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Drums as a unifying deity in Africa: Reminiscing the Nigerian drum festival

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Abstract

The idea that certain beliefs in Africa are fetish is not only demeaning but has the tendency of eroding the very rich cultural heritage in the continent. Studies have shown that Africa is blessed with so many untold stories which have hitherto been hidden as a result of the inability of our forefathers to document events that have given rise to such mythology. Drumming as an art form is found to be a unifying tool that cut across different nationalities, yet have the semblance of a deified being. This paper unveils the important role the drum plays in the life of Africans using the Nigerian Drums Festival as a case in point. Method of research and information gathering are mostly from personal interviews with veteran drummers who participated in the Festival which held in Ogun State, Nigeria at the June 12 Cultural Centre on 22nd April, 2016. Findings have shown that Africans revere and deify certain drums as a result of the kind of roles they have played in sacred events in their communities.

Keywords: drums, unifying deity, reminiscing, drum festival, Africa, Nigerian

Introduction

Drums are wonderful instruments that produce pleasant sounds for the purposes entertainment, rhythm or music. In Africa, drums are very important in people's daily life. They are used in different ways; drums are used for sending messages to people even in distant places – typical examples include the fact that the Oba of Benin was said to hear drum messages from Oyo, the wooden gong was also used especially in the Eastern part of Nigeria to summon all members of the community to a meeting at the Town square. Drums are also used as instruments of celebration during festivals, marriage ceremonies, naming ceremonies etc. An interview with Mufutau Afolabi, the Public Relations Officer of Association of Nigerian Professional Drummers reveals thus;

Drum must not be a skinned musical instrument. Whatever objects that produce sound when we hit them together or with our hands could be regarded as drum. We can hit a piece of wood against another; we can use bottles or iron. As far as they produce rhythmic sound, they are drums. Drums all over the world, are instruments of celebration and celebration is never complete without drums except mourning. Drums are also instruments of announcement, notice, warning against danger and war. Drums can be used to constitute chaos and also used to settle disputes. Drums are used to bring peace to society. Drums signify that good things are happening whenever we find them (Personal Interview).

Africa as a unique continent where camaraderie flourishes between humanity and divinities also makes use of the drum as a means of reaching their deities whenever the need arises. The mysterious nature of drums is such that when you hear them, there is a universal communication that touches the soul and evokes the spirit. Afolabi daringly attributes human nature to the African drums which he claims speak like humans and are superior to singing. As he puts it,

The Yorubas believe that drums are like solicitors before Olodumare (God) therefore they make their request known through drums believing that God created them as a means of communication to reach Him.

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Sometimes, barren women meet drummers for prayers and they become fruitful through the spiritual communication between the drum and God. So, whenever the drummers perform the necessary rites, the drums get into the appropriate mood to speak. Drums speak like humans. For example, drums were used to sing the national anthem on the first day of this festival and you could clearly hear the tune. Drums are viable tools to achieve so many things. If one dances without drum, people will take such person to be insane, but a drummer can play alone and people will even spray him money and be happy. A musician cannot be well appreciated without the use of drums, but drums can be appreciated even without song, that's why I regard drumming to be superior to singing. (Personal Interview)

The Nigerian drum festival: an overview

African drums hold a special place in the history of Africa. In western culture, the idea of drumming is nearly always associated with entertainment or just to add to the musical quality in the orchestration of music, while drums hold a deeper, symbolic and historical meaning in Africa.

The Djembe drum is possibly the most influential and basic of all the African drums. Originally, it dates back to 500 A.D and was originally created as a sacred drum to be used in healing ceremonies, rites of passage, ancestral worship, warrior rituals and social dances. Over the years, drum has been adjudged an integral tool of identity, preservation, and cultural resuscitation which is a universal phenomenon that cuts across diverse human species. For this reason, Ogun State Ministry of Culture and Tourism with the support of Ogun State Government and the sponsorship of several enterprises and other business organizations has consciously organized this noteworthy event, tagged *Nigerian Drum Festival, Ogun 2016* with the theme "Reviving our Culture in Drums."

