



An Ethnomusicological Study of Palace Rhythms in the Palace of the Olúbàdàn of Ìbàdàn Land

Owolabi, A. T.

Department of Music Technology

The Federal Polytechnic, Ilaro

Ogun State, Nigeria

adeolu.owolabi@federalpolyilaro.edu.ng

Adesioye, A. O.

Department of Music Technology

The Federal Polytechnic, Ilaro

Ogun State, Nigeria

Abstract

Southwestern Nigerian Yorùbá musical traditions feature distinctive drum rhythms shaped by history, acoustics, and social function. Using Alan Merriam's tripartite model linking sound, behavior, and concepts, this study examines the dùndún ensemble, a central musical institution in Yorùbá monarchical culture. In the Olúbàdàn's palace, a specific rhythmic pairing of dùndún and sèkèrè-ajé operates as a key symbol of royal authority and has developed into a recognizable style used for both social and ritual purposes. Palace musicians, highly skilled performers devoted to the royal lineage, improvise extensively and preserve genealogical knowledge through performance. Despite this rich heritage, palace rhythms rarely appear in popular recordings and are increasingly at risk of fading from public consciousness. Through ethnomusicological and analytical methods, this study explores the musical structure, performance practice, and socio-political significance of the dùndún-sèkèrè ensemble. Interviews with palace musicians reveal tensions in cultural perception, particularly the rejection of palace rhythms in churches due to their ritual associations. Findings affirm that these diverse rhythmic traditions remain vital to royal identity. The study concludes by advocating broader acceptance, cultural sustainability, and improved recognition and welfare for palace musicians across Nigeria.

Keywords: Ethnomusicological Study, Ìbàdàn Land, Olúbàdàn, Palace, Palace Rhythms



Introduction

The role of music in royal palaces in southwestern Nigeria has been observed to be diversified. Unarguably, music occupies a pivotal role in documenting palace history, and even the cultural heritage of the Yoruba people is lively secured in the rhythms of the royal ensemble. In the Yorùbá worldview, it is believed that a king without palace music is a silent monarch. Hence, palace music in the Yorùbá monarchical kingdoms is indispensable. Although the musical practices differ from palace to palace in terms of the specific royal ensemble, rhythm, and poetic rendition of the king. The palace of the Olúbàdàn serves not merely as a residence but as the acoustic epicenter of one of Africa's largest indigenous cities. The rhythmic tradition represents more than musical tempo; it is a royal signature, a spiritual and social signal. Within the walls of the palace, the musical tradition of *dùndún-sèkèrè* acts as a surrogate for speech, announcing the arrival of dignitaries through poetic rendition of the person's official title and cognomen.

Ìbàdàn history is rooted in military prowess and a democratic chieftaincy system. Consequently, its palace music and the system of king installation are distinct compared to those of the neighboring royal institutions like Ọyọ, Ògbómòsọ and Abẹ̀òkúta. The rhythm of the Olúbàdàn is characterized by its narrative function. It is a tool for historical documentation. The drummers, often from the Ayan lineage, are the walking archives of the city who are equipped with traditional knowledge of drumming, using complex meters to recite the praise poetry of the reigning king and his predecessors. The Olúbàdàn ensemble involves the *iyá'lù* as the master drum, followed by the *kẹríkẹrí* (also called *aguda*), *isájú*, *àtẹlé*, *gúdúgúdú*, *sèkèrè-ajé* and *aro*. While previous scholarship examined Yorùbá court music broadly, little attention is paid to the specific rhythmic organization, ensemble interaction, and performance structure of the Olúbàdàn palace tradition. Much of the existing literature focuses on the history of the Ìbàdàn monarchy or the lyrics of the songs but often ignores the techniques or the organization of the rhythm, the polyrhythmic interlocking of the *iyá'lù* alongside its consorting drums. Furthermore, as popular music like *fújì* and *jùjú* influences the Ìbàdàn city, the original palace rhythms become gradually eroded.

