

Masculinity and Femininity in Àwòrì Traditional Musical Instruments

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Abstract

The Àwòrì, a Yorùbá sub-ethnic group, utilises a variety of traditional musical instruments in their music making. These instruments, which varied, ancient, and highly symbolic with rich sound qualities, serve various musical and cultural functions within the Àwòrì communities and its environs as they are also given nomenclatures analogous to the parents-children (*òbí-ọmọ*) and masculine-feminine (*akọ-abo* or *takọ-tabo*) designations, according to their musical functions. This nomenclature equivalent is prevalent in Àwòrì traditional instrumental music, where each ensemble is led by the feminine '*Ìyá-Ìlú*' instrument. Despite the importance of traditional musical instruments in Àwòrì land, its musical classifications and functions remains under-documented in Yorùbá music scholarship. This study examined the gender issue of masculinity and femininity symbolisms of traditional musical instruments in Àwòrì land, with a view to analysing their musical/extra-musical and cultural roles. Using quantitative research approach, the study employed participant observation, semi-structured interviews with 27 purposively selected traditional musicians/performers, and instrumentalists in Àwòrì communities and a targeted literature review. Hinged on Relativism and Pluralism theory, the study revealed the coterminous nature of gender (masculine-feminine) designations in Àwòrì traditional instruments. Furthermore, it discovered the symbolism in Àwòrì traditional instruments, their masculine and feminine roles, musical functionalities and ensemble forms. The study concluded that Àwòrì musical instruments are bound in their cultural and traditional roles. It underscores the need for more ethnomusicological research of the various Yorùbá traditional musical instruments in particular, and those of Nigeria in general, giving preference to their gender nomenclatures, towards preservations for future consultations and references.

Keywords: Àwòrì people, Cultural factors, Functions, Gender, and Traditional instruments

Introduction

Music among the Àwòrì serves as a means through which the people reflect and celebrate their socio-cultural and religious way of life. This traditional music, which is orally transmitted, is passed from one generation to another. In the same manner, the playing of traditional musical instruments, an integral part of traditional music in Àwòrì land, are learned through oral instructions (Adébólá, 2019: 55). Despite the rich scholarship on Yorùbá musical traditions, gender issue of masculinity and femininity symbolisms of traditional musical instruments in Àwòrì communities remains under-documented. The making of the instruments, their cultural significance, and the histories embedded in their existence are kept in the memories of the players or custodians (Ibid, p. 78-79). In this connection, David (2013) argues that Yorùbá traditional musical instruments, their music, and historical narratives inherent to them can possibly go into extinction, partially because the practitioners are getting old with little or no documentation of what they know about these instruments, especially from historical perspective.

However, traditional musical instruments in Àwòrì communities, seen as integral part of the people's cultural fabric, serve as a powerful means of expressing identity, celebrating life events, and preserving their rich heritage. These instruments according to Adébólá (2019) are classified in relation to the manner by which they are manipulated to produce sound, that is, the technique of sound production, nature and role of peculiar sound, construction techniques, physical characteristics, functions, beliefs and values in Àwòrì culture. Scholars such as Akpabot (1998); Omojola (2006); Vidal (2012); Agawu (2016); Olúdàré (2018), Adébólá and Titus (2026) among others corroborate this assertion in that traditional musical instruments generally in Yorùbá communities, are given nomenclatures equivalent to the masculine-feminine (*akọ-abo* or *takọ-tabo*) designations according to their musical functions. This masculine-feminine and/or parent-children nomenclatures as noted by Olúdàré (2018) includes *Ìyá-Ìlù* (mother drum), *omele akọ* (male drum), *omele abo* (female drum), among other instruments .

In Àwòrì land, musicians and instrumentalists engage their instruments to display gender (masculine and feminine) qualities according to the musical role they perform in the ensemble, corresponding with the cultural function of the personality they are named after in a family. This study examines the social and musical factors relating to the gender status and nomenclature of masculinity and femininity in traditional musical instruments among the Àwòrì, as well as their musical and extra-musical functions.

