

REAPPRAISING THE MUSICAL LEGACIES IN YORÙBÁ *IFÁ* LITERARY CORPUS



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Abstract

Ifá literary corpus from time immemorial served as an invaluable ‘warehouse’ of the Yorùbá indigenous belief systems; including arts, science and technology, values, and religion. Consequently, the practice of music as the most popular of the arts is preserved in the *Ifá* literary corpus. In order to exhume the belief systems and the authentic knowledge of the traditional Yorùbá music, *Ifá* literary corpus is therefore indispensable. This paper, using the literary analytical and biblio-musicological methods, highlights and interprets selected passages from the *Ifá* literary corpus that bother on Yorùbá musicianship. The objective is to reiterate the necessity of indigenous belief systems for a more functionally and socio-culturally relevant music education and practice among the global Yorùbá people. The paper reveals that the indigenous Yorùbá musical elements as contained in the *Ifá* literary corpus constitute the bedrock of original traditional Yorùbá music. The paper therefore concludes on their radical inclusion and application to the contemporary Yorùbá music theory and practices.

Keywords: *Ifá* corpus, Yorùbá music, indigenous musical instruments, musical legacies

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to highlight traditional musical practices preserved in the Yorùbá *Ifá* literary corpus with the purpose of critical examination. The findings reveal the philosophical basis behind some of the Yorùbá traditional musical arts. Clues as to the factors distinguishing Yorùbá musical traditions from Western Musical aesthetics are also to be inferred from the assertions of the paper.

A lot has been written on *Ifá* literary corpus by Abimbola (1976, 1977a, 1977b) and others such as Ibie (1987), Armstrong et al (n.d), and Babayemi & Adeola (1987a, 1987b, 1987c). These works featured the historical background, collections, and analyses of *Ifá* oracles and *Ifá* chants. This paper is a literary-critical study of the *Ifá* texts that speak on musical arts in the Yorùbá *Ifá* literary corpus. The approach is however ethno/biblio-musicological. One of the numerous literatures on *Ifá* written by Abimbola (1977a) is the resource text for this paper.

The Importance of the Yorùbá *Ifá* Literary Corpus

The *Ifá* literary corpus consists of the divination activities of Òrúnmìlà who himself is the Yorùbá god of wisdom and divination (Adedeji, 1992). There are sixteen major divisions in the *Ifá* Corpus, which are referred to as *Ojú Odù* (the principal *Odùs*) (Abimbola, 1976). These are similar to various book units in the Holy Bible. The sixteen principal *Odùs* are: Èjì ogbè, Òyèkú méjì, Ìwòrì Méjì, Òdí Méjì, Ìrosùn Méjì, Òwónrín Méjì, Òbàrà Méjì, Òkànràn Méjì, Ògúndá Méjì, Òṣá Méjì, Ìká Méjì, Òtúúrúpòn (*Ològbòn*) Méjì, Òtúrá Méjì, Ìrètè Méjì, Òṣé Méjì and Òfún Òràngún Méjì.

These *Odùs* are mathematically subdivided into another two hundred and forty minor *Odùs* called *Omọ Odù*, altogether making a totality of two hundred and fifty-six *Odùs*. The minor *Odùs* is similar to the chapterization of the Christian Bible. Each of the two hundred and fifty-six *Odùs* has several lines called *esè* (verse) which grow from time to time in length.

According to Ibie (1986), Babayemi & Adekola (1987), and Abimbola (1976), the sixteen principal *Odùs* are regarded as divinities in their own rights. They are believed to be the Apostles of Òrúnmìlà sent down from heaven after Òrúnmìlà's ascension. The other two hundred and forty minor *Odùs* are also believed to be the children of the sixteen divinities. It is believed that these Apostles (sixteen divinities) worked while they were in heaven. Their works thus constitute the contents of the sixteen principal *Odùs*. The divination works of their children also form the contents of the minor *Odùs*.

While one may safely accept the deified positions of the sixteen principal *Odùs*, the personification of the other two hundred and forty sub-divisions

may not be sensible. This is because they are mathematically subdivided and composed. Since each of the principal *Odùs* is merged with each of the rest fifteen so that each of the principal *Odùs* is sub-divided into another fifteen, personifying them will not be logically explicable. (Adedeji, 1992).