This research paper aims to bridge this gap by conducting an ethnomusicological study of the specific rhythmic patterns captured in the Olúbàdàn's palace. While the internal musical tradition within the precinct of the palace forms the scope of this study, the study set to answer the following research questions:

- How many instruments form the Olúbàdàn ensemble?
- What are the general characteristics of the palace rhythm?
- What are the specific rhythmic motifs that distinguish the Olúbàdàn's court from other Yorùbá palaces?
- How do the musicians organize themselves in performance?
- What is the specific determinant of song selection as well as the change of rhythm?



Theoretical Framework

This study integrates Alan Merriam's (1964) Tripartite Model of Ethnomusicology and Bode Ọmọjọlà's (2012) framework of musical agency to investigate the cultural sustainability of the *dùndún-ẹ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀* court ensemble within the Olúbàdàn's palace in Ibadan.

Conceptual and Ideological Dynamics (Merriam)

While classical scholarship often privileges the structural, acoustic, and linguistic speech surrogate features of the *iyá'lù* (Euba, 1990), or the descriptive physical staging of court performances (Ọlánípẹ̀kun, 2024), Merriam's model demands equal interrogation of the conceptual/ideological domain. This study moves beyond sound and behavior to examine the contemporary ideological ecosystem of the urban palace. It posits that the vulnerability of the *dùndún-ẹ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀* ensemble stems not from internal structural decay, but from external friction caused by westernised religious institutions and systemic modern media exclusion.

Musical Agency and Structural Sustainability (Ọmọjọlà)

To account for these external pressures, this study expands upon Ọmọjọlà's (2012) conceptualization of musical agency and identity evolution. While Euba (1990) provided a macro-historical foundation of *dùndún* across Yorùbáland, and Ọlánípẹ̀kun (2024) mapped broad regional court spaces, this framework isolates the micro-dynamics of the Olúbàdàn court during installation rituals. By synthesizing Merriam's ideological component with Ọmọjọlà's framework, this study argues that traditional genres falter when they fail to transition into contemporary media landscapes. Consequently, safeguarding these royal insignias requires moving beyond passive historical documentation; it demands reframing cultural sustainability as a direct function of the socio-economic welfare and agency of the palace musicians themselves.

Research Methodology

The Olúbàdàn's palace was visited with audio-visual recording equipment, and a structured interview was conducted among the palace musicians. The research involved a combination of formal questioning and participant observation. Interviews were conducted with the palace musicians, who were aged between 30 and 70 years. To clarify, the researcher rephrased any question that seemed unclear to the respondents. The fieldwork emphasized the history of the *dùndún-ẹ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀* ensemble and its social structure, alongside the role it plays in the day-to-day activities of the palace. The process of instrument making and related myths or taboos were also captured in the interview. Alhaji Àyànrìnplá and Alhaji Rasak Ọlátúnjì, who were the group leaders, provided extensive insights as it concerns the subject; while Mr. Àyànlẹ̀yẹ, by extension, supplied information regarding ritual observance of *dùndún* tradition, and this



information was further substantiated in the physical welcoming of a visitor during the interview. The welcoming performance was also recorded to capture authentic musical and choreographed dance movements. To corroborate the evidence supplied by the palace musicians during the interview, the researcher physically participated in the installation event of new chiefs, and this further enriched the data collection process through the direct observation method.

Findings

Structural and Rhythmic roles

The findings from the respondents showed that the *dùndún-sẹ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀* ensemble is a combination of different instruments that work in rhythmic and melodic synergy. The first is the *dùndún* family, and the other is the *sẹ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀-àjé* family. As a unique musical style, it comprises an hourglass-shaped tension drum equipped with jingling bells, notably called “*iyá’lù*” which is the lead drum in the ensemble and is committed to the responsibility of esoteric communication, rendering praises, improvisation, and distribution of rhythmic patterns to its followers. It is played by hanging the strap on the player’s shoulder while the player positions himself by squatting. As the player beats the drum with one hand, the other hand is busy manipulating the tensioning thongs to generate different musical tones.



