

**Functions of Yoruba songs in initiation rites of theatre arts
students of FCE, Abeokuta: 2023 ceremony in perspective**

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Abstract

Yoruba songs serve as vital cultural tools for identity, communication, instruction, and spirituality. This paper explores the functional significance of Yoruba songs within the initiation rites of Theatre Arts students at the Federal College of Education (FCE), Abeokuta, with specific attention to the 2023 ceremony. The study adopts a qualitative ethnographic approach which involves participant observation and contextual review of songs used at the initiation ceremony. Findings reveal that the songs performed at the ceremony are not merely for entertainment purposes, but serve as symbolic narratives that reinforce the transition of the inductees from ‘non-thespians’ to ‘thespians-in-training’ within the theatre community, under the tutelage of their lecturers. Furthermore, the songs embody coded and plain language and performative nuances which overall function is to creatively coordinate/advance the event, pass specific instructions, knowledge and wisdom to the inductees. The paper concludes that Yoruba songs play a pivotal role in sustaining indigenous epistemologies within formal academic spaces, offering both cultural continuity and pedagogical relevance in the training of Theatre Arts students. The study recommends the preservation and scholarly engagement of such ritual performances as part of Nigeria’s intangible heritage and theatre pedagogy.

Key words: functions, initiation rites, theatre arts students, Yoruba songs

Introduction

The Department of Theatre Arts, Federal College of Education, Abeokuta, was established in January 2004; its pioneer Head of Department was Basil Ledego Wikina. The vision was to provide a robust training for teachers of drama in the disciplines of education and arts of the theatre.

The annual event of initiation/induction has been a norm for newly admitted Year One students from the inception of the department. The induction for all Year One students is to formally welcome them to the theatre discipline in a culturally-rooted manner. Taking part in the event as a Year One student of the department is seen as a non-negotiable tradition. Therefore, students who fail to participate in the event may be barred from stage acting.

One of the initiation rites is procession which ends up at the 'shrine' (being the performance space) where the actual oath-taking, drama, chants, songs, and other forms of performances would take place. At the heart of the initiation ceremony is a strong visual symbolism: inductees are dressed in unique traditional attires mirroring indigenous ritual settings, particularly those associated with spiritual rites or cultic expressions. For instance, beyond being regarded as costume, white garment is understood to set a tone of seriousness and mystique, whereby an atmosphere blending tradition with theatre is created. For many participants, the wearing of such attire is interpreted as a means of stepping into a symbolic world in which both cultural heritage and dramatic artistry are reflected. As part of the ceremony, oaths are required to be recited by inductees, and the performance is carried out in a manner closely resembling what is obtainable in traditional cult rites.

It must, however, be clearly understood that the entire event is constructed as a performance. The oath-taking, rituals, chants, and songs are scripted and enacted solely for theatrical and symbolic purposes. Nothing within the event is constituted as spiritually binding or religious in function. Instead, the practice is framed as a rite of passage rooted in dramatic expression, through which students are initiated into the performative discipline of Theatre Arts in a way that is both culturally resonant and theatrically rich.

Despite the richness and layered nature of the event, particularly in the manner through which Yoruba songs are employed to anchor its mood and meaning, limited academic attention has been given to it. This oversight leaves a gap in scholarship, particularly around how indigenous song traditions continue to find space in formal theatre education. For this reason, the present study sets out to examine the functions of Yoruba songs in this initiation context, with the aim of preserving, interpreting, and appreciating their role in shaping both cultural identity and performance practice within the Theatre Arts programme.

Yoruba Music

Yoruba music plays important role in the cultural and social life of the people. It is not only employed for entertainment but also regarded as a medium of communication, spiritual expression, and education. Songs are treated as integral to everyday life, being used in festivals, worship, storytelling, and rituals. It has been noted by scholars such as Omojola (2012) that Yoruba songs are filled with meaning, often containing proverbs, praise names, and symbolic messages. Through these songs, history is preserved and moral lessons are transmitted from one generation to another.

Particular musical styles, such as call-and-response, rhythm-based singing, and the use of traditional instruments like the talking drum, are expressed in Yoruba song performance. According to Akin Euba (2016), music in Yoruba culture is regarded as both functional and artistic, through which communal bonds are reinforced, and cultural identity maintained. More recent studies, such as Adeogun (2020), indicate that traditional Yoruba songs are still employed in schools, religious settings, and academic theatre performances, demonstrating that the culture continues to remain active and evolving.

