Songs of the King's Wives: Women, Power and Performance in the Yoruba Public Sphere

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Introduction

Historical and oral sources point to the vibrancy of musical ensembles as an integral part of palace protocol in ancient Yoruba palaces. The functions of such ensembles include routine activities like saluting the king and royal dignitaries as well as announcing the imminent arrival of visitors. Although many palace ensembles have dwindled in size today, they remain a visible and an important aspect of court ceremonies. In palaces such as those of the Alaafin of Oyo and the Ataoja of Oshogbo, for example, talking drummers and bugle players continue to function on a daily basis. Such ensembles, though often limited to just a few instruments on ordinary days, are usually augmented by musicians from outside the palace to provide a performance that is befitting of special occasions.

This paper discusses two unique types of palace-affiliated musical ensembles in Emure, a small Yoruba town in the Ekiti region in southwestern Nigeria. These are orin olori (songs of the king’s wives) and its related ensemble, orin airegbe, a musical performance that is associated with female chiefs. Membership of orin olori ensemble is exclusive to the wives of the reigning king, and widows of departed ones. Although quite widespread in Ekiti, this type of ensemble is rare in other parts of Yorubaland. Orin olori maintains a complementary relationship with ere airegbe (airegbe performance). Ere airegbe, though originally performed by Emure women during the annual initiation ceremony for pubescent girls, is now performed mainly by female chiefs and no longer restricted to its original context. In analyzing orili and airegbe performances in this paper, I am guided by certain critical questions as posed by Drewal (1992: 172). According to her, in order to move beyond a “social Darwinist” perspective on gender, it is necessary to ask whether “the construction of gender in African performances is always in fact asymmetrical and whether power always resides in the male half of that structure.” I am also interested in exploring how orin olori and airegbe relate to certain well known conventions of Yoruba musical practice. I argue that the complementary relationship between the two ensembles and the scope of the creative and performance strategies associated with them highlight important perspectives on the ways in which public musical performances speak to the status and agency of women in Emure-Ekiti. As a background to my discussion it is instructive to briefly evaluate the relationship between gender and public performance in Africa.
Gender in African Performance

Sex- and gender-related issues are critical to the conception and organization of African musical ensembles. For example, sex-based division of roles constitutes “taboos” through which sex is conceived in two “mutually exclusive categories that exacerbate biological differences and thereby create gender, which is a socially imposed construction” (Drewal 1992: 172; Gay Rubin 1975: 178).

The intersection of gender and power in modern Yoruba societies manifests vividly in bounded, formal performances. Drewal again has observed that “there are more restrictions placed on women in performances organized by men than there seem to be in women’s performances” (Drewal 1992: 172). Citing examples from Yoruba media art, she explains that socially inscribed notions of gender manifest both in the type of materials that men and women may work with as well as in the types of artistic formations those artists may create. For example “while women work in clay, men specialize in wood, metal and beads” (Drewal 1992: 172).

Perceived as masters of the private domain, African women are often associated with informal and non-professional performances. This is a cultural practice that has been discussed by various scholars working in different parts of the continent. In her discussion of Hausa Muslim women’s performances, Mack (2004:4) has, for example, explained that although exceptionally gifted Hausa women in Kano may have the opportunity to perform in public spaces such as the emir’s palace, the practice of wife seclusion and the need for women to fulfill their responsibilities as mothers and wives in a predominantly Islamic environment often dictate that they perform mainly in private spaces located in the harems of their husbands and inside family compounds. A comparative, though contextually different situation exists among the women of the KwaZulu iBandla lamaNazaretha (Nazareth Baptist Church), where, as Muller (1999: 224-226) has explained, female performances, even within the context of a modern, syncretic religious organization, are restricted largely to the private homes of individuals and to meetings that are exclusive to women. These examples reflect a general tendency for African musical performances to be dominated by men at the professional and public sphere level. In many such situations women often complement rather peripherally as creators of ululations and as cheerers. It is also generally assumed that women, even when they hold a leadership or dominant musical role, do so at events at which men are either not present or only minimally represented. Furthermore, instrumental ensembles are often dominated by male musicians as has been documented in a number of examples, including *dundun* (Euba, 1990; Yoruba, Nigeria); *agbekor* (Locke, 2005; Ewe, Ghana); *sabar*
(Tang, 2007; Wolof, Senegal); and baakisimba (Nannyonga-Tamusuza, 2005; Buganda, Uganda). Nannyonga-Tamusuza (2005: 17), narrating her experience with reference to baakisimba, for example, has stated that “roles….were clearly distinguished; boys were restricted to drumming and girls controlled the dancing arena. Whenever I tried to “beat” the drums, my teachers outwardly told me “women do not beat the drums, they are dancers.”