Figure 1. *Iya Ilu* Drum Pattern

Kẹ̀ríkẹ̀rì/Aguda: *kẹ̀ríkẹ̀rì* is next in rank to the *iyá’lù* in the ensemble. In most cases, it is usually tied to performance to provide metronomic rhythms; sometimes the rhythm is observably monotonic. On rare occasions (depending on the performance context) when untied, it doubles the rhythmic role persistently as laid by the *iyá’lù* to provide a robust/more acoustic resonance. While *kẹ̀ríkẹ̀rì* drum can be used interchangeably with *iyá’lù*, it can also be played with *kòngó* stick and supported by the palm. This is where the popular Yorùbá statement was generated “*ìgbájú-ìgbámú ni kẹ̀ríkẹ̀rì nbá r’òde*”, meaning “*kẹ̀ríkẹ̀rì* is played in the public domain through serious slappings”.



Figure 2. *kẹ̀ríkẹ̀rì* drum

Omele isájú and Àtẹ̀lé: These are accompanying drums with a smaller hourglass shape, traditionally referred to as male and female. *Omele isájú*, being the male, leads the *àtẹ̀lé*– the female. In fact, from the



Yorùbá worldview, *ìsájú* means a leader, frontliner, and *àtẹ̀lé* means a follower. In performance, the *ìsájú* is tied and tuned to a very high frequency while the *àtẹ̀lé* is tuned to a frequency lower than *ìsájú* at about 32.03hertz (*this was measured in the acoustic laboratory through a frequency analyzer*) to create pitch variation. Both drums function primarily through a responsorial style and efficiently play ostinato and hocket rhythms that fill the background space and reinforce the melody of the other instruments. While the *ìsájú* establishes a specific rhythmic foundation, the *àtẹ̀lé* responds to it, creating a balanced, melodic speech-rhythm which characterizes African music.

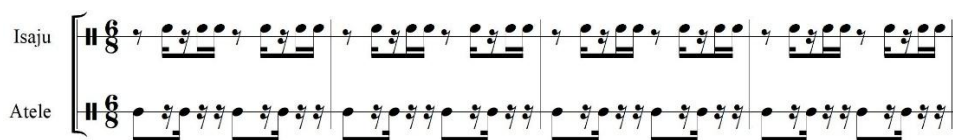


Figure 3. *Melodic Speech-Rhythm*

Gúdúgúdú: *Gúdúgúdú* is a fascinating drum that holds a central and indispensable position within the ensemble. It is versatile and can assume both a leading and a supporting role. Structurally, *gúdúgúdú* is somewhat hemispherical in shape with a black wax placed at the center of its surface and fitted with unmanipulable tensioning thongs that encircle its wooden frame, along with a ring-shaped metal component known culturally as *kúsanrín* attached at its base. The black wax known as *ida*, plays a crucial role in shaping and enriching its tonal quality. In performance, it is hung across the player's neck and played using a pair of beaters crafted from an antelope membrane (*awọ ẹtu*). Beyond its musical engagement, *gúdúgúdú* carries a deep ritual significance. During ritual sacrifice dedicated to *Àyàn-Àgalú*, the rituals are exclusively prepared and processed on the *gúdúgúdú* drum for appeasement or petition.



Figure 4. *Gudúgúdú drum Pattern*

Sẹ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀-ajé: Among many musical instruments of the Yorùbá people, *sẹ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀-ajé* is evidently ubiquitous. It is an instrument of people, especially people of high status. It is portable and easily accessible. In *dùndún-sẹ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀* ensemble, *sẹ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀-ajé* players are between three and five because they are the chorus singers that turn the speech melo-rhythms of the *ìyá'lù* into artistic singing. This suggests their active engagement in performance. As they play the instruments, they sing alongside. *Sẹ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀-ajé* is played by hand shaking, palm beating, or finger fisting. And sometimes at the height of performance/excitement, the player may decide to throw it in the air and catch it to show his virtuosity. While the *sẹ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀-ajé* acts as a melodic shaker that generates a steady, driving rhythm, the mood of the overall rendition can be noticed through its players.

