

## ÀGBÁ MUSIC ENSEMBLE OF THE ÒGBÓNI CULT IN YORUBALAND: AN ETHNOMUSICOLOGICAL STUDY



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### **Abstract**

This study discusses the Àgbá Music Ensemble of the Ògbóni Cult in Yorubaland. Àgbá ensemble is a specialized ensemble and music exclusive to the Ògbóni cult in Yoruba land. Designed as an ethnomusicological survey, the study adopts the Ilédi Olú of Ìkejà as a platform to interrogate the discourse (Ilédi is the chamber of the Ògbóni cult). This study relied on personal observation, focus group discussions, and oral interviews with initiates and cult musicians to source the primary data. Secondary data for the study were garnered from available literature, archival materials, and online facilities. The findings in the paper emphasise a waning culture that has fallen victim to urbanization and civilization. The study also revealed that Àgbá is statutorily performed in the Ògbóni chambers and in rare cases, selective performances are held at the king's court. But in all cases, performance is held in seclusion and restricted to the initiates. Àgbá ensemble symbolises Yoruba traditional music categorised in the sacred sphere and a representative of the dynamic court administration in Yoruba land. Short repetitive patterns, ostinato, and polyrhythm characterise rhythm in the Àgbá ensemble. In conclusion, the paper recommends a concerted effort to protect the musical culture of these people from threats instigated by globalisation and civilization.

**Keywords:** Àgbá, Music, Ògbóni Cult, Yorubaland, Ensemble.

### **Introduction**

There is abundant literature on Yoruba music, dealing with various aspects of the musical culture of the over 50 million people that span across Nigeria,

the west coast of Africa, and South America. Adegbite, (1988). Euba 1977, 1992a, 1992b, 1998), Durojaye (2019). Ogunyemi (2022a, 2022b), Omojola, (2019, 2012), Waterman (1990, 2014) Vidal 2012. Euba's literature on Yoruba music is regarded as one of the most comprehensive in recent times, particularly his copy that focussed on Dundun music. While Euba and Omojola Adegbite examine Yoruba music in general, Vidal, Ogunyemi, and Durojaiye focus on the traditional music of the Yoruba people. However, Vidal is credited with having done more work on the music of the Lagos people. On the surface, Yoruba music, like many musical cultures in her category, is generally categorised as secular and sacred. Secular music is those that are open to the generality of the people- Yoruba and non-Yoruba people while sacred ensembles (Ilu Awo) are restricted to a selection. The general characteristics of these two categories also vary extensively. The sacred category, for instance, has dedicated musical instruments, and musicians, that operate in a separate context. In some instances, they have symbolic rhythmic patterns that are identifiable with their performance. Ensembles in the category of sacred are the Igbin ensemble (for the Ifa cult, the Agere ensemble (for the hunters,) Bata Ensemble (Sango Devotees), and Ilu Osugbo (Osugbo Cult music). These ensembles also have accompanying vocal renditions. Àgbá ensemble and music, the focus of this paper falls into the category of sacred music ensemble in Yorubaland.

Cult is also a part of Yoruba cosmology. These are sects that are established mainly for various purposes in the process of administration of the society. The beliefs sustaining these cults are not at variance with that held by the entire generality of the people. The cults are also classified using either age, gender or influence. The Ògbóni, for instance, is intimately involved in the general administration of the town. They work in consonance with the King. The same can be said of the cult of the Órúnmilà which is exclusive to the Ifa worshippers diviners. (Ifa is a Yoruba divination System). Although civilization has come to re-characterise some of these cults, unfortunately negatively, the salient understanding amongst the people is that these cults are an essential part of Yoruba sociology. Today, their activities are further restricted to grooves and enclosed to the new Yoruba society. Just as these cults are defined by their privileged ethos and dedicated liturgies they also have specialized music and music ensembles. This paper discusses the musical practices of the Ògbóni cult in Ilédi Olú of Íkejà. (Olú of Íkejà is the

king of Ìkẹjà in Lagos State. The paper examines the content of and analyses its various forms. Emphasis will also be laid on the context of performance and other extra-musical practices that characterise this music.

Using the historical ethnomusicology approach, Vidal (2012) discusses at length the history of Yoruba music from what I will call the Lagos dimension. Covering the gaps in earlier writings, this paper intends to follow the approach of Vidal, looking at Yoruba music in Lagos but the emphasis on the traditional music of Ìkẹjà people as earlier described above using the palace as a study. The paper intends to document the entire gamut of Àgbá drumming as practised in the Ilédí Olú of Ìkẹjà. The paper documents the song text, the content of the music, and the context of its performance as well as the sociological implications of the ensemble.

