a key informant and two research assistants were employed in the course of this study to interpret the Egun language. The secondary source included books, journal articles, magazines, newspapers and the internet. Data collected was transcribed and analysed within the ethnomusicological framework. The study revealed that Sato music had developed from its strictly sacred and traditional essence to social and entertainment presentations. The study further revealed that the content of Sato music is determined by the context of performance. In addition, it further revealed that Sato music has a significant impact on the educational, economic, political and the socio-religious life of the people. The paper concludes that the relevance of Sato music was not premised only on the context of the music but also on the structural design and the utilitarian values of Sato music among the Egun people of Badagry.

Keywords: Sato music; Egun people; aesthetic functionalism; performance; utilitarian; south-western Nigeria.

Introduction

The focus of this paper is on Sato, a traditional music genre of the Egun people domicile in Badagry, Lagos State a western part of Nigeria. Among several other traditional music in Badagry, Sato music will be discussed from the socio-cultural perspectives. The music is built around Sato drum, which is the bedrock of this traditional music. The music got its name from this “mysterious” drum which is held in high esteem by the Egun people for its uniqueness and relevance to the socio-economic growth of the people.

According to Burton, (1863) in Vidal (2002), the Badagry people cover the coastal area in Lagos State and it was traced to 1727 when the King of Dahomey had conquered Whydah. These people were called Popo who came out to settle in the coastal area of Lagos state. They were called the Egun by the Yoruba and they settled in Lagos with a mixture of their Egun language and Yoruba Language. The presence of the Egun people brought about a powerful coastal kingdom which played an active role in the 19th Century Atlantic Slave Trade with the Portuguese exporting slaves to Brazil (Vidal 2002). The principal religious belief of the Egun is the worship of a python, commonly referred to as ‘the Snake Worship’, ‘the Tree Worship’, and ‘the Sea Worship’. Among a wide range of membrane drums in south-western Nigeria, Sato drum is a unique drum to the Egun people.

Existing studies have focused on different aspects of traditional drum music among the people of south-western Nigeria. These include studies on *bata*, *dundun*, *agere* and *igbin* ensembles. However, there has been no in-depth academic endeavour on the socio-cultural functions of Sato music of the Egun of Badagry. This present study intends to fill this gap, provides a better perception and appreciation of Sato music. The specific objectives of the study are to examine the origin and the development of Sato music, and analyse the socio-cultural function of Sato music among the Egun people of Badagry. To achieve these objectives, both primary and secondary sources of data were employed. The primary sources included participant observation and in-depth interviews, which were conducted with five each of purposively selected Sato drummers and prominent traditional chiefs in the Badagry community. In addition, participant observations of Sato music performances (during which audio and video recordings were made) were undertaken. A key informant and two research assistants were employed in the course of this study to interpret the Egun language. The secondary sources include books, journal articles, magazines, newspapers and the Internet. Data collected were transcribed and analysed within the ethnomusicological framework.

The study is based on Akuno’s 2005 theory of aesthetic functionalism (Mutuku, 2008), which views the meaning of music as being rooted in the role/function music plays in the life of those who make it. Just as the author puts it, the functionalists attribute the meaning and value of a work of art to its relationship with the activities of the society. As a work of art, the value of Sato music is, therefore, appreciated from the point of view of the society’s participation in its making or consumption as a consequence of its inalienable role or function.

African features in Egun traditional music

Generally, African music is the music indigenous to Africa. It involves the language, the customs and values of the society. African languages, notes Onwuekwe (2009), are characteristically tonal for which reason the music should adhere to the tonal inflection of the words. This feature is present among the Egun people of Badagry whose songs are predominantly tonal. African music is either sung with or without accompaniments, and it can take any shape such as being sung in a solo or chorus form; purely

instrumental music also exists in some cultures, nevertheless. Ferris (1995) corroborates this view when he observes that

While there is considerable variety in music experience among African tribal cultures, most African music is sung, by solo or chorus, alone or accompanied by musical instruments or by simple clapping and other rhythmic body gestures. Singing is usually loud and enthusiastic, often with a strident quality of voice. (p. 314)

