

## SOUND, STRUCTURAL PATTERNS AND ICONOGRAPHY IN THE TRADITIONAL MUSIC OF GBÈDU OLÚ OF ÈPÉ, LAGOS, NIGERIA

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### **Abstract**

*Traditional music is central to the lives of the Yorùbá people. This genre of music is constantly being challenged by emerging trends in musical arts in the Yorùbá states of the South Western Nigeria. It has continued to writhe under the stress of urbanization and globalization. The challenge of upholding this waning musical tradition falls on the surviving socio-political institutions. This paper therefore, examines the Gbèdu traditional music of the of Èpé people of Lagos State. The article examines the sound, the structural patterns and other extraneous content of this particular traditional drums as performed in Èpé land. Exploring ethnomusicological approach, the study relies on archival and ethnographic sources for its methodology. The article employs as research instruments, focus group discussion, key informant interview, non-participants' observation methods to elicit data. This article aims at bringing into focus critical perspectives of traditional music of the Yorùbá people. Primary data for the article were collected from the palace of Olú of Èpé, a prominent and ancient Yorùbá town in Lagos state, South West Nigeria. This article concludes that efforts need to be made by concerned authorities to promote Yoruba traditional music and preserve it from going into extinction.*

**Keywords:** Urbanization, Globalization, Ethnomusicology, Archival, Ethnographic

## **Introduction**

The Yoruba is one of the most culturally diverse ethnic group in Africa. The ethnic group are found in the South western part of Nigeria, with a great infusion of music in their cultural life. It plays significant roles in the organization of Yorùbá Society, the Yoruba cosmology and philosophical life. Lagos is a part of the larger Yorùbá land. It is a conglomerate of various settlements, which are predominant traditional Yorùbá cities with a rich and diverse Yorùbá cultural setting. There are dances, music, plastic arts spread across the 20 local governments of the state. Badagry is reputed for cultural displays like Zangbeto, Sato and Jogu dance. Lagos Island is also reputed for Korogún Dance, Adámú Òrisà, Igunnuko (customs of the Tapa people that migrated to Lagos led by Oshòdì Tápà); Sàngó (brought to Lagos by Óyó Settlers) and so many others. Over the years, urbanization has influenced status of Lagos with an influx of migrants both from within and outside the country. Apart from being the commercial nerve center of the nation, Lagos has a wide range of cosmopolitan interests. It parades diverse and hybrid cultures which endear people to her and it has since grown over the years to accommodate other cultural interests within and outside Nigeria. One intriguing part of Lagos is its ability to preserve the cultural heritage through several institutions of the land. One of such institutions is the palaces. The major focus of this article is the music of music of Gbèdu Olú of Èpé in Lagos state, Nigeria.

Èpé is the principal town in Èpé division of Lagos State. The people of Èpé belong to the Ijebu sub-Yorùbá tribe in Lagos state. The town was founded by Olójà Samagbara, Ògúnmudé and Rámópéwo who came to settle there from Ìjèbú Òdeend<sup>1</sup>. The initial settlers in Èpé were farmers, hunters, fisher men who made use of the creek and the Ocean for their source of livelihood. The people of Èpé are culturally knitted with other Ìjèbú towns and by extension Yorùbá nations. The study therefore examines the rich musical heritage of Epe with specific reference to Gbdeu Music in the palace of the Olu of Epe. It investigates the musical instruments and their functions in the music ensembles in the palace. Furthermore, it examines the performance settings and structural composition of the music. It also attempts a musicological analysis of selected music components.

### **Gbèdu Music ensemble in Èpé Land**

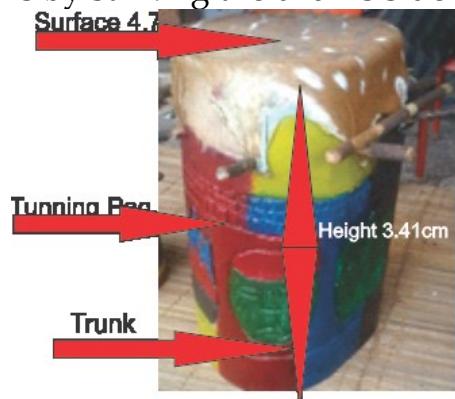
The Gbèdu is a prominent royal drum in Yorùbá land. It is a set of single headed drum that is considered sacred. In Epe land, the Gbèdu Olú is the royal drum of the king of Èpé. The drum is exclusive to the king and cannot be found in any other home in the land. The term Gbèdu is used interchangeably for the components of the ensemble as well as music played on these drums.

