

# 17

## Royal melodies in the palace: a study of Olubadan court music

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### Abstract

*The Yoruba people of South-West Nigeria are renowned for their rich musical culture, which is deeply intertwined with various aspects of life, including festivals, chieftaincy matters, historical events, entertainment and social control. Music plays a vital role at every important stage of life, certain musical genre are specially reserved for royalty both within and beyond the palace. The scholarly studies on Ibadan have explored its history, political significance, and monarchy system, with little attention given to the cultural shifts and innovations in court music over time. This study therefore addresses this gap by examining the evolving dynamics in the musical traditions of the Olubadan palace, focusing on the changes in performance, technological advancements, instrumentation and song form. It also examines the influence of new monarchs, urbanization and acculturation of the musical tradition, using the Diffusion and Innovation Theory as its foundation. The study employs purposive sampling to select respondents. Data were gathered through non-participant observation, group discussions with court musicians and interviews with the Olubadan's former media aide and a member of the royal Aje Ogunguluso II Dynasty. The study highlights the significant cultural changes in the court music. These include shifts in performance timing, technology, remuneration, instrumentation and style. It recommends the training of musicians and improved remuneration to preserve and enhance Ibadan's musical heritage in Ibadan.*

*Keywords: culture, court music, musical tradition, Olubadan, cultural changes*

### Introduction

**C**ourt music is a subsection of traditional music popular within its locality. It is the indigenous music of every society, an integral part of their life. Ajewole (2018) notes that the most significant nature of court music is the historic role of its vocal and instrumental repertoires. Ajewole (2018) opine that court music documents histories and events within a society. This depicts that court musicians are embodiment of history, an aspect of culture that is

transmitted orally. Akpabot (1986) submits that every communal ceremony within and outside the king's domain is incomplete without music since music has the mystical power to soothe a savage beast, to soften rocks bend a knotted oak across all cultural divides in the palace. The status of music within the palace and the community at large remains uncompromised for the undoubted role it plays within the community, thereby functioning in many capacities as an agent of local history, entertaining, social control etc. Music within the palace; structure is part of the daily routine of the palace and for this irrefutable role, traditional rulers, most especially the kings that guide our cultural heritage must do everything possible to preserve. Many scholars such as Akpabot (1986), Okafor (2004), Omojola (2009), Omojola (2006) Ajewole (2008), Ajewole (2018) have written extensively on court musical experiences across cultural divides. Of importance is the study of Ogunyemi (2018) who noted the musical forms in Yorùbá Court music, focusing on Ìgà Ìdúnùgánràn of Lagos State. Notables are the works of Okunade (2010) who did a comparative study of court music in Egba Land. Among others, Omojola (2006) critically surveyed the female court music of the Emure Ekiti, reserved for Oloris (Queens) within the palace. Yet, little or no attention has been given to the studies related to cultural evolutions of court musical experiences in the palace of Olubadan. This study remains significant to the cultural heritage of Ibadan Land and her kingship style.

## Music as Culture.

Anthropology is a social science that studies every aspect of human culture. Culture is a broad and diverse concept that encompasses day-to-day human activities and the totality of humanity in different spheres of life. Anthropology explains how cultures are formed, identifies the elements of cultures that form the structure of such cultures and explains how cultures are associated to generate specific functions for the effective running of the society.

Cultural anthropology is the study of humanity at all times and in all places. It explains humanity's origin, creativity and functions in every society in people's day-to-day activities. There is consensus that people cannot be separated from their cultures. Harris a cultural materialist (1979) asserts that culture is the total manner of life or lifestyle socially acquired by a group of people. It refers to the patterned, repetitive ways of thinking, feeling and acting that are unique to the members of a particular society or segment of society. One aspect of culture is its non-material components including language, codes and signals, music and history. Music, an important aspect of non-material culture, remains an anthropological element understudy by

anthropologist in explaining a particular culture. Music represents a symbol of cultural identity and power. This makes custodians of culture such as the *oba* (King), *emir* (title of a traditional ruler in the North), *obi* (title of a traditional ruler in the Eastern part of the country Nigeria), and chiefs preserves music as a cultural element within the palace structure.