The importance of music in African societies cannot be over emphasised from cradle to grave and in every essential area of human life. Okafor (2007) notes the importance of music in Nigerian society, and affirms that “music is integrated with every facet of Nigerian traditional life from birth to death. Hence in almost every Nigerian society, musicians are held in very high esteem”. Writing on African music, Onwuekwe (2009) explains that African music is the music of Black Africans living South of the Sahara, as distinct from the Arab music of North Africa. A rich musical tradition has developed in this vast region of more than 40 nations, each with its own history and unique of cultures and languages. (p.171). She further elucidates that the definition given above is not a complete one since not all Africans are, and excluding non-black Africans will make African music incomplete. Masasabi (2007) affirms that African music is a general term referring to music across the African continent. Agawu (2003) also defines African music as a term best understood not as a finite repertoire but as a potentiality.... African music designates those numerous repertoires of song and instrumental music that originate in specific African communities, [and] are performed regularly as part of play, ritual and worship, and circulate most orally/aurally, within and across language, ethnic, and cultural boundaries (p.304).

Yoruba traditional music is the traditions of the people reflected in their music. Yoruba tradition within the Yoruba cosmology gives room for a wide number of repertoires for Yoruba music. The Yoruba people are spread across and around Nigeria and abroad but the people are based in the southwestern Nigeria according to the geo political zone in Nigeria. So, African traditional music can be defined as the songs and tunes which have been performed by African custom over a long period of time from one generation to the other.

Basic African musical instruments used in Egun music

Traditional musical instruments are peculiar to most nations of the world. There is no doubt about the fact that a people of different clan or society have either one or various instruments common to them because these instruments were built in that clan or society. Musical instrument is a means of expression of one’s emotion and excitement and a means of worship. These musical instruments are found in different places and in different circles of various communities.

African traditional instruments can also be influenced through acculturation. A musician or a group of musicians can decide to build a replica of musical instruments they came across in neighbouring towns or villages for enjoyment and pleasure in their own society. This explains why we have similarities in the music and musical instruments of Africa. Vidal (2012) affirms that the musical instruments in different

societies of Africa reflect diverse variety of traditions and history. According to Agordoh (2002) and Abiodun (2014), Africans attach great importance to instruments in accompanying their music.

The instrumental resources at the disposal of performers in Africa naturally tend to be limited to those their respective communities are specialised in. They may be instruments believed to be of local origin, or instruments which became integrated into the musical life of the communities from other areas. Nketia (1974) In the same vein, among the Yoruba people musical instruments are built either for pleasure or for significant purposes like worship rituals and recreations.



The researcher in a pose with some Sato drummers and dancers.

Development of African traditional musical instruments

The continent of Africa is blessed with very many musical instruments created by the people through their sense of exploration, creative ability and their life experiences. Music creativity is one important aspect of the cultural heritage of the people. Many researchers and scholars on African music have noted the very rich cultural heritage of the people. The diversity of traditions in Africa has facilitated the development of numerous musical instruments, which have resulted in the creativity of various genres of music, Olaniyan (2007) This development are influenced by factors such environment, deity and gods, identities of localities, and ritual purpose.

Environmental factors

Two important materials in the making of Sato drum are wood and animal skin. Generally, the materials that are available in a particular area are often preferred most in the making of musical instruments, especially in traditional settings. Akpabot (1998) notes that many factors are responsible for the diversity of African society and by extension, musical instruments; and these are the environment and occupation. From the observation of Akpabot it can be deduced that it is the kind of materials available to the craftsmen that they are able to work with to make or build musical instruments for their communal usage.

Deity and gods

Belief in myths and ancestors provides room for reservation of some musical instruments for some deities and gods. In south-western Nigeria in particular, certain musical instruments are preferred above others in the worship of some divinities: *bata* drums for *Sango*, *Saworo ide* for *Ayan Agalu*, and *igbin* drum for *Obatala*, among others. Some of the deities are believed to have initiated the design of these instruments as symbolic emblems of their authority. Of the different forms of Yoruba music (drumming, song, chant and dance), drumming is the one imbued with the greatest spiritual significance.

