

**COURT MUSIC AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA:**

**THE ALAAFIN OF OYO EXPERIENCE**

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**John Olugbenga Ajewole (Ph.D.)**

Department of Creative Arts (Music),

Faculty of Arts,

University of Lagos Akoka, Lagos Nigeria

Email: [Pastorajewolejohn1@yahoo.com](mailto:Pastorajewolejohn1@yahoo.com)

**ABSTRACT**

*Court music is played in the palace of kings (Oba, Obi, Sarkin, Etsu and Alaaḡin) in Nigeria. The music consists of both vocal and instrumental repertoires. The music forms part of the integrative mechanisms of traditional political system due to its function. The most important thing about court music is the historical nature of the vocal and instrumental repertoires. The Alaaḡin of Oyo is the supreme head of all the kings and princes of the Yoruba nation, as he is the direct lineal descendant and successor of the reputed founder of the nation. This study, court music and national development in Nigeria examined the functional role of court music in Oyo community and in the palace of Alaaḡin Oyo, (Oyo is the name of a tradition popular town in Yoruba land in Nigeria). The study highlights the features of the Yoruba court music and discusses the impact of court music to the people of Oyo as a means of national development in the community. The study made use of oral tradition and written documents in its data collection approach. The outcome of the study reveals the impact and contribution of court music to the development and growth of Oyo community in ceremony communication, education, entertainment, history, politics, and ritual/religion and as a means of national development among Yoruba people of Nigeria. A conclusion is therefore dawn that court music is historical in nature in vocal and instrumental repertoires. It communicates the beliefs, custom and values of the Yoruba in various ways. Court music records historical events and transmits social means in the traditional society.*

**Key Words:** Court music, Alaaḡin Oyo, National development, Yoruba community, Instrumental repertoires

**INTRODUCTION**

Ajewole (2007) wrote that the most important thing about court music is the historical nature of the vocal and instrumental repertoires. Court music records historical events and transmits social norms in the traditional society. It is the type of music associated with the royalty i.e. Emirs, Sultans and Chiefs in Nigeria. The origin and functions of court music in Yoruba land stems from the pomp and pageantry that characterize Yoruba nobility and it epitomizes

Yoruba aristocracy. Political authority in Yoruba land has a religious basis. The Kings are always involved in priestly functions, some of which are performed with music.

Court music communicates the beliefs, customs and values of the Yoruba in various ways. It influences the society and also socializes the society. Court music reflects the identity, history, and genealogy of the Yoruba. It helps to stimulate national awareness, ethnic identity and feeling of homogeneity and solidarity. Some people are employed on permanent basis for the job. Majority of musical expressions described by the early European explorers belong to the court tradition, (Clapperton, 1922). In each society, court traditions are practiced at the musician's quarters of the palace and are employed as part of the entire court administration.

Their daily functions among other things include:

1. Playing the herald at 7.00 am
2. Singing praises of the king several times in the day.

In Yoruba land, the general characteristic features of court music center on the following:

- a. Social organization of various events, occasions and ceremonies that take place in the court.
- b. Court music communicates specific moral and educational information/instruction to the performer and the audience.
- c. Court music portrays folktales, folk stories and welcomes dance from the audience.
- d. Court music directly or indirectly communicates information to the members of the communities as a whole.

The Alaafin is the supreme head of all the kings and princes of the Yoruba nation, as he is the direct lineal descendant and successor of the reputed founder of the nation. He was not a dictator. He ruled according to the advice of the Council of Chiefs called the Oyomesi.

Though the Alaafin must seek the advice of the Oyomesi, it was not under compulsion for him to accept all the pieces of advice given to him.

The Oyomesi constitutes seven notable king-maker led by the Basorun or Prime Minister.

