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FEMALE MUSICIANSHIP IN AFRICAN MUSIC STUDIES: *BALUU* AND *KENGBE* MUSIC OF ILORIN PEOPLE AS PARADIGMS

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Abstract

Over time, scholars and researchers in African music, culture and performance studies have raised opinions on the dearth of research and marginalisation of the female gender in African musicology. Hence, this study finds the need to fill this lacuna and bring studies on female musicianship in African music to the fore, using indigenous Baluu and Kengbe music of the Ilorin people as paradigms. Through the descriptive method, field observation of the performances of Iyabo Awero, a Baluu musician in Ilorin, Egbe Onikengbe of Magaji Nda family house in Ilorin, Kwara State and review of literatures, this study discovered that Baluu and Kengbe music are female oral musical arts unique to the cultural and social life of the Ilorin people. Through music, history is documented in their song texts and transferred orally to generations. These indigenous forms are entertaining yet didactic as they are used to chastise immoralities, indecency, indiscipline and other sociocultural issues. This study concludes that indigenous music is pivotal to the growth and development of a society. Women who are key players in indigenous African music performance such as Baluu and Kengbe musicians contribute a lot to the knowledge of indigenous cultural and social values.

Keywords: Musicianship, female gender, African music, Baluu, Kengbe

Introduction

Various scholars and researchers (Duran 142; Idamoyibo 19; Marshall 2; Scharfenberger 224) have raised the question on the lack of "in-depth musicological studies and documentation of the contributions of female musicians to the growth and development of African music" (Samuel 339). There is a view that women in West Africa are marginalised as professional musicians. Katherine Marshall noted that, "there is need for more research to be conducted in the area of women and music in West Africa" (2). According to Marshall, the lack of research in this area can be attributed to "both the combination of male dominated field of

African studies, as well as the patriarchal structures of communities usually being studied in Africa as a whole" (2).

Duran opines that, "studying gender in West African music is of central importance in studying West African culture to redress the prevailing view that women in West Africa play marginal roles as professional music makers" (142). Lucy Duran concludes that, "not only does more research need to be done on women and music in West Africa, but also on the gender roles within West African musical performances" (142). In fact, Isaac Idamoyibo stressed that, "women reserve rights to participate in, and possibly dominate the scene" (19).

There are two possible explanations for this lack in the scholarship on women in West African music. First is "the interests and gender of the scholar or ethnographer certainly affect the choices of topics studied" (Scharfenberger 224). The inaccessibility of certain women's rituals is a second possible reason for a lack of West African music scholarship that considers gender. The activities of women's associations and secret societies are often closed to men and cultural outsiders. Women are the central performers in certain rites of passage and initiation rituals. Angela Scharfenberger notes that, "there may be public performances during some aspects of the ritual, such as, the common practice of reintroducing girls back into society as women following initiation; but the majority of the ritual is performed to the exclusion of men and outsiders" (224). Thus, few researchers have been able to study these performances.

Furthermore, Marcia Herndon and Suzanne Zeigler maintain that, "a prominence of stereotypes from ethnographers regarding women's participation in music has created a narrow perspective" (5). Thus, this study x-rays the indigenous music performances of Baluu and Kengbe music in the context of Ilorin culture where it emanated and developed. Both styles are secular music forms performed at different social gatherings in Ilorin metropolis. Both being female oral musical arts, this study uncovers the origin of these styles, stylistic features, music ensembles, similarities and distinctive differences in Baluu and Kengbe music.

Discourses on the Female gender in African music

Music in the African context exists with reference to the female gender. Meki Nzewi (cited in Scherzinger 90) advances the thesis that all music in Africa is gendered female: "Music is a Woman." The female gender represents the woman, feminity and mother-figure in African music performance. Looking at African musical performances which can be in vocal or instrumental or a combination of both, the mother-figure is usually and visibly evident in either way. Concisely, it is not that traditional music in Africa is performed only or even mainly by women but rather that music's philosophical import is intricately associated with the social

power of women. The effect of music on humans operates in a subtle nature similar to the woman's exercise of power in the affairs of traditional African society.

