

Ihafa: A Journal of African Studies 8: 1

June 2016, 199-217

Vision of Ancestorhood and Apotheosis in Alternative Yoruba Music

Abiodun Bello
University of Lagos

Abstract

The Yoruba world is the totality of the tripartite connection of the worlds of the dead, the living, and the unborn. These three spheres and phases also correspond to the past, the present and the future, respectively. The living are always in awe of the dead and revere them, while the dead are believed to possess the ability to (re)visit the world of the living through reincarnation. The present study is based on the claim that, while aspects of the indigenous Yoruba belief system such as ancestorhood and apotheosis are getting lost on the millennial generation of Yoruba persons, the alter-native Yoruba music genre provides a viable evidence of how elements of Yoruba folk culture are being preserved by culturally and ideologically conscious members of the same generation. Using the Cultural Theory framework, the study demonstrates the possibility of mainstreaming Yoruba cultural studies into the larger corpus of canonical theories in global cultural studies.

Keywords: ancestorhood; apotheosis; alter-native music; Yoruba; ideology; millennial; stylistic; culture

Abiodun Bello
Department of Linguistics, African and Asian Studies
University of Lagos, Akoka Lagos, Nigeria
Phone: +234 703 137 7993; Email:biobell2000@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Alter-native Yoruba music, as conceptualised in this study, refers to Yoruba songs that reflect the nature of external cultural influences that have been brought upon the artistes that produce them, thereby indicating the nature and extent of alteration or *alterity* identifiable in the Yoruba personality both physically and cognitively. In the case of the artistes selected for this study, the level of alterity and external influence brought upon the individual artiste can be seen in the fact some of them are of racially mixed parentage as well as transnationals, that is having multi-local global residence and in some case double or multiple citizenship (Forna, 2017). Therefore, the scope of the analysis in this study covers only works selected from the alter-native music opuses of four Yoruba artistes relevant to the subject matter of ancestorhood and apotheosis. The artistes are Bùkólá Elemide, also known as Àsá (born of Yoruba parents in France and raised in Nigeria); Adégòkè Òdúkòyà, also known as Adé Bantu (born in London of a German mother and a Yoruba father, grew up in Nigeria and Germany); Funṣò Ògúndípè, who leads the Ayétòrò band (born and raised in Lagos by Yoruba parents from Ilèṣà, Osun State) and Bísádé Ológundé (also known as Lágbájá, born of Yoruba parents in Lagos, but now now shuttles between Nigeria and Manhattan, New York).

Furthermore, the Yoruba universe is a numinous composite of the tripartite worlds of the living, the dead, and the unborn. The Yoruba, like many Africans in Sub-Saharan Africa, are often seen to maintain a close connection with their progenitors who could be dead or separated in time and space. Often, Yoruba parents who have become ancestors on account of their death are sometimes *elevated* by their children or community to the status of deity. This is usually in consideration of their extraordinary existence and contribution to their community while alive. While it appears that cultural knowledge

such as this seems to be getting eroded and worn as more alien civilisations encroach upon the African, and indeed the Yoruba psyche, it is interesting to note that an alter-native music form is seen to be preserving this aspect of Yoruba cultural existence. This, evidently, is partly owing to the fact that the artistes of the music form are themselves ideologically and culturally conscious.

2. Summary of Relevant Literature

Indeed, the world of the living, representing the present in temporal sense, typically maintains a profound sense of nostalgia with the world of the dead, representing the past in the temporal sense (Noret, 2008). Hence, it is in this sense that the Yoruba *egúngún* is not an art for its own sake. Ancestor cult such as the Yoruba *egúngún* is an iconic representation of personal and collective relations with the past (Idowu, 1975; Okediji, 1997; Noret, 2008). Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) is, for example, a dramatic interpretation of the numinous connection of the worlds of the living, the dead and the unborn. The three realms are interdependent in a continuous cycle of existence, thereby creating cosmic balance and equilibrium at all times in the people's socio-cultural existence and indeed their universe.