Since the *Ifá* literary corpus consists of the past divination works of *Ọ̀rúnmìlà* and his Apostles, his divine words are inevitably found therein. The *Ifá* literary corpus therefore forms a major source of hearing from *Ọ̀rúnmìlà* and the other gods. It is the oracle of the gods. This is why each *Babaláwo* (Diviner) has to memorize all the *Odùs* and their verses. Whenever a client consults a *Babaláwo*, he displays his *Ifá* paraphernalia which indicate the signatures of a particular *Odù*. It is from that particular *Odù* that the client will be guided. The content of any *Odù* always focuses on how previous similar problems were solved by *Ọ̀rúnmìlà* or his Apostles after he had divined for the client. Sometimes the *Odù* also consists of the doom or calamity that befell the client who might have been believed to have disobeyed or not to have faithfully carried out whatever was spelled out in the divination.

Ifá literary corpus remains the earliest of all Yoruba oral literature. In it are found the wisdom and knowledge of *Ọ̀rúnmìlà*. Not only that but most of the Yorùbá philosophical thoughts are largely drawn from *Ifá* literary Corpus. The Yorùbá believe that *Ifá* has the key to the knowledge of the past, present, and future. *Ọ̀rúnmìlà* knows all things and reveals them in the *Ifá* corpus. Chapter two of *Ọ̀gúndá Mèjì* in *Ifá* corpus buttresses this claim:

Ifá ló lòní;
Ifá ló lẹ̀la
Ifá ló lẹ̀túnla pẹ̀lú ẹ̀
Ọ̀rúnmìlà ló nijó méré̀ẹ̀rìn oòsà dááyé...
 (Abimbola, 1977a:10).

(*Ifá* has today
Ifá has tomorrow
Ifá has the next day with it
Ọ̀rúnmìlà has the four creative days...)

Most of the cultural traditions and religious values of the Yorùbá are preserved in the *Ifá* literary corpus. This assertion was buttressed by Abimbola (1977b) when he wrote:

Ifá is the means through which Yorùbá Culture informs and regulates itself and preserves all that is considered good and memorable in that society. *Ifá* is Yoruba culture in its true dynamic and traditional sense. *Ifá* is a means whereby a non-literate society attempts to keep and disseminate its own philosophy and values despite the lapses and imperfections of human memory on which the system is based (Abimbola, 14)

Having clarified the above fundamental issues, it is implied that *Ifá* 's literary corpus remains one of the few pieces of oral literature that serve as a treasure house or a custodian of all traditional customs and practices of the Yorùbá: Ethics, History, Science, Technology, and various Arts, Music inclusive. This is why the traditional musical practices of the Yorùbá could trace their origin and the principles underlying them to *Ifá* literary corpus.

The Legacies

One of the musical legacies found in the *Ifá* literary corpus is the role of singing in the Yorùbá culture. Though there are several other roles, *Ifá* literary corpus reveals that the traditional people sing whenever they are happy. In other words, they sing for the purpose of expressing happiness and joy. There are two excerpts from the *Ifá* literary corpus to illustrate this assertion. *Èjì ogbè* Chapter six has the following:

Ìgbà tí inúu wọn-ón dùn tàn-án,
Orin ní wọn ń kọ (Abimbola, 1977a:7);

(When they became happy,
they burst into songs).

Ìgbà tí inúu rẹ ẹ dùn tàn-án,
Orin awo ní ń kọ (Abimbola, 1977a:9)

(When he became so happy

he started singing cult songs).

These quotations from the *Ifá* literary corpus imply that the traditional Yorùbá man whenever he is happy bursts into songs.

The theological relationship between happiness and music is also shared in the Judaeo-Christian beliefs and practices. It forms one of the basic similarities between the traditional Yorùbá musical practices and the Judaeo-Christian musical culture. This is inferred from the statement of James in the book of James Chapter 5 verse 13 of the Holy Bible when he said:

Is anyone among you suffering?

Let him pray

Is any cheerful?

Let him sing praise (R.S.V.)