Literature Review

Gender Issues in African Music and Yorùbá Organology

Yorùbá musical practices including the Àwòrì subgroup in Lagos and Ògùn States often encode gender through instrument naming, pitch, and ritual restrictions. Instruments are not neutral objects; some of them are anthropomorphic and as such treated as *Òrìṣà* (divinities). For instance, the *Ìyálóde* (mother drum) of the *Gbèdu* ensemble among the Òtò-Àwòrì is venerated like a god, yet women are not permitted

in playing them simply because they are considered sacred and pantheon-bound. According to Mokwunyei (2018), gender issues in the hands of a female suggests a feminist approach, a perception which may not be wrong if one looks at it insouciantly. It is important to note that several gender-based apprehensions are usually focused on old and new ideologies of gender roles, feminism, womanism, gender and politics and interestingly, quite a number on music, in relation to social and cultural constructs of masculinities, femininities and the state of being male or female (p. 1). In the words of Ozah (2018), “gender relationships and roles among African cultures are complex.” He notes that women are relevant in terms of dance and music which are intertwined in the social lives of the people. It will not be out of place to mention that women’s music and dance are essential aspects of rituals. This is also the case with female members of *Ìgunnukó* society where women play indispensable roles in the music performance during the *Ìgunnukó* festival in Àwòrì land (Adébóla, 2025). Ozah (2018) and Turner (2008) further mention that appreciating the innate significance of these women’s musical art, the ritual itself must be understood. In order to interpret rituals, it is imperative to have some knowledge and understanding of the various related areas of a people’s culture (Ozah, *op. cit.*).

Onyenye (2018) argues that the development of *Ema* performance in *Uvwie* was made possible by the contributions of both male and female members of the communities in the Kingdom. The development of *Ema* musical performance in *Uvwie* based on gender, has positively influenced the music and the tradition of the people (*Uvwie*) which allows the participation of women who have contributed in songs composition, and dance that is no doubt sustained the ritual till the present time. Similarly, the involvement of women in the musical performance in Àwòrì communities is indispensable in the sense that they play more roles than their male counterparts in music making as far as ritual worship at festivals is concerned. Igbi (2018) corroborates Onyenye when he mentioned that in Okpeland, there are different typologies of music for male, female or mixed performances. He notes that although, women are debarred from performing certain roles in *Okpe* traditional music ensembles, however, they (women) are given other responsibilities that are correspondingly important to music making. The reason is not far-fetched, as in some cases that women are not allowed to take up roles like drumming in *Okpe* music ensembles. In addition, in *Ìgunnukó* festival, women are not allowed to take part in drumming especially, *Ìkòkò* (pot) and *Bèmbé* drums as this is considered a taboo (Adébóla, 2025).

It is important to note that the place of drums in Yorùbá spirituality is indispensable. As earlier noted, while some of these drums are used for ritual purposes and connected with one *Òrìṣà* (divinity) or the other in worships of the tutelage divinity, others are used for social ceremonies. On African instruments, especially drums, it is no doubt that different scholars have written extensively on its organological classifications and functions, especially those that are sacred-bound in Yorùbá communities. Some of them are Vidal (2012a, 2012b, & 2012c), Adédèjì (2016), Dáramólá (2010), Samuel and Olápádé (2013), Loko (2014), Oláníyan (2015),

Oikelome and Ògúnyemí (2020), Adéyeyè (2018), Akere (2023), Adébólá (2026) to mention but a few. For instance, Adédèjì (2016) in his work identified, categorised and described the physical properties, distribution and functions of traditional Yorùbá musical instruments. Oikelome and Ògúnyemí (2020) explain that *Gbèdu Olú* of Èpé, the exclusive drum to the king cannot be found in any other home in the land. The sound of the drum, which heralds the coronation of the Oba (king) elect and his exit consists of four drums namely; *Ìyá ilù Gbèdu*, *Perente*, *Àtèlè Ìyá ilù*, and *Omele*. To Akere (2023), *Àgídígbo* as indigenous instrument is a social and/or recreational music that is rooted in aphorism, customs and traditions of the Yoruba people. In terms of classification, *Àgídígbo* is Lamellaphone (Prongaphone) in that it is regarded as metamorphic piano as a result of its unique features and sound production.