According to High Chief Yésírù Dàda, the Agbòn of Èpé land, and the chief custodian of cultures of Èpé Land, who served as a resource person to the research, Gbèdu Olú of Èpé was one of the royal emblematic items brought to Èpé by the founders of the town. The founders of the town brought it from Ijébú Òde. Chief Agbòn further stressed that the ensemble is over 200 years and has served many Kings of Èpé land. Gbèdu is the personal drums of Olú of Èpé and it resides permanently in the palace. No one plays the drum without the knowledge and permission of the king. Officially, the ensemble comes out of the palace only once in a year and it is for the yearly celebration of the king. However, with the permission of the king, it can be commissioned for other occasion of importance. Gbèdu is the only instrument that is involved in the installation and burial of the Olú of Èpé. It is the instruments that announces the death and subsequent rites preceding the burial of the king. The sound of Gbedu also heralds the coronation of the Oba elect and his exit from solitary confinement in a place called Ìpèbí.

Gbèdu Olú of Èpé ensemble is constituted by the initiates of the Òsùgbó cult. The Òsùgbó are a class of the Ògbóni cult. The drummers of Gbèdu Olú Èpé are known as Adáàgbáyè. Gbèdu Olú Èpé is a musical ensemble with extra-terrestrial powers and cryptic functions. The practices in this ensemble, are therefore not free to women and non-initiates. Women are allowed to touch Gbèdu or even beat the drum, but they are not excluded from dancing to the beats. Gbèdu Olú Èpé is also believed to have therapeutic powers. The drums are constantly venerated and oblations offered before performance. Items required for offertory of Gbèdu Olú of Èpé are, Efun (white chalk), Osù, (camwood), Obì àbàtà (Cola-nuts) Dry gin. It is also forbidden for Gbèdu Olú Èpé to be displayed on the bare floor. The trunk of drums is made of Òmò tree while the surface is covered with the membrane of Ekìrà. (Duiker). Gbèdu Olú Èpé consists of four drum namely; Ìyá ilù, Perente, Àtèlé Ìyá ilù, Omele.

### **Ìyá ilù**

The Iya Ilu is the mother drum with the lowest pitch. The depth of the pitch is usually deep enough to serve as the tone foundation for all other instruments in the ensemble. It is played by the lead drummer who is the Adáàgbáyè. Ìyá ilù Gbèdu (the mother drum) is the principal drum in this ensemble. It is the improviser and the anchor of all drums and other forms of musical play in this ensemble. There are two types of strokes in Ìyá ilù, The single stroke involves the use of one stick at a time while the double strokes entail the use of the two sticks at a time and in most cases to dampen the resonance of the sound. Apart from strikes on the membrane surface of the drums, another means of tone generation is by striking the drums sideways



**Plate 1: Iya Ilu**

### **Perente**

This is the lead drum of the rhythm section in the ensemble of Gbèdu Olú Èpé. It combines the functions of the other two lead instrument. The drum is also involved in the dialogue process with the Iyailu. It is smaller in shape and has a tone lower than the Ìyá ilù.



### **Plate 2: Perente drum**

#### **Àtèlé and Omele**

These are basically rhythm keepers in the ensemble. The two have the same size and smaller than Perente. Although, they are different in tones, their functions are interchangeable. They play complementary roles with Perente drum.



**Plate 3: Àtèlé**



**Omele**

### **Performance Setting**

Gbèdu performance is usually performed at the premises of Olú of Èpé. The performers sit a role in the court of Olú Èpé. Perente, the lead rhythm instruments is seated at the right hand of the lead drummer who plays the Ìyá ìlù. The other two rhythm drummers, Omele and Àtèlé seat at the left side of the Lead drummer. There is no reason adduced for this. However, a closer observation of performers on set showed that the sitting arrangement might have been designed to aid communication, particularly between the lead drummer and the Perente drummer.



**Plate 4:** Title: Performance setting of Gbèdu Olú Èpé. Source: Researcher

### Scales, tuning and tonal organization

Song are not prominent in the ensemble of Gbèdu Olú Èpé. The ensemble leader explained that Gbèdu Oba is predominantly a dance ensemble. However, over the time some songs have crept into the performance, particularly in those performances that are sacred oriented. He said it will be inappropriate to describe the ensemble as a song oriented one. He explained further that, the few songs were introduced to the ensemble by women fold who form the spectators at Gbèdu performances.

**Tuning system:** This is done in descending order. The highest pitched instrument, Omele is tuned first, followed by the Àtèlé in that order. After the tone of the Omele is determined, all others are tuned approximately a fourth lower.