Within this numinous cycle, 'heaven' or *òrun* is more of an ever-abiding transcendental consciousness than an apocalyptic and paradisiac destination as found in the religious narratives of Abrahamic religions. In this numinous cycle, ancestors are believed to exist alongside or in the manner of gods or deities, so that material existence and immateriality exist side by side (Idowu, 1975; Ojo, 1966). The *egúngún* tradition, both in its sacred and secular interpretations, is a testament to how this belief has continued to be preserved among the Yoruba people. It is against this background that alter-native Yoruba

music is found to have been able to preserve this very aspect of the Yoruba culture and philosophy in its artistic creations.

Irele (1975) offers a critical basis for understanding how the Yoruba folk tradition source provides and constitutes a whirlpool of artistic possibility and preferences from which the individual Yoruba artist re-creates an original artistic object – a piece of music, novel, drama, etc. – from his artistic choice(s). Hence, there is sometimes a gradual intra-generational and inter-generational shift observable in the transmogrification of the originary Yoruba imagination through and into different media, either through the native or imperial linguistic medium or a combination of both.

3. Methodology

Data for the study were collected through interview and direct observation methods, complemented with library and archival literature. The researcher interviewed and observed live performances of a cross section of the artistes under study. Their artistic recordings were afterwards subjected to interpretative analysis and discussion.

The study is interpreted within the Cultural Theory framework with primary focus on Yoruba cultural studies. The Yoruba artistes that are selected for the study represent a cross section of ideologically conscious Yoruba artistes with their music tradition existing on a stage considered marginal to popular mainstream of its time. Hence, the choice of Cultural Theory as a framework which seeks to highlight the ideological significance of marginal or peripheral cultures or subcultures existing in relation to corresponding dominant cultures or ideologies.

4. Yoruba Ancestorhood and Apotheosis

The Yoruba, wherever they may be around the world, have maintained a unified body politic, so that their philosophy and lived experience cohere regardless of time and space. In this consideration, the Yoruba masquerade is understood to be symbolic of both rejuvenation and nostalgia at once. In other words, the present maintains a strong and ever-abiding tie with the past. A dead parent, upon his or her death, assumes the status of an ancestor. Also, death is believed to hold the capacity to make the younger sibling an ‘elder’ of the living elderly if the former dies first; hence, the Yoruba saying *ó fì ikú sàgbà mi* (he/she becomes older than I am on account of early death).

Similarly, children maintain a long-lasting relationship with their parents, dead or alive and dead parents are believed to visit their living progeny in their dreams in order to communicate vital information with the living relatives. However, a situation of apotheosis occurs when a person, after his or her death, is elevated onto the status of a god, especially by their immediate community in consideration of their good works and contributions to their natal society or land of sojourn while alive.

Interestingly, this cultural phenomenon has come to be acknowledged and transmuted as well as preserved into the corpus of alter-native Yoruba music. In this form, it has also become a leitmotif, a stylistic recurrence which indexes its cultural significance as being worthy to be preserved by a millennial and ideologically conscious generation of Yoruba music artistes. For instance, Bantu’s *I’m Waiting* provides a reference that ancestor worship is indeed about consciousness of the ever-abiding presence of the dead especially one’s progenitors:

(1) Father,
Mother,
Forgive me
Of the times that I may lose my faith
I'm trying to be strong
But the world is falling apart
I'm trying to find the light
Be patient with me
Give me your blessings...
(Bantu, *I'm Waiting*)

By racial and physical identity, Ade Odukoya is the son of a Yoruba father and a German mother. He lost his father at a tender age¹ and now lives in Lagos where he coordinates the Bantu band shuttling between Nigeria and Germany. Hence, separated from his parents by time and space, the artiste, represented by the male persona in this song, still does not lose touch with his progenitors. Having the consciousness that there is no barrier between his him and his parents, he appeals to them to bear with his current state or station in life, especially for 'the times that I may lose my faith'. In actual fact, and as Ade Bantu explained to the researcher during an interview, the artiste has renounced his Christian faith as handed to him by his parents and has established a spiritual rebirth in *Ifá* religion. He 'loses' his *alien* Christian faith to embrace his authentic *folk* or native religion. The sense of nostalgia which he feels prompts him to inform his dead but yet abiding parents of how much of loneliness there is in the world. Thus, it is against the

¹ The artiste provided the researcher with a body of musical works recorded by and about him, including a biographical documentary on him titled *Yes I Am* which details the account of his life as narrated by him, his German mother and other Afro-German artistes of similar social identity.

background of this new-found self-discovery and spiritual re-awakening that the ancestor consciousness of the male voice in this song can be better appreciated as being well preserved through the art of alter-native Yoruba music.