From the foregoing, the reviewed literature reveals that Àwòrì traditional musical instruments are deeply embedded in a semiotic system where masculinity (*omele akọ*) and femininity (*omele abo*) are communicated through naming, pitch, and performance and ritual context. This study therefore seeks to fill the gap by examining how masculinity and femininity are constructed and experience through Àwòrì traditional musical instruments.

Ethnography of the Àwòrì People

The Àwòrì are sub-ethnic group of the Yorùbá of Lagos, speaking a distinct dialect of the Yorùbá language called *Àwòrì*. The origin of the Àwòrì people is entrenched in oral traditions. To Vidal (2007) and Adébólá (2019), the existence of the Àwòrì group and settlements in the region of Lagos and Ògùn States has two major groups of traditions. The two traditions maintain that Olófín Ògúnfúnminíre was the progenitor of all the Àwòrì clan. The first tradition affirms that Ògúnfúnminíre, one of the princes of Ilé-Ifè and a brave hunter, was the founder of Ìshèrì. As an adventurous hunter, part of the present Àwòrì land constituted his hunting territory. While on a prolonged hunting expedition, his father died and his properties were shared among other children leaving behind a ritual pot. The tradition continues that Ògúnfúnminíre arrived to be displeased by the state of affairs and consulted with Ifá Oracle, which counselled migration with the admonition to float the ritual pot on water and to follow it until it disappears. (The sinking of the ritual pot or its disappearance signified settlements). The river pot floated on the Ògùn River and moved southwards until it sank at a place now known as Ìshèrì.

The second tradition narrates Ògúnfúnminíre and Oníkòyí were brothers that left Ilé-Ifè on hunting expedition. Their hunting expedition took them far away and consequently their father died and as such they were unable to meet his funeral. Because Ògúnfúnminíre and Oníkòyí were nowhere to be found, they relatives concluded that they were dead, so their younger brother was enthroned in their stead, and this caused the two powerful princes annoyance upon their returned. However, Ògúnfúnminíre took the calabash (*igbá*) that was willed to him and journeyed southwards following the movement of the ritual dish (*àwo*) on river Ògùn. The calabash eventually disappeared at Ìshèrì. They eventually decided to settle. Oral

records available agreed that the migrations of the Àwòrì group did not occur until after the death of Odùduwà. According to Adérìbigbé (1975), Ògúnfúnminíre founded the first of the series of settlements at Ìshẹ̀rì, played the pioneering role, which hunters like him generally played in the establishment of Yorùbá towns.

In Lagos, the Àwòrì constitute the bulk of the indigenous population of seventeen, out of the Twenty Local Government areas of Lagos State as at the year 2025, the only exception being Èpẹ̀, Ìkòròdú and Ìbẹ̀jù-Lẹ̀kkí who are the Ìjẹ̀bú. The remaining Local Government occupied and owned by the Àwòrì include: Àlímòsọ̀, Ajẹròmí-Ìfẹ̀lódùn, Kòsòfẹ̀, Mushin, Oshòdì-Ìsọ̀lò, Ọ̀jọ̀, Sùúrùlérè, Agége, Ìfàkò-Ìjáyè, Sómólú, Amúwo-Òdòfin, Lagos Mainland, Ìkẹ̀jà, Etí-Ọ̀sà, Badagry, Àpápá and Lagos Island. As earlier mentioned, the Àwòrì could be grouped into two major divisions, that is, the early and the latter Àwòrì groups. Among the early Àwòrì settlements are Ìshẹ̀rì, Ọ̀tò- Ọ̀lọ̀fin, Ìddó, Èbúté-Méta, Àpá, Ìbèréko as well as Ọ̀tá and Adó-Odò in Ògùn state of Nigeria. A common feature of these settlements is that they were founded before 1500. They also have a related migratory history and recognise Ọ̀lọ̀fin Ògúnfúnminíre as their progenitor. The latter settlements include Ọ̀jọ̀, Ìtírẹ̀, Mushin, Ògùdù, Àgbòyí, Ìkẹ̀jà, Onígbòngbò, Ibà, Ọ̀tò-Àwòrì, Ìjànìkín, Ìlogbò Elẹ̀gbà, Ìlogbò-Erémí, Iwóró, Àgbára all of which are post 1500 settlements located in Lagos State of Nigeria (Adébólá, 2025).

