

THE IMPACT OF *DÚNDÚN* DRUMMERS ON THE DEVELOPMENT
OF TRADITIONAL MUSIC IN SOUTH WEST NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The dúndún ensemble drummers are the custodians of Yoruba oral repertoire in South West Nigeria. Their skills are transmitted to the younger generation in simple and articulate style. It is important however, to distinguish between the dúndún ensemble groups at the king's palace, city square, town hall and the dundún ensemble groups who perform on the streets and who normally impose themselves on guests at organised social events in Yoruba land. The court musicians and their counterparts usually, at the city square or town hall are gainfully employed by the king. This group of drummers are practitioners who perform mainly for royalties at the palace. The dundún street drummers, however, are prolific drummers who perform generally within the circles of the poor, roaming from street to street. They are generally perceived as beggars by those who do not understand the importance of the group in the society in which they reside. Their performance is sometimes extended to the social events in the midst of the rich without any invitation. The members of these groups are skilled instrumentalists according to the standard of measurement of artistic excellence in Yoruba land. Nevertheless, they lack the financial stability and social patronage to form a real dance band that promotes classical recordings of their works for a wider public consumption. Sociological and analytical methods of data collection used in the study reveal the societal intolerance of these groups of drummers and the drummers' wise resistance of this attitude to their performances. The findings reveal that the ensemble drummers though do not get enough patronage, are very versatile performers and are promoters of their traditional musical culture. In conclusion, the status of the drummers does not influence the quality of their performances; rather, they are very happy people, thoroughly groomed as drummer ensemble whose impact deserves a better recognition and patronage.

Key words: drummer ensemble, traditional music, *dùndún* drummers, music development

INTRODUCTION

Dùndún drummers ensemble are master performers who contribute significantly to keeping the centuries-old Yoruba drumming culture and repertoire alive and relevant in Nigeria today. Yoruba *dùndún* drum music has been widely studied as a distinct ensemble instruments that is majorly associated with the Yoruba of South West Nigeria. Many researches such as Oba-Laoye (1975) Euba (2010) Olaniyan (2013) and Omojola (2012) among others have written

extensively on the verbal relevance of the drum. However, this is only one of the many manifestations of this versatile instrument, which plays a central role in many other genres of Yoruba music found in the land. In Yorubaland the *dùndún* drum is an hourglass tension drum that can imitate the tonal speech of the language. Today, it is used in some contexts to praise the *orisha* (divine spirits) or the *egungun* (ancestral spirits) and praise of the kings, chiefs and important elders by certain lineages of drummers that have great deal of respect and unlimited financial remuneration from the king for their art. The drum in other contexts is used to praise ordinary people on the street, market square and local get together by other lineages of drummers that are conversely denigrated in society for their association to recreational genres solely, consequently, receiving little economic support for their work. The court musicians play traditionally sacred roles primarily and entertainment rarely while the street drummers' role is purely recreational.

This study is based on ethnographic data collected from active Yoruba *dùndún* drummers in five States, which reveals the social context and positioning of a group of neighborhood drummers within the landscape of traditional music performance in Lagos, Ilorin, Ile-Ife, Saki and Ibadan. Street drumming performances at both sacred and secular events forms the scope of the study. The paper therefore documents the importance of street drummers in a number of socially significant ways.

The study is guided by the following questions: How are drummers classified in Yorubaland? What is Yoruba *dùndún* drumming tradition? What is the audience's perception of the street drummers' performance role in imparting knowledge? In what ways are *dùndún* drummers relevant in Yoruba society? Who are the audiences at such social events? Are the audiences of a different social-economic class than the performers?