Initiation rites

Initiation rites are culturally-structured ceremonies through which the transformation/transition of an individual from one recognised status to another is symbolised, and they are often associated with social maturity, spiritual awakening, or acceptance into specific societal groups. Such rites are treated as central to many traditional societies, particularly in Africa, where they function not only as personal transitions but also as communal reaffirmations of shared values and knowledge systems. Initiation, in essence, is defined as both a spiritual and sociocultural act that underscores the continuity of community life.

It is emphasised in contemporary scholarship that these rites retain relevance in various forms today. Olupona (2014) explains that initiation rites in African contexts are structured as pedagogical systems through which cultural, religious, and moral knowledge is imparted. Ritual performances involving chants, drumming, and symbolic acts are often employed to align the individual with communal and ancestral expectations. Similarly, Kanu (2020) notes that such rites are indispensable for communal integration - they ensure that personal transformation is accompanied by reintegration into the community with a renewed sense of responsibility and identity.

Although often rooted in tradition, these ceremonies continue to evolve, and they are sometimes adapted for educational, theatrical, or socio-political purposes, particularly among younger generations seeking reconnection with cultural heritage. Thus, initiation rites are maintained as profound cultural institutions that encapsulate both identity formation and communal affirmation.

Theatre and ritual

In African culture, and especially within Yoruba tradition, theatre and ritual are viewed as closely interconnected. Many of the earliest Yoruba theatrical forms were ritual-based and performed as components of religious or communal ceremonies. It has been observed by Adedeji (2020) that traditional festivals such as *Egungun* and *Ifa* are not merely religious but theatrical in nature, involving costumes, music, dance, and audience participation. This observation is still regarded as relevant in contemporary practice. In university theatre, ritual and performance are frequently blended by students in order to express cultural ideas. For example, during student induction ceremonies, songs and dances that are rooted in Yoruba tradition are employed to mark the entry of new members into the performance group. According to a recent study by Olorunyomi and Adeyemo (2022), such rituals function simultaneously as artistic expressions and tools for cultural education, enabling students to connect with their heritage while also acquiring performance techniques.

Theory of functionalism

The theory of functionalism is considered useful in explaining the importance of these songs and rituals. Functionalism, originally articulated by Malinowski and later applied to African contexts by scholars such as Mbiti, frames culture as serving societal needs. Within this framework, every cultural practice, including music and ritual, is regarded as fulfilling a role in maintaining social order and group identity.

This perspective is supported by recent African scholars such as Falola and Akinyemi (2020), who argue that rituals, such as initiation, function in social bonding, knowledge transfer, and conflict management. Yoruba songs that are used in initiation contexts are treated as teaching tools through which cultural lessons are conveyed, group unity is reinforced, and new members are prepared for future responsibilities. Within theatre arts departments, especially in Nigeria, these same functions are achieved through combinations of traditional songs, symbolic actions, and group performances.

Functions of select Yoruba songs and chants at the initiation rite

Some of the Yoruba songs of initiation performed during the initiation ceremony of the theatre art students and their functions are presented and discussed as follows.

1. *Moboju wodo*

Mo boju, wodo, oduke roro, ero wonu oko,
Mo boju womi o te lo rere, awa n wonu oko
Eleda wa sin wa lo, ninu irin ajo yi
Kama s'okun ara wa, kama sofo ara wa
Ka kore oko dele

Translation

I looked at the calm river, people are entering the boat

I looked at the wide water, people are entering the boat
Creator please go with us in this journey
Let us not weep, let us not sorrow
Let us return with harvest.

This song served as a processional song. It accompanied the grand entrance of the new Theatre Arts students to be initiated on stage. During the procession, the inductees moved in a straight line to the stage while singing together as devotees of a powerful spiritual being. The procession is led by a chief priest who would eventually conduct the actual initiation. The song functions as a song of hope while journeying into a destination unknown or not readily within sight. The processional song is also a song of prayer for protection and journey mercies, while also asking for a safe return with blessings from the journey.