It is worth noting that court music is not only performed by men but sometimes it is also carried out by women only in the palace. Ajewole (2008) gave an example in his study on *Igbatiti* Court Music, which is a musical performance displayed by the *Olori* (queen) of the *Alaafin* (An Imperial Majesty, a first-class king from the West) of Oyo. Ajewole (2008) emphasised the musical style, instrumentation and the importance of the music. Membership is limited to the *Olori* (Queen) of the *Alaafin* and this becomes an identity to the great Oyo kingdom. Omojola (2009: 2–5) also noted that the Ekiti people have a typical female court ensemble in Emure-Ekiti, which is known as the *Olori* ensemble:

These are *orin orori* (songs of the king's wife) 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 the departed ones. This *orin Olori* in Emure consists mainly of singers who also dance, and two instrumentalists, each playing an *agere* drum, a single-headed membranophone drum. The two female drummers are not members of the traditional Yoruba *ayan* (drumming) families, she perfected her drumming skills through regular practice on *agere* and from many years of playing in the *Olori* ensemble.

## Traditional Music in Yoruba Culture

Music is an important aspect of culture that showcases the arts and creative prowess of indigenous people. Traditional music is a form of locally popularised music in a defined community. Court music is a subset of traditional music as well as the indigenous music of any society. It is an integral part of the life of every society. Lasisi (2012) submits that traditional music is a genre created entirely from traditional elements and that it has no stylistic connection with Western music. While tracing the original transmission and evolutionary processes of traditional music, Agu (1990) asserted that the traditional music of a set of people evolves from a corporate communal

experience. It has been handed down from generation to generation and continues expanding and enriching its resources as it evolves.

Okafor (2004) noted that traditional music plays a functional part in all important stages of a person's life, especially birth, puberty, initiation, title-taking, marriage and death. Agu (1990) identified the functions of traditional music as transmitting and encouraging cultural ideals, condemning and discouraging social vices in a culture and serving as a custodian of sociocultural, religious, and traditional lifestyles. Traditional music is popular in traditional institutions due to the indisputable role it plays as mentioned earlier by Agu (1990). The palace is a major traditional institution that preserves the cultural heritage of the people, their language, artwork and music in Yoruba Land. Music is an important part of daily life in the palace, and it is highly reserved for the king and his chiefs. According to Omojola (2006), royal institutions in different parts of Nigeria are known for their traditions of using elaborate court music to entertain royalty and for conducting day-to-day activities in and around the palace. The purpose of court music extends beyond mere entertainment. It is used to announce the arrival of guests; give regular salutes to the king; and perform at festivals connected to the palace, among other duties (Omojola 2006).

## **Court Music as a Subset of Traditional Music**

Court music has been a prominent experience in many African communities especially in the southern region of the Sahara. Virtually, all ethnic groups have a unique form of music that is performed exclusively for royalty, which is characterised by their unique culture which include language, arts and belief systems.

The previous statement explains how and why musical forms, styles, and instruments are cherished and jealously guarded in royal palaces (Ogunyemi 2018). This is particularly true in traditional societies in Nigeria, especially in Yorùbá Land, where towns and villages have their own types of court music genres, despite the influence of westernisation on Africans. The influence of westernisation and artificial intelligence on African culture is evident in some area of Nigeria cultural practices, particularly her music, which has undergone many changes both in practice and content because culture is dynamic and ever-changing. Manuel (1988:22) argued that the transformation of music in Africa has been ongoing since time immemorial. Ethnomusicology is a branch of anthropology that studies music in its cultural context. Prior to colonialism, changes in indigenous music were smaller in scale and were prompted by socio-economic developments in African societies.

Music is an integral part of every society. It is a cultural tool that serves many purposes sacred and secular, in both traditional and urban settings. The Yorùbá's for instance, use music in virtually every aspect of their culture. Music is still one of the most important cultural events in the Yorùbá royal court, especially in Ibadan, the capital city of Oyo State. The king, known as the *Olubadan*, is the custodian of culture and preserves the musical culture of this ancient city located on the edge of Savanna (Eba Odan). However, innovations, inventions, hybridity, and cultural borrowing have implications on the musical practices in the palace of the *Olubadan*, as mentioned earlier. Court music is an integral part of Yorùbá culture. It is performed in all palaces of the Yorùbá kings during palace activities. Laoye (1959) confirmed that the presence of musical activities in the kings' courts, in Yorùbá land is considered an integral part of palace structure and activities. Thus, Ibadan Land is not excluded from its court's musical activities.