The African woman possesses the power that binds a society together. Oseni Afisi states that, "the African woman played a key role in the education and the teaching of children social, ethical and moral values which were part of the cultural standards for evaluating proper societal behaviour" (229). This is why Sylvia Leith-Ross emphasised that culturally,

> African women were the transmitters of the language, the history and the oral culture, the music, the dance, the habits and the artisanal knowledge. They were the teachers and were responsible for instilling traditional values and knowledge in children (34).

Martin Scherzinger rightly posits that, "the three concentric circles of participants in a Kiba performance of the Pedi people in South Africa for instance, symbolise a trinity of power, or energy domains, which are associated with gendered aspects of traditional life" (90). He explains further that:

> The inner circle of women drummers, symbolising the womb, is the foundation ("the source and crucible") of the performance; the middle circle of men *dinaka* (pipe) players, symbolising the male role in society, is the active, yet "ephemeral" dimension of the performance; and the outer circle of women members, symbolising the female guardians of the community, is the critically observant aspect of the performance (90).

In different African musical instruments ensemble, reference is usually made to the female or mother-figure. For instance, in different drum ensembles such as Bata drum ensemble, Dundun drum ensemble and Gangan drum ensemble amongst the Yoruba in the South-western Nigeria, there is a lead drum called, "Iya Ilu", that is, mother drum. There is also Omele Abo (Female backing drum) in these ensembles. These drums are named Iya/abo (mother/female) because of the essential and functional roles they play in the ensemble. In fact, in Igbin drums ensemble which is usually associated to Orisa Obatala, the four drums in the ensemble "are named after his four wives – Iya Nla, Iya Agan, Afere and Keke" (Akpabot 97). The tones they produce represent the seniority of the wives. This implies that, Iya Nla is the most senior wife and the largest drum in the ensemble.

In Okpe Igoru music in Delta State, for instance, the three drums of the ensemble are named 'mother ukiri' (*izu-ukiri*), 'baby ukiri' (*omo-ukiri*) and 'varied ukiri' (*ukiri evwarien*) (Idamoyibo 20). The leadership roles the mother drum plays

in an ensemble, the fundamental foreground, and the layer which other drums in the ensemble build on is symbolic and similitude to the key roles of a woman in an African society. In several African cultures, the drum that has the deepest tones in the ensemble is called, the mother drum.

Eunice Ibekwe avers that, "gender has a strong force on the type of musical performances of any ethnic group or society" (141). This is because of the gender roles in a given society. In her own opinion, Ibekwe stressed that, "women excel in musical activities which focus mainly on the rites of passage due to their gender role." Evident examples are Kengbe music among the Ilorin people, which is the crux of our study, also Shao Awonga mass wedding musical activities among the Shao people in Kwara state, and Obitun in Ondo State. Ibekwe's point of view corroborates Nketia's position in his discourse on women in Ghana music that, "exclusively, women's music was performed at only two occasions: girls' puberty rites and recreational forms such as maiden songs" (Nketia 107).

There are several female oral musical arts across Africa. Among them are, Baluu and Kengbe of the Ilorin people in Kwara state, Nigeria which is the focus of our study. Another female musical art among these people is Ere-Olomoba, Ilorin-Fulani Royal nuptial performance. Similar to Kengbe music of the Ilorin people is Adenkum, female band music of the Akan people in Ghana. Adenkum is the word for the hollowed gourds played percussively against the palms and lap, which are accompanied by call-and-response singing and performed at community events. Surano people in the west of Kumasi perform Dansuom, which means, "Lying in Water."

> This style of music is named as such for the large gourd that is placed upside down in a large metal tub full of water while singing in call and response. As the music gets moving, several of the women dance in the circle (Scharfenberger 227).

Also, Akùnyùngbà, Apíntí and Igbá-títí, the three prominent female court music in the Alaafin of Oyo's palace with the sole aim goal of praising the Obas, the chiefs and some other people connected with the Alaafin's palace. Nnwonkor of the Akan people in Ghana which is usually performed by women informally in the evenings is another example from western Africa. During their performance, women commented on social issues, often criticising men's behaviour and commenting on other local concerns. The songs are accompanied by hand clapping and idiophonic percussion. Girls' nubility rite in Ashanti, Ghana is a performance of initiation rites, which includes music and dance performances. Another women's musical performance is found among the Limba in Northern Sierra Leone. Here, women sing and lament at funerals and work songs in the field and

accompany themselves with drums for the girls' initiation society, Bondo. At second funerals, groups of women dress as the deceased person, and behave as they remember what he or she did in life, with peculiarities of speech and movement (Ottenberg 85).