Drum ensembles are generally of two main categories - sacred and social. (Omojola 2010) Even though these two categories are not mutually exclusive, Yoruba sacred ensembles are dominated by uni-membranophonic (single-headed membrane) drums. Prominent examples include cylindrical drums like *igbin*, *ipese*, and *agere*, each of which (like most sacred drums), is associated with a specific spirit or deity. (Euba, 1990: 93) This is because “appropriate drums must be used for particular *orisha*, otherwise they [the devotees] will incur the wrath of their tutelary deity”. (Adegbite, 1988) Thus *igbin* is associated with *Obatala*, the arch-divinity and deity of children; while *ipese* is performed in ritual activities devoted to *Orunmila*. *Agere* drums are performed to appease and venerate *Ogun*. While sacred rituals are dominated by the use of uni-membranophonic drums, the *bata* ensemble - whose principal drums are bi-membranophonic (double-headed) - is the principal musical instrument of *Sango* worship.

The *dundun* hourglass drum (originally regarded as a foremost social ensemble), now also functions within religious rituals. Unlike other Yoruba drums, *dundun* consists of leather strings, which connect its two drum heads, and are pulled or relaxed to alter the surface tension of the drum head, thus making it possible for the drummer to generate different pitches and imitate the inflectional contours of the Yoruba tonal language. Although Yoruba drums are dominated by those made from a single, hollowed and carved tree log, other examples include those made from gourds (such as *kiriboto*), and from earthenware (such as *apinti*). (Omojola 2010)

Identities of localities

Musical instruments are developed in different societies for historical references. There are some communities that have particular instruments ascribed to their localities. Some examples are *sato* drum among the Egun people, *sokorogho* and *apete* among the Owo people, Kalangu drum among the Hausa, and the *sabar* drum among the Wolof of Senegal and Gambians.

Ritual purpose

In African traditions, there are various forms of rites and rituals performed at one stage or another alongside musical instruments that are played to accompany them. In Africa, special instruments feature for different rites or rituals. For example, during the *Igogo* festival, membrane instruments are banned in Owo environ, while gong and other idiophones are allowed. The *bata* drum is used for the worship of *Sango* deity, although

other instruments may feature, but the *bata* drum is predominant. The *mbira* (thumb piano) musical instrument is used in the *shona* spirit possession ceremony among the Shona people of Zimbabwe (Johannes, 2002).

Historical background of Sato music

Among a wide range of membrane drums in south-western Nigeria, Sato drum is a unique drum peculiar to the Egun people. The history of Sato in Nigeria will not be complete without tracing it to Akarakunmo. The following is a mixture of history *Akarakunmo* and Sato drums. Kodjo, Avidagba and Tosavi came from different regions of Dahomey (present day Benin Republic) but when they met, they became very close friends. The three loved and protected one another from harm. They displayed true solidarity and loyalty to one another by doing does most things in unison and even travel together. Kodjo, Avidagba and Tosavi had different occupations but they complemented one another. Kodjo was a herbalist, a psychic, an angler and a powerful warrior. He was a prince of Weme Kingdom in Benin, but lived amongst the people as an ordinary individual.

Avidagba was a hunter and was full of strength. He was able to hunt down dangerous animals and he showed great zeal. Tosavi was a farmer and an angler. It was found out that Tosavi came from Fanme Agboto in Weme Kingdom. He, along with his friends Kodjo and Avidagba, fled Agboto when there were calamities there, and upon hearing news of war. Their search for better and peaceful places took them through to Nmufo Ipookia, Ogun State, but they could not settle down there because they found the area inconducive for fishing and hunting.

They arrived at several locations, but they could not find a place that suited them. Then Kodjo consulted the oracle and they were led by the oracle to reside in a place where they will find a tree called Ajorohuntin; they found the tree after weeks of travelling. At this point the three men parted: Kodjo felt he should be close to the entrance of Akarakunmo and near Ajorohuntin tree in order to protect his friends from any possible danger. Avidagba moved further into Akarakunmo, into an area called Lokosa, while Tosavi moved into an area called Dadapame (now referred to as Wheaga).