## Research Methods

This paper investigates Royal melodies in the palace of *Olubadan* of Ibadan, using the Theory of Diffusion and Innovation as an anchor. The theory of diffusion and innovation was propounded by Everett Rogers in 1962. The theory explains the process of a new idea through progressions of adoption, by different people who participate in the adoption process. The integration of an innovative idea into the mainstream system makes it very difficult for the users to do without it. This theory was used to explain how adoption of new ideas through technology influence, change in office holders, modernization, time and personnel, has conveyed changes in the royal musical culture in the palace of *Olubadan* in terms of practice and performance context. Interviews with a key informant, Alhaji Basiru Amole, the leader of the palace musician was done while a focus group discussion was conducted with members of the palace musicians. The researcher also observed series of performance at the palace scheduled for morning (*Ilu Sise*) and the evening performances respectively in gathering data, which was analysed using content and musical analysis.

## Historical Background of Ibadan Land

Ibadan (Èba-Òdan), meaning the city on the edge of a savannah, was initially established by Lagelu, an Ile-Ifẹ Commander-In-Chief, and happened to be a refugee camp. The city sustained many attacks which brought about the present-day Ibadan founded in 1829 and is now the capital city of Oyo State. Ibadan is not only one of the largest cities in Nigeria but also one of the

fastest growing cities in Africa. It is the seat of political power of the South-Western region of Nigeria.

The monarchy system of the throne is one of the best in all of Yorùbá Land. It is without a tussle for power, whereby once an *Olubadan* joins his ancestors, the next in line to the throne on either side, be it civil or military, ascends the throne. The Nations (2024). Till date, Ibadan Land has sustained its kingship system despite the transitional course, that almost put the ancient city in shambles after the demise of the immediate past Olubadan, Oba Lekan Balogun Aliiwo the 2<sup>nd</sup>. Historians, elders of the Land, and the Oyo State Government, interested in sustaining the legal kingship process to the throne of Olubadan, quickly saved the 'decade' tradition of ascension to the throne by installing the *Olubadan* designate, Oba Akinloye, Owolabi Olakulehin as the 43<sup>rd</sup> *Olubadan*, upon the nomination of the *Olubadan* in council, authenticated by the Governor of the State. Musicians from the city occasionally visit the palace to herald, pay homage to, and salute the king. This practice date back to before Ibadan Land became a city with a beaded crown.

The music tradition in the palace date back to the first *Olubadan*, Oba Okunlola Abass Alesinloye (1930–1946), and has been sustained to the present.

## Classification of music in Olubadan Palace

The court music of Olubadan Palace can be classified into two groups, - functional/entertaining music and occasional music.

### Functional Music

Functional music is the music used on a daily basis to prepare the monarch for the day's activities. The music starts at 9:00 am, and the musicians are expected to be on-site before then. The *kakaki*, which is now represented by a bugle (a valveless trumpet), is used to start the music. The bugle player uses the bugle as a speech surrogate to eulogise the monarch. Thereafter, the king's cantor or *oniraraoba* (palace poet) comes in and chants the eulogy. The texts of the chant are based on the use of allusion and poetic lineage, which are conceived in the style of proverbs or songs. These texts exploit the vocative powers in the name of the *Olubadan*. After a while, the cantor starts singing some traditional songs, which are keyed in by the *alaro* (one who plays a dual gong hit against each other), the *onisekere-aje* (one who plays the traditional gourd rattle), and the *onidundun* (one who plays the talking drum). The musicians often stop the performance at their own discretion or whenever

they feel they have satisfied the monarch.

The same procedure is repeated at 5:00 pm, which signifies the end of the day's functions for the monarch. The performance of the palace griot touches on the historical background of some past monarchs to link the monarch to the past glories of his predecessors. It is important to note that this session may be suspended if the monarch is attending an official function and has not yet returned to the palace.