Today, there are eight generations of the kings in the Oyo city as stated below:

1. The 1<sup>st</sup> generation king-Alaafin Olatunbosun Adeleye Atiba
2. The 2<sup>nd</sup> generation king-Alaafin Adeolu Olujide
3. The 3<sup>rd</sup> generation king-Alaafin Adeyemi I (Alowolodu)
4. The 4<sup>th</sup> generation king-Alaafin Lawani AgogoIja
5. The 5<sup>th</sup> generationking-Alaafin Ladigbolu Siyanbola I (Afasegbojo)
6. The 6<sup>th</sup> generation king-Alaafin Afolabi Adenira Adeyemi II
7. The 7<sup>th</sup> generation king-Alaafin Gbadegesin Ladigbolu II
8. The 8<sup>th</sup> generation King- His Royal Majesty Alaafin Lamidi Olayiwola Adeyemi III

The present Alaafin of Oyo, His Royal Highness, Oba Lamidi Olayiwola Adeyemi III was enthroned in December 1970. At the age of 31 years, he became the first ever literate Alaafin and one of the youngest natural rulers in Yoruba land. He is now the 8<sup>th</sup>Alaafin of Oyo in the new Oyo.

The genealogy of the Alaafin right from the first Alaafin – Alaafin Atiba to the present has now reached the 8<sup>th</sup> generations.

**THE ALAAFIN OF OYO**



**HIS ROYAL MAJESTY ALAYELUWA OBA (DR.) LAMIDI OLAYIWOLA**

**ADEYEMI III JP, CFR, LLD**

**Court Music in Yoruba Land**

Yoruba today occupies the South western part of Nigeria. In modern political map of Nigeria, the Yoruba are found in Oyo, Ogun, Osun, Ondo, Ekiti and Lagos States of Nigeria. A significant population of Yoruba equally occupies Kwara and Kogi States in the middle belt. Other Yoruba sub group include the: (1) Egba, (2) Ijebu, (3) Ijesa, (4) Ekiti, (5) Ondo, (6) Ife and (7) Ikale.

Court music is played generally in the palaces of Yoruba Kings. Although there are slight differences and variations that exist from one town to another amongst sub-ethnic in Yoruba land. Court music performs a lot of functions in the palace of the Oba in Yoruba land.

The Oyo people love music, and they involve their children in folktale songs. Majority of them take music as their profession to earn a living, for example, the praise singers. Nowadays, Oyo town is a multi-religion centre with most of the people being traditional

African religion worshipers, but there are other religions such as Christianity and Islam. The presence of other religions does not however stop the Oyo people from observing their traditional festivals. They lay more emphasis on their cultural heritage. The Oyo town today is not yet fully developed into what we can call an urban area or a big city, it is on the average. Oyo town is situated between Ibadan and Ogbomoso, with Iwo on its East and Iseyin on its West. The surrounding towns of Oyo are: Awe, Akinmoorin, Fiditi, Ilora, Jobele, Iware and Oluwatedo (all belonging to Afijo Local Government).

This study focuses on the music of the King's court the Alaafin of Oyo with an aim to examine the functional role of court music in the palace of Alaafin of Oyo and in Oyo community, highlighting the features of the Yoruba court music and a discussion of the impact of court music of the Alaafin of Oyo to the people of Oyo as a means of national development in the community.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The study methodology relies solely on oral tradition and written documents. A review of literature was done on various concepts/issues that centre on the court music and national development in Oyo town.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **The Role of Alaafin's Court Music in Oyo Community**

Like other types of music, court music plays an important role in various aspects of life of the community. These aspects of life include ceremony, communication, education, entertainment, history, politics, creative, ritual, religion and psychology.

*The Ceremonial Role*

Court music is played on various events, occasions and ceremonies that take place in the palace of the Alaafin of Oyo. According to Akpabot (1986, p. 22), no social ceremony can be said to be successful without music because music has charms to soothe a savage beast, to soften rocks, bend a knotted oak, across all cultural divides in the palace.

Court music is played for the Alaafin on festive occasions. Public performances of court music takes place on social occasions when members of a group or community come together for the enjoyment of leisure, recreational activities, or for the performance of a rite, ceremony, festival or any other kinds of collective activity.