Other critical examples of the preservation of the ancestorhood consciousness are found in Asa's 'So Beautiful', Asa and Ruth Tafebe's 'Mother' and Lagbaja's 'Abami'. The example of Asa's 'So Beautiful' shows, for instance, how the figure or personage of *mother* is not only idealised but also idolised in the Yoruba consciousness, as observed in:

(2) Èmi n wá mama kan
Ta ló rí yèyè yen?
Màmá mi ò rojú rí
And that's why I'm loving you

Nítorí omọ
Ó jìyà nílẹ̀ ọkọ
Màmá mi ò rojú rí
And that's why I'm loving you
Oh oh oh oh, la lalalala

*I'm in search for a woman
Who has seen that mother?
Mother has never known respite²
That's why I'm loving you*

*On account of her brood
She bore sufferings in her husband's house
Mother has never known respite
That's why I'm loving you*

² This can also translate as 'Mother has never been languid towards work'.

Oh oh oh oh, la lalalala

While the song is in celebration of the mother and motherhood, it is understandable that the artiste, through the song-persona, takes time to idealise the figure and role of the mother in her life. However, there comes a point in the song when the artiste moves from a mere idealisation of *mother* as an immanent figure to an idolisation of her, as noted in the following verse from Asa's track titled *So Beautiful*:

(3) È bá mi kírà fún Màmá à mi
Òrìṣà bí iyá o
Kò sí láyé

*Come help salute my Mother
There is no deity as the mother
Upon the earth*

In other words, the mother's position transcends that of a biological or filial figure, as she is now to be seen and appreciated in the manner and role of a deity, *òrìṣà*. Hence, the personae in both Bantu's *I'm Waiting* and Asa's *So Beautiful* appeal to their ancestors as their *heaven*. *Òrun* in Yoruba belief refers to one's dead parents and not the Christian 'heaven' in the transcendental and apocalyptic sense. Thus, the mother in Asa's *So Beautiful* is *so beautiful* that her true beauty earns her a status as a deity, *òrìṣà*. Similarly, in the song 'Mother' which features Aşa and Ruth Tafebe, her alter-native contemporary from Ivory Coast, the mother is elevated to a pedestal of a fragile being that must not be tampered with, disregarded or disrespected, especially as Aşa opens the song with the expression:

(4) Èyin-ojú mi ni Màmá...

The apple of my eye is Mother...

or

The 'egg' of my eye is Mother...

Then, in a stylistic alternation of voices, Ruth Tafebe moves on to say:

(5) Everything I do in her name,
I do to get my blessing;
Every time I cry out her name,
I do get my answers...

This bold affirmation by the song-persona acknowledges the mother as a being, a deity, worth praying to with an assurance of the efficacy of such a prayer. And, at another point in the song:

(6) Asa: Yèyè, Yèyè, takùn wálẹ̀
Àlùṣòinṣòinkíṣòin
Gbogbo ayé pa yèyè rẹ̀ jẹ
Àlùṣòinṣòinkíṣòin
Yèyè, má fi mí sílẹ̀ lọ!
Àlùṣòinṣòinkíṣòin
Yèyè tó fún mi lómú mu
Àlùṣòinṣòinkíṣòin...
Yèyè ni jíjí ojú mi
Àlùṣòinṣòinkíṣòin
Jígí tí mo fi ń ríran
Àlùṣòinṣòinkíṣòin...
Má bàáYèyè mi ẹ̀seré
Àlùṣòinṣòinkíṣòin

Máà bàá Yèyé mi seré
Àlùjòinjòinkíjòin
Yèyé ni jígí ojú mi...
Mother, Mother let down the rope
Àlùjòinjòinkíjòin
The whole world kills its own mother
Àlùjòinjòinkíjòin
Mother, do not leave me to myself!
Àlùjòinjòinkíjòin
Mother who suckled me
Àlùjòinjòinkíjòin...
Mother is my looking glass
Àlùjòinjòinkíjòin
Looking glass which I see through
Àlùjòinjòinkíjòin...
Dare not toy with my Mother³
Àlùjòinjòinkíjòin
Dare not toy with my Mother
Àlùjòinjòinkíjòin
Mother is my looking glass...