This quotation teaches that just as a suffering Christian should find solace in prayer, a cheerful Christian should express his happiness through singing praises unto Jehovah. Today, among the traditional Yorùbá society, this belief is still practiced at large and it takes its legacy from the *Ifá* literary corpus.

Apart from the above, as implied in *Ifá* literary corpus, music also performs other functional roles such as sacred, educative, historical, therapeutic, and communicative. It also serves as an instrument of social control by admonishing and warning people to desist from evil. (Also see Adedeji, 1997).

The second musical legacy found in the *Ifá* literary corpus is the relationship of music-making and mood among the traditional Yorùbá societies. Mood is indispensable in traditional Yoruba musical compositions. As revealed in the *Ifá* literary corpus, the source of musical compositions of the traditional Yorùbá man/woman is mainly inspirational. He/she does not sit down to compose music like the white man/woman. The music is dictated by the level of inspiration, which has come from a happy mood. This kind of spontaneous musical composition is found throughout the *Ifá* literary corpus.

Òwónrín Méjì Chapter 3 records that when *Mofẹ̀ni* became rich and prosperous, he burst into singing.

Ni Mofẹ̀ni bá d'olòrò, ó d'alájé

Ó ya ẹnu kótó,

Orin awo ní ń kọ. (Abimbola, 1977:34)

Mofẹ̀ni became rich and prosperous

He opened his mouth spontaneously,

He started singing cult songs).

This same experience was recorded about a group of people that installed *Òwónrín* as a Chief in *Òwónrín Méjì* Chapter 7.

Wón ya ẹnu kótó,

Orin awo ní ń kọ. (Abimbola, 1977a:37)

(They opened their mouth suddenly,

they started singing cult songs).

Òbàrà Méjì Chapter 8 presents this fact in a more lucid form when it reads:

O ya ẹnu kótó,

Orin awo ní ń kọ. (Abimbola, 1977a:45)

(As he opened his mouth spontaneously,

a cult song 'entered' into his mouth).

Ògúndá Méjì Chapter 8 has also recorded this same practice of spontaneous musical composition. (Abimbola, 1977a:55).

In all the above quotations, a particular formula is common – *ya ẹnu kótó* (opened the mouth spontaneously). Opening the mouth this way and bursting into singing may depict the formation of a new musical piece since it is implied that the singer did not know when and what he was singing. It therefore means that the musical composition which itself is born out of inspiration is spontaneous and new.

The third musical legacy in the *Ifá* literary corpus is the preservation of two musical types: panegyric type and cult (sacred) type. While the songs may look alike, the two musical types are distinguishable. For instance, there is a statement found throughout the *Ifá* literary corpus to show that the music under discussion is panegyric. The statement in *Ọ̀yẹ̀kú méjì* Chapter 8 reads:

Ó n yin àwọn awo rẹ,
Àwọn awo rẹ n yin *Ifá*. (Abimbola, 1977:15)

(He was praising his diviners,
His diviners were praising *Ifá*)

Similar statements are also found in *Ìwòrì Méjì* Chapter 3 and *Ọ̀bàrà Méjì* Chapter 1 (Abimbola, 1977a: 17, 39).

The person or a group of persons singing were recipients of miracles and blessings from *Òrúnmìlà*. What they then sang was praise unto god and appreciation for his oracles.

The term ‘cult song’ implies *Òrúnmìlà*’s or *Ifá*’s sacred song. It became so because the song was composed and sung to praise *Òrúnmìlà* or his sacred agents. One can infer from this conceptualization that the traditional Yorùbá societies do have secular music also. This kind of distinction is also found in the Judaeo-Christian musical practices. References to ‘*Orin awo*’ (cult song) are found throughout the *Ifá* literary corpus: *Ìrosùn Méjì* Chapter 5, *Ọ̀bàrà Méjì* Chapter 8, *Ọ̀kànran Méjì* Chapter 7, and *Ọ̀gúndá Méjì* Chapter 8. (Abimbola, 1977a: 29, 45, 50, 55).

Another musical legacy preserved in the Yorùbá *Ifá* literary corpus is the art of dancing as a means of musical expression. The traditional Yorùbá musical tradition is thus found to be a dancing one. It is an established fact today through daily experiences and research that the Western aesthetic art of merely listening to music is foreign to Africans. Africans would always want to respond to musical performances by active participation, such as in dance. In *Ifá* literary corpus, dancing is seen as part of the musical art. *Ọ̀yẹ̀kú méjì* Chapter 8 records that *Akapo* was dancing and rejoicing as he sang.