### Tone | differentiation:

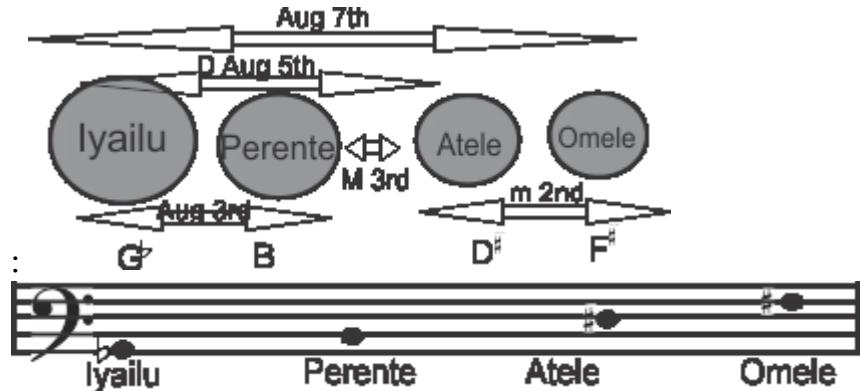


Figure 1: Tone differentiation of Gbèdu Olú Èpé

**N.B This differentiation in tones was achieved through aural perception.**

One of such songs was sampled in the course of this study.

Song in Gbèdu Olú Èpé ensemble is characterized by short phrases and in responsorial form.

### Gbedu Olu Epe

Arolugbaye O gbayi

Transcribed & Arranged by Bayo Ogunyem

Solo

Chorus

5th

5th

5ths

5th

1. 2.

Figure 2: Arólúgbayé Gbayì Ó gbèye

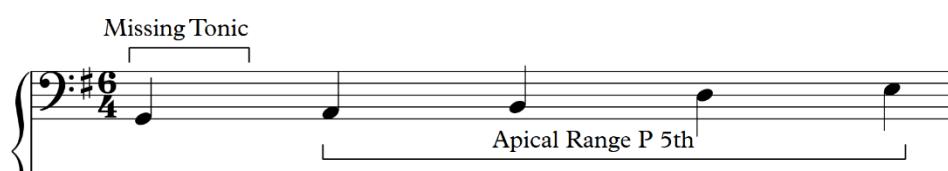
**Scale:** Pentatonic scale (Dorian Mode) the entire song employs four note. The 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 2<sup>nd</sup> missing out the tonic in a pentatonic scale. The two rest points

in the song a median in measures 3 and 5 and a supertonic in measures 6 and 13 till the end shows it ends on the second note of the scale. These two rest notes also indicate the cadences in the song. A rearrangement of the notes in the order of scale show as follows

**Figure 3:**

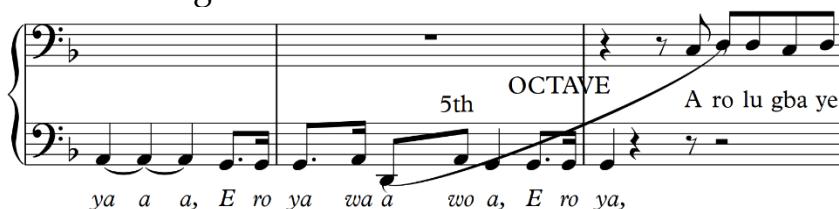


(a) Notes in order of appearance



(b) Notes in Scale

- (i) **Form of song:** Short repetitive melody
- (ii) **Melodic range:** It is an Octave. Lowest note is D 2 octaves below middle C. While the highest is the D below middle C



**Figure 4**

The melody is free flowing and parallel. The biggest leap in the melody is a 5<sup>th</sup>. This leap formed a sequence at every approach to cadence in the melody. These occur in bars 5, 8, 12, 15, 17, 18, 19, 21, (See table above)

### Form of song text

Song	Translation
<i>Arólúgbayé Gbayì Ó gbèye</i>	Arolugbaye is elevated and honour
<i>Èrò yà, èrò yà</i>	O ye people should come and see
<i>Wáà wóó èrò yà</i>	come and see people should come

Èrò yà w áà wóo o èrò yà

O ye people should come and see

### (iii) Analysis of rhythm

Three rhythm patterns were sampled for this study. The three rhythm Patterns have similar features



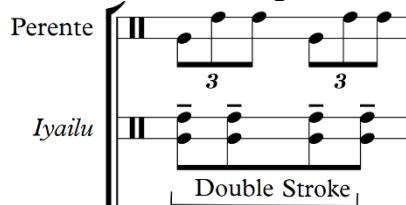
**Fig 5:** Rhythm Notation of Patterns

Rhythm in Gbèdu Olú Èpé ensemble is characterized by short repetitive patterns,

ostinato      Atele      and      polyrhythm.  
                    Omeli

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

one of the pattern that was used in Omi ayé, the hemiola



appears in the combinations of Ìyáàlù and Perente.