The organization of music in the Alaafin's court is connected with the royal institution, aristocracy, and with the events of life cycle in the palace such as naming, birthday ceremony, convocation and chieftaincy. Nketia (1979, p. 35) remarks that the degree of social cohesion in community is usually very strong; not only may the members be known to one another, but also be bound by a network of social relations, organized games and sports (such as wrestling) beer parties and feasts, festivals and social and religious ceremonies or rites. These social events bring the members of a community together and provide an important means of encouraging involvement in collective behavior, a means of strengthening the social bonds that bind them and the values that inspire their corporate life.

Court music is organized on the various events and occasions that call for music at the Alaafin's palace. The Alaafin's court music is concerned with the organization both of sound and of humanity. Court music is an act of respect to the kings, chiefs and the noble men in the palace. Great rejoicing is celebrated with court music.

Alaafin's court music centers majority on ceremonial music. It deals with the series of repertoires that are performed to mark the various stages of the human life from birth through puberty to death. Ceremonial music plays a significant role in the life of individuals in Oyo community and demonstrates the Yoruba penchant besides being a source of emotional gratification. The type of songs to be sung here is determined by the type of ceremony at their disposal.

The role of court music in various ceremonies such as 'Jimoh Oloyin (Special Friday), Month of Ramadan fasting, the eve of every El-del-Fitri festival, Bere festival, funeral, marriage, naming, coronation, dethronement, social homage, inter-ethnic wars, announcement, news agency, and so on cannot be over-emphasized.

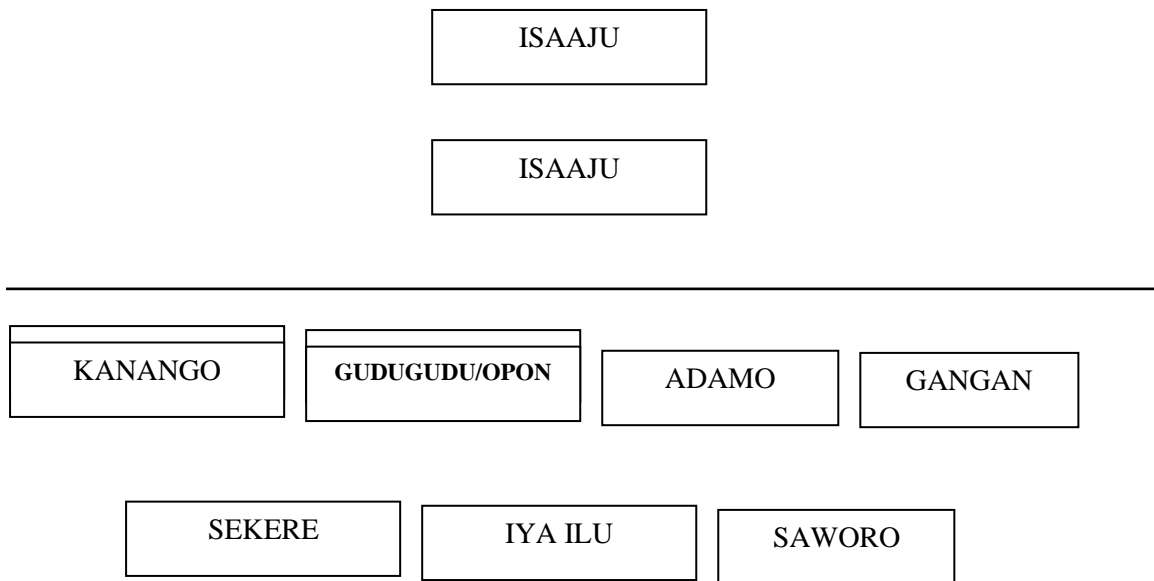


**The standing Position of the Performance of *Dundun Sekere* Ensemble**



*Dundun Sekere Dancers*

**The Diagram Illustration of “Alujo” (Dancing time) in *Dundun Sekere* Ensemble**





*The Communicative Role*

Signaling, drums are used to signal danger, warn of curfew, call for town meetings, announce the death of important personalities e.g. Oba among others. In song texts, speech discourse often takes place through the medium of chanting and singing.