During a research on the history, principles, theories and applications of drums, many great drummers and artists in Nigeria and beyond were interviewed. Contributions gathered from these veterans through oral interviews have informed and formed the thrust of this work.

Afolabi further insists that the origin of drums is traced to the gods, which makes it an observable fact that *Obatala* who is the most creative of all Yoruba gods must have carved the very first drum known as *Àgbá* drum. *Agba* drum which is regarded as the first drum is a very sacred drum which was only found in the palace, the shrine and other sacred areas of the Awo initiates. It was only played by either the Chief Priest or any qualified initiated drummer. It was never played by women.

According to Afolabi as stated earlier, in the olden days, people were speaking to drums and drums speak to them in return. Little wonder the professional drummers in Yoruba land chant the panegyric of drum as "*Oku ewure ti n f' ohun bi eniyan*" (the skin of a dead goat that speaks like humans). He also mentioned the rituals of drums where he explained that some very sacred drums like *Bata* drum, which is mostly used to worship *Sango*, *Agba* drum and *gudugudu* drum which are used during rituals, have a black spot on them which they call "*kusanri*". This black spot on these drums is itself a shrine which drummers place ritual elements like, *kolanut*, *sheabutter*, *bitter kola*, *white cloth*, *alligator pepper*, and *cock on*. It is believed that when drummers perform these rites, "*Ayangalu*" the deity of

drums would make them successful drummers and even help them to always hit the right notes while playing. In another interview with son of Hubert Ogunde, the first Doyen of Nigerian Traditional Theatre, *Akeem Ogunde*, the current manager of *Ogunde theatre* after his stellar performance at *Nigerian Drums Festival 2016*, he defined drumming as an essential practice of African culture. *Ogunde* enumerates the different kinds of African drums that can be found in Yoruba land. According to him,

Ehnn... There are plenty drums in Yoruba land... If I mention some now, you can't know them. There is one we call "*Ejigona*", that one has some mysteries, we have *bata oyo*, we have *bata ijebu*, we have *yengben ijebu*, we have *sato*, if you go to *yewa*, you will see so many drums. In fact, there are so many drums in Nigeria that we need to handle properly and consciously. (Personal Interview)

Ayandapo Olubiyi is one of the most popular drummers in *Abeokuta, Ogun State, Nigeria*. *Ayandapo* who is a native of *Abeokuta, Ogun State* reveals that the event *Nigerian Drums Festival, 2016* was solely organized for people to know what we call drum and to get the younger citizens interested in participating in true African culture. He asserts that Nigeria as a country that is rich in culture has several drums which have been made for different occasions. He talks about the "*Iya ilu*" which is a bigger version of a talking drum called *gangan*. It is usually hung on the shoulder with longer skin strings which one either tightens or releases while playing to give any desired note or tone. This drum and other forms of talking drum were used to render the *Nigerian National Anthem* on the first day of this festival 19th of April 2016 at the opening ceremony. "*Iya ilu*" which could be literally translated to mean "mother of drum" is mostly used at wedding ceremony. It is the drum they use to call out the bride during the traditional engagement.

He reveals that "*Ayangalu*," the deified personage of drums was a normal human being with extraordinary power. According to *Ayandapo*, *Ayangalu* was a jovial drummer who plays a lot with children and derives joy in making people happy but was unfortunately antagonized by some conspirators to a ridiculous extent that frustrated him to turn to a tree in anger. According to him,

Ah... *Ayangalu* is a great deity o, he is really a mighty one. Well, according to the story as told by our forefathers. *Ayangalu* was living like normal mortal with other human beings in the society. But he was greatly envied by others who hated him for his joviality. *Ayangalu* was antagonized by his enemies who were jealous because he was loved by many. They conspired against him and he was so frustrated to the extent of turning to a tree in anger. *Ayangalu* was a great deity we can never forget and to sustain his immortality:

It is for this reason that the Association of Professional Drummers of Nigeria (A.P.D.O.N) in the Western parts of Nigeria have an anthem that was composed in his honor and it goes thus:

Tiwa n tiwa.....