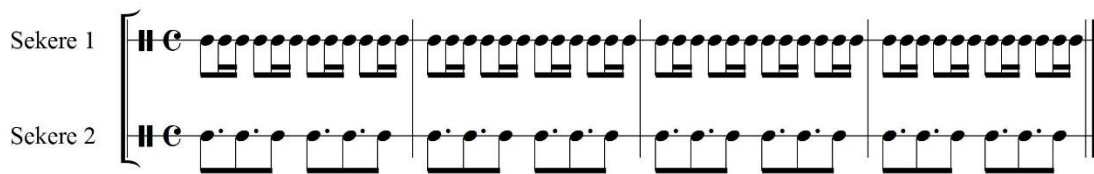


Figure 5. *Sèkèrè Rhythm*

Aro (metal clapper): *Aro* is a pair of two iron rings with curved handles. Each ring contains about three to five small internal bulbs that help to create a distinct rattling sound when shaken. It is not as common as *sèkèrè*. In *dùndún-sèkèrè* ensemble, *aro* provides a unique sonic layer, supplying a persistent metronomic, rhythmic pulse when the two pieces are struck together. It serves to enhance the overall musical texture. The *aro* musician typically doubles as a vocalist within the group. Beyond its musical role, *aro* could be gently shaken as a form of greeting to prominent people. It is specially crafted by blacksmiths. Like *sèkèrè*, *aro* belongs to the class of idiophone instruments.



Figure 6. *Aro Rhythm*



Figure 7. *The Aro*

Discussion

Dùndún-Sèkèrè ensemble in Olubadan's palace

Among many traditional musical genres found in Yorùbá land, this author, during fieldwork, discovered *dùndún-sèkèrè* as the main musical tradition with myriad functions in the palace of Olúbàdàn. These are initially separate instruments and now culturally fused through palace engagement to form a unique musical genre that has become indispensable and functionally serves as the bedrock of any activity



that unfolds in the palace. Upon research investigation and as also corroborated by the respondents, it was discovered that the Olúbàdàn's musical landscape is organized into three tiers: The official musicians who are daily, mobile, and salaried musicians, the weekly musicians who perform on Fridays of the week, and the occasional musicians who are ceremonial. Their overall musical performances or engagement within the precinct of the palace are conceived as the palace music. Beyond entertainment, these groups act as oral historians and keepers of the palace's cultural paraphernalia. All the song compositions and arrangements, as well as the construction of the regalia ensemble, were their brainchild. Although the indigenous knowledge system of the *dùndún-sẹ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀* tradition was passed down orally to them by their forefathers through stage observation and imitation.

The performance dynamics of the three musical groups were thoroughly observed during chieftaincy installations on August 23, 2021, at the Olúbàdàn's palace. The official musicians were the group who integrated directly into the installation rituals. Their performance featured a fusion of slow and fast tempos with a heavy emphasis on logogenic melodic nature (melody shaped by speech tones), notably vocalizing the congratulatory song "*O m'óyè yí jẹ ná, ìwonà ìwonpápá ìwonà*" (you truly earned the traditional title that befits you) as a means to felicitate and welcome the chief into his/her new traditional office. Although restricted access to the inner ritual scene limited deeper analysis, the music remained audible from the perimeter. The second group positioned near the installation site was to herald the would-be chiefs' arrival and departure. Their performance followed a structured poetic rendition, "*A tí n'retí rẹ, kábò, sé dǎa dǎa lo dé*", (you're gently welcome! we've been expecting you, hope you arrived well?), and because of their limited time, they immediately shifted to the rendition of his praise poetry (*oríkí*). While the *iyá'lù* musician handled the lyrical eulogies on the drum, the *sẹ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀-ajé* musicians immediately chorused it and the rest of the ensemble maintained steady ostinato rhythms. The third group, though uninvited, are volunteered street musician with passion for culture. These patriotic, virtuoso drummers performed within the palace space to felicitate with the new chiefs and earn patronage. They specifically accompanied the newly installed chiefs out of the palace with the celebratory chant: "*Oyè náà kó'lée wà, ódì kóró*" meaning "The traditional title has come home to us, and is here to stay"

Oye naa koole wa odi koro



Figure 8. *Dùndún-sẹ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀ melody*



Because the event requires a beehive of activities, the musical performance unearths special information peculiar to the individuals as well as the palace in general. Both past and current history are well preserved in the *dùndún-sèkèrè* repertoires.