Ìjọ ni Akápò n jó
Ayò ní n yò (Abimbola, 1977a:15).

(Akapo was dancing
as he was rejoicing...).

Ìwòrì Méjì Chapter 3 records another dancing scenario as it reads:

Íjọ ní àwon ọmọ aráyé n jọ
Ayọ ní wọn n yẹ... (Abimbola, 1977a:17).

(The people on earth started dancing
as they were also rejoicing).

In *Òdí Méjì* Chapter 4, the traditional Ife people were seen dancing.
It reads:

Íjọ ní àwon ará Ìfẹ n jọ
Ayọ ní wọn n yẹ... (Abimbola, 1977a:24).

(The Ife people were dancing
As they were also rejoicing).

Ọbàrà Méjì Chapter 8 presents the dancing of the traditional King of *Adó* more figuratively when it reads:

Ẹsẹ tí ó nà
Íjọ fà á... (Abimbola, 1977a:45).

(As he reached out his leg,
dance drew it).

The figurative presentation in *Ọbàrà Méjì* implies that just as it is in song composition, the dancing is also spontaneous. It implies that the King of *Adó* did not know when he started dancing. The dance there is born out of inspiration or supernatural motivated instincts.

Another very important musical legacy found in the *Ifá* literary corpus is the employment of musical instruments in traditional Yorùbá music. Two categories of musical instruments are used in the traditional *Ifá* music (using the taxonomic classification of Sachs Hornbostel). These are idiophones and membranophones. Of the idiophones, the most prominent is the *Agogo* (gong).

Under the membranophones, different types of drum-ensembles are mentioned in the *Ifá* Literary corpus. The *Ìpèsè* or *Àrán* drum ensemble is the traditional sacred ensemble of *Ifá*. This has been confirmed by Daramola and Jeje, Afolabi Olabimtan et al., Abimbola Wande, Mosunmola Omibiyi, and Adedeji (See Adedeji, 1992: 70).

Other drum ensembles mentioned in the *Ifá* literary corpus are the *Àgbá*, the *Gbèdu*, the *Ògìdán*, and the *Dùndún*. While the *Àgbá* drum ensemble consisting of three drums is considered to be another *Ifá* drum ensemble according to Abimbola (1976), Omibiyi (1978) associated the ensemble with the *Ògbóni* cult and the *Obàlùfòn* worshippers. Vidal (1987) has also identified the *Àgbá* of the Yorùbá Chiefs. However, according to Adedeji (1992), the *Ìpèsè/Àrán* ensemble is called the *Àgbá* at *Ìlìsàn* by the *Òrúnmilà* worshippers.

The *Gbèdu* and *Ògìdán* were described by Abimbola (1976) as the *Ifá* diviners’ drum ensembles. The *gáńgan* mentioned in *Ifá* Corpus refers to the *dùndún* ensemble. The *dùndún* drum ensemble unlike others that are upright consists of hourglass tensioned drums, *gúdúdúdú*, (a cylindrical drum), the *agogo* (gong), and sometimes the *şèkèrè* – (rattle, and idiophone). The *dundun* ensemble is the traditional Yorùbá ceremonial ensemble used in both secular and religious functions. In *Ìrosùn Méjì* Chapter 8, the people of *Enpe* are found to be dancing to *gáńgan* drumming. Not only that, the *gáńgan* was used to ‘talk’. This is why it is called the ‘talking’ drum.

Wón wá bèrè sí í jó gáńgan
 Onígáńgan n wí pé:
 ‘Ọpẹ́ n fọ́ Tápà,
 Ẹ̀ ọ́ gbọ́ ni?
 Edu mo mò n fọ́ Tápà
 Ẹ̀ ọ́ gbọ́ ni?
 Ọpẹ́ n fọ́ Tápà
 Ẹ̀ ọ́ gbọ́ ni? (Abimbola, 1997a:81).