In this part of the song, *mother* takes the validity of her ancestorhood and spiritual potency from an ordinary folk textuality (oral) which (re)locates the agency of the mother figure from a physical plane to a celestial position to be prayed unto or called upon for help; hence, in the original folk text:

(7) Ìyá, Ìyá takùn wálẹ̀ o
Àlùjòinjòinkíjòin
Ìyá, Ìyá takùn wálẹ̀ o
Àlùjòinjòinkíjòin

³ This could also be rendered as 'Dare not disrespect my mother'.

Gbogbo ayé pa yèyé rè jẹ o
Àlùjòinjòinkíjòin
Ajá gbé tirè, ó rỌrun o
Àlùjòinjòinkíjòin
Ìyá, Ìyá takùn wálẹ o
Àlùjòinjòinkíjòin...

Mother, Mother let down the rope
Àlùjòinjòinkíjòin
Mother, Mother let down the rope
Àlùjòinjòinkíjòin
The whole world kills its own mother
Àlùjòinjòinkíjòin
But Dog took his to the Sky
Àlùjòinjòinkíjòin
Mother, Mother let down the rope
Àlùjòinjòinkíjòin ...

And, in the alter-native text of Àsá and Ruth Tafebe, 'Ìyá' in the original folk text becomes 'Yèyé', as echoed in

(8) Yèyé, Yèyé, takùn wálẹ
Àlùjòinjòinkíjòin

Mother, Mother let down the rope
Àlùjòinjòinkíjòin

These illustrative examples from alter-native Yoruba music show that ancestorhood is a psycho-spiritual consciousness residing in the Yoruba personality. This consciousness is continually active (or activated) whether one's progenitors are dead or alive. Carlos Moore's (2009: 246) report of one of the

personal experiences of Fela lends credence to this fact about Yoruba ancestors and ancestorhood:

My mother is dead. Yet I communicate with her. The first time she spoke to me since her death was when I was in Italy. That was in September '80. I'd gone to play for the annual ball of *Unita*, in Milano.... The day we left Lagos it rained heavy-o! I knew there was something. I felt it. Then we get to Italy and I'm jailed. Now, the night before I was released, it started raining heavily. I asked:
"Does it rain like this in Italy?"
"It hasn't rained like this in Italy for years," they told me.
It was while I was in prison in Italy that I saw my mother in a dream for the first time. She said to me: "Fela, never give up the struggle!" Oh!! Then I asked her: "This rain, what is it?" She answered: "Ehhh, don't ask me that. Everybody does this thing up here." Now I know what she meant. That's the first and last time I saw her in a dream till now. What did she mean? She meant the rain was her, man. The next day I was released from prison. They cleared me of all the charges against me. So what she meant was that I would always know she would manifest herself to me by other means.

This example as provided by Moore from an artiste's lived experience underscores the Yoruba cultural fact that the worlds of the living and that of ancestors are co-existent and are treated as such by the people. Alter-native Yoruba music, therefore,

tends to be characterised by a stylistic transmogrification of ancestor consciousness from lived experience into its artistic process and content. A typical example is now to be found in the quest to memorialise Fela Aníkúlápó (One-who-has-death-in-his-pouch) within the music and social circle, both continentally and globally, among African and non-African peoples.