Eeh eeh tiwa n tiwa (2x)

Ise baba wa, adaiyeba
 Ayangalu wa, ko ni sise
 E gbe
 Eh eh e gbe
 Call: E je ka gbe l'aruge
 Response: Ayangalu wa koni baje o ...

The above is translated thus

It is our heritage (2x)
 Our father's work is our heritage
 May Ayangalu never falter
 Raise it
 Oh raise it
 Ayangalu will never be destroyed ...

Richard Hodges corroborates the above claim in his article; Drum is the Ear of God where he describes African music using drums as an experience that has the power to possess a magic door to religious experience. As he puts it,

The deities in whose service music and dance are performed are traditionally understood not as being divine in themselves-rather, their divinity is a particle of the Divinity of a higher principle, the creative principle behind the Universe. But this principle is already always everywhere and in everything and hence needs no service to call its presence. No special temporal material condition, such as a temple, ceremony, or artifact, can concentrate its force. Its action at our level is non-action. Its symbol is silence. In music, it is expressed by the rhythmic pulses that are heard innerly though the instrument is not played; through their silence, these pulses give shape and meaning to the rhythm that is heard outerly. The Great Principle is too far above the level of man for him to relate to it directly. The deities are necessary intermediaries through whom man and God address each other. In some traditions the drums themselves are also specially invested as divine intermediaries. The Dogon say that Drum is the ear of God and one must beat it with the attitude that one is speaking to God on behalf of mankind. This attitude requires respect, but also great force. (1992)

In another vein, an art consultant, Founder/Artistic Director of Drums View Concept (an art academy for the youths), creator and director of Sights and Sounds de L' Afrique, Isioma Williams, who is also a pioneer member of Korean-Culture Supporters Group and member of International Dance Council (CID) among other dance groups spoke to Omiko Awa on his drum clinic, the Korean Janggu drum among others. According to him,

From my personal studies and knowledge of drums, drums' spirituality is embedded in the drum itself. Drum is a deity itself; it relates to you on account of your relationship with it, that is, your interest, the attraction, the urge and your mental feelings towards it. So most times, it is a connection between the drum's spirit and the spirit of the person playing the tunes that do the connection. So, uniquely, you don't really have to know about any deity before you can commune with drums because the spiritual connection between the drum and the drummer does the magic. I categorically

say this because it happened to me at different occasions and that was how I acquired the ability of playing different ethnic drums in Nigeria fluently. (Awa, 2018)

The *Bata* drum is one of the most popular drums of the Yoruba people in Nigeria. It is near impossible to find an event in Nigeria with the Yoruba people and not find a group of *Bata* drummers either as performers or as praise-singers who approach dignitaries with drumbeats of praise in anticipation for a token of appreciation.

Awobiroso Ayangbemi, a leading drummer in Nigeria who has toured many countries in Africa and beyond asserts that *Bata* drum which is associated with Sango has another brand called "*Bata Remo*". According to him, this particular drum has its root in Remo which is a popular clan in Ogun State. He explains that "*Bata Remo*" is usually accompanied by three different back-up drums. The first one is "*Omele Bata*" which has a sharp tone, the second one is called "*Ako*" which has a tenor sound and the third drum called "*Apere*" which has bass sound those coordinates the different sounds of the backup drums to produce a balanced rhythm. The *Apere* sound is as heavy as that of "*Bata Remo*" itself. These drums are used for Sango and masquerades display. He goes further to talk about the talking drum and the accompaniments that make it a complete orchestra,

Talking drum comes in two major categories (i) Apala: This is the small talking drum we hang under our arm to play. Then we have (ii) Iyaalu: The bigger type of talking drum that has larger faces and longer stripes. We hang it on our shoulder and hold its stripes as we drag or pull it to get any desired tone. This bigger version of talking drum is often accompanied by other drums like akuba, atele and shekere (shakers). The Hausas also use the talking drum, so talking drum is like a general drum but what we use it for differs (Personal Interview).



Pic 1: Bata Drum Set

He also describes another drum called "*Balafon*" which is another version of the Ancient Agba drum. This drum is used during a dance performance that is dedicated to the deity of crafts and sculptures called Obalufon and the dance is very popular in Remo, Ogun State. According to him, *Balafon* drum was originally played only by men while only women dance to its rhythm. The men who play these drums don't wear clothes but only tie shaki or Aso oke

round their waist to play the drum. However, this practice no longer seems tenable in present day.