According to one of the respondents (the *gúdúgúdú* player) he established that: “Lààrò tía bá kòkò dé s’ààfin, áá kòkò sẹ̀ ilù láti fi kí Ọba” meaning that “upon our early morning arrival at the palace, it is our sacred tradition to first sound the drums in homage, our rhythmic salutation to the king”

This they do with solemn declaration, playing and vocalizing “Èrù Ọba ni mo bà, Ọba tó” (I reverence the king, for he is supreme) as an intro before the main performance commences. This is constant for the early morning sacred invocation for the king. This solemn spirit-filled tune will be first dictated by the *iyá’lù*, with the rest of the ensemble gently responding at the same time in a rhythmic chorus. After this salutation, they transition into performance, rendering a series of melodic chants and rhythms designed to invigorate the king for the day’s activities.

Ojumo Ire Ni



Figure 9. Musical example 2 of *Dùndún-sèkèrè* melody

A defining characteristic of music is its capacity to soothe the spirit and inspire hope. The *dùndún-sèkèrè* music performed at dawn are infused with poignant prayers, providing the king with a spiritual foundation for his day. Because the music follows the natural tonal inflections of the Yorùbá language, it becomes logogenic, where the melodic contours perfectly mirror and amplify the tune of the spoken word.

Bi Mope se n'pe



Figure 10. Musical example 3 of *Dùndún-sèkèrè* melody



In the repertoire of the palace musicians, referring to the Olúbàdàn as “*mópe*”, they are invoking a potent blessing for longevity. It is a melodic wish for long life, transforming the performance into a petition for the king’s lasting existence.

While the simultaneous singing and drumming constitutes the artistic form, the *iyá’lù* known as the cantor and/or pacesetter would lay a particular rhythm and the troupe would join immediately playing their peculiar rhythmic patterns.

Despite the musician’s substandard academic background, they are very proficient and consummate with an ability to create on the spur-of-the-moment. Their long time in practice grant them the knowledge of esoteric communication, performance dexterity and spontaneous manipulation. With exceptional memory and seasoned artistry, they possess capacity to adapt and set any subject matter to rhythm and melody comfortably.

The *dùndún-ṣẹ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀* melody is short, poetic and repetitive, structurally pentatonic and mostly conjunctive, consisting of composition materials including proverbs, chronicles and praises peculiar to the reigning king and paramount chiefs. Often times, it follows call and response form to emphasize certain qualities within the performance context.

System 1:

Iy.L. $\text{A-de-wo-lu O-si O-lu-ba-dan A-de-wo-lu o-mo Po-po}$

Vox. $\text{A-de-wo-lu O-si O-lu-ba-dan}$

System 2:

Iy.L. $\text{o-la E-se-len-si A-la-nu me-kun-nu}$

Vox. $\text{A-de-wo-lu o-mo Po-po - o-la}$

System 3:

Iy.L. $\text{L'o-mo Po-po - o-la.}$

Vox. $\text{E-se-len-si A-la-nu me-kun-nu L'o-mo Po-po - o-la.}$

Figure 11. Musical example 4 of *Dùndún-ṣẹ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀* melody



The *dùndún-sẹ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀* repertoire of the Olúbàdàn often centers around syncopated simple and compound meters, especially 6/8 and 4/4 meters are mostly identified, providing the structural direction of vocal melodies, instrumental accompaniment, as well as dance movement.

The *dùndún-sẹ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀* musicians of the Olúbàdàn possess vast specialised compositions channeled towards a specific royal function. The immediate environment shapes the selection of song, and the specific drum rhythm will be infused into it to create a symmetrically balanced performance. The same is also a determining factor for social organization. The musicians do not just interplay; they are bound by the social structure of their performance and maintain high artistic standards. Sometimes, they could begin with an extolment, usually a simple chant phrase serving to praise the king. This will be rendered by the *iyá'lù*, and the *sẹ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀-ajé* musicians who are the vocalists, will verbalize it. The *sẹ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀-ajé* players don't just provide a steady pulse; they play a counter motif that accents the off-beat more aggressively than in other courts.