## Occasional Music

Occasional music is played in the palace during *Jimoh Oloyin*, which takes place on Fridays. Different traditional *dundun* ensembles from the town go to the palace to entertain the monarch. When the musicians arrive, they play their drums and imitate certain Yorùbá phrases to pay homage to the monarch. After a while, the musicians pay homage to the palace musicians, after which they enter the realm of entertainment. The monarch shows his appreciation by sending them a package, which often includes money. It is important that musicians obtain permission from the *Olubadan* if they are unable to meet their Friday schedule.

## Changes in the Musical Experience of Olubadan Palace

The palace is one of the major traditional institutions in Yorùbá Land that preserves the cultural heritage people, which includes language, artwork and music of the people. Music is a daily activity in the palace that is highly reserved for the king and his chiefs. The effect of westernisation on African culture as a result of acculturation is evident in some cultural practices, especially music which has undergone significant changes in both practice and content due to the dynamic and ever-changing nature of culture. Merriam (1964:303) opined that African music cultures have undergone changes through various processes, including innovation, variation and invention. He further stated that the processes of appropriation, hybridity, and cultural borrowing, known as acculturation, have greatly influenced the transformation of traditional music. During the process of transformation, some musical characteristics are preserved while others are discarded or modified in the new cultural context. However, no culture changes completely overnight; the threads of continuity run through every culture. Therefore, change must always be considered against a background of stability. Change and continuity are integral processes in every culture, and they will continue to occur.

Olubadan royal music culture conforms with the above statement,

including performances schedules, following a progressive change observed in her music culture such as technological advancements, compensation, instrumentation, uniform, recruitments, office space, and performance style. Emielu (2018) agrees with the above submission, posed a theory known to be progressive traditionalism. He submits that, no culture remains static and that certain things are bound to experience changes inters of tradition as a result of innovation and modernity. Furthermore, Emielu (2020) further state that acculturation, trade and politics are catalyst that facilitates progressive traditionalism citing Edo highlife music as a case study whereby the performers who compose using element within the locality now incorporate styles and ideas from neighbouring communities and western popular music. The practice of court music at Olubadan Palace changed in terms of schedule, technology and Western influences on the lives of court musicians.

### **Change in Performance Time and Technological Influence**

The early morning performance which used to start at 5:30 am was changed during the reign of *Oba* Emmanuel Adeyemo (Operinde the first, 1993 to 1999). It now begins at 9:00 am.

Alhaji Bashiru Amole, the *Onirara Oba* (palace poet), explained during an oral interview session that the reason for the time shift was due to security concerns. The musicians shifted the morning session to 9:00 am to protect themselves from being robbed or attacked by hoodlums. Another reason for the change in schedule is that, unlike in the past, the distance between the homes of the court musicians and the palace has become so great that musicians would not be able to meet the 5:30 am schedule.

In terms of technological and Western influences on the lives of court musicians, *Onirara Obain* the past, only used his natural voices during performances. However, with the help of technology, the cantor now uses a megaphone, which allows him to project his voice without strain. The traditional *kakaaki* has been substituted with a bugle, which makes it more convenient for the player to perform his duty without stress. Unlike in the past, palace court musicians of the *Olubadan* now have freedom of religion and freedom in their personal lives, and are also given a health package.

### **Western Influence, Changes in the Measures to Maintain court Musicians and Recruitment Process**

In contrast to the past, court musicians are now employed as palace staff and receive a salary. This innovation was introduced by *Oba* Yinusa Bankole Ogundipe (1999–2002). Court musicians further have a general office and



an official vehicle to transport them whenever they need to accompany the *Olubadan*. The monarch also provides the court musicians with transport fare to and from their homes on a daily basis. In the past, court musicians did not dress in uniform or in a dignified manner, which made them look shabby. With the help of civilisation, palace musicians now dress gorgeously and sometimes wear uniforms when they go out with the monarch.