4.1. Towards the Apotheosis of Fela

Ancestor worship is a well-established cultural and spiritual practice among different peoples of Africa (Addison, 1924). This practice, the knowledge of which is now getting uncommon among millennial African youth, is found to be among the many cultural signposts seen to be preserved in alter-native Yoruba music. Instances of this are found especially in the works of artistes of alter-native Yoruba music, a selection of which is represented in this study. The example of the song 'Baba Don Go' from the Ayétòrò band led by Funso Ogundipe is quite illustrative as captured in the lines:

(9) *Baba don go*
Baba never go
Im dey sleep with im fathers

The song, done in celebration of the immortalisation of Fela Aníkúlápó Kuti, is rendered in a stylistic blend of West African Pidgin (Ghanaian and Nigerian lexification) and English as a language of colonial heritage. The contrastive parallelism:

(10) *Baba don go*
Baba never go

is a literary, stylistic and yet symbolic representation as well as interpretation of the folk belief in the concomitant existence of

the worlds of the living and the dead within *ayé*, the universe. It represents and asserts the idea and widely held belief that the dead are not really dead.⁴ The third line is an apt rider on the parallelism, as it provides a quick response to the preceding couplet by stating where exactly ‘Baba’ must be if he ‘never go’: *im dey sleep with im fathers*. In other words, in the Yoruba imagination, death is simply a transition from one state of existence to another.

In addition to this fact, a progression into apotheosis takes place when, in Yoruba belief system, a personality is promoted or elevated from a position of an ancestor to that of a deity or *òrìṣà*. This usually occurs when an individual is considered to have had an extraordinary existence during his or her lifetime, as is believed to have been the case with *Ṣàngó*, a Yoruba deity. This very fact, as related to the apotheosis of Fela, is boldly, jubilantly and ecstatically brought alive in Lagbaja’s ‘Abami’. The tone and general mood of this song is celebratory and commemorative of Fela Aníkúlápó Kutí (a.k.a. *Abàmi Èdà* ‘the Weird Being’) in the very same manner in which the progeny of a deceased conduct final funeral rites for him or her. This is evident in the following verses of the song:

- (11) Many, many, many years ago
 For Yoruba land
 Before dem born your papa
 An’ my mama
 Before dem born your grandpapa papa
 papa papa sef o
 You no dey for there
 I no dey for there
 But you believe

⁴ See Birago Diop’s poem titled ‘Breadth’.

We believe our history o
Dem say, fire, fire
Fire, fire dey come out
Fire, fire fire, fire for im mouth

Chorus: Şàngó o
Şàngó Olúkòso
Şàngó o
Şàngó Olúkòso
Şàngó o
Şàngó Olúkòso
Şàngó o...

Last century wey im pass
History happen for my eye
Dis one no be dem say, dem say
E happen for my eye
Korokoro like dis o
If I no dey for there
I for say na lie
Just like some people who no believe
Say fire dey come out for Şàngó mouth o
Na those who dey for there
Pass down the history
But dis particular history happen for my eye
gangan
Dis one no be dem say, dem say
E happen for my eye
Korokoro like dis o

Chorus: Abàmì!
Lead: When im start to dey yab, ah!
Chorus: Abàmì!

Lead: Dictator go dey shake, ah!
Chorus: Abàmì!
Lead: Oppressor go dey fear
Chorus: Abàmì!
Lead: When im put him mouth for song
Chorus: Abàmì!
Lead: Philosophy go dey flow
Chorus: Abàmì!
Lead: When im put him horn for mouth
Chorus: Abàmì!
Lead: Melody go dey blow
Chorus: Abàmì!

Eléniyàn
Augustine
Baba 70 o
Ah *béẹ̀ fẹ́, béẹ̀ kò*, shaam!
Whether you like it or not
Béẹ̀ fẹ́, béẹ̀ kò sé
I say whether you like it or not
Láyé...

Refrain: *Abàmì ti d'òrìṣà o, yéèpà!*
The Weird One has become a deity, *yéèpà!*
Baba 70 dey o, dey o, dey o
 Baba 70 lives, lives
Abàmì ti d'òrìṣà o, yéèpà!
 Baba 70 dey o, dey o, dey o
Abàmì ti d'òrìṣà o, yéèpà!
 Baba 70 dey o
Abàmì ti d'òrìṣà o, yéèpà!
 Baba 70 dey o, dey o, dey o
Abàmì ti d'òrìṣà o, yéèpà!