However, it is important to note that the Àwòrì are culturally, historically and politically bound as a Yorùbá people. Also, there are cultural evidences that suggest unifying themes in the ways of life of the Yorùbá people of Nigeria of which Àwòrì is one. Such includes language, the physical indices, and cultural complexes of which religious cults, masquerades, and festivals; and other cultural manifestations are a common trait among the Yorùbá communities of the world (Nigeria, Benin Republic, and Brazil) (*Ibid*).

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the combined theory of Relativism and Pluralism, as posited by Collins (2004) conceptualises the ‘polysided’ nature of African traditional life. Although, relativism and pluralism as philosophical concepts are distinct but often intertwined. While relativism asserts that truth or value is relative to a particular culture or individual, pluralism advocates the existence of numerous, potentially conflicting, but equally valid perspectives or values. In other words, pluralism acknowledges the existence of diverse perspectives, relativism on the other hand postulates that these perspectives are equally valid, without necessarily implying a multiplicity of truths. This theory according to Collins, explains that the polysided nature of African social life structure has a symbolic influence on her traditional music. He further asserts that “relativism and pluralism permeates many aspects of traditional African life, which encourages an equitable distribution of symbolic or social weight” (p. 111). This polysided nature in African life is reflective in the sense that things are done in multiples.

For instance, African music is polyphonal; their calendars polycyclic; their religions are polytheistic; marriage is customarily polygamous; their social organisation is polycentric, and almost average African homes are compound-houses composed of collection of huts and households that face inwards around a central communal courtyard. Olúdare (2018) also notes that the polysided nature of African life is reflective in the musical structure of Yorùbá traditional instruments. According to him, “Yorùbá instrumental music is polyphonic (melo-rhythmic voices producing different parts of harmonic texture/grading) and polyrhythmic (instruments playing numerous inherent cross or syncopating rhythms based on the time-line pattern), with resultant rhythmic effects” (p. 101).

This theory is germane to this study as the relevance of relativism in the polysided African music and culture is apparent in the narratives of contrast between the Àwòrì social and musical structure. By relativism, the Àwòrì people relate their instrumental ensemble (usually four instruments) with the masculine and feminine family structure [father (*bàbá*), mother (*iyá*), daughter (*omọ obìnrin* or *abo*) and son (*omọ okùnrin* or *akọ*)], corresponding with the Western ideology of a four-part of male (*akọ*) and female (*abo*), that is soprano, alto, tenor and bass instrumental (string quartet) of the orchestral family or ensemble. The *omele akọ* (masculinity) and *omele abo* (femininity) become semiotic texts through which Àwòrì society communicates its gender ideology of relational complementarities. This pluralism therefore explains the pluralistic nature of Àwòrì traditional musical culture within the context of communal music participation, justifies the communal practice of African music.

Methodology

The study adopted a quantitative research design in examining the various musical and cultural factors influencing the gender nomenclatures and functions of Àwòrì traditional instruments. It explored the connection and influence of the Àwòrì social structure on their musical organisation. Furthermore, it focussed on the family, gender and hierarchical symbolism in the instruments, their masculine and feminine roles and functions in achieving musical and extra-musical creativity. The study employed both primary and secondary source of data collection. The primary source included semi-structured interviews with 27 purposively selected traditional musicians/performers and instrumentalists in Àwòrì communities. The interviewees were selected based on their active roles in traditional music and instrumental ensembles for a period of twenty-one years, and recognised roles within festival contexts. The semi-structured interviews which lasted 35 minutes on the appointed days were conducted in Yorùbá language almost in Àwòrì dialect. Interview transcripts and field notes were coded thematically, while music examples and instrumental ensembles of selected instruments such as *Bàtá*, *Ìgbìn*, *Sákàrà*, *Bèmbé*, *Sèkèrè*, *Dùndún* and so on were transcribed and analysed for rhythmic, melodic, and structural features. The secondary source is consultation of relevant books, journal articles, and the Internet. Findings were interpreted through an ethnomusicological lens, emphasising the relationship between musical structure and cultural context, while ethical approval was obtained, and all participants provided informed consent.