Avidagba was a brave and powerful hunter who could hunt down any animal. His friends commonly referred to him as Aklasu or Aklak (meaning the powerful bird). One day Avidagba went hunting and never came back. The villagers thought that he had died, and as a result conducted his burial. Several days after the conclusion of is funeral rites, Avidagba returned to Akarakunmo, and his people shed tears of joy and chanted his name "*Alakamakunmo*" (aklak did not die). However, due to poor pronunciation and translation by the colonial masters, the name was changed to Akarakunmo.

According to oral information gathered, the existence of Sato drums in Badagry can be traced to two accounts: the first revealed that Sato was built as a replica of a drum found in Weme in Benin Republic; and the second revealed that Sato was carved and

designed according to the directives of the oracle during a period of calamities in Badagry. The two accounts are hereby given below.

The first account states that Kodjo, Avidagba and Tosavi travelled to Weme for a function. They saw a drum played at the gathering and they got entertained by the performance. Upon returning to Akarakunmo, they decided to build a similar drum in the village. In their search for the materials to use in constructing the drum, they travelled to Gbagodo forest to look for a tree called *Atototin*. They found the tree, cut it down and transported it in a boat via a river route to a large space of land to build the drum there. They dug holes in the ground and placed the log in it to enable them carve the drum shell. Subsequently, they covered the head with a membrane like the replica of the drum they saw in Weme (Benin Republic). After the completion of the drum, they took it to Akarakunmo. The *Sato* drum also has a loud terrifying sound which made many animals away in fear.

The second account revolves around a historic incident of the havoc caused by a spirit snake called *Othan* that was ravaging the entire Akarakunmo village, killing children and youth with diseases, pestilence and famine. The helpless people consulted the oracle for solution. The oracle decreed that a twin-drum (male and female) of 12 feet high should be carved and beaten in order to send the evil snake from the land. The evil snake (*Othan*) resided in the hollow of the mighty *Ajorohuntin* tree, somewhere in the village. The oracle revealed that *Ajorohuntin* must be fetched from the forest by exuberant youths and carved with images of various ferocious animals, basically of reptile species to show its potency as conqueror over the evil snake and a mediator for mankind. The sound of the *Sato* (*Ajorohuntin*) will produce an offensive rhythm to the evil snake which will allow the snake to be flushed away into the river. This act is conveyed in the statement "*Othan, Oku lo ni Sato boyi*", and this declaration was shortened to *Sato*. That was how the land was cleansed and peace was restored and sustained thereafter.

From the oral accounts, it could be deduced that *Sato* drums were actually carved and built in Badagry, and the sound indeed terrifies animals considering the size of the drum. Finally, it also confirms the fact that the Egun are connected to snake worship as mentioned by Vidal (2012).

Function of *Sato* music

Music is known to perform an important function among people of various cultures and it may be absolutely impossible to have a community where music is not used either directly or indirectly. From observation and oral account, *Sato* traditional music among the Egun of Badagry performs the following function: re-echoing spiritual sound; creating a nexus between the living and the dead; therapy; protection; re-enactment of heroic antecedents; symbol of identity; and creation of motivation.

Re-echoing spiritual sound

According to the oral tradition of the people of Egun, *Sato* drum came to existence through a spiritual intervention during woes and calamities in the town. During *Sato*

music performance, the historical experiences of the people are re-echoed repeatedly and relentlessly to remind them of Egun as the source of their survival. Similarly in African traditions when there are cases of calamities befalling a town or village there are always a means of consulting the oracles and whatever be the prescription of the oracle by the priest, the people adhere to with absolute trust and, in most cases, there are always solutions to the issues taken to the oracle. This was the opinion of the Egun people as at when Sato drum was recommended by the oracle which became part and parcel of their tradition. Hunpevi Jomoh, a Sato drummer, affirms that the sound of Sato drum is believed to be scary and spiritual and that it is not ordinary. This makes it potent and operates to chase evil away from the society. The text of the song below exemplifies the preceding assertion. Example 1