The classification of *dùndún* drummers in Yoruba land

Ayanwale Adeboye in an oral interview (10th June, 2012) explains that master drummers in Yoruba land are of two categories, the court drummers and the street drummers. The court drummers are part of the king's ensemble and are also members of the *Ayan* families, trained to be court musicians within their families through the processes of socialization and apprenticeship. The street (the term street is used to describe the musicians because they usually perform on the street and not at fixed venues as the other group of drummers) drummers however, are trained in their lineages to occupy a range of class and professional statuses within the Yoruba region that is subsidiary to the court musician historically but not socially. Notable scholars in Yoruba land including Euba Akin who wrote on the "*Dùndún* Music of the Yoruba" and "Yoruba Drumming" and Yemi Olaniyan who wrote on "*Dùndún* Tradition", "Yorùbá *Dùndún* Drummers" and "The *Dùndún* Master Drummer" have written extensively on the court drummers. Most recently, Bode Omojola wrote on Yoruba Music in the Twentieth Century while the street drummers have not been given attention in serious research.

Court musicians are artists with generational records of performance at both ritual and historical/praise poetry drumming events. This class of drummers performs and composes; they create original compositions on the spur of events. On the contrary, street *dùndún* drummers refer to those who play outside the praise poetry (*oriki*) tradition, playing peculiar roles at grassroot music events. They are different in status from the court musicians in Yoruba society. Though they speak the same language which is *Yoruba*, live in the same community, wear the same traditional garments (though with variation in quality) *aso okè*, *ànkàrá* or *àdìrè* and they have the same cultural practices. The street drummers belong to a lower political and economic class with limited social opportunities than the palace/court

musicians. This is because they lack regular income and depend entirely on the generosity of the members of the public at social events where they perform to earn a living. The token they earn from public performances is never enough for them to stabilize economically. The consequence of their low status is poor general appearances at performances and a merry making/not too serious outlook in the nature of their performance. The court musicians discriminate against the minority drummers and minority drummers are not allowed to join the former regardless of their skills. The drumming skills of the former group in *Yoruba* land are recognised because of several performance opportunities made available to them by the kings in whose palaces they serve as musicians. This paper suggests that they only appear to be better than the minority drummers who lack regular performance opportunities.

METHODOLOGY

This section procedurally shows the range of events attended by the author and the number of drummers interviewed. It also reveals towns and or/cities that were part of the study. In her studies to pursue PhD programme in African Music at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, the author came across quite a number of ensemble drummers that resided in the neighborhood of hunters who took delight in entertaining themselves with *Ìjálá* songs/chants after every successful hunting adventure. Some of those minority drummers served as drummers at those casual meetings, where they performed just for a meal. No financial reward was expected after such performance. The agility with which the drummers performed despite not receiving any financial gratification was noticeable. This prompted a further investigation of the street drummers at a social event that took place in Saki in Oyo State, during a burial ceremony in Nigeria in the year 2010. It was observed that the drummers performed to entertain a small group of people at a time because their performance is not amplified electronically and so could only reach a small group of people at a time. The author observed the dexterity of their

performance, and listened critically to their song repertoire thus the study focusing on street drumming and drummers. Baba Alajede (the leader of the first drumming group), Baba Akeem, Isola Opo (whose real name is Dele Tomori) Ayanwale and Mr. Fasipe among other leaders of street drumming groups were interviewed.

RESULTS

Audience perception of street drummers in Yoruba land

Okoto, in an interview (26th March, 2013) affirms that the street drummers, though poor, have a passion for drumming and singing. They are great inspiration in the sustenance of Yoruba *dùndún* drumming tradition and are largely responsible for the systematic transmission of Yoruba oral genres. Besides engagement in drumming, their performances are often accompanied with singing and dancing. He further confirms that most master drummers who are leader of street ensembles have sonorous voices and very good memory of local histories, which they transmit in oral form. If these drummers are significant in the society as affirmed by the audience, then there is need to determine why there are no specific institutionalised arrangements by the government to secure the future of these musicians. More so they are perceived by their audience as beggars and as lazy people because they chose music making at the grass root as their profession. The Yoruba generally do not believe that an able man should spend his entire life making music. Occupations such as farming, hunting, cloth weaving, pottery, calabash making, carving, welding, driving among others are seen as viable means of livelihood. This may be responsible for Yoruba non-tolerance of anyone in the traditional society who claims to be a full-time musician. Music is viewed as a redundant occupation. This is why the drummers must seek daily acceptance/absorption at social events that take place in their communities. These drummers are capable of spontaneous creation of drumming patterns and indigenous songs styles to suit any social