The recruitment process for palace musicians of Olubadan Palace is not precise. In some cases, older musicians transfer their duties to any of their children, extended family members, or relatives who are capable and have been practising the art. Court musicians also adopt talented people within and outside the city of Ibadan, training them to take over their duties in the palace.

During an oral interview session with Adeola Oloko, he was asked about his stance regarding the recruitment process. Oloko serves as both the media aide and personal assistant to the Imperial Majesty *Oba* Saliu Akanmu Adetunji (Aje Ogunguluso I), the immediate past *Olubadan* before the late monarch, *Olubadan* *Oba* lekan Balogun (Ali Okumade II) who just joined his ancestor. Oloko expressed his displeasure with the inadequate recruitment process for court musicians in Olubadan Palace. Oloko further acknowledged the significance of court musicians in the palace, as they embody history and are an integral part of the palace culture of paramount rulers. He stressed that an *oriki* (eulogy) is a vital part of the Yorùbá oral tradition which needs to be preserved, especially in the palace. He explained that an *oriki* reveals the origin of the people, their ancestors, traits, occupation, and deeds of a particular family. When recited well by a proficient person or musician, the eulogy touches the mind of the bearer, often prompting them to give a gift to the person chanting. Court musicians perform functions that make the palace lively and fill it with entertainment.

Oloko concluded that without strategic efforts to train a new generation of palace musicians, the future occupiers of the throne in Yorùbá palaces may not have the privilege of having court musicians, who may play an integral part of the cultural tradition of the palaces. To support his forecast, Oloko recounted a conversation with the secretary to the *Olubadan* in council. The secretary to the Olubadan in council explained that the leader of the court musicians, Alhaji Basiru (the *onirara oba*), died a few months earlier and it took several months to find someone to fill the void. The new leader was unable to deliver what was expected because he could not match the creative prowess of the late *Onirara Oba*, who was known for his mastery of art. The Secretary asserted that the reason for its being difficult to get someone to continue his legacy can be traced to inadequate pay and the poor recognition accorded to

court musicians, despite the significant role they play. Western education has been both a blessing and a serious threat to these traditions. Everybody wants a white-collar job, and even the few talented musicians prefer to promoting themselves on social media platforms, which earns them more respect and greater rewards.

## Classification and Analysis of Songs

Olubadan Palace songs are written in the Ibadan dialect. Although song texts are language behaviour rather than sound, they are an integral part of music, and it is evident that the language used in connection with music differs. African texts cover diverse areas of people's lives including narratives as well as historical, praise, entertainment, philosophical and ritual songs. This study focuses on praise, historical, and entertainment songs.

### Praise Songs

The Olubadan Palace court musicians sing praise songs, usually during the morning session, to awaken the *Olubadan's* spirit and prepare him for the day's activities. Figure 1 shows an example of a praise song.



**Figure 1. *Ki la n f' oba pe*: an example of a praise song. Performance by court musicians, notated by the researcher.**

This song extols the king, reiterating the high esteem in which the people hold him. The text is interpreted with mythical reference to *Aro*, a local dye used to ornament and beautify clothes, and *Osun*, the local ointment that

beautifies the body and it is also used to beautify clothing materials.

## Historical Songs

Historical songs are songs that connect the people with their past glories as well as ancestors. Such songs are sung by the palace court musicians as narrations of the experience of people during the reigns of the past kings as well as general satisfaction of life in Ibadan Land and in particular, Ibadan town. Examples of such songs include:

**OWO ORI DÓDE**

Andante ♩ = 80

O-wo o-ri d'ò-de o d'ò-de o, ba-ba wa lo 'koo san, O-wo o-ri d'ò-de, o d'ò-de o,  
 ba-ba wa lo 'koo san, a - won a-gba ti ko san o won n be fa-ti-mo  
 le. O-wo o-ri d'ò-de, o d'ò-de o, ba-ba wa lo 'koo san.

## Entertainment songs

Palacemusicianssingentertainmentsongs to entertain the king and chiefs in the palace where they visit. Thesame songs are sung when the monarch is on an official outing with the palace court musicians. Figures 2 and 3 provide examples of entertainment songs.