The people of Ìkẹjà belong to the Àwòrì sub- Yorùbá tribe in Lagos State. The town heads one of the five political divisions of Lagos State. According to palace sources, the town, Ìkẹjà, is named after Àkẹja-Onígorun who was a deity worshipped in Òtà. (Òtà, a leading Àwòrì town is in Ògùn State). The palace sources also established that the earlier settlers of Ìkẹjà were the Àwòrì Ogbo. The people of Ìkẹjà share similar beliefs with other Àwòrì towns and by extension Yorùbá nations. They are strong in the practices of traditional worship like Egúngún, Èsù, Ifá, Ọbàtálá, Ọgún, Sàngó in Ìkẹjà.

The emergence of Ìkẹjà as the seat of State government in Lagos State, as expressed by the sources who were interviewed for this study, has caused a displacement in their cultural landscape. According to them, the land was lost to the state government in the process and some of their gods, deities, and festivals were affected by the expansion and acquisition while some ritual spots had to be relocated or outrightly dismantled. A lot of cultural practices, they said had to be jettisoned or put under the control of the State government. Olú of Ìkẹjà is the traditional head of Ìkẹjà town in Lagos state. His palace is located in Ìpodò quarters in Ìkẹjà. Since the creation of Lagos State in 1967, Ìkẹjà has hosted the (State capital).

For instance, they said, for them to execute any curfew in order to celebrate the Orò festival required the permission of the Commissioner of Police of the State. This is a practice that is not done in other towns around the State. “the ancient community cemetery has been turned into a motor park by the

State government. The present space occupied by the Nigeria customs, in Ìkejà, used to be a foremost Ìkejà traditional village.

The village was outrightly dismantled to give way to Nigerian Customs. As it is today, Ìkejà remains the only division, out of the five divisions of the state without a modern palace, because we cannot get land to build the sources claim. The only music ensemble found in the palace of Olú of Ìkejà is Àgbá. Àgbá, a ritual drum that is located in Ilèdí. Ilèdí is the grove of the Ògbóni cult. The Ògbóni is known to be a socio-political cult in Yoruba Land. In Ìkejà the Ògbóni serves as the legislative adviser to the king. They also sit with the king to form juries for certain cases. They have parts to play in the ceremonies following the death of a king as well as his installation. In all this Àgbá, being the official drum of the Òba features prominently.

The history of the Àgbá ensemble in Ìkejà can be dated to the beginning of the town. No one could put a date to the present set of drums. Palace sources were served as informants to this research said it predated the installation of Òba Mòómódù in 1957. The only situation when Àgbá Olú Ìkejà can be taken out of the precincts of the sacred groove of the Ògbóni is at the demise of Olú of Ìkejà. At the demise of the king, after due consultations, the drums are removed by the Apènà and the Olùwo, and another principal offers the groove to the palace. The purpose of this is to announce the demise of the king. There, at the palace, the drum will stay for 7 days while the burial rites will be performed for the departed king. However, the Olùwo with the permission of the other principal officers of the sacred groove may allow non-initiates to access the Àgbá as applies to this study. In the case of this research, oracular consultations were made to determine the terms and conditions acceptable to Àgbá before it is either moved out of the Ilèdí or the non-initiate (researcher) is allowed to view it in the groove.

The following items were offered as a sacrifice before the drums were displayed for the researcher. 1 He-goat, 1 duck, 1 fowl, 1 pigeon, 21 Tilapia fish, 21 Pieces of Kola, 21 Pieces of Bitter kola, 20 litres of palm oil, 6 Bottles of hot drinks, 21 pieces of Alligator pepper, lots of food and drinks. All these were offered as a sacrifice before the researcher was allowed to view the ritual proceeding and granted an interview. Àgbá Olú Ìkejà is a totemic drum with anthropomorphic functions. It is regarded as the binding

spirit of the initiates of the cult. The initiates solicit help, favour and assistance from the drums. They constantly offer prayers to Àgbá. There are situations where initiates facing vicissitude of life, after oracular consultations, are made to venerate Àgbá. It is customary for every initiate, on entering the Ilèdí to pay obeisance to Àgbá as a form of propitiation. It is common to hear the initiates using the name of Àgbá to appease aggrieved members in a dispute. Only those who are consecrated for drumming Àgbá are permitted to discharge the sacred function. The drumsticks for Àgbá are a ritual object. Therefore, it is always kept in the custody of the Olórí Adáàgbá Ilèdí Olú Ìkẹjà. (Lead drummer of Àgbá in Olú of Ìkẹjà Ògbóni Cult. The principal drum of the Àgbá ensemble is always robed in white cloth.