occasion. Even though they are viewed as beggars, their skilful performances at events endear them to the hearts of some guests who pay close attention to their acts and the brilliant ways in which they weave and re-weave words into their songs by adopting excellent rhythmic exploration. A few *dùndún* drummers have succeeded in preserving many indigenous songs that might have been forgotten due to the advent of western civilization and cultural integration of pop songs into Yoruba society. The drummers have preserved many of the cultural drumming/singing characteristics of the Yoruba in very simple performance.

The street drummers are aware of their subordinate status. This realisation is sometimes evident in their performance as they often resist discrimination by event planners by singing abusive songs or by using drum language to protest marginalisation, which most often gives them access or the opportunity to perform. The street drummers know their limitations and they restrict themselves to the opportunity available to them. They do not in any way clash with the stage musicians at social events, less patronised by the society at social events being the reasons of their involvement in other occupation besides drumming.

In another interview, Okoto in Lagos (26th March 2013) describes the relationship among the minority groups as not often being cordial. “The rivalry between the groups is sometimes alarming”. One sees the other as a threat and moves to do everything possible to hinder the performance of the other group in order to humiliate it. A very skillful drummer may suddenly become dull at performance just because someone has played a prank on him by use of charms, that being an action revealing envy (Baba Hakeem in an interview, 26th March 2013). They sometimes go to the extent of physical combat to show their displeasure to fellow drummer who intrude at social events. This has generated lots of strife to the profession.

The Yoruba Dùndún Street drumming tradition

Authentic documentation on Yoruba drumming tradition could be traced to (Beier 1954, p. 23) who writes on the talking drums of the Yoruba focusing on its verbal capacity, the cultural relevance and the tonal importance of the instruments to Yoruba language. The origins of the *dùndún* drum stretch back to the old Oyo kingdom (Laoye, 1975, p. 5). Olátúnjí (1984) argues that the dominant instrument determines the name by which the ensemble is called and Euba (1974) concentrates on the re-definition of the peculiarity of the drums, what guarantees the tone quality, the significance of the membrane, the quality of the woodwork and the drummers and their skills, Akpabot (1975, p. 23) concludes that the repetitive nature of African drums music is a deliberate device that enables the audience to memorize the drum patterns and also to verbalize them. The peculiarity of Yoruba music is always closely linked with the drum ensemble. Oláníyan (2013, p.72) holds that “out of many traditional instrumental ensembles of the Yoruba of South West Nigeria, *dùndún* stands out as the most popular’. Yoruba Street drumming is a combination of ancient and modern drumming/singing practices that originated in Yoruba land. It is an integrated art that is mostly associated with singing, dancing and drumming. The songs are mostly traditional. It is assumed that Yoruba street music is all about drumming, however this is not entirely so, although drumming is a major feature as ensemble instruments are mostly rhythmic in nature. This enhances spontaneous performances.

Anku (1988, p. 167) asserts that “rhythm in African drumming is not a haphazard assemblage but something that occurs on the spur of the moment without any kind of structural framework”. Anku’s position is similar to the experience of Yoruba street drummers where the enthusiastic force of rhythms forms a dominant factor in their spontaneous drum music. This aligns with Olaniyan’s view when he remarks that the simultaneous composition of

dùndún drummers is their area of strength Olaniyan (1984, p. 98). He equally asserts that *sekere* music at some *dùndún* traditional performances plays significant role. *Sekere* music is very important in Oyo town, as it is associated with specific palace events that involve the queens.