Music is a communicative culture and its power of communication cannot be over-emphasized. Since instrumental structures are closely related to the music phonological structures of the song, both instrumental and vocal music perform communicative functions. Alaafin music in this sense is conceived as an integral part of oral mode of communication. It is used as a means of communication of the norms and values in Oyo community.

In support of this assertion, Vidal (1996) remarked that:

Yoruba children folksong repertoires are part of the oral tradition and cultural transmission. By oral tradition, it meant the verbally preserved records of the ancient past and experiences of the people that were handed down from one generation to another by word of mouth (p. 1)

Alaafin music is known to perform an important role in the tradition and lives of the Oyo people. In support of this fact, Vidal (1989) remarked that:

The death of the king, for example, is often announced through the sounding of the rhythms performed on the gbedu drums (a set of five drums of contrasting sizes and pitches kept by Yoruba kings in the palace and played during important ceremonies). Individual and familiar identities are often presented to the community in the form of Oriki) praise chant) that gives the subjects, history and genealogy.

Important historical events are recorded for posterity and either through the composition of special music or the invention of new musical instrument. Alaafin music is used as a record of history. It places that part in legend, myths and history concerning many events in Oyo town. These are stored in songs like *Oriki* and *Ewi of Oyo people*.

*Educational Role*

Alaafin music is a medium for providing creativity, and imagination in children. The music is an instrument for all round development of children in Oyo. It enables individuals to be gainfully employed thereby reducing crimes like corruption in the community. This emphasized the role of the Alaafin's music as a vital instrument in Oyo town.

Alaafin music helps the child to grow physically, socially, intellectually and emotionally. It provides deeper insight and aesthetic experiences capable of controlling the general growth and development of each child and the entire community. Adegbite (1992) stressed that:

The serious study of music as other arts develops man's creative ability which in turn is very important in every aspect of human endeavor. Through dancing, singing, performing, playing instrument, conducting, composing songs, constructing instruments and equipment, the individual child is guided to develop his creative and manipulative skills which help in nation building (p. 18).

Alaafin court music trains the mental and motor skills of the child. It develops ability to manipulate, improvise and experiment with artistic elements. The music provides children with opportunities to experience music as performers and music creators. The educational values of the Alaafin music in the community serve as a means of social values, aesthetic values, self-expression and insight. The palace music of the Alaafin of Oyo has the power to illuminate, adding interest, satisfaction, understanding and enjoyment to learning. It motivates learning because it appeals to Children's imagination, emotions and moods.

The music develops moral, character and good citizenship. Alaafin music serves as a means of self-identification and self-realization. The music is a necessary educational tool for the all-round development of the citizens. It is virtually impossible to talk about anything that concerns those who live in any nation without reference to their music. It is recognized as a

medium of instruction and contributes immensely to the general growth and development of the community, especially through schools.

The Alaafin's court music has an educational role in folk-tale song, in game songs and children rhythmic poetic lines as well as provides instructional (Didactic) songs which teach discipline, respect for elders, healthcare and personal hygiene. The music helps in regulating the social mores and institutions of the society as in satirical and derisive songs.

### ***The Entertainment Role***

Alaafin music performs important entertainment role either for recreation, diversion or amusement of the individual or for alleviating the monotony of routing and regimented life. The entertainment role of *Dundun Sekere* ensemble for instance, can be observed: at the Alaafin's palace at night gathering where the music is played for amusement or enjoyment by the individuals.

Alaafin's court music is also entertaining in the sense that it involves people in a shared experience within the framework of the cultural experiences and thereby making them more aware of themselves and of their responsibilities towards each other.

One of such events that entertain Oyo community is the special Friday called 'Jimoh Oloyin' by the Muslims. It takes place once a month. This day is significant as it gives community leaders opportunity to interact and have merriments in the palace. This occasion always witnesses a large crowd. Any social-cultural occasion that involves many people is always a good performance occasion for court music in the Alaafin's palace. Actually, the second type of musical setting in the palace of Alaafin of Oyo is that in which entertainment is the primary object of performance. In this type of setting, performers often compete with one another for the place of honor. The best artists are judged by a number of criteria set up by

the society. Court music in the Alaafin's palace therefore performs the functions of welcoming and entertainment visitors to the palace.