Pic 2: The Balafon Drum

The Shagam people of Ogun State perform Balafon dance during coronation ceremonies till date. Ayangbemi identifies some advantages of Nigerian Drums Festival as he states that firstly, it is a learning medium for drummers to learn about other people’s drums and patterns of drumming which may be used to embellish their indigenous ones and avoid monotony or keep the audience from getting bored.

Samson Alayande, a native of Abeokuta and one of the prominent drum builders in the state describes drum as an integral member of human communities. He asserts that no king can ascend the throne without hearing the sound of the drum which ushers him to ascend the throne. An interview with him unveils another kind of drum known as *Gudugudu*, which he describes as a bit smaller and round shaped drum, usually hung on the neck and placed at the upper region of the player’s stomach. He claims that the *Gudugudu* is the father of drums because it possesses a larger proportion of spirituality. Alayande professes that *Gudugudu* drum cannot be carved by anyone less than forty years because it entails a lot of sacred materials which traditionally, must not be handled by any man below forty years of age.



Pic 3: *Gudugudu* drum

He further explains that *Gudugudu* can be used to pray for a deserving member of the community and it’s also used to curse any culpable transgressor. According to him, *Gudugudu* is a sacred drum that must be respected by even

its owner and it is traditionally placed facing down after use. He added that no drum ritual can ever take place without *Gudugudu* because it bears and receives the ritual elements brought by any drummer performing the rite and no one dares steal it!

Kehinde Akinyemi, another African leading drummer defines drum as the life of music, what he means by this is that music without drum cannot be regarded as a complete artistic expression because drum gives meaning to music and it creates the stimuli that gets the audience irresistibly involved. He said “people don’t brood moodily when the drum sounds.” This simply means that drumming is a therapeutic art that eases people of their pains and other forms of traumatic conditions. In other words, drum prevents many ailing diseases such as high blood pressure, neuralgia, neurasthenia etc.

Mohammed Ismail, a solo drummer from Kano State Nigeria. He has been playing drums for fourteen years and he is a lead drummer of Kano State Cultural Troupe. Ismail was discovered by Mr. Saidu Sanusi who is a top officer in Kano State Arts Council and his current manager. Ismail has travelled to many countries of the world to play drum and to him, drumming is life and a very effective means of communication. Ismail rehearses for three hours every day and he has been a very successful professional drummer in Nigeria, Africa and beyond. To him, drumming is a major way of displaying our culture and to attract other people to us.

Babatunde Bankole is a prolific drummer that works in the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Ogun State. Bankole has played the drums for several years and trained many drummers to become professionals. He explained the nature of the world tallest drum which was first played by Ogun State Governor, Sen. Ibikunle Amosun on the first day of the event 19th of April 2016. He said that the world tallest drum which is 17ft tall was inspired by a particular drum from Badagry called “Sato drum”.



Pic 4: *Sato* Drum

Sato drum is a special drum that is about 6ft long and it is used to call people together in times of war and it is also used to reconcile disputes among people. So, the world tallest drum which has the image of different gods like Ogun, Sango, Oduduwa has its root in Sato drum of the Badagry people.



Pic 5: *World's Tallest Drum*

The world's tallest drum is an 11ft master piece designed by Edward, a self-trained sculptor under the supervision of the C.E.O of Femi Art Ware House, Mr. Femi Coker. In a newspaper report by Ozolua Uhakheme, "Its sheer height of 11 feet naturally makes the drum an outdoor piece or a museum piece. At the top of the drum are reliefs that symbolise empires and kingdoms of royalty. The three themes of the drum are on African heritage, culture and festivities." He further opines,

Coker, who inaugurated the sculptor to create the master-piece, said that he has been nursing the idea of the drum for years but constantly reviewing its format and design. He said the drum was created specifically as a tribute to the immense contributions of Blacks and people of African descents to world civilization. "In fact, the drum was created in honour of the irrepressible African spirit as well as a salute to Pan Africanism," Coker said. He disclosed that the symbolic drum was inspired by the Sato drum of Togo, Benin Republics and the Ogu people of Badagry and Ogun state. He described the sculptor as a naturally gifted artist who only had a secondary school education. "He had tutelage under his elder brother who is a master self-trained sculptor. He also worked as a studio assistant to the late Prof. Enwonwu in the 80s," Coker added (Uhakheme, 2013).