Baba Hakeem in an interview (25th May, 2013) explains interlocking in the context of the performance of street drummers which differs from its usage in Western harmony. He associates the term to the integration of the tones that are fused with each of the *dùndún* ensemble instruments perform by this group. He also emphasises the realization of the various rhythmic patterns as they emerge in sounds at drumming events. Yoruba drumming traditional, with specific reference to the street drummer exhibits two distinctive characteristics: One is the tonal character of the music in relation to the language that guides the verbalised melody and the other is the rhythmic character. The dominant of the two is the reflection of the tone of the language in the vocal music especially in the melody. Yoruba language has three tones: the low, middle and high tones and the association of the words with the tones is considered very important in street drumming. Euba (1992, p. 46) explains the importance of intonation in Yoruba language beyond the spoken texts. In the traditional culture the melodies of songs and drums language reflect speech intonation. Speech tone is reflected in street drumming when a drummer uses his drum to communicate speech as shown in the music extract below. See figure 1.



Figure 1. “Gon go su odidare” verbalised drumming in Yoruba land. (Transcribed by the Author)

The notation above is a simple verbalised drumming pattern that is often used in a satirical way to discourage patronage without financial gratification. It is in compound duple time, notated for the purpose of the study in the key of G Major, in eight bars. Meaning one’s intelligence equals one’s foolishness.

The other distinctive characteristic of street drumming focuses on the rhythmic emergence of the accompanying instruments. Songs in Yoruba land are generally accompanied by drum beats. The tones of the drum beats at performance form a collection of sounds that resembles the formation of a chord in rudiments and theory of music.

Euba identifies harmonic integration of the emerging sounds of the instrumental ensemble, within the concept of drumming in Yoruba culture as the shadow chord and the nuclear chord as terms that form the theories of Yoruba drumming especially the *dùndún* ensemble (Euba, 1968a, p. 196).

The use of chord in the context of this study differs remarkably from its usage in the Western world. It refers rather to the building up of ensemble sound as the instruments integrate in

performance forming emerging harmonic sounds. This fusion of ensemble instruments motivates an average Yoruba person to dance and sing. (Naturally, man follows the rhythm of the instrument in dance more than the rhythm of the songs).

Mr. Fadipe, in an oral interview in Ibadan (23rd November 2000, 5th April 2004 and 28th August 2014) admits that dancing and singing are integral parts of street drumming; dance articulation motivates street drummers and enhances their drumming prowess. The dance pattern associated with the *dùndún* ensemble is different from the one tied to the *bàtá*. The kind associated with the *bembe* ensemble is different from that of the *sekere*. A good *dùndún* dancer glides with the beats; she does not count the beats before changing his dance pattern as does the *bàtá* dancer. He or she swings along with the drum beats in simple and dramatic style: Omíbiyí (1975, p. 62) in her explanation of musical universalism remarks that, ‘culture has a system of introducing members into its musical tradition’. Her opinion is quite relevant in this study. This is because the street drummers have been situated culturally to transmit their musical skills to younger ones with ease. First, they are very friendly, second, they are thoroughly groomed musically and culturally and third, they are easy going and always willing to share the knowledge of drumming with whoever shows interest in their art. They are different from court musicians who have sound drumming skills but do not interact with youth in the community as they are confined to the palace and restricted to playing mainly for royalty. In Yoruba culture music is mostly associated with instruments, the most popular of which is the *dùndún* ensemble that is mostly rhythmic in nature, however there are a few tonal drums too. The *iyáàlù* for example is a tonal drum as the realisation of between three and five tones are possible, depending on the skill of the master drummer. In this tradition, there is an extricable link between rhythm and melody; and drumming and singing. The attraction to Yoruba music is tied to its rhythmic inventiveness and its complexity on one hand and the ensemble secular patterns on the other hand. See Figure 2.