Findings and Discussion

Categorisation of Musical Instruments in Àwòrì Land

In African music, there are four basic categories of musical instruments. They are: Chordophones, Aerophones, Membranophones, and Idiophones. These basic global classifications are also used in classifying Yorùbá musical instruments in which Àwòrì traditional musical instruments belongs. This study however discusses the *lamellaphone* (also called *prongaphone*) – a prong-plucking instrument separately, which some music scholars referred to as a subset of idiophone instrument. As noted by Adébólá (2019, pp. 79-80), some music scholars (both African and western) have identified, categorised and described the physical properties, distribution and functions of the instruments. These include Adédèjì (2016), Agawu (2016), Akpabot (1986), Aluede (2006), Blench (1984, 1987, 2009), Echezona (1981), Euba (1990), Olúdàrè (2018), Oluga and Babalola (2012), Omibiyi-Obidike (1977), Nketia (1982) and Vidal (2012), to mention but a few.

The instrumental resources however at the disposal of performers of traditional musicians in Àwòrì land, naturally tend to be limited to those available within the Àwòrì communities. They are instruments made and constructed by the Àwòrì people themselves. The instruments are varied, ancient and symbolic with very rich sound qualities. These traditional musical instruments are classified in relation to the manner by which they are manipulated to produce sound, that is, the technique of sound production, nature and role of peculiar sound, construction techniques, physical characteristics, functions, beliefs, and values in Àwòrì culture. However, musical instruments found among the people of Àwòrì make use of the four musical instruments within the classification of idiophone, membranophone, chordophone, and aerophone. Table 1 below shows the different instruments categorisation and Table 2, the various ensembles and some genre's instrumental accompaniments of music in Àwòrì land.

Table 1: Categorisation of Selected Traditional Musical Instruments in Àwòrì Land

Membranophones	<i>Dùndún, Bàtá, Gúdúgúdú, Kẹríkẹrí, Kanangó, Bẹmbẹ, Ìkòkò, Sákàrà, Ìpèsè, Ìgbìn, Gbèdu (Ọba and Ọgbóni), Agere, Koso, Kete (Bàtá-Koto), Kiriboto, Ogido, Asiko (Samba)</i>
Idiophones	<i>Agogo (Aja, Ilu, Aro Oje), Şaworo, Sẹkẹrẹ (Agbe), Igbá, Apepe, Ose (Sere), Ogidigbo</i>
Lamellaphone (Prongaphone)	<i>Agídìgbo</i>
Aerophones	<i>Oro, Kàkàkí, Fere, Ekutu, Epe, Tioko, Ayede ode, Ipe and Toromogbe,</i>
Chordophones	<i>Gòjé</i>

Table by Adébólá E.A. (Source: Akpabot, 1986; Oluga & Babalola, 2012; Vidal, 2012; Olúdàrè, 2018; Adébólá & Titus, 2026).

Table 2: Àwóri Traditional Instrumental Ensembles and Genre Accompaniments

Medium	Ensemble/Genre	Instrument's Nomenclature
Instrumental	<i>Bàtá</i> ensemble	<i>Ìyá-Ìlù Bàtá, Omele Akọ Bàtá, Omele Abo Bàtá, Kùdi, and Afere</i>
	<i>Dùndún</i> ensemble	<i>Ìyá-Ìlù Dùndún, Gúdúgúdú, Omele Ísáájú, Omele Ìkẹhìn, Kanangó and Kẹrìkẹrì (Aguda)</i>
	<i>Gbèdu</i> ensemble	<i>Ìyá-Ìlù Gbèdu, Gúdúgúdú, Ísáájú, Ìkẹhìn and Kẹrìkẹrì</i>
	<i>Bàtá-Koto</i> ensemble	<i>Ìyákoto, Omele Koto, and Àtẹlé Ejìn</i>
	<i>Aya-Èkùn</i> ensemble	<i>Ìyá-Ìlù Dùndún, Omele Akọ, Omele Abo, Kanangó, Agogo and Aro/Şaworo</i>
	<i>Aran</i> ensemble	<i>Ìyá-Ìlù Aran, Omele Aran, Aran Gáangan Agogo and Sẹkẹrẹ</i>
	<i>Karogun-Olosa</i> ensemble	<i>Ìyá-Ìlù, Ehavi, Kónkóló and Agogo</i>
	<i>Karajágbá/Katajágbá</i> ensemble	<i>Karajágbá, Sákàrà/Gáangan Agogo, and Sẹkẹrẹ</i>
	<i>Gúdúgúdú</i> ensemble	<i>Gúdúgúdú, Agogo, Aro/Şaworo (sometimes Dùndún is added)</i>
	<i>Sákàrà</i> ensemble	<i>Ìyá-Ìlù Sákàrà, Omele Abo and Omele Akọ</i>
	<i>Gẹlẹdẹ</i> ensemble	<i>Gáangan, Agogo, and Sẹkẹrẹ</i>
	<i>Bẹmbẹ</i> ensemble	<i>Ìyá-Ìlù Bẹmbẹ, Ísáájú, Atele and Ejìn</i>
	<i>Sẹkẹrẹ</i> ensemble	<i>Ìyá Ajé Sẹkẹrẹ, Ísáájú Ajé and Ìkẹhìn Ajé</i>
	<i>Ìgbìn</i> ensemble	<i>Ìyá Nla, Ìyá Ágan, Keke and Aféré</i>
	<i>Agogo</i> ensemble	<i>Ìyá Arò, Ísáájú Arò and Ìkẹhìn Arò</i>