Bankole goes further and explains that the small bells which are found around the face of some talking drums are called "saworo" and they perform two basic functions. The first function is that they add beauty to the drum as design and add interesting notes to the sound of the drum as they shake while playing. Secondly, they perform the role of a messenger. This second function is utterly mysterious because Bankole asserts that these bells are what make a man or the whole community hear the message of the drum from a faraway distance even when the drummer is playing from miles away.



Pic 6: *The Saworo Drum*

Nafiu Adeseye is a native of Igbogila clan in Ogun State and a specialist on "Bembe drum" Bembe drum is a two faced drum, created in form of or military drum but made with sheep or goat skin. The "kongo stick" we use in playing talking drum is the same we use for bembe but while we play it with one hand, the other hand is placed on the other face of the drum to alter the tones to achieve the sounds "doh" "re" "mi".

Adeseye professes that Bembe drum is traditionally created for sacred events. They play Bembe for Egungun festival (masquerade) and also for the burial of cult initiates and elderly men of the society. The Hausas also play Bembe drum but they use it for mere celebrations.



Pic 7: *The bembe drums and players below*

Pa Adewole Oniluola is the oldest professional talking drummer who has played for a popular Yoruba traditional musician, late Ayinla Omowura for decades. Adewole is 89years old and he is still in charge of very sophisticated rhythm on the drum. He maintains that drumming should be an act of possession and this corroborates Peter Brook's acting theory termed "Act of possession". Oniluola believes that a drummer must be possessed by the spirit of drumming through personal rehearsal and imagination in order to perform effectively with other artists. He has proven this theory viable severally by recording more than 20minutes tracks in the studio without serious rehearsal with the vocalist. He is of the opinion that a good talking drummer must build an archive of words and develop an improvisational skill which helps him to flow with any artist without any prior rehearsal.

An interview with Adebowale Folashayo, a female drummer and a drum maker who plays for the Ogun State troupe reveals that the Nigerian Drums Festival is a generative idea that spurs drummers to better creativity through getting exposed to different techniques of drumming and knowing different drums from other parts of the world.

Folashayo's position is very true because the event has practically revealed the effectiveness of Nigerian culture

even beyond the country. An example to buttress this point is the display of “Eko Samba Community” which uses Brazilian drums and publicly announces that though they use Brazilian drums such as “sodus”, Eko Samba Community as a troupe has its root in Nigeria and the rhythm they play is that of Africa.

Many foreigners came to witness this event and enjoy the Nigerian culture through the display of wonderful drums. Mr. Alex, who came from Serbia, South Europe, admits to the truth that African drums attract people from different parts of the world, regardless of your age, race or religion. Nobody resists drums!

Drum as a symbol of unity

From the foregoing, it is evident that drums play a major role in the ensemble of music. Even western music is not left out of the benefits of the drum as a unifier with the assemblage. As a result, the jazz drum provides the beat with which all other instruments follow. Generally, music is played in beats and it takes the drums to regulate these beats. Irrespective of the language of music, the drumbeat is a universally accepted phenomenon in the performance.

Consequently, the drum is able to achieve the role of calling people from all walks of life together and make them dance or move according to a particular rhythm which it dictates. These rhythms are dependent on the mood of the moment, ranging from the melancholic to jubilation.

Summary

Admittedly, the drum is indeed an irresistible phenomenon. Though out of skepticism, one may consider some of the contributions of these aforementioned drummers as myths or superstitious fables, but no one can debunk the rhythmic stimuli that the drum produces and its importance. More importantly is the undeniable fact that the nature of the drum and its significance is felt in the same way across ethnic nationalities in Africa. Even in generations to come, the drum remains an irresistible caller that no one flouts its order!

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