2. Iba olu aye

*Iba o olu aye ajuba, iba edumare ajuba
Awa ti seba eyin agbagba kato wole odu,
Eyin, to lo de, eje ko yewa*

Translation

Reverence to God on earth, reverence to God
We reverence the elders before our entry
Ye owners of the earth, let us succeed.

This is an acknowledgement song. This song is used to recognise and acknowledge the presence of a Supreme Being, ancestors and elders at the ceremony. Yoruba deities are numerous and this reflects the dynamic nature of Yoruba religion itself. The Yoruba Supreme Being is known as “Olodumare” also called Olu Aye (The King of the Earth). Important kings and leaders in Yoruba land are deified as they died. Therefore, songs and chants are dedicated to reverence them.

3 Ire

*Ire ire o, ire l’otun, ire losi ire ire
Joko si ile wa o ire gbogbo
Ire theatre te lewa wa, ire Atas sin w abo o
Ire gusu at’ariwa ti wan I keje
Yaro si ile wa o, ire gbogbo.*

Translation

Blessings, Blessings from the right, Blessings from the left
Abide in our house, Blessings
Blessings of theatre, follow us. Blessings of Atas, follow us
Blessings from the North and South
Come to our habitation, all blessings.

This is a song of prayer: it is sung to make a solemn request for the blessing of the Supreme Being. Using the song, the inductees at the initiation rite asked for blessings and grace to successfully practice Theatre Arts. The Yoruba believe in the power of prayer and the efficacy of getting spiritual blessings.

4. Chant for Esu (Oriki Esu)

*Esu ota orisa
Osetura l'oruko baba mo o
Alagogo ija l'oruko iya npe e
Esu odara omokunrin idolofin
O loe sonso sori ese elese
Ko je, osi je ki eni nje gbe mi
Aki i l'owo lai mu t'esu kuro
Asotun-sosi lain i tiju
Esu, apata s'omo olomo l'enu
Ofi okuta dipo iyo.*

The chant was used to eulogise *Esu* during the initiation rite. *Esu* is a prominent primordial divinity who descended from *Ikole Orun* (heaven). *Esu* is the minister of justice; he represents *Olodumare* (God) in passing judgment on the character and conducts mankind. *Esu* is also believed to serve as a messenger between heaven and earth. The chant acknowledged *Esu* as the unpredictable god of human conduct, who can be both malevolent and benevolent, and who also reports back to *Olodumare* on matters relating to human activities.

5. Agidi Ma Laja

*Call: Agidi ma laja
Response: Agidi ma a lajaa
All: Agidi ma laja awo ile-ife, awo ni gbawo nigbowo ooo,
ai faigbawo ni gbawo o, awo ate o
Call: K'awo maba a te
Response: K'awo maba ya
Call: Agidi ma laja awo ni mi se
Response: Awo oo, awo ni se e awo*

This is a song of unity among cult members. *Awo* is Yoruba word that means 'secret'. The song is sung by members of *Awo* cult to fellowship and identify with one another. *Agidi ma laja awo ile-ife, awo ni gbawo nigbowo ooo, ai faigbawo ni gbawo o, awo ate* meaning 'The mysticism of unity is based on communalism'. It is a rich proverb in Yoruba language and cultural heritage that is used to drum support, or canvass for cooperation and strong unity. The proverb is of the view that failure by an individual or a group to support each other or one another may likely lead to disintegration and disunity. It serves as a warning, considering the negative effect of lack of cooperation among men in the society. During the initiation ceremony, it was sung to foster unity, love, and some kind of cult-brotherhood

among the inductees, being that unity, cooperation and team-spirit is the cornerstone of Theatre Arts discipline.

6. Eri Wo Ya

Eriwo ya a omo awo ooo (2x)

Awon debe won yo subu

Awa debe arin garara

Eriwo, ya omo awo

Translation

Congregation pay attention

Others went and they fell

We went and walked with pride

Congregation pay attention

This is a song used to announce the arrival and presence of *Awo*. *Awo* is a Yoruba word that means ‘secret’. *Eriwo ya* meaning ‘hear ye or pay attention’ is an expression to call to an important message used in *Ogboni* confraternity ceremonies to get the attention and focus of the congregation. The saying is important because *Awo* cult gathering is a gathering of people with trained minds that use certain terms and codes not known to everybody. Likewise, the Theatre Arts inductees are a group of people with trained minds in the arts of the theatre, and certain calls that require precise reactions are usually made during stage performances and rehearsals sessions.