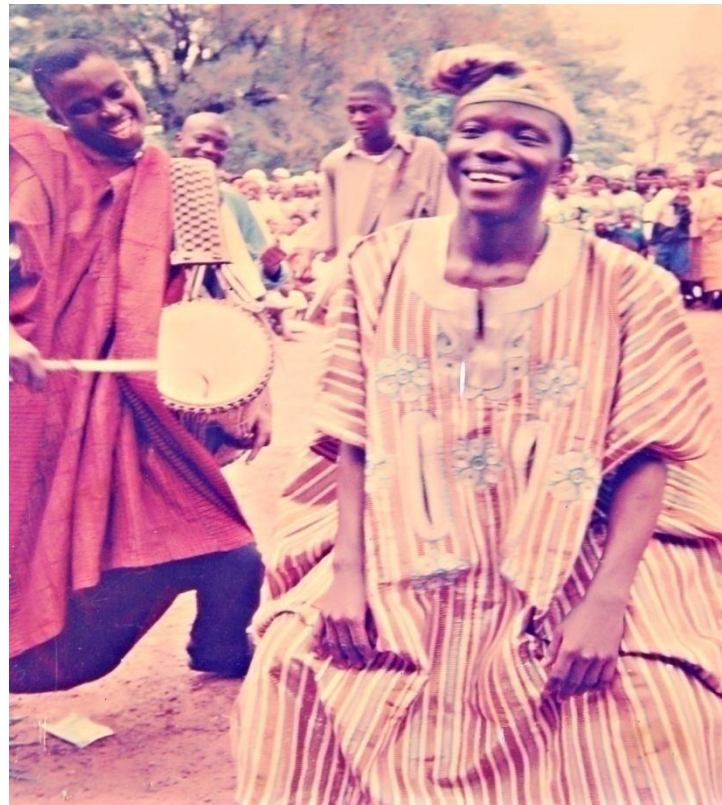


Figure 2. A master dùndún street drummer and an articulate dancer, Ibadan,
March 2013

In figure 2, a crowd acknowledging the performance of a versatile master drummer and an articulate dancer in Ibadan, Oyo State. The exploration of the nature of drum music is in agreement with Euba's depiction of Yoruba drum music in the pre-colonial era thus:

In pre-colonial traditional music repetition is one of the most outstanding stylistic devices. This is not to say that variety is absent in the old traditional music; the music is indeed a subtle blend of repetition and variety, sometimes a single line of varied patterns is balanced against several lines of other activities...(Euba, 1977, p.7).

The study corresponds to the primary goal of African Musicology, which is theoretical research that brings about scholarship and a humanistic approach to the understanding of African music practice. The study explains are made on the classification and status of the street drummers and their impact in the promotion of music and dance in Yoruba land.

Street drumming in the context of today's performance differs remarkably from that of the olden days in the variation and stylistic repetitions of the rhythmic patterns and the ornamentation of the themes of the folk or indigenous songs that the drummers sing at performance. The genre is now characterised by the various appearances of the punctuation style of drumming and different phases of drum strokes application as it is suitable to the artists.

The audience's perception of the drummers' performance role in impacting knowledge

Alajede in an interview (26th March 2013) admits that the street drummers are oral artistes who perform spontaneously at occasions. The possibility of reconstruction is always evident during performance at social events. When a master drummer creates a rhythm, it serves as a building block for the laying of other rhythmic concepts that might follow in the course of his performance. Master musicians according to him create new or varied patterns in the performance of an already existing song. This is to create variety and new excitement at events. Street drummer as a cantor uses folk songs (in the community in which they live) by varying the original rhythm either by shortening the rhythm of the notes or by elongating it. Extra notes are even sometimes added to the song if an art musician is to rearrange such tunes. The word note(s) is used here to distinguish between the performance of the folk tune in its natural state and the ornamental and a spontaneous variation of the same song by the same artiste during performance.

Variation in street drumming is a very skillful art and that is where an ensemble leader manipulates the rhythm of the song without prior preparation. He gets to the circle of friends at performance, selects a known tune, sings it in its original form and then renders endless variations of it to the admiration of his audience who gives approval to his versatility by

giving him some monetary gifts. The musical illustration below is an example of a popular traditional song that is often improvised.