(They started to dance to *gangan*’s drumming
 The drummer was saying (on his drum)
Ope is speaking *Tapa* (the language of the Nupes)

Don't you hear?
Edu speaks *Tapa* language
 Don't you hear?
 Ope speaking the *Tapa* language
 Don't you hear?)

The *Ìrètè Méjì* in Chapter 5 mentions three of the above-named ensembles as shown below:

Àgbá n subú l'àgbá
 Ògidán n subú l'ògidán
 Ìpèsè n subú lu'pèsè (Abimbola, 1977a:ix, 37).

(Many *Agba* drums were sounding together
Ogidan drums were sounding together
Ipese drums were also sounding together).

The *Ifá* drum ensembles were praised in *Ifá* poems as revealed by Abimbola (1977a).

Agogo níí p'oró
 Àrán ni ìkijà
 Opa kugúkugú l'òjú'lé Iṣerimogbé
 Wón s'òpá s'arán
 Ó mú ti'nú u rẹ́ jáde
 Wón yí Àgbá sí mọrun àìkú (Abimbola, *ibid*).

(The gong neutralizes,
 The *Aran* settles crisis
 Drumming sticks are found at *Iserimogbe's* house
Aran is beaten with sticks
 The *Aran* 'voices' out
 The *Agba* is beaten to sound to eternity).

Also according to Abimbola (1977a), both the *Agba* and the *Ipese* are praised thus:

Àgbá b'orí pètè
 Ìpèsè àb'ágbá rí jìn jìn kun jìn (Abimbola, *ibid*).

(*Àgbá* is of a flat cover
Ìpèsè is of a heavy sounding cover).

The above praise poems refer to the description of the physical properties and the sound qualities emanating from the *Ifá* musical instruments

The *Ìkà Méjì* in chapter 3 describes how the *Gbèdu* drum is beaten and also the importance of *Ifá* drums, when it says:

Ọmọ fọfọ tí fọ dídùn l’Eégún
 Ọjọ a kó’lù sílẹ̀ la ò r’eégún
 A kó aṣẹ sínú ilé fún ọmọ Èlẹbọra
 Sè bí ọpá ńlá ńlá
 Nì wọn fií lu gbèdu àrán fún ayaba
 Ọlórún n lu ‘pèsè
 Ènikan ò bó sí’jó (Abimbola, 1977a:62).

(A speaking child that speaks nice things at *Egun*
 The *Egun* was not seen on the day the drums were
 brought out.
 Earthen pots were kept in the house for the genie
 It is with the big sticks
 the *Gbedu* *aran* was played for the queen
 God is beating the *Ipese* drum
 Who will not want to dance?

The most important musical legacy found in the *Ifá* literary corpus is the preservation of traditional Yorùbá songs or hymns. In *Ifá* corpus contains an anthology of traditional Yorùbá song forms. The poetic forms found in the *Ifá* literary corpus have been retained in the traditional Yorùbá music till today.

According to Vidal (1981), the poetic forms of traditional Yorùbá songs can be divided into major categories, viz; the short verse form and the long verse or litany form, with the short verse form sub-divided into binary, ternary, quaternary, quinary, hexanary, septenary, octenary and nonary line constructions. Looking at the structures of the songs in the *Ifá* literary corpus,

one could identify all the above forms there. The texts of some of these songs and their translations are found in the appendix at the end of this paper.

The *Ifá* literary corpus has been very instrumental to the development of Yorùbá music generally because the contents have served as one of the sources of Yorùbá textual musical compositions. Under traditional Yorùbá classical music, chants such as *Ìyèré Ifá*, *Oferere*, and *Ifá Ibule* have evolved, all of which are based on the texts of the *Ifá* literary corpus. In addition, some of the current Yorùbá folk songs are based on *Ifá* texts. Where direct retention has not taken place, both the musical and poetic structural forms have been retained till today. This is why one can easily find these forms in both traditional Yorùbá folk and popular genres and even in Yorùbá Church music. Of all the poetic forms, the quaternary is prevalent today, thus confirming Vidal's assertion that the most common construction in the short-verse form is the quaternary line.

Examples of songs in quaternary line constructions are:

Ọba ò Ọba aláṣẹ, Ọba
 Ọba ò Ọba aláṣẹ, Ọba
 Kí là n f'Ọba pè?
 Ọba ò Ọba aláṣẹ, Ọba (anonymous).