Baba 70 dey o

This musical piece is more or less a neo-traditional or neo-modern requiem commemorating the transitioning of its subject, Fela Aníkúlápó Kuti, from mortality to immortality and from death into apotheosis. It stylistically utilises the Nigerian Pidgin and Yoruba in a deliberate alternation and in celebrating the extraordinary and heroic qualities of the subject, Fela or Abàmì Èḍá. It also, at the same time, impresses the fact upon the mind of a class of doubting persons (the ‘Holier than thou’, representing a divergent social ideology, usually religious commentators and, sometimes, passers-by at Fela’s Afrika Shrine) that, willy-nilly, Fela the object of the celebration was, by all standards, qualified to be admitted into the pantheon of apotheosised Yoruba – and indeed global – personages.

In addition, all of the four primary song-texts of this analysis – Bantu’s *I’m Waiting*, Ruth Tafebe and Àṣá’s *Mother*, Ayétòrò’s *Baba Don Go* and Lágbájá’s *Abàmì*– attest to the fact of the presence of an absence and the absence of a presence which typically characterise the Yoruba consciousness of ancestors and deities within the context of their own cultural universe.

It is against this background that the study of alter-native Yoruba music enhances the understanding that Felabration⁵ represents a memorial fete in honour and perpetuation of the memory of Fela or Abàmì Èḍá, in the same manner as Dionysus was celebrated by the ancient Greeks and Bacchus (or Liber) by the Romans. Indeed, it is significant to note that, in their preternatural grandeur, the triad of Fela, Dionysus, and Bacchus

⁵ In 2016, the Felabration event was celebrated in about 20 countries across the continents of the world, thus foregrounding a global consensus and universal validation of the apotheosis of the object of celebration –Fela!

(or Liber) now share a common fact of being associated with wine, revelry, fecundity and cultivation as well as rejuvenation of the flora. Today, it is common to observe, in popular music circles, expressions such as ‘Fela don talk ...’ (Fela had said ...) or ‘Fela say’ (Fela says), often used to validate argumentative positions during discussions. This shows the very high extent to which the personage as well as memory of Fela is treasured and revered in the state of apotheosis.

5. Conclusion

This study has revealed the connection between tradition and the Yoruba artist (Irele, 1975) on the one hand and the creative process which serves as catalyst for the transmogrification of a people’s lived experience into the artistic process and artistic representations on the other. The study highlighted the significance of alter-native music propensity to preserving its beauty and truth, i.e. its artistic appeal and believability at one fell swoop. It showed that, the Yoruba attitude to their ancestors, as seen preserved in the music form is as real and true in the music opus as it is in the people’s lived experience, whether in the Yoruba homeland or in their cultural dispersal – diaspora or exile.

References

- Addison, J. T. 1924. ‘Ancestor Worship in Africa.’ *The Harvard Theological Review* Vol. 17, No. 2, pp. 155-171.
- Forna, A. 2017. ‘The Global Soul: Imagining the Cosmopolitan’. Synopsis of Symposium held at The Lannan Center for Poetics and Social Practice, Washington DC, March 27-28, 2017 Accessed on <https://africanwords.com/2017/02/19/event-the->

[global-soul-imagining-the-cosmopolitan-27-28-march-2017-bath/#more-15074](#)

- Idowu, B. 1975. *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*. London: Longman.
- Irele, A. 1975. 'Tradition and the Yoruba Writer: D. O. Fagunwa, Amos Tutuola and Wole Soyinka', *Odu: Journal of Yoruba and Related Studies New Series* No. 11, pp. 75-100
- Moore, C. 2009. *Fela: This Bitch of a Life*. Illinois: Lawrence Hill Books.
- Noret, J. 2008. 'Between Authenticity and Nostalgia: the Making of a Yoruba Tradition in Southern Benin'. *African Arts* Volume 41, No. 4 pp. 26-31.
- Ojo, G. J. A. 1966. *Yorùbá Culture* London: University of London Press Ltd.
- Okediji, M. 1997. 'Art of the Yoruba'. *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 2, African Art at the Art Institute of Chicago pp. 164-181+198 Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago.
- Soyinka, W. 1975. *Death and the King's Horseman*. London: Eyre Methuen.