Vocal	Àgàsá music	Bẹmbẹ, Omele, Gbingbi, Gbèdugbèdu, Sẹkẹrẹ, Woroworo and Agogo
	Àpàlà music	Àgídìgbo, Gáangan, Omele Gáangan, Àkúbà (Bẹmbẹ) and Sẹkẹrẹ
	Ìgunnukó music	Ìkòkò, Bẹmbẹ and Bàbò (Sẹkẹrẹ)
	Efe/Egúngún music	Ìyá-Ìlù Bàtá, Omele abo, Awere, Oji-ìlù, Sẹkẹrẹ, Agogo and Şaworo
	Sákàrà music	Ìyá-Ìlù Sákàrà, Omele Sákàrà, Goje, Sẹkẹrẹ and Igbá (calabash)
	Karajágbá music	Karajágbá, Sákàrà/Gáangan Agogo, and Sẹkẹrẹ

	<i>Igbe</i> music	<i>Ìyá-Ìlù Igbe, Ìṣáájú, Ìkẹhìn, and Agogo</i>
	<i>Àgídígbo</i> music	<i>Àgídígbo, Ìyá-Ìlù Dùndún, Omele Dùndún, Sèkèrè and Agogo</i>

Table by Adébóla E.A. (Source: Adébóla, 2019; Akpabot, 1986; Oikelome, 2000; Oluga & Babalola, 2012; Oludare, 2018; Vidal, 2012).

Masculinity and Femininity in Àwòrì Traditional Musical Instruments

In Àwòrì traditional music, gender (masculine and feminine) roles are evident in the naming and function of musical instruments, with instruments often categorised as masculine (*akọ*) or feminine (*abo*). These gendered instrument categorisations are not indiscriminate, rather reflective of the Yorùbá worldview and social structure, where masculine-feminine (*akọ-abo* or *takọ-tabo*) roles are clearly defined and interconnected. In Àwòrì communities, traditional instruments are classified as masculine, feminine or context-dependent based on local belief and usage. For instance, masculine-coded instruments which include *Bàtá*, *Gúdúgúdú*, and *Omele akọ* are played for the Òrìṣà (divinity) like *Ṣàngó* and *Ògún* in public, royal, and war-related ceremonies, and primarily played by men. Instruments that are feminine-coded like *Àgídígbo*, *Sèkèrè* (also known as *bàbò* among the Ìgunnukó music practitioners), and certain forms of *Ìyá-Ìlù* are associated with domestic spaces, fertility, and women's societies within their local communities are typically played by women. On the other hand, drums such as *Dùndún* and *Gáangan*, and *Agogo* (gong) considered as neutral instruments are used by genders (both masculine and feminine), which is determined by context of performance, that is, public/social events or ritual. Also, the biggest drum in the ensemble, is the mother drum (instrument) known as *Ìyá-Ìlù*, is considered feminine, while accompanying drums are categorised as male (*omele akọ*) and/or female (*omele abo*), indicating their supporting roles and mirroring the social structure where men (masculine) and women (feminine) have divergent but interrelated roles.