Àgbá is used to install the king of Ìkẹjà. According to palace sources who worked with the researcher in the course of this study, after the divination to choose a king has been concluded, the chosen person is heralded into Ìpèdí (seclusion) where he stays for several days, performing rites leading to his enthronement as the Ọba. On his first day in the house, Àgbá is played, he is made to dance to the specific rhythm of the drums to herald him into the sacred groove. The ensemble is also played on the 7<sup>th</sup> day and 17<sup>th</sup> days. When he leaves the groove, the drum is also played. It is by the sound of this drum that the people of the town are informed of the emergence of a new king. At the demise of the king, the Olùwo of Ìkẹjà is one of the early chiefs to be contacted. Immediately after he ascertained the demise of the king by physical inspection, he calls the Apènà, (talebearer) who informed other initiates and the principal officers of the Ògbóni cult. These people move Àgbá Olú of Ìkẹjà from the groove to the palace.

They begin to beat the drum to inform the entire Community of the transition of the king. The drums stay at the premises of the king till the burial rites are completed. However, before the drums are moved to the palace. Oracular consultations are made to inquire from the drums the nature of offering it shall require. The items as might have been listed by the oracle are provided by the household of the departed king. It is after this sacrifice has been made that the drum can only be moved. The consequence of distorting the process, according to Olùwo, (Head of Ògbóni) who served as a resource person for this research is grave for the community. Women members of the cult

cannot participate in the drumming of Àgbá. It is the same way non-initiates are not permitted to beat the Àgbá drum. The drumming is exclusively reserved for the Adáàgbá, the chief drummer and his accompanists.

### **Configuration of the Ensemble**

There are four drums in the ensemble of Àgbá Olú Ìkejà. The four drums are Àgbá (the principal drum. Àtẹ̀lé Àgbá, Omele Akọ and Omele Abo.



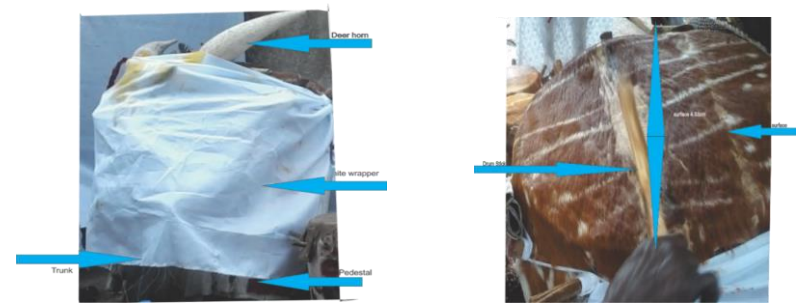
**Plate 1: Title:** Àgbá Olú Ìkejà Ensemble **Source:** Researchers



**Àgbá:** The other drum

The trunk of Àgbá is made of Òmò tree. The surface is laced with the membrane of a deer. It is the biggest drum in the ensemble and it is the principal drum. It is played with the aid of beaters. Àgbá is robed in white cloth because it is the idol Object of the ensemble. Any animal sacrificed in the cause of worshipping Àgbá has its blood poured on the drums and its head hung on the surface of the drum. Àgbá is also the lead drum in the ensemble. It stands as the link between the terrestrial and celestial spirits. In the performance setting, Àgbá is the first to be played before any other in the

ensemble. In the ensemble, Àgbá does the improvisation. This drum is also an altar for the ensemble. Every sacrifice made to the ensemble is offered to Àgbá on behalf of the entire ensemble. The lead drummer who plays the drum is called Adáàgbá. Adáàgbá who is usually the most experienced drummer in the ensemble is a chief in the Ògbóni cult.