**NI'BADAN NI WON BI WA SI**

♩ = 80

Ni ba dan ni won bi wa si o ni ba dan ni won bi wa si ba ba wa pe lu won lo ni le  
 ba ba wa pe lu won lo ni le ni ba dan ni eh ni ba dan ni won bi wa si.

**Figure 2. *Ni'badan niwon biwa si*: an example of an entertaining song. Musical performance by court musicians, notated by the researcher.**

## IBADAN L'A WAYI O



<i>Iba dan l'a wa yii,</i>	<i>We are in Ibadan,</i>
<i>Iba dan l'a wa yii,</i>	<i>We are in Ibadan,</i>
<i>Olorun ma jee o baje o</i>	<i>May God forbid its destruction</i>
<i>Iba dan l'a wa yii eee.</i>	<i>We are in Ibadan.</i>

**Figure 3.** *Iba dan l'a wa yii o*: an example of an entertainment song. Performance by court musicians. Notated by the researcher.

These songs, and many others, are used by the palace court musicians of the *Olubadan* to entertain the *Olubadan* and his guests in *Olubadan Palace* and at other official events. The songs highlight the cultural aspects of life that are connected to the people being entertained. As shown in Figure 3, entertaining songs are sometimes used as prayers by indigenous people and for the town.



**Figure 4.** From left to right is (1) Oni sekere Oba; (2) Alaro Oba; (3) the researcher; (4) Oni Rara Oba, the leader of the court musicians; (5) Oni kakaaki substituted with a bugle; and (6) the dundun player.

Sometimes, the musicians also sing popular tunes and songs sung by popular artists to encourage, praise and entertain visitors within and outside the palace during their arrival or departure. This music might either be played using the speech surrogacy technique of the talking drum or might be sung.

## KE JE BU NI E BA N WA

Anonymous



<i>Keje bu ni e ba n wa,</i>	<i>just help me get an inexpensive lady</i>
<i>Kejebu ni e ba n wa,</i>	<i>just help me get an inexpensive lady</i>
<i>Emi o folo moge ti o</i>	<i>I don't want a lady</i>
<i>Gbemi mi</i>	<i>that will be too expensive to maintain</i>
<i>Keje bu ni e ba n wa</i>	<i>just help me get an inexpensive lady</i>

Figure 5. *Ke je bu ni e ba n wa*: an example of a popular song which is performed as an entertaining music most especially for visitors around the palace. It is a popular music, now which is being adopted by court musicians to display some level of understanding of what popular music is as well as being able to cater for different categories of audience present, they might be having at a point in time outside their registered repertoires. Performance by Onilu-ola (2024).

## Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined the forms, performance techniques, usage of music and observable changes in the royal music of Olubadan of Ibadan Land. Some of the changes include change in the duration of performance from 5:30 am to 9:00am, representation of the Bugle for Kaakaki, provision of uniform for court musicians when accompany the monarch to functions, the adoption of moveable megaphone by the Onirara Oba, "the palace cantor" to make his work easier and reach out to a wider audience without having to strain his voice. Court musicians in the palace of Olubadan now has an office space to themselves, a modern idea compared to business as usual when they sit at the entrance of the palace without an office space. Also, the adoption of

popular music as part of their repertoires is worthy of note, most times used to welcome visitors suspected to be of the contemporary age.

The recruitment and continuity of court music were also examined. The recruitment of musicians is imprecise. A performer may transfer his duty to any of his children, relatives or family members. On the other hand, if a palace musician is unable to present a family member, child or relative to succeed him, the society may adopt a capable musician from within. Palace court musicians are now being supported with an official car to transport them during their official duties alongside the monarch, with regular salaries. The study recommends that the recruitment process for the palace musicians of the *Olubadan* should be structured and improved on. This would ensure that the musical art is being learnt by upcoming employed court musicians who can support the senior musicians and ensure continuity and preservation. Trained musicians should also be employed to ensure proper documentation.

Training students on indigenous musical instruments should be embedded in schools to ensure the continuity of general music practice and prevent cultural heritage from extinction. Traditional court musicians should be taught the techniques of playing African musical instruments in order to pass down such techniques to upcoming generations as this will preserve the original form of learning.

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