There are three significant factors at play in this context by Euba 1992 as indicated below:

...the importance of intonation in Yoruba language is not limited to spoken texts. In the traditional culture the melodies of songs and drums language reflect the speech intonation too (p. 46).

Euba's view is valid because there is a close relationship between Yoruba language, the text of the song and the melody.

Isola Opo emphasises that the street master drummer is also the song leader in an indigenous drum ensemble, who is not only expected to vary his songs but also to improvise skillfully on his drumming patterns as well. In most cases, he does the variation of the songs and its accompaniment on the drum simultaneously. Understanding traditional performance requires the evaluation of the task before the master musician, whose virtuoso skill of improvisation is mysterious even unto the drummer himself Isola Opo, in another interview in Ile Ife, (15th January, 2013). The word mysterious is used because the leader or cantor may not be able to repeat the same performance at the same level of musical prowess twice. There is always a difference in performance. The art of improvisation is daunting to the master musician himself hence, he cannot instruct specifically on how to realise or attain such musical versatility in performance. "Good drumming skill in Yoruba land is in association with the inspirational power of *Àyàn*, the god of drumming. If a good drummer is asked to explain his drumming prowess, he simply says he was endowed by the god." Alajede in another interview (26th March 2013) On the contrary, the researcher does not believe that endowment alone is sufficient for sustainability in the art; practice is also a pre-requisite for outstanding performance.

Ijoye Onilu real name Baba Ayandiran in an interview in Ibadan, (19th September 2013) describe the acquisition of the improvisation skill in street drumming as deeper in practice than of normal drumming style or singing skill. The former is a development of the latter. It may be strange to assume that improvisation skill is not necessary in drumming, yet skillful drummers improvised endlessly on their instruments focusing on a traditional rhythmic motive. Improvisation is an admirable and a complementary skill in street drumming. Until an instrumentalist attains this height, he or she is still lacking in expression or musical communication. Musical practice according to Nketia, (1963) is by absorption. It means that for a man to excel in musical practice he must have received and digested some musical knowledge and ideas from older musicians. Rhythmic improvisation requires a good musical memory, which is the ability to hear and retain rhythmic patterns and variations as performed by older and more experienced musicians.

The Street Drummers' interpretation of rhythmic variation and freedom of interpretation in Yoruba music

Lagelu Ayanrinde, in an interview in Ibadan, (28th August 2014) narrates the relationship between the street drummers in the contemporary Yoruba society and indigenous court musicians as varied from context to context. The modern performances of street drummers exemplify the extent to which creative ensemble leaders have been influenced by new occurrences within their musical cultures.

Alajede in another interview (26th March, 2013), contributes to this study by asserting that the development of street drumming is gradual and tied to the readiness on the part of the ensemble members and sufficient development of their drumming and variation skills. If street drummer does not develop his skills sufficiently, he may give repetitive performance of some repertoire and may lack spontaneous creation of rhythmic patterns. It has been

established that Yoruba oral musicians perform from memory. This according to Olaniyan (2005, p. 60) does not make the music a mere mental exercise and this has a way of activating their confidence. It is sufficient confidence at street drumming performance that leads to variation of an existing or an already known rhythm. A keen memory of drum patterns is very significant. The acquisition of this however, requires discipline and determination. It is very easy to identify a struggling musician during casual street drumming events because he is often stagnant at play and he may not show any fluent or convincing performance on his drums.

Repetition is an important feature in street drumming, but the sustaining power of this is accurate variation. A single rhythmic fragment if properly and skillfully varied can be performed repeatedly without the drummer creating an atmosphere of boredom. Drums if made to communicate manifest in reality an atmosphere of artistic matrix that forms the relationship between men, musical arts of drumming and singing, which sometimes transcends the understanding artistic creative ability in man (Hakeem interview 26th March 2013). See Figure 3.