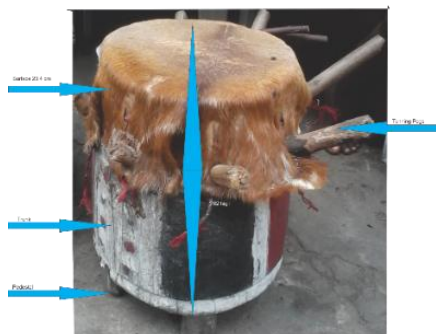
**Plate 2: Title:** Àgbá drum and its basic features **Plate 3: Title:** Membrane surface of Àgbá

**Source:** Researchers

**Àtèlé Àgbá:**



Àtèlé Àgbá is a monotone drum that follows Àgbá both in rank and size in the ensemble. It is the only one played with the hand. Its functions are complimentary to that o



**Plate 4:** **Title:** Basic features of Àtẹ̀lé Àgbá  
**Source:** Researchers

### Omele Akọ:



Omele Akọ is the lead rhythm keeper. Usually, a monotone drum is played with beaters. It is made of the same animal skin. The drum is also filled with icons depicting the beliefs of the people. It also parades sacrificial spots where items used for veneration are placed.

### Omele Abo:



This is a corresponding drum to the Omele Akọ the 2 drums play the rhythm patterns, particularly the interlocking patterns that are explicit with them.



### **The Performance Setting**

Àgbá is statutorily performed in the Ògbóni chambers and special cases, at the palace. When the drums are played the drummers are seated with enough space for initiates and attendees, as the case may be, to dance.



**Plate 5: Title:** Performance Setting of Àgbá  
**Source:** Researchers

### **Technical and Contextual Analysis Sampled**

Three songs were for this study. These songs were played consecutively on a string of rhythmic patterns. The songs are used interchangeably in the analysis below.

#### **i. Scales, Tuning, and Tonal Organisation**

Songs in the Àgbá ensemble are characterized by short phrases and chorus. The phrases are repétitive with little variation

#### **Song 1** Ení Bá S'àbòsí Imolè

Agba Olu Ikeja  
Eni Ba S'abosi'mole

Transcribed & Arranged by Bayo Ogunyemi

Staff notation for the song "Agba Olu Ikeja" (Eni Ba S'abosi'mole). The notation is in 4/4 time and features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: A gba a gba, A gba a gba, c ni ba s'a bo si mo le e E ni ba s'a bo si mo. The piano accompaniment consists of a simple bass line with notes A, g, b, a, g, b, a.

Staff Notation 12: E ni ba s'abosi Imole

**Scale:** Pentatonic Scale (Dorian Mode). It contains the notes of C major but the tonal center is equivalent to a minor and the resting note is the supertonic (D). It is therefore a Dorian mode of C major. In the order of occurrence, the 5 notes employed by the song appeared in the songs are as follows

Staff notation showing the notes in order of appearance: A, g, b, a, g.

Notes in order of appearance

Staff notation showing the notes in scale: A, g, b, a, g.

(b) Notes in Scale

**Form of the Song:** Short repetitive melody

**Melodic Range:** It is a Minor 7th. With the apical range as shown below.

Staff notation showing the melodic range. The notes are A, g, b, a, g. The apical range is indicated as a Minor 7th.



**Form of Song:** Responsorial in Binary form. (a.a<sub>i</sub>.b.b<sub>i</sub>)

**Recitative:**

Lead Chanter

Respondent chanters

Omele Ako

Omele Abo

Atele Agba

Agba

Speech Tone

E e

E pa ri pa mo le

3 3 3

**Staff Notation 13: Recitative**

**Structure and Form**

**Recitative:** This is an identifiable characteristic of songs in the Àgbá Ensemble. In the cult, Apènà, who is the chief judicial officer in the cult is also the lead chanter while other members present at every meeting form the chorus. The pitch of his chant or form is determined by him according to the sonority of his voice. The chant, in this case, is unaccompanied, non-tonal, and in free meter. The test of the recitative can also be a direct repétition of the lead text or completion of the lead text.

Song 11

Agba Olu Ikeja

Omi O Lapa

Transcribed & Arranged by Bayo Ogunyemi

11

11

o le se O mi gbe ni lo o i da mu a ye wa A gba gbe won lo

Scale: Pentatonic scale. (Dorian Mode)

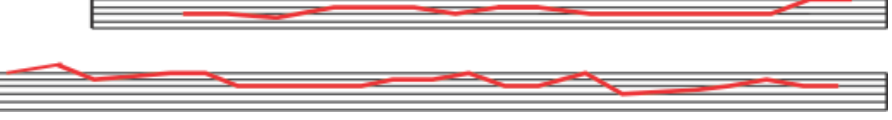
(a) Notes in the order of appearance

(b) Notes in Scale

(ii) Melody Range: The melody range is an octave. Middle C – C<sub>1</sub>

11

Melodic Contour:



**Illustration 26:** Melody Contour of Omi a Lapa in Àgbá Olú Ìkẹjà Ensemble

The melodic contour here is almost parallel with step-like movement in approaching a leap. It moves around the third and occasionally rises while approaching the octave.