It is important to observe that although these prominent examples all point in the direction of a pre-determined social hierarchy within which women are perpetually disadvantaged, other examples, such as those that I examine in this paper, point in the direction of a dialectical framework within which life and play reshape one another, and therefore within which issues such as those relating to gender are debated and contested. The processual nature of African performances, defined in the ways in which they construct and re-invent themselves, speaks to the utility of an agency-driven musical medium that facilitates social conversation as well as the questioning and the negotiation of social relations. Drewal has observed that African “performances or rituals “operate not merely as models of and for society, which somehow stand timelessly alongside “real” life. Rather, they construct what reality is and how it is experienced and understood” (Drewal 1992: 174).

In order to fully understand the dialogical nature of African performance, Askew, in her study of Tanzanian taarab music, has stressed the need to adopt an “integrative” approach. She harmonizes a wide range of analytical perspectives that draw on David Turner’s “agonistic paradigm of social drama” (Turner 1974 in Askew 2002: 19), the processual dimension of performance (Drewal 1991), the “concern for form and politics of context” (Fabian 1990 in Askew 2002: 21), and the significance of performance as “text” (Bauman 1977 in Askew 2002: 22). She thus proposes an “integrated theory” that interrogates the form, the content and the dialogical dimensions of performance. It is at the intersection of these elements that the “the nonfinite, emergent and contingent,” in short, the “performative” character of performance lies (see Askew 2002: 19-23). Following on Askew’s “integrated theory,” I discuss the ways in which song-texts, musical instrumentation (or the lack of it), the processes of musical composition and performance are structured and deployed to draw attention to the status and agency of women in Yoruba culture and to their roles as social actors and active molders of the public sphere.
Olori and Airegbe Ensembles

The *olori* ensemble in Emure consists mainly of singers who also dance, and two instrumentalists, each playing an *agere* drum, a single-headed membranophone. Olori singing is cast in solo-responsorial phrases, with the role of cantor freely moving amongst a core group of leaders. The two female drummers, whose roles include setting the tempo and helping to sustain a pervading element of dance, are not members of the traditional Yoruba *ayan* [drumming] families. The circumstances surrounding their functions as drummers thus challenge and deviate from the more conventional practice within which drummers are produced in traditional Yoruba culture. One of them informed me, for example, that she perfected her drumming skills through regular practice on *agere* and from many years of playing in the *olori* ensemble.

The most important annual contexts for the public performance of *olori* ensemble is *odun ijesu* (new yam festival), which takes place in July or August. The festival marks the beginning of the harvest season and the symbolic tasting of the new yam by the king. The festival, like similar ones all over Yoruba land, provides an opportunity for members of the Emure community to celebrate their common ancestry, pay homage and re-affirm their loyalty to the king. It is one of the major events at which the structures and hierarchies of power are publicly displayed. And as I explained below, performances by *olori* and *airegbe* at this and other festivals often resonate with considerable social and political significance.

*Airegbe* was originally restricted to the initiation ceremony for pubescent girls. Significantly however, new musical compositions that derive from the original *airegbe* tradition are now often performed mainly by Emure female chieftaincy title holders on a wide range of occasions that include the installation of a new king, the commissioning of a new palace, and investiture ceremonies for newly appointed chiefs. While *olori* music is performed to the accompaniment of *agere* drums, *airegbe* does not make use of musical instruments. But although, *airegbe* and *olori* are two distinct categories, a complimentary relationship exists between them. Many of the women who perform *airegbe* are also members of the *olori* ensemble because of their dual status as chiefs and royal wives. While the membership of *olori* ensemble attracts mostly young adults and a few elderly people, virtually all members of *airegbe* ensemble are advanced in age. There is thus a sense in which performers of *olori* music graduate into the membership of *airegbe*. It is also important to mention that performances of *airegbe* and *olori* now often take place at the same event, especially at important festivals and special occasions involving the entire Emure community.
Regency, Gender and Social Mobility in Performance