The Àwòrì cultural belief is that these instruments are gendered through association with Òrìṣà as earlier mentioned. While *Bàtá* is linked to *Ṣàngó* (masculine divinity) known for fiery energy, *Àgídígbo* is associated with female fertility and soothing functions in Àwòrì oral narratives. It was gathered that some of these instruments are taboo for women to touch or play them especially when they are on their menstrual periods or/and in the sacred groove of the divinities. Men are also forbidden from playing instruments used in women's ritual ceremonies or rites. In terms of performance practice, masculine instruments among the Àwòrì during such festivals as *Ìgunnukó*, *Gèlèdè*, *Egúngún*, *Ògún* among others use aggressive and fast tempo but with low-pitch strokes; whereas, the feminine instruments use lighter and higher-pitched patterns. The vocal tone and dance movements accompanying each instrument however reinforce these gender symbols (Oral Communication).

In terms of role allocation, instruments as masculine-feminine nomenclatures reveals that men by virtue of their strength and agility dominate public, royalty, and war-related performances, control political and spiritual status, and are seen as master

drummers especially in such instrumental performance in *Bàtá* music ensemble. Women on the other hand, concentrated more in private, domestic, and such ceremonial function relating with women which give them authority within those domains. However, from the general viewpoint, Yorùbá context of gender Àwòrì inclusive as noted by Olúdàré (2018) masculinity does not necessarily connote being superior to a femininity status as far as musical instruments and singing is concerned. Rather, he mentioned that “...each gender has its unique, significant and dedicated designations and functions in their social and musical structure” (p. 103).

From the foregoing, it is important to note that the categorisations of these traditional musical instruments reflect the Àwòrì social structure family life [parents (*bàbá* and *ìyá*), son (*omọ kùnrin* or *akọ*) and daughter (*omọ bínrin* or *abo*)] and its influence on musical practices. The *Ìyá-Ìlù* (*Bẹmbẹ*), often the largest and most prominent drum, is designated as the feminine leader, thereby symbolising motherhood and nurturing within the ensemble. For instance, the masculine-feminine (*akọ-abo*) roles in Àwòrì traditional musical instruments as used in their music highlight their understanding of complementary relationships between men and women, where both contribute to the overall harmony and balance of the ensemble and society.

Functions of Traditional Musical Instruments in Àwòrì Land

The most common characteristic features of all African musical instruments—whether idiophones, aerophones, chordophones, membranophones, are production of sound in which the sound may be different in timbre. As David (2013) notes, the distinguishing characteristics can be drawn from their functions and significances, either generally or specifically, within their cultural contexts (p. 62). The functions of Yorùbá musical instruments are diverse as diverse the instruments. Yorùbá traditional musical instruments generally serve diverse functions, ranging from religious and ceremonial roles to social and entertainment purposes. In other words, the instruments are used to accompany ritual, festivals, and ceremonies, often with specific instruments reserved for particular occasions or divinities. Adébólá (2019) explains traditional musical instruments in Àwòrì communities, a sub-ethnic group in Yorùbá land, which is the focus of this study, share this view. As an integral part of the Àwòrì culture, the musical instruments act as medium of expressing identity, preserving history, and transmitting knowledge through music and performance (p. 78).

The various arrangements of Àwòrì traditional instrumental ensemble are categorised according to the functions they perform in Àwòrì music. These functions range from musical (rhythmic, melodic, harmonic, dance and creativity, and textual performance) and extra-musical (ritual, entertainment, panegyric, historical, communication, timing, enlightenment, correction, mask and costume) functions. Each ensemble form has its unique cultural function in terms of the specific divinity, ritual, festival/worship, and gender that are associated with. For example, *Ìgbìn* drum is associated with, and the worship of *Ọbàtálá* (god of creation or arch-divinity); *Gbèdu* is allied with *Edan*, an *Ògbóni* object of worship, and also used in the palace of the *Ọba* (king); *Bàtá* is connected with *Ẹ̀ṣàngó* (god of thunder) and *Egúngún* (a

masquerade); *Òsìrìgì* is related with *Ọ̀rànmiyàn*; *Eéwo* to *Olúorogbo* and *Ọ̀rìṣàkìrè* even *Ọ̀bàtálá*, and *Şèkèrè* is linked with *Ọ̀rìṣà Ajé* (goddess of wealth) and also used for entertainment in company of other drum(s) such as *Dùndún* (Adébólá, 2026). However, *Dùndún* drum with its melo-rhythmic and rhythmic structure as seen in Example 1 below has no specific association with any *Ọ̀rìṣà*, except for social celebrations.