Form and Structure of Song Text:

Song Text

Omi ò lápá.

Translation

(a) Water has no hands

<i>Omi gbégi lo</i>	(b)	Water swept off the tree
<i>Omi ò lèsè</i>	(b <sub>i</sub> )	Water has no legs
<i>Omi gbé'niyán lo</i>	(a <sub>ii</sub> )	Water swept off human being
<i>Ìdà mú ayé wa</i>	(c)	Misfortunes in our lives
<i>Àgbá á gbe lo</i>	(d)	Àgbá will sweep it away

The song text emphasises the spiritual powers of water and personifies the powers of the spirit of water with that of Àgbá.

### Song 3

#### Agba Olu Ikeja

Omi Aye

Transcribed & Arranged by Bayo Ogunyemi

Staff notation for Song 3, Agba Olu Ikeja, Omi Aye. The notation is in 6/8 time and features two voices (Voice1 and Voice2) and piano accompaniment. The lyrics are in Yoruba and English.

Measures 11-15: Voice1 (11) O mi o (12) o o O mi a ye O mi o (13) o o O mo ro (14) pe se O mi la (15) ye bu ta ye

Measures 16-19: Voice2 (16) ro pe (17) Overlapping (18) O mi o o O mi a ye (19) O mi o o O mi ro

Measures 20-22: Voice1 (20) pe se (21) O mi la ye bu t'a ye (22) ro pe se

Measures 23-24: Voice1 (23) Solo (24) Overlapping mi O O mi o

#### Staff Notation 14: Omi Ayé.

#### Scale: Pentatonic Major Scale

Notes, as appeared in Song (b), Notes in the scale



## Rhythm

Short repetitive patterns, ostinato, and polyrhythm characterize rhythm in Àgbá ensemble. There is a primary rhythm and a Secondary rhythm. In virtually all the cases in performances sampled, the primary rhythm is implicit and cannot be identified with a particular drum. Performances sampled in the Àgbá ensemble made use of both the simple triple and simple duple meter. Other elements of the rhythm are syncopation, improvisation, and in a few instances Hemiola. The rhythms are mainly implicit. In one of



the patterns that were used in ‘Omi ayé,’ the hemiola appears in the combinations of left and right hands in Àtẹ̀lé Àgbá as shown in the score below:

A musical score for five instruments: Omele Ako, Omele Abo, Atele Agba, Agba (sub), and Agba (main). Each staff is in 6/8 time. The score shows a complex polyrhythmic pattern with various note values, rests, and syncopation. A bracket groups a sequence of notes in the Atele Agba staff, and a red dot is placed below a note, indicating a specific rhythmic feature.

**Fig 10:** Rhythm Pattern of Omi Ayé as Sampled

An example of Cross rhythm as sampled in the song titled Omi ò Lápá is shown below:



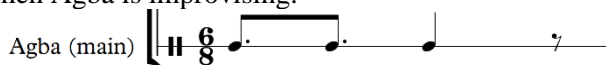


**Fig 11:** Rhythm pattern of Omi ò Lápá as sampled

The primary rhythm in the song as sampled is shown in the pattern played by the Àgbá (Sub) Àgbá (sub) as used in the transcription to represent the beat coming from the main surface of the drum. The drummer also generates a beat by striking the trunk of the drum in complementary to the main beat.



Syncopation also occurs regularly in the Omele Akò and Àgbá particularly when Àgbá is improvising.



## Conclusion

This paper discussed traditional music in Yoruba land using the Agba Music of the Ikeja People of Lagos State as a study. Ikeja People are of the Awori sub-tribe of the Yoruba people. The paper has examined the place of this music in the social life of the people and how the music defines the cosmology of the Yoruba people. Music in this instance is considered beyond the sonic configurations. Music contains the religion and sociology of the people. The paper discussed the content of the music- rhythm, tone, instrumentation, orchestration and so many others that made up the music. The paper also looked at the context of performance, the functions and role of the music in the society.

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