I shall now briefly describe a performance event that started as *olori* performance but later evolved into *airegbe*. The ceremony took place at a time when, following the death of the king, the town was under the administration of a female regent [an interim leader] who had been chosen by the *ifa* oracle to act as ruler for the town until a new king was selected. The festival was thus unique in the sense that women played an even much greater role in it, with a female ruler presiding over what was the first major outing for the newly appointed regent. The festival began with a special performance of *olori* songs, complete with the accompaniment of the two *agere* drums. After about forty-five minutes, the women changed to *airegbe* music, a shift that was dramatically underlined by cessation of drumming. At this point, members of the *olori* who were not chiefs withdrew from the performance. The female regent, clad in male attire, held a horsetail and wore neck-beads, two important emblems of Yoruba royal authority. Like the regent, the female chiefs also wore beads, and danced up and down the performance space waving their horsetails. From time to time, the regent got up from her seat and moved round to express her royal appreciation to the performers by pasting wads of money on their foreheads. The women praised the regent in return, wishing her a successful tenure. Their songs are replete with insights of historical and social significance. In a song titled “Opo Ule Elemure” (Pillars of Elemure’s Palace), for example, they sang about the importance of the local market as the locus of economic activity and suggested that women are the controllers of all major activities in the market:

**Opo Ule Elemure** (Pillars of Elemure’s Place)

1. *Opo ule elemure o,*  
Pillars of the palace of Elemure
2. *Ara ule olaja lore,*  
The dwellers of the market place
3. *Opo momo yo’se labe orisha,*  
The pillar must not collapse under the gods
4. *Maa se t’emiye l’oju aseni*  
We will succeed in spite of our detractors.

In the opening part of the song, they described themselves as the “pillars” of Emure community by drawing a symbolic comparison between their roles in the society and the strong concrete pillars that help to keep their king’s palace magnificent and strong. In another
song, “Aso Uyi” (Costume of Honor), the women enjoined all Emure women to answer the king’s call to duty:

Aso Uyi (Wrapper of Honor)
1. Aso uyi ni in muro o,
   We are knotting a wrapper of honor
2. Ua uyi ni in wo,
   The sight of us is a sight of honor
3. Owa ran ni ya pe a o,
   The king has sent for us
4. Ara oye wo mo sere.
   Thank you for the honor.

They explained that their presence and their performance activities (ua) are in response to the king’s call. They express their gratitude to the king for counting them worthy of serving their community. They sing that they are persons of honor and integrity, qualities which are symbolically expressed in the phrase “We knot a wrapper of honor.”

“You Caught us Unawares”: Agency and Dialogue in the Creative Process
Like the performance and the song-texts described above, the creative process through which Emure female performers generate their music resonates with considerable social significance and therefore deserves an analytical attention. Ethnomusicologists working in Africa often focus mainly on public performances while largely ignoring the creative process that leads to them. Commenting on the relative lack of scholarly attention to the creative process in African music, Ampene, in his study of Nnwonkoro, a song tradition of the Akan women of Ghana, has observed that “not much is known about the techniques and processes of musical composition in preliterate societies” (Ampene 2005: 11). Although it is true that the scene of public performance constitutes a major avenue for creative engagement with the material of performance (“composition-in-performance,” Ampene 2005: 8), a much more deliberative process of creativity often precedes and generates the actual performance. As Merriam (1960: 165-84 in Ampene 2005: 11) has observed, for example, African musicians do practice “composition, recognize it as a distinct process, and are in a number of cases quite able to discuss it.” But while some African musicians may not always be disposed to describing the nature of the creative process they engage in, that process is often rigorous and intensive as I have found out in my study of the music of Emure women. The ethnographic description
below captures the dynamics of this process as it occurred during one of my many visits to Emure to study airegbe performance.