### ***The Historical Role***

Alaafin court music plays the historical role in the sense that it reminds people about their fore-father's functions or activities. For example, if a masquerade shows some slight cowardice in a public performance, the drummers will encourage him by reminding him of his ancestors by saying "O le se bi baba re" (you cannot do like your for-father). By so doing he would remember all that he could do to show bravery.

### ***The Political Role***

The contribution of the Alaafin's court music to the political development of the Oyo community cannot be overlooked. Most of the political contestants used to take along the drummers during their campaigns to convince people about what they are capable of doing as leaders.

### ***The Creative Role***

Music is used as a vehicle in the promotion of creativity in children through games, songs and folk-tale songs. Alaafin court music itself is a medium for promoting artistic creativity and imagination. Yoruba music like African music emphasizes the "creative performance". Creativity is portrayed in dramatic and theatrical productions in dance performance and presentation, and in modern poetry recitation in which music (drumming and singing) is used as both accompaniment and background.

*The Ritual Role*

Alaafin court music is used to venerate and propitiate the Orisas (divinities) and the ancestors. In the worship of the divinities, the priest, priestess or the officiating chiefs punctuate their prayers and requests with songs even with *Dundun* ensemble.

There are specific songs and even the musical instruments in the Alaafin's court music that are exclusively meant for performance during religious ceremonies such as Ifa worship, Sango festivals and that of other gods and so on. There would however be changes in the song text, if the song used for the worship of one god is to be used for another.

The first and obvious type of musical setting in the palace of the Alaafin of Oyo is that in which the performances are looked upon as part of rituals ceremonies connected with ancestral worship and festivals.

The rituals vary from those connected with the repose of the souls of departed ancestors. Alaafin ritual music provided the means of communication between man and the spirit world, for the African that he lives in a spiritual world. Ayankunle (2001) remarks that:

These are specific songs/music and even the musical instrument that are exclusively meant for performance during religious ceremonies such as new Yam festival, Sango festivals, Obatala festival and that of other gods and so on. There will be changes in the songs text, if the songs used for the worship of one god is to be used for another.

The Alaafin Atiba made sure that regular court rituals that involved him and his subjects alone were observed so as to make peace reign in the Oyo town and to make Oyo people to be free from any form of hardship.

*The Religious Role*

Alaafin music is used for religious worship. It is used during festivals such as Bere festival and Ogun festival etc. Alaafin music is used for prayer purposes and for healing. It is used as a spiritual weapon. Faseun (1998, p. 1) noted that, "the history of music in Nigeria could be equated to the origin of the country. On colonization of Nigeria, music was introduced into the churches by missionaries and from there to Sunday schools through, teacher catechists." The involvement of government in the administration of schools with religious denomination finally brought music into the formal educational system. In spite of the government's involvement, the teaching of music, was still in firm control of religious denominations through their trained teacher catechist and choirmasters who made use of the training of the school children in singing for preparation for church services on Sundays.

Invariably; majority of school children that learnt music in form of singing in schools, constituted the bulk of choir for various church denominations. Hence, there was a strong relationship between the needs of the church and the type of music taught in schools during the colonial era. The use of music in religious context cannot be overemphasized as a means of nation building. African traditional religion still co-exists with the imported faith of Islam and Christianity.

Some Africans embrace both traditional and foreign religion. Music has been a medium to communicating with the divine. Marriage ceremonies as important events in human life are accompanied with music even in the most fashionable church wedding.

### ***The Psychological Role***

Alaafin court music stimulates and enlivens forlorn spirits. It may warn, counsel, decry, moralize, document, extol, mobilize or edify as the case may be. It may even engender healing revival and stabilization for the broken hearted and the psychologically disoriented.