Worthy of note, however, is the fact that, there are musical activities in some African societies which excludes the female to a large extent. That is, women are forbidden to even watch, let alone play or perform such music. For instance, in Egwu Omaba of Nsukka – (xylophone music) women are strictly banned from watching or taking part. Though, Idamoyibo explains that, "this restriction and restraints on the part of the women in some musical activities are for protection" (22). In his words:

> When our forefathers restricted women from being close or from participating in some rituals and ritual music, or from playing some musical instruments, it is not for evil but for protection. It is for the fact that women are specially created with certain spiritual powers to procreate and to defy; thus her touch in any form is capable of defying the potency certain traditional medicine, particularly when she is in her period (22).

Juxtaposing *Baluu* and *Kengbe* Music

Baluu and Kengbe music are female oral musical arts in the Ilorin culture. These two styles of music being indigenous secular music genres are meant for entertainment at social gatherings. They are unique to the cultural and social life in Ilorin. Though, the historical evolution of Kengbe can be traced to Igbá-títí court music in Alaafin of Oyo's palace, Kengbe and Baluu music developed in the Ilorin Socio-cultural environment. The name 'Baluu' is a Yoruba word from the English word, 'Aeroplane.' Ibitoye asserts that, "the music was named 'Baluu' as a product of the type of dance movement that opens the musical performance which is synonymous to the aeroplane's taxiing movement on taxiways and runways before flying" (335).

It is noteworthy that, Kengbe and Baluu music styles have Islamic religious import in their music as they cannot be separated from the religion of the people among which it is popular. They fall within Olatunji Vidal's categorisation of Islamised music as they are influenced by the ideology and doctrines of Islam. Using Agu's classification of traditional music in Nigeria, the Baluu and Kengbe music fall under the, 'occasional music' category as performance is usually occasional and strictly serve entertainment purposes. Also, both styles adopt the Ilorin sociolectal variant of Yoruba language known as Yorùbá Ilorin.

Kengbe is significant to wedding/marriage entertainment music and symbolic to marital context in performance, Baluu is dynamic to various social gatherings in performance context. In marriage context, Kengbe music rise to frenzy on the second day of the marriage ceremony during the night party before the bride's traditional bath. As noted earlier, the two genres are predominantly female musical arts, though, the musical instruments section of Baluu music comprises of men. But, the musical instruments, dancers and singers' sections in Kengbe music are made of females, usually, matured and married women. Dance is pivotal to these musical performances; in some cases, however, dance can be excluded in a Kengbe music performance. This is because, it can be seen as seductive and contrary to the religious notions on maintaining morality But, Baluu dance is so important to if there is any Baluu music performance without the dance, the music performance cannot start or be said to have held. Baluu dance is the opening glee at any Baluu music performance. In Baluu music band, the dance section is different from the chorus section, however, in Kengbe music, the dance section sometimes serves the dual purpose of the chorus and dancers. That is, as they are dancing in choreography, they are also singing the choruses and responses to the leader's calls.

The texture of Kengbe and Baluu music is homophonic texture. As the band leader establishes melodic lines, the chorus repeats the melody. The nature of rhythm is a typical example of the complex rhythmic nature of an African music. Baluu songs are usually anacrustic as the first note is not accented and the songs start on a weak beat, but Kengbe songs are accented and they start on a strong beat. The simple binary form is common to Baluu and Kengbe music. Slight variations of the first section are observed in the second section of the melodic compositions. While Baluu music favours the five-tone pentatonic scale, Kengbe music songs are more of the four-tone tetratonic scale. Melodies in Baluu and Kengbe music are established and built on poetic rhymes, proverbs, cultural values, traditions, historical documentation, religious beliefs, philosophical expressions and exaggerations, a symbolic pointer of African music. Evidently, larger percentage of melodic lines in the Baluu and Kengbe music are used for speech surrogacy, which is a popular feature of African indigenous music. Melodies are performed in Chorus or sometimes in call and response form. It is also worthy to note that, in some of the songs gathered on the field, use of triplets was observed.