My first contact with the women who performed airegbe was in 2006 when I embarked on a preliminary investigation. I had become fascinated with their performance after watching a video recording of a previous edition of the initiation festival for pubescent girls. In 2007, when I traveled back to observe that year’s edition of the festival, I realized that many of the songs that were performed during that festival were different from those on the video recording. This made me to doubt the authenticity of the recording, and thus looked forward to observing the “authentic” performance during my visit. I did all the interviews and recorded the music in audio and video format and returned to the United States, where I later transcribed the performances. When I returned to Emure in May 2008 a prominent Emure female chief explained to me that new compositions are often composed for new and specific occasions. Although there is an underlining structural and melodic formula, each song is unique, and every new performance is constituted by a set of newly composed songs. I did not realize the full import of this information until much later when I paid another visit to the group as a whole. I had wanted them to perform the same songs so I could check to see if my transcriptions were correct. They remembered some but not all of the songs. But more significantly, they informed me that they would prefer to perform new songs rather than spend precious time trying to figure out the texts and melodies of those of last year. The explained to me that they would need to compose new egbe (musical chorus) and combine them with esa (extended musical narrative). It was at this juncture that they began to put their heads together right in my presence to create new songs. They incorporated some pre-existing thematic material into new ones to generate totally different songs. Ultimately, their new compositions appropriated certain events of the past. I watched them as they deliberated on their new compositions. They disagreed, agreed, rejected some phrases, argued strongly, adjusted phrases here and there, laughed, teased one another, and paused now and then as if confused, all in the process of working out a new performance. They told me that one of the songs they were putting together was derived from a previous performance of theirs that took place during the installation ceremony of their new king, which held earlier in the year. After about forty five minutes of intense but well-mannered negotiation, they told me that they were ready to perform a “final version” for me. One of these new created songs forms the basis for the discussion that follows in which I explore the social significance of this creative process.
Egbe and Asa: Musical Discourse as Social Action

The notion of a musical discourse derives from the understanding that a musical activity often constitutes a social action. This is a theme that many ethnomusicologists have explored. Monson (2007: 24), for example, has explained that musical performances are shaped discursively as utterances, which articulate specific positions and arguments, and which are deployed to engage issues about identity, politics, and social currents as defined within the larger society. Monson explains that, just like linguistic expressions, musical performances or compositions are typified by an internal logic that is defined by the positional relationships and significance of musical material both within specific works as well as within the larger body of the genre or tradition to which a work belongs. In reference to American music, for example, she explains that “just as linguistic discourses form an interrelated matrix of meaning, so do musical utterances of jazz improvisers form a large network of musical meanings that are invoked and commented upon in the course of performance” (Monson 2007:24). A musical discourse refers thus not just to “talk about music,” but also to “the relationships between the sounds themselves and the symbolic, social, political, and personal meanings that individuals, collectivities, and institutions construct for them” (Monson 2007:24). She observes that “the music itself” is “not external to a social and political account but rather a central player in the dialogue between art and meaning” (Monson 2007:24). In olori and airegbe music, musical structures resonate with social significance both in terms of their positional relationships within the context of a performance as well as in terms of the creative actions from which they emanate. In the process of creating a new example of airegbe song, for example, Emure female chiefs employed two key words that describe the structural technique that guides their compositional process. These are egbe and esa. Egbe, as used by the women, refers to the recurring key thematic elements of the piece, while esa refers to the process of structural unfolding that propels and gives full life to the performance. The women explained that egbe usually occurs right at the beginning of a song or performance, as an opening musical and textual material. It is the principal thematic idea that constitutes the foundation upon which an entire piece is built. On the other hand, esa is the “flesh and body” of the piece. It is the part of the performance where the full details of the performance are worked out and negotiated. Egbe and esa are thus not mere musical materials: they constitute socio-musical activities. They refer to specific musical actions, which are enacted through negotiation, argument, debate, fun-poking, and even angry exchanges as I described above. The Yoruba word egbe literally means to support and to agree. It connotes communal harmony, both within the specific context of a musical
performance as well as in terms of the social idea that generates or informs the performance. Within the specific context of performance, *egbe* serves a musical purpose of emphasis as well as a symbol of agreement and unity amongst the performers. *Esa*, like *egbe* also refers to a musical activity, while symbolizing a process of social interaction that informs the creation and define the context of the performance. *Esa*, which translates as “to choose,” describes the process through which the opening *egbe* is developed into a full performance. Since the process of musical development could traverse an almost infinite pathways, the musical activity that *esa* describes is informed by an intense process of argumentation and bargaining leading to the adoption of a particular structural arrangement. The social conditions that the two words signify were clearly revealed in my earlier ethnographic description of the creative process employed by the women. The consequent emergence of the performance in its totality thus marks a state of agreement—a communal resolution, the process that led to the final agreement having been framed by intense debate, conflict and negotiation.