On the therapeutic prowess of music for instance, the bible recorded in (1 Samuel 16 verses 14:22-23) as quoted by Okwuoliseh (2000, p. 87) that, “when the spirit of the LORD GOD departed from Saul, an evil spirit came upon him and ‘troubled him’”. But at the instance of Saul, David took a harp and played with his hands; so Saul was refreshed and well and the evil spirit departed from him. Alaafin music then becomes relevant and phenomenal in life's struggles, being a social psychological tool for rehabilitation and comforting.

It is also used in medical and healing processes. Many people still believe that a sickness is sometimes a result of moral evil or the actions of evil forces. Therefore, cure must be accompanied by spiritual atonement. The traditional healer usually employs music in their art -for instance among Uhorobo, they believe that the vibrations of their songs and choruses get into the bodies of their patients and heal them. The Alaafin music in Oyo town is of great importance.

In chants and in contrary message e.g. Ifa chants, Oriki and praise poetry. Alaafin court music creates psychological awareness. The psychological effect of the drum texts and song texts can result in clashes between two opposing groups. Drumming generally may create motor response from the individual in the form of dancing, jumping and running.

### **The Functional Role of the Alaafin's Court Musicians**

The Alaafin's court music and musicians perform communicative, entertainment and culturally indicative functions. The Alaafin's court musicians are to:

1. Wake up the Alaafin very early in the morning
2. Pay homage to the Alaafin
3. Make appeals to the Alaafin (where some issues are burning and controversial)
4. Console the Alaafin
5. Praise and influence the Alaafin
6. Announce the influence of an approaching visitor into the palace
7. Lure the Alaafin into sleep and,
8. Announce the Alaafin's movement in and out of his palace as well as herald his movement when on entourage.

## CONCLUSION

The Oyos are referred to as 'Yoruba Proper' and they are believed to be the custodians of almost all Yoruba culture. It is also believed that all other Yoruba communities take after Oyo in almost every aspect of Yoruba culture. This brought about the common injunction that says: "AJI SE BI OYO LAA RI, OYO KI I SE BE ENIKAN" this is also evident in the idea of court music in the Yoruba land. The much-favored music in the court of Yoruba Obas is the *Dundun* and *Sekere* Music, and the Oyos happen to be the originators of *Dundun* and *Sekere*, hence, the other Yoruba take after the Oyos. The Oyos are generally greeted with a historical allusion which says:

AJI SE BI OYO LAA RI,  
OYO KI I SE BI ENIKAN  
OJO PA SEKERE MO DE  
OMO ATIBA

The message of the Alaafin's court musicians is clear enough for Oyo community to understand. This paper has shown the impact of the Alaafin's court music in the development



of Oyo community or Yoruba nation. The paper has argued that Alaafin musicians have contributed a great deal in moving the Yoruba race forward through court music. Alaafin of Oyo court music promotes sustainable democracy, political stability and national development in Oyo community and among Yoruba race.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Now that there are African Musicologist, indigenous music, especially historical type like court music, should not be allowed to lose original purpose through the perpetualism of oral tradition. It needs to be documented. Musicologists are implored to delve into research and study of other Nigeria indigenous music. Otherwise it will be too late and the future Nigerian generations will not know whether there was, at any time in the history of the nation, any indigenous music.

The musicologist should collect, classify and put into staff notation, Nigerian folklore and historical songs, standardize them and use them in schools. Although, it is obvious that we have the problem of indigenous notational system, African formally-trained musicologists should be aware of this and use their acquisition of formal techniques to develop aspects of traditional musical elements.

The Alaafin's court ritual should be given adequate attention so as to preserve the palace custom and tradition in the Alaafin's court music. The Alaafin should give free access to researchers in the aspects of the ritual effects on the researcher(s), on Oyo Community and even the Alaafin himself.

The government must do something to preserve traditional court music and the system that has sustained it. The traditional music of countries like Japan, India, among others, were

preserved by the governments of these countries by institutionalizing them. The same can be done for the traditional Alaafin court music of Nigeria's Yoruba land.

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