(King, Oh the authoritative King
 King, Oh the authoritative King

Ó fẹẹ kàn ó ràn
 O jiyán tán o
 O jiyán tán, o k'ẹbà s'ápò
 Ó fẹẹ kàn ó ràn ò, eh

(It will soon be your turn
 You ate pounded yam
 You then smuggled pounded cassava into your bag
 It will soon be your turn).

Oni ba e mu 'kara k'omo o ko na 'wo soke
 Emi rian

Emi rian lee mu ‘kara komo o,
Mo na ‘wo soke

(Those who desire to bless their children should raise up their hands
Yes, I am one of them
I am one of those who will bless their children
I raise up my hand)

Conclusion

This paper has been able to highlight the importance and relevance of *Ifá* literary corpus to the contemporary practices and study of Yorùbá Music. It has preserved the indigenous Yorùbá musical legacies, just as it has preserved other Yorùbá cultural patterns. Considering the bulk of musical materials inherent in the *Ifá* corpus and its inseparable interrelationship with music, it can therefore be concluded that the *Ifá* literary corpus is in itself musical.

Secondly, the Yorùbá could be seen as a highly musical people. There is a close fusion of religion and music in the culture. It could be said that the Yorùbá culture is musical just as its music is also cultural. In the same way, Yorùbá religion is musical while Yorùbá music is also equally religious. This interrelationship also exists between Yorùbá culture and its religion, thus the three are inseparable.

Finally, the *Ifá* literary corpus serves as an unlimited compositional resource to art and popular music composers and in addition, constitutes a valuable source of information to researchers in traditional Yorùbá music. Based on the findings in this paper, it is recommended that authentic Yorùbá music should derive its aesthetic philosophy, composition, instrumentation, performance practices, technology, and functionality from the Yorùbá indigenous belief system as preserved in *Ifá* literary corpus.

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APPENDIX I

Words and Meaning

Akapo	A diviner that kept the <i>Ifá</i> bag which contained <i>Ifá</i> paraphernalia.
Babaláwo	An <i>Ifá</i> priest and a diviner.
Egungun	Ancestral spirit that appears in a masked human form.
Enpe	The name of a town in the middle belt area of Nigeria.
Erigi Alo	A praise name of Orunmila.

Iyere	The name of an <i>Ifá</i> chant.
Mofeeni	The name of a mythical person.
Odi	The name of a mythical Apostle of Orunmila.
Owonrin	The name of a mythical Apostle of Orunmila.
Yegede	Another Yorùbá equivalent of the English ‘Hurrah’.

APPENDIX II

Some *Ifá* Song-Texts

Below are a few excerpts of song texts from the *Ifá* literary corpus. There are still several others (see Abimbola, 1977a: 7, 15, 18, 40, 45, 55, 63, 82).

- Ro rere O
Ika, ro rere
Ohun ti Ogede se f’agbe lo po,
Ro rere
Ika, ro rere (Ejiogbe Chapter 8 in Abimbola, 1977a:9)

(Think twice
Cruel man, think twice
The plantain tree is so precious to the farmer,
Think twice
Cruel man, twice).
- Odi O
Agbalagba Ife
Odi O
Agbalagba Ife (Ode Meji Chapter 4 in Abimbola, 1977a:24)

(Odi
An aged man of Ife
Odi
An aged man of Ife
- Kini yoo ba mi tunwaa temi se?
Orunmila, ibaa mi, Erigi Alo

Ni yoo ba mi tunwaa temi se (Irosun Meji Chapter 5 in Abimbola, 1977a:29)

(Who will help me reform my behavior?

Orunmila, *Erigi Alo* my father,

He is the one who will reconstruct my behavior).

4. A f'Owonrin joye loni o

Ire de

Yegede

A f'Owonrin joye loni o

Aje

Yegede

Eni bimo biye lo bimo

Yegede (Owonrin Meji Chapter 7 in Abimbola, 1977a:37)

(We have coronated Owonrin today

Blessing is here

Yegede

We have coronated Owonrin today

Prosperity is here

Yegede

It is when your child lives that you could say you have a child

Yegede).