The second general point that I want to make about *egbe* and *esa* relates more to their dynamic character in the course of a performance. Within the context of a performance, *egbe* is constantly repeated, but also sometimes reworked. *Esa*, by its very nature is more dynamic, as it involves the continuous process of extemporization and development. The final shape of the performance or composition is ultimately defined by the continuing dialectical engagement between *egbe* and *esa* as shown in Figure I, which presents the formal outline of a composition titled “In Mo D’aKodi,” a song that is framed by series of attributive epithets for the Elemure, the king of Emure town.
As this table shows, *egbe* and *esa* are combined to generate a ternary musical form in which the opening section introduces the principal thematic elements of the piece, while the middle section elaborates on the principal thematic material. The third section introduces new elements that provide a closure to the performance.
Conclusions:
The creative and performance conventions of *olori* and *airegbe* challenge certain assumptions about Yoruba performance. The attitude of the two female groups to the use of the drum is particularly significant in this regard. The drum, in its strong attachment to male musicians, has come to be regarded as an instrument through which gender categories are inscribed into Yoruba musical practice. Its inclusion in traditional ensembles often invests men with considerable power. Emure women performers’ attitude to the use of the drum serves to neutralize this power of the drum and the way in which its use might privilege the male gender. In the *olori* ensemble, women simply assume responsibility for the playing of the drum, ensuring that men are kept away from their ensemble. In *airegbe* music, the drum is prohibited altogether, foreclosing any potential basis for male participation. The dis-gendering of the drum in *olori* music and its neutralization in *airegbe* manifest the agency of a group of women who feel able to cope with the challenges that they face as women without the inclusion of the male gender. One might be tempted to interpret this process of identity construction through male exclusion as a deliberate oppositional move to curtail the power of men. But the response that I kept getting from the women contradicted any notion of oppositional gendering. Nonetheless, this dis-gendering and the neutralization of the drum, though not a strategic oppositional move, are both powerfully symbolic of the desire by these women to take control of their lives as they see it rather than as might be dictated to them by any other social category in the community. The structural features of *airegbe* music, the communal creative approach through which performers of the music work out new pieces, and the ways in which the boundaries of compositional styles are negotiated, varied and re-defined, are performance strategies that are agency-driven. Further, these performance and creative features underline the high level of professionalism that goes into the making of the music, and draws attention to the status of these women as an elite group with considerable cultural and political authority

The role of the two female groups as the main musical groups within key festivals is significant both materially and symbolically. It must be remembered that these two festivals constitute the important public events at which the structures of power and the social and cultural values, which help hold the Emure community together, are renewed and consolidated. The strong presence of these all-female ensembles at these very important festivals draws attention to the status of these women as part of the political elite of the community. In addition, as highlighted in their songs, their performances, rather than
fashioned as mere entertainment, constitute a critical part of the social conversation that takes places at these public events.

The status shift that is inherent in the progression from *olori* to *airegbe*, as displayed during the public performance that I described earlier, also has an equally strong social and political message. The acting-out, through the medium of musical performance, of the mobility between the two social categories of “wife” and “chief” helps to draw attention to the fluid nature of social movement among the women of Emure. Social mobility is dynamic and negotiable. It is not, as shown in this case, encumbered by the factor of gender. Following the mobility inherent in the complementary relationship between *olori* and *airegbe* musical ensembles, the social status of Emure women, like that of their male counterparts, is shaped within an ongoing social process in which individual effort and seniority of age play vital roles. The fluctuating levels of identity that are homologically represented in the musical performance of chiefs (*airegbe*) and that of the king’s wives (*olori*) offer a reflection on the shifting images of the power and status of the female members of the community. The Emure community is organized in a manner that facilitates the elevation of women beyond the domestic space—the often powerless domain of a wife--into positions of social responsibility in the public sphere.

References