"Ko ni ja se mo"

Arr. Atinuke Idamoyibo

The musical score is for the song "Ko ni ja se mo" arranged by Atinuke Idamoyibo. It is marked "Moderato" and is in 12/8 time. The score includes five parts: Voice, Isaaaju, Atele, Aguda, and Iyaalu. The lyrics "Ko ni ja se mo ko ni ja-a se mo Ko ni ja se mo" are written under the voice part. The Isaaaju, Atele, Aguda, and Iyaalu parts provide a rhythmic accompaniment with various drum patterns.

Figure 3. The transcription of "Ko ni ja se mo" by Ishola Opo, with the dùndún ensemble serving as accompaniment.

Ko ni ja se mo means It will not be the end, the performer assures the audience that there will be opportunity for him to perform again. The simple and very short voice part is in compound quadruple time, the voice serves as the principal instrument in this context of this study while the *dùndún* ensemble play subsidiary role. The composition of the ensemble drums includes *Isaaju, Atele, Aguda and Iyaalu*, *Isaaju* and *Aguda* play monotone *Atele* play dual tone while *Iyaalu* play multiple tone.

CONCLUSION

This study was conducted in Yoruba land, South West, Nigeria with specific interviews from street drummers and audiences in Lagos, Ilorin, Ile-Ife, Saki and Ibadan. Street drumming performances at both sacred and secular scenes from the scope of the study is addressing the sought objective to document the importance of street drummers in a number of socially significant ways was achieved. The audiences of street drummers are market men and women, street party audience, cobblers, artisans among others. Common people generally who reside in the neighbourhoods of drummers or guests at low class parties. The audiences are often of the same social-economic class as the performers. Seven master drummers were interviewed and two articulate dancers within a period of fifteen years.

The ideas expressed in this study generates interest and further debate, particularly on the treatment of street drummers and the impact of this diversified culturally active artistes on the development of Yoruba traditional music. A master drummer in the context of Yoruba usage is a skillful ensemble leader and a custodian of oral repertoire. He is a diligent instructor, a composer of spontaneous songs, a merry maker, a cantor and a good dancer. The assignment/responsibility as court musician is a hereditary profession and the members of the group take delight in showing off this heritage at any occasion where the king presides and they enjoy financial support from the palace/royalty. The street drummers belong to a

different class of musician with limited resources. These groups of drummers belong to traditional Àyàn family lineage (the drummers that have been certified by the god called Àyàn as good and fit to perform) and are disempowered financially because they do not have sufficient recognition that enhances their inclusion in a social band. They find contentment in moving from street to street seeking patronage for daily sustenance.

The street drummers do not only engage in drumming, they also accompany their performances with singing and dancing. Most master drummers who are leader of street ensembles have sonorous voices and very good memory of local histories which they transmit in oral form. As significant as they are in the society, this paper reveals that there are no specific institutionalised arrangements by the government to secure the future of these musicians. They are often portrayed as lazy people because they chose music making at the grass root as their profession.

There are similarities in drumming traditions specifically amongst the street drummers in Yoruba land bringing to light the accuracy of transmission formula from generation to generation; we admit that there is a uniform or almost uniform style of drumming but different approaches depending on the versatility of the drummers. This study confirms how the minority drummers are important in a number of socially significant ways.

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Okoto, Oral interview in Lagos, 26th March 2013

Mr. Fadipe, Oral interview Ibadan 23rd November 2000, 5th April 2004, 28th August 2014

Lagelu Ayanrinde, Oral interview Ibadan, 28th August 2014

Hunters, market Women, men, and artisans' Oral interview between September 2000 and August 2014.

APPENDIX

Metric variation

"Gongo su odidare"

Arr. Atinuke Idamoyibo

Gon - go su o - di da - re, gon - go su o - di da - re,

3
bo-o ti gbo'n lo na - lo go to, gon - go su o - di - da - re.

“Gon go su odidare” variation 1. Transcribed by author