YEWE LO SATO YEWE



Egun dialect

Menu die yewe loo Sato yawe

English translation

Oh yes this is the ingenuous Sato drum

Menu die yewe no donu bo to no ke

Your piercing sacred sound is arresting the universe

Nexus between the living and the dead

According to an informant, Mr Kotin Samuel who is a Sato drummer and performer, Sato music performing groups are not open to just anybody. To be a member of the group, one must be an indigene of Badagry, and must come from either Ajara or Akrakumo from where the drum practice originated among the Egun people. He said further that Sato drummers must have lost one or both parents before they can play the Sato drum; this is based on the belief that the spirit of the dead will intercede for them in taking away the calamity on the people as they perform the music. The Sato drum, therefore, serves as an intermediary between the living and the dead.

Therapeutic function

Health is wealth, and in a gathering of sound-minded people there lies peace, happiness, festivity, joy, order and stability. According to Chief Mobee of Boekoh quarter (in an oral interview), during Sato performance people with illness offer prayers to the ancestors, and they get healed. He affirmed that this has been the purpose of creating Sato drum, and that this is still potent till today, especially when the drum is played at *yoho* shrine.

Protective function

Sato music is the hope the indigenes anticipated to bring them rest of mind during the occurrence of the death of children that ravaged the community. According to an

informant, Mr Kotin, the community was helpless until Sato music was prescribed: the sound of Sato sent death away.

Re-enactment of heroic antecedence

At the performance of Sato music there is a quick reflection on the labours and contributions of heroes in the community - people who hazarded their lives to rescue fellow indigenes of the community. Songs are rendered in remembrance of them and their deeds.

Means of identity

Through the performance of Sato music, the Egun people have been able to distinguish their community from other communities around her as far as Nigeria is concerned. Sato music is exclusive to the Egun people (Vidal, 2002). Sato music functions as the image of the people - a symbolic illumination on their identity as a cultural entity. In addition, Sato is one of the tallest drums in Africa, and the Badagry people are proud to be the custodian of such unique tradition.

Means of motivation

With Sato music, members of the community of Badagry and members of all the Egun family at large feels motivated, resuscitated and propelled at the performance of Sato music. This could be seen in the text of the song below.

Example 2

Me de Mo wa

Me de mo wa me to nu bo whu whe oyan yan de - e lo mi a ji vi ma so
wa yan yan de

Egun dialect

Mede mowa metonu bowhuwhe
Oyanyan de elo

English translation

No one should disdain our lineage's tradition,
Our tradition is sacred and essential to our
existence

Miu ajivi le ma so wa Yayan de Our lineage tradition is not offensive; it is our pride

Summary of findings

The study revealed that Sato music had developed from strictly sacred and traditional purpose to social and entertainment. Apparently from the study, Sato music was for strict traditional rites, but as times evolved it was performed for entertainment at

ceremonies. The study further revealed that the content of Sato music is determined by the context of performance. Therefore, Sato performers must be well-grounded in culture and must be fully aware of the occasion before they perform. The study shows that Sato music has significant impact on the educational, economic, political and the ceremonial life of the people of Badagry.

Contribution to knowledge

This paper documents Sato music, relying on interviews with key individuals associated with Sato music, as well as participant-observation and transcription of field recordings of songs that have been presented as music examples in this work. Thus, this paper constitutes an important contribution to music scholarship through its provision of materials for the academia that would further enhance theory, research and practice especially in music studies and allied disciplines.

Conclusion

The socio-cultural functions of Sato traditional music among the Egun people of Badagry have been examined in this paper. The Sato drum is not attached to any deity, and it is not a deity; rather, it is a highly-honoured and hallowed musical instrument. The pride of place that the instrument enjoys in the community derives from the traditional belief of the people that it salvaged them from the woes and calamities that befell them many years ago.

Finally, the study has contributed to the field of ethnomusicology by supplying ethnographical and musicological information on the function and structure of Sato music of the Egun of Badagry.

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