Language and Structure in Baluu Music

As observed in Iyawo Awero's Baluu music band, Baluu music uses the Yorùbá language as its medium of communication and expression. The typical Ilorin sociolectal variant of the Yorùbá dialect called Yorùbá Ilorin is the language used. The Yoruba Ilorin is different from the conventional Oyo – Yoruba in the South

Western Nigeria. This is because there are elements of Fulani and other indigenous languages like Hausa, Nupe and Bariba in it. Hence, there are differences in the intonation and pronunciation of some Yoruba words in Ilorin (Adeola 247). For instance, when Oyo Yoruba says, "Mo," Yoruba Ilorin will say, "Hin." In the song below by Iyabo Awero, the Oyo Yoruba, "to," is replaced with "tii" in the Yoruba Ilorin:

Call: At'orin Atilu As for the songs and the instruments
Response: O dowo're They are committed in your (Allah) hands
Call: Oro mi dowomuhammadutiij'onsenla I commit my case into the hands of Muhammad who is the great messenger
Response: O dowoo're They are committed in your hands



Compositions are built and arranged on the premise of poetic rhymes, proverbs, philosophical expressions and exaggerations. The language use in the music serves the efficient purpose of entertainment. However, idiolectal peculiarities may be noticed in an artiste's singing which can be distinguished from another artiste's singing.

The texture of the music is homophonic. The leader of the band takes the melodic lead while the chorus accompanies. However, the chorus does not have harmonic implication of any kind. Usually, chorus sings in Unison. Variations of the same melody are repeated simultaneously by the chorus as the leader of the band elaborates on the established melody. Melodic sections may be repeated before another melody is raised. Melodic lines are usually anhemitonic pentatonic scale.

The rhythmic pattern is polyrhythmic in nature. Baluu being an indigenous African music, the polyrhythmic nature would be naturally expected. As noted earlier, the instrumental section is dominated by male drummers (lead and supportive drums) who play underlying rhythms and accompaniment to the music. The number of the drummers in a band depends on how large the band is, usually between 3 and 8 drummers. In Iyabo Awero's Band, there are 8 drummers. The lead drummer (Iyaa'lu) leads and does the talking while other drums play rhythmic accompaniment creating a complex rhythm interplay.

An Overview of the Kengbe Ensemble

The Kengbe is an instrument made from carved calabash and could be seen as water pitcher. It is carved in varying sizes from bowl shaped to gourd shaped and pot shaped. These varying sizes are used in the ensemble to produce variety of sounds and rhythms. The smaller Kengbe produces higher pitch while the big Kengbe is low-pitched. Kengbe has dual mechanism for sound production which is triggered either by a mallet (padded or unpadded) or simply by direct application of the hand. This dual mechanism is used to create complex rhythm which African music is hinged on. While one hand covers the hollow part of the Kengbe playing intermittently, the other hand strikes the body of the Kengbe. The lead player strikes the body with a mallet which may be padded or unpadded; other back-up players hit the body with the palm or the fist (fingers of the hand curled inwards). In some cases, the Kengbe could be filled with some small stones as an effect to the resonance of the instrument. During performance, Kengbe players place the instrument in-between the two legs as support. From the foregoing, Kengbe falls under the directly-struck idiophone category of the African musical instruments classification.



Fig 1: Picture taken after a Kengbe music performance at Queen's Secondary School Ilorin. Two girls pose with the Kengbe while they squat in front of other performers.
Picture Credit: Researcher.