7. Iba F’olodumare

Call: Iba f’olodumare

Response: Iba olode ee

Call: Yiye ni ye eyele

Response: Ayewa kale.

Chorus: My god o, follow me chineke biko nu yeru maka,

Ubangiji na ye bio ni, make I carry m load o, make e no heavy.

This is a song of praise to *Olodumare* (God); the song is used to reverence the Supreme Being. *Iba* is a Yoruba word that connotes: to give reverence/praise and deep obeisance”. During the induction ceremony, the theatre arts inductees sang the song *Iba* to give gratitude to God. It is the belief of Yoruba people to reverence God and sing praises to him for healing, blessings, protection and different successes accomplished.

8. Imule Re

Imule re eeeee (2x)

B’oju baye, kese ma ye (2x)

Imule re e, imule agbagba oo

Ai dale omo awo.

Translation

This is your Covenant
If eyes fail, legs must not fail
This is your Covenant
You don't betray, you children of the cult.

This song is a song of covenant. *Imule* is a Yoruba word which connotes “drinking from the earth”. It was sung during the oath-taking by inductees to commit themselves to the theatre profession and never to turn back. Among the Yoruba, relationships are generally seen as covenants. Covenant is a spiritual means by which relationships are maintained in order to avoid betrayals.

Discussion of findings

From the observation and engagement with the 2023 initiation ceremony of Theatre Arts students at the Federal College of Education (FCE), Abeokuta, it became clear that Yoruba songs held more than just an entertainment value during the process. These songs played a strong cultural and communicative role that helped to give meaning to the entire initiation exercise. For instance, the songs carried coded messages, proverbial expressions, and age-long wisdom that spoke to both the mind and the soul of the initiates. Many of the lyrics passed instructions especially to the inductees, reminding them of relevant values, and the responsibilities that came with being part of a creative and culturally grounded discipline like Theatre Arts.

Another thing that stood out was how these songs reinforced the identity of the students as part of the Yoruba cultural heritage. Even though the setting was an academic one, the songs rooted the event in tradition, showing that cultural knowledge and artistic expression can go hand in hand. The ceremony, through its rich use of Yoruba songs, did not only facilitate the initiation ceremony by way of preparing the minds of the students to the task ahead, but has become an inalienable part of the living tradition in the department. This strongly suggests that indigenous music like Yoruba songs remains relevant in today's creative training, especially in Nigerian higher institutions where cultural preservation and practical theatre education should go side by side.

Songs performed at the 2023 Theatre Arts initiation ceremony were functionally significant to the success of the event and the cultural training essence of Theatre Arts students at the department. The songs' narratives were symbolic, reinforcing the transition of the inductees into the theatre community within the university environment and the world at large. Whilst the ceremony was performed in the modern context of a modern educational environment, the initiation rites generally served similar purposes of preparation, with symbolic meanings rooted in African traditions (Ogunwale, 2022).

Conclusion

The 2023 initiation ceremony of Theatre Arts students at the Federal College of Education, Abeokuta, clearly showed how Yoruba songs continue to play powerful and meaningful roles within academic and cultural spaces in Nigeria. These songs were not just performed for entertainment - they carried deep cultural weight and served several important purposes. They guided the initiates through their transition, preserved aspects of Yoruba tradition, fostered unity among students, and passed messages across in ways that ordinary speech may not have achieved. The structure of the songs - often rooted in antiphones, chants, and praise poetry - brought both emotional depth and communal energy to the event.

Yoruba songs in this context proved to be more than just performance tools: they were vehicles of cultural education, socialisation, and identity formation. In combining music, theatre, and ritual, the event demonstrated how Nigerian higher institutions, especially departments like Theatre Arts, are still deeply connected to traditional practices, even as they prepare students for contemporary creative work. As Oikelome (2020) rightly notes, traditional music in Nigerian institutions helps toward bridging the gap between cultural heritage and academic expression, and offers students a strong foundation in indigenous knowledge and performance. The functions of these songs, therefore, go beyond the ceremony itself - they contribute to preserving cultural values and shaping the next generation of Nigerian theatre performers and custodians of culture.

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