Example 1: Melo-Rhythmic and Rhythmic Parts of *Dùndún* Ensemble

The musical score for the *Dùndún* ensemble is presented in a staff format with five parts. The time signature is 4/4. The parts are: *Iya-ilu*, *Omele-ako*, *Omele-Ako*, *Kerikeri*, and *Gudugudu*. The *Iya-ilu* part is a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes. The *Omele-ako* and *Omele-Ako* parts are rhythmic lines with eighth and sixteenth notes. The *Kerikeri* part is a simple two-tone melodic line. The *Gudugudu* part is a complex rhythmic line with many sixteenth notes.

Example 1 above shows the melorhythmic and rhythmic patterns of *Dùndún* ensemble which learner(s) or apprentice is introduced to. From the illustration, it is observed that the *Ìyá-ilù* expresses more melodic and rhythmic freedom than other members of the ensemble. This is because *Ìyá-ilù* as the mother drum is expected to govern the ensemble as such giving direction through melo-rhythmic speech imitation. Other instruments *Omele ako*, *Omele abo* are playing complementary role, while *Kerikeri* keeps the timeline in the overall performance; whereas, *Gúdúgúdú* playing only a two-tone melo-rhythmic part.

Conclusion

This study examined the classification and performance of masculinity and femininity of traditional musical instruments in *Àwòrì* land. It revealed that these instruments are not ordinary sound-producing tools but serve as cultural signals that encode gender ideology, cosmological beliefs, and social structure among the *Àwòrì* people. In *Àwòrì* communities, musical instruments are classified as masculine, feminine or context-dependent based on pitch, performance technique, mythological association, and ritual restriction. Such instruments which are considered masculine-coded as *Bàtá* and *Gúdúgúdú* are used in the public, royalty, and associated with one *Ọ̀rìṣà* (divinity) or the other in ceremonies as festivals/worships, and are mainly performed by men. *Àgídígbo* and *Şèkèrè* instruments seen as female (feminine)

counterpart are associated with familial, social, and women's spaces are played by women.

Dùndún and *Gáangan* instruments have no specific gender barriers in the sense that the performance context determined their gender role. The study contributes to knowledge in that it provides the first systematic documentation of how specific instruments in Àwòrì land are gendered, classified, outlawed, and performance contexts that fluctuate from the broader Yorùbá overviews. Analysing these instruments through both oral and aural traditions, the study extends existing frameworks on gender and music beyond vocal/text-based analysis to include instrumental sound, timbre, and embodied performance. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that gender is inscribed not only in librettos but also in instrument morphology, playing technique, and performance space.

Recommendations

The study recommends that further ethnographic research should be conducted in Àwòrì communities in Lagos and Ògùn states to document contemporary perspectives on masculinity and femininity in the use of traditions instruments. Cultural institutions such as the National Council for Arts and Culture and Àwòrì traditional councils should digitise and archive Àwòrì-specific instruments, performance practices, and gendered roles to prevent loss of indigenous knowledge. Also, the Àwòrì should promote inclusive cultural transmission by encouraging women's participation in non-sacred and female-gendered musical genres, while respecting restrictions tied to sacred instruments.

Traditional rulers and community leaders should initiate dialogue on the cultural meanings behind gendered restrictions to clarify whether exclusions are based on spiritual taboos or ability, thereby fostering mutual understanding without eroding tradition. More so, government (both state and federal levels) and cultural agencies should fund Àwòrì festivals and music programmes that showcase both male-led and female-led ensembles to affirm that masculinity and femininity are complementary aspects of Àwòrì musical identity. Furthermore, schools within Àwòrì-dominated areas should integrate local musical heritage and gender dynamics into the curriculum to educate younger generations on the cultural significance of their instruments and performances.

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