### Pattern II

**Fig 6:** The second pattern sampled in this ensemble

The rhythm pattern as shown above shows various elements of African rhythmic patterns such as:

**Basic Rhythm Pattern** || II 6/8 

**Syncopation:** Atele || II 6/8 

### Interlocking rhythm;

### Pattern III

The musical notation for Pattern III is divided into four staves, each representing a different drum or instrument. The staves are labeled from top to bottom: Perente, Iyailu, Atele, and Omele. The notation is in common time, indicated by a '12/8' signature. Each staff consists of vertical strokes on a five-line staff, representing the rhythmic pattern. The first staff, Perente, shows a steady pattern of vertical strokes. The second staff, Iyailu, shows a pattern where the first stroke is a vertical line and the second is a horizontal line. The third staff, Atele, shows a pattern where the first stroke is a vertical line and the second is a horizontal line. The fourth staff, Omele, shows a pattern where the first stroke is a vertical line and the second is a horizontal line.

**Fig 7: Rhythm Pattern in Gbèdu Olú Èpé**

This is called Ijó Oba, and in most cases it is danced by the Oba alone. It is used as a prelude to his performance. It is after this performance that he invites people to join him on the dance floor.

The tempo of this rhythm is usually slow and the basic rhythm is the "kon ko ko lo" rhythmic pattern which is played on double stroke by Perente

A single staff for the Perente drum, showing a repeating pattern of two vertical strokes followed by one horizontal stroke, representing the "kon ko ko lo" rhythmic pattern.

Ìyáìlù plays the syncopation in this pattern. It is this syncopated rhythm that dictates the dance pace and style to the king. The king dances in conformity with the rhythm coming from the Ìyáìlù.

A single staff for the Iyailu drum, showing a repeating pattern of a vertical stroke followed by a horizontal stroke, representing the syncopated rhythm played by Iyailu.

### 1. Iconography

The totality of appearance and fixtures embodied in Gbedu Olú of Èpé connote profound and arcane meaning in the music. These are further enhanced by the anthropomorphic nature of the drums. The Yorùbá's perception of Gbèdu is that the drum is totemic. Therefore, every items associated with the drums have far reaching meaning. They are imaginative not mundane and go beyond aesthetics. It is generally believed that the spirit of Àyàngalú, the Yorùbá god of drums and drumming, superintends both the spiritual and the terrestrial in every performance involving drums. Therefore, the drums must be constantly

propitiated in other not to evoke the wrath of the god of drums on both the people and the King who is the custodian of the tradition. For instance, the five straight lines marks (three in white and two in red) on the surface of each of the drums that make up Gbèdu Olú of Èpé ensemble are not for aesthetics. They are esoteric lines with psychical functions. As explained by the Agbon of Èpé, Chief Yesiru Dada, who served as an informant to the study, the Spirit of Àyángalú is ever present at every performance of Gbèdu. It watches and controls every performance of the ensemble. Therefore, the marks are mandatory for the appeasement of the spirit. "they are not ordinary and cannot be subjected to any methodical explanation. Failure to put the marks will hurt the spirit of the god of drum and the consequences are severe. In the event of such occurrence, the membrane covering the surface of the drum will tear. This a physical manifestation of discontentment in the spiritual realm. A torn Gbèdu, under any circumstance, is a bad omen.



**Plate 5: Gbedu drums in display**

Gbèdu is seen as the binding spirit for the community. It symbolizes the reign of the king. Therefore a torn Gbèdu is considered a prophetic utterance that must be attended with dispatch. Chief Dàda Explained. In the words of another informant, Ayò Òkédòkun, it takes an oracular consultation to determine the offertory in demand if a Gbedu is torn. As he puts it, Priest are sometimes invited to determine the nature of the offering requested by Àyàngalú for evil not to befall the king and his kingdom.

### **Conclusion.**

There is no doubt, Yoruba musical culture has evolved over a period of time. However, this evolution, which in many cases are as a result of urbanization and globalization has given birth to an array of genre at the expense of the traditional genre of music. Today, the traditional genre, particularly in urban centers, groans under extraneous influences. This study has shown that regardless of the tremendous influence of these external factors, circumstances have made traditional music continue to exist in Yorùbá land. The study elaborated these circumstances as those occasioned by the extra-musical functions of this particular genre which has made them indispensable. Understanding the whole gamut of traditional music in Yorùbá land demands a holistic and panoramic view. The content of the Yoruba traditional music is further crystalized in the context of performance. Therefore, the entire body of Yorùbá traditional musical culture is better understood from the periscopic and not parochial view. It is hereby recommended that a more attention should be given to the study, sustenance and promotion of this genre of music.

### **End Note**

1. Oral interview through sources from the custodians of history in the palace of Olu of Epe

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