While strict protocols prohibit the general public's access to the king's private quarters, the musicians occupy a liminal space of privileged entry. During performance, they are granted entry into the restricted sanctum and still maintain direct gaze with the king without violating any sacred traditional rules.

Court music is constant in royal institutions, and each royal kingdom possesses her peculiar rhythmic tradition. The court of Olúbàdàn of Ìbàdànland is distinguished by several specific rhythms and melodies that are exclusively peculiar, reflecting the city's unique history as a military camp rather than an ancient ancestral kingdom. The specific rhythmic motifs that distinguish the Olúbàdàn's palace from other royal kingdoms include:

- The "Ibadan Mesi Ogo" signature: This music tune characterizes the Ìbàdàn metropolitan area as a unique city with a nonhereditary throne and often mimics the syllabic structure of the city's praises through the *dùndún-sẹ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀* ensemble.
- The Dominance of specialized Rhythmic pattern: Unlike the Ọyọ tradition, which favors *gangan* pattern, and the Ìjẹbú kingdom, which favors the *agbá* pattern. The Olúbàdàn court is distinguished by a strong use of *ẹ̀tíkẹ̀*, *gánnà* and *jalansín* dance rhythmic motifs. *Ẹ̀tíkẹ̀*, also used interchangeably with *ẹ̀tíkẹ̀tì* is a royal dance characterized by slow movement that exhibits ostinato rhythm on *sẹ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀-ajé*. *Gánnà* style moves directly with the syncopated strokes of the *dùndún* drum, characterized by specific movement of hands and legs. *Jalansín*, on the other hand, is mostly technical; it constitutes a dignified fast tempo employing staccato in order to portray the iconic ancestral warriors in the rhythm because Ìbàdàn city was founded by warriors from various backgrounds. When the Olúbàdàn is about to speak or move, there is a specialized rhythm on the *omele* drum. The rhythm is known as *Òsùbà*. It is characterized by high-tensioned rhythmic rolls to create an atmosphere of urgency.



Dundun-Sekere Ensemble



Figure 12. Musical example 5 of *Dùndún-ṣẹ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀* rhythm

Conclusion

This study investigates the palace rhythms of the Yorùbá people, specifically examining their cultural significance in sustaining indigenous heritage. By making use of primary data collected from the hereditary palace musicians, the research explores how the *dùndún-ṣẹ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀* ensemble serves as the primary rhythmic tradition within the Olúbàdàn's palace. This musical style functions not merely as entertainment but as a symbolic regalia that epitomizes royal authority, power, and status. In the court of Olúbàdàn, the *dùndún-ṣẹ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀* is indispensable. It serves a multidimensional role. Acting as a conduit for esoteric communication, facilitating sacred rituals, and announcing the arrival of dignitaries. Furthermore, the ensemble serves as a vehicle for chanting praises, recounting the lineage and achievements of the king and his paramount chiefs.

The performance structure of *dùndún-ṣẹ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀* is characterized by the tight integration of vocals and melody and percussive rhythms with a strong emphasis on textual interpretation. The melodies are typically short, poetic, and repetitive, facilitating oral transmission. The music is fundamentally pentatonic in nature and primarily conjunctive. A call-and-response form is often employed to create a dynamic engagement and emphasize specific thematic elements. As the custodians of the oral repertoire and cultural paraphernalia of the palace, these musicians are both the composers and the craftsmen of their instruments. However, their prestigious status comes with a socio-economic paradox. While they enjoy consistent financial support from the palace, unlike itinerant street drummers, their exclusive commitment



to royal service restricts external engagements. This professional exclusivity limits their potential for broader commercial earnings but preserves the sanctity of the palace tradition.

The findings of this study contribute largely to the Ethnomusicological discourse regarding royal music traditions in Yoruba urban centers. To prevent the erosion of these authentic cultural expressions, there is an urgent need for scholars and concerned cultural stakeholders to prioritize the formal documentation of African oral traditions. Preserving these rhythms is essential to ensuring that the richness of Yorùbá heritage remains vibrant for future generations.

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