Fig 2: A variant of the Kengbe instrument
Picture Credit: Researcher



Fig 3: A woman playing the Kengbe instrument at a band performance. She placed it between her legs as support. The palm of the right hand covers the hollow body, while the left hand hits the body of the instrument.
Picture Credit: Researcher

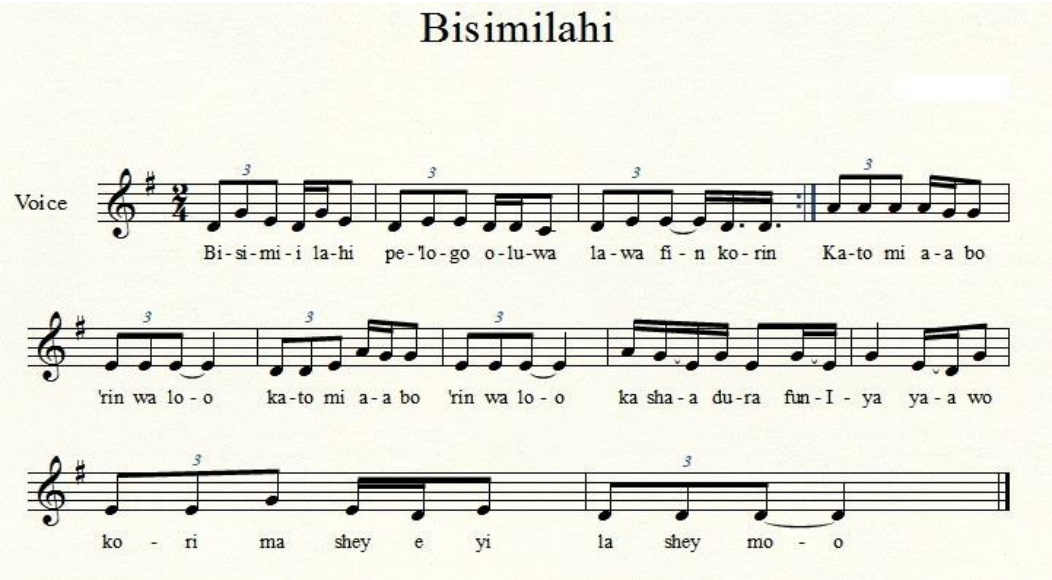


Fig 4: The Kengbe player striking the body of the Kengbe with an unpadded mallet.
Picture Credit: Researcher

Kengbe music primarily employs variants of the calabash in different shapes and sizes as its instruments without any other instrument outside the context of Kengbe itself. The Kengbe is used to produce the metronome, dance punctuations and rhythmic accompaniments to the songs and the dances. For every Kengbe music performance, the band leader takes the melodic lead as she sings most of the

solo songs. For instance, the song below is an introductory song which usually opens their performances and serves as exposition:

Bisimilahi pel'ogo oluwa lawa fi'nkorin With the help of God we sing
Bi moto tin lo, ni keke tin bo niwaju Alimi as vehicles pass in front of Alimi, so do bicycles
K'ato mi a b'orin wa lo Before we proceed with the songs
K'ato mi a b'orin wa lo Before we proceed with the songs
K'asadura fun Iya'yawo kori ma seyi lashemo Let's pray that hers would not be the last one



Usually, the chorus repeats the established melodic lines by the leader. Hence, the texture of the music can be called homophonic.



Fig 5: The researcher and Kengbe musicians in a pose after a Kengbe music performance at Magaji Nda family house, Ilorin on 11 June, 2019.



Fig 6: The researcher, Kengbe musicians and young trainees after a Kengbe music performance at Magaji Nda family house, Ilorin on 11 June, 2019.
Picture Credit: Researcher

Conclusion

This study is a response to the argument that women in West African music are marginalised as professional music makers and contributors to the growth and development of African music as Baluu and Kengbe music are indigenous secular and female oral musical arts peculiar to the people of Ilorin, Kwara state Nigeria. This study discussed the music in the context of gender and cultural functionalism among the people it originated and developed. Composition and production of music is a conscious art; hence, Baluu and Kengbe musicians used their cultural and social consciousness to drive the fulcrum of their music performance. Indigenous music as a performance art is pivotal to the growth and development of a society. However, unlike some other indigenous music and arts of the Ilorin people, there is need for more to be done on the documentation and preservation of these musical arts, especially Kengbe music, as only little has been done in the area of research, documentation and preservation of the Kengbe music. Also, a comparative research on Kengbe music in Ilorin and Igbá-tití court music in the Alaafin of Oyo's palace is highly recommended.

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