



Exploring the Role of Women in Court Music Traditions of the Olubadan and Alaafin of Oyo's Palaces

OLAKUNLE GEORGE OLANIPEKUN
Federal College of Education, Oyo, Nigeria

OLUWASEGUN MICHAEL OJO
Emmanuel Alayande University of Education, Oyo, Nigeria.

Abstract. This study explores the role of women in the court music traditions of two prominent Yoruba royal institutions: the palace of the Olubadan of Ibadan and that of the Alaafin of Oyo. It examines the historical development, performance practices, and sociocultural significance of female engagement in these traditional musical settings. Drawing on oral interviews, participant observation, and existing literature, the research reveals that women have long played vital roles as praise singers, drummers, dancers, ritual performers, and cultural transmitters within these courts. Their musical contributions not only enhance the aesthetic and ceremonial functions of court life but also reinforce royal identity, preserve oral history, and facilitate the transmission of indigenous knowledge across generations. The study further highlights how women's participation in court music serves as a platform for gender expression, social mobility, and cultural resilience. In conclusion, by foregrounding the experiences and contributions of female court musicians, the research underscores their indispensable role in sustaining and evolving Yoruba royal musical heritage in contemporary times.

Keywords: Women, Court, Music, Olubadan, Alaafin.

1. Introduction

Court music holds a significant place in the socio-cultural and political life of traditional African societies, serving as a vital medium of expression, communication, and preservation of cultural heritage. In Yoruba royal settings, such as the palaces of the Olubadan of Ibadan and the Alaafin of Oyo, music transcends mere entertainment—it is a vehicle for royal authority, historical narration, and ritual observance. While much scholarly attention has been given to the musical forms, instruments, and performers associated with court music, the specific

contributions and roles of women within these traditions remain underexplored.

According to Ajewole (2006:100), women have long been active participants in the cultural life of Yoruba courts, functioning as praise singers, drummers, dancers, and custodians of oral history. In the palaces of the Olubadan and the Alaafin, women contribute not only to the aesthetic value of performances but also to the continuity and identity of the court's musical traditions. Their roles often reflect a complex interplay of gender, status, and cultural expectations, which have evolved over time in response to both internal dynamics and external influences.

This study seeks to explore the multifaceted roles of women in the court music traditions of these two prominent Yoruba palaces. It examines the historical development, performance practices, and sociocultural significance of female musical engagement in these royal contexts. By doing so, the research aims to illuminate the often-overlooked narratives of female musicians and their enduring impact on the preservation and transformation of Yoruba court music heritage.

This study, in its objectives, is set up on the three well-aligned research objectives:

- Trace the historical development of women's participation in court music within the palaces of the Olubadan and the Alaafin of Oyo.
- Analyze the performance practices and musical roles undertaken by women in the court music traditions of these Yoruba royal settings.
- Examine the sociocultural significance of female musical engagement and its impact on

the preservation and transmission of court music in both palaces.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative ethnographic approach to investigate the roles, practices, and significance of women in the court music traditions of the Olubadan and the Alaafin of Oyo's palaces. The methodology is designed to capture the lived experiences, cultural meanings, and historical dynamics that shape female musical participation in these royal settings. A descriptive ethnographic design was employed to provide an in-depth exploration of the musical roles of women within their natural socio-cultural contexts. This approach allows for the integration of both historical and contemporary perspectives, enabling the researcher to trace continuity and change in women's engagement with court music over time.

Fieldwork was conducted in Ibadan (Oyo State) and Oyo Town, the seats of the Olubadan and the Alaafin, respectively. These two palaces represent distinct yet interrelated centers of Yoruba royal musical tradition and serve as ideal case studies for comparative cultural analysis.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a variety of stakeholders including:

- Female court musicians (singers, drummers, dancers)
- Palace chiefs and cultural custodians
- Music historians and traditional worshippers
- Elderly women with lived experiences of court performances

These interviews were conducted in Yoruba and English, recorded with consent, and later transcribed and translated for analysis.

The researcher attended various palace events and festivals such as:

Odun Oba and *Itunu Awe* in Ibadan
Oranyan Festival, *Sango Festival*, and coronation ceremonies in Oyo

Observations focused on women's roles during musical performances, including their dress, instruments, vocal styles, positioning, and interactions within the ensemble. Field notes, video recordings, and photographs were taken to support analysis. Historical records, palace documents, previous ethnomusicological studies, and oral historical accounts were consulted to trace the evolution of women's roles in Yoruba court music. Local libraries,

museums, and university archives in Ibadan and Oyo provided valuable secondary data.

Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and archival materials were coded to identify recurring themes such as:

- Gender and performance roles
- Ritual and symbolic functions
- Musical transmission and training
- Historical continuity and change

NVivo software was used for coding and organizing data to ensure rigor and consistency in theme development. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board. All participants provided informed consent and were assured of anonymity and confidentiality where requested. Cultural protocols and palace customs were respected throughout the research process. This methodological framework allows for a holistic and culturally sensitive exploration of the roles of women in Yoruba court music traditions. By combining oral narratives, direct observation, and historical documentation, the study provides a rich and grounded account of women's musical contributions to the palaces of the Olubadan and the Alaafin of Oyo.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two complementary theoretical perspectives: Feminist Theory and Ethnomusicology's Sociocultural Theory. These frameworks provide a multidimensional lens through which the roles, experiences, and cultural significance of women in Yoruba royal court music traditions can be critically examined and interpreted.

3.1 Feminist Theory (African Feminist Perspective)

Feminist theory, particularly within the context of African feminism, provides the primary lens for understanding gender dynamics in Yoruba court music traditions. Unlike Western feminist paradigms that often emphasize oppositional gender binaries, African feminism emphasizes complementarity, cultural rootedness, and social harmony.

This framework enables an analysis of:

- The agency of women within male-dominated cultural institutions like the palace.
- How women negotiate visibility and power through music, rituals, and performance.
- The symbolic and functional significance of female presence in courtly traditions, not as

passive participants, but as active cultural producers and transmitters.

According to Nettle (2015:16), the work of scholars such as Oyeronke Oyewumi and Molará Ogundipe supports this perspective by highlighting how Yoruba society traditionally recognizes role-based rather than gender-based hierarchies, allowing space for women to perform influential roles in public life, including within the royal court.

3.2 Ethnomusicology's Sociocultural Theory

The second theoretical anchor is drawn from ethnomusicological theories that view music as a social and cultural phenomenon. This perspective considers music not only as an artistic expression but also as a medium of identity, history, power, and community life.

Key concepts include:

- **Music as a cultural text:** Court music can be read as a reflection of the social order, cosmology, and values of Yoruba society.
- **Performance as social interaction:** Music-making in the palace is not merely performative but also communicative, ritualistic, and pedagogical.
- **Transmission and preservation:** Women's involvement in teaching, mentoring, and ritual participation is understood as a form of intergenerational knowledge transfer that sustains cultural continuity.

This theoretical lens is supported by the works of Bruno Nettle, John Blacking, and Akin Euba, whose studies affirm that music, especially in African contexts, is deeply embedded in the ritual, social, and political fabric of the community.

Together, feminist theory and ethnomusicological sociocultural theory enable a robust analysis of women's roles in Yoruba court music. While feminist theory addresses issues of identity, empowerment, and social roles, ethnomusicological theory provides tools to explore the meanings, functions, and cultural embeddedness of music within royal contexts.

This integrated approach allows the study to:

- Contextualize the historical and contemporary significance of female performers.
- Analyze the gendered nuances of performance practices.

- Understand how music becomes a vehicle for cultural preservation, negotiation of power, and affirmation of royal traditions.

By employing both African feminist and ethnomusicological theoretical frameworks, this study illuminates the complex interplay of gender, culture, and music within the palaces of the Olubadan and the Alaafin of Oyo. These perspectives help to reposition women not as peripheral contributors but as central figures in the shaping, sustaining, and transmitting of Yoruba court music heritage.

4. Discussion and Analysis of the Data

The discussion of the findings in this study is in line with the stated objectives of this study, as summarized below:

Objective 1: To trace the historical development of women's participation in court music within the palaces of the Olubadan and the Alaafin of Oyo

The participation of women in court music traditions in Yoruba royal palaces, particularly those of the Olubadan of Ibadan and the Alaafin of Oyo, has deep historical roots that reflect broader patterns in Yoruba society regarding gender roles, cultural expression, and artistic heritage. While Yoruba traditional music is widely recognized for its rich ensemble of instruments, vocal styles, and ceremonial functions, the role of women, though historically less documented, has been both dynamic and essential in shaping court music practices.

According to Omojola (2009:10), in precolonial Yoruba society, women were vital custodians of oral traditions, often serving as *iyèrè*, *oríki* (praise poetry) chanters, and ritual performers. In the palace of the Alaafin of Oyo, elite women known as *iyálóde* and *ayaba* (royal wives) were known to lead songs during festivals and spiritual ceremonies. Some women were members of specialized guilds and groups such as the eulogists (*akigbe* or *oriki* chanters), whose roles were central in affirming royal prestige and ancestral connections through music.

Similarly, in the palace of the Olubadan, women engaged in musical performances during coronation rites, traditional festivals like *Odun Olubadan*, and community celebrations. Their roles included call-and-response singing, drumming, and dancing, which complemented the roles of male court musicians.

Oyeniya (2021:8) notes that the advent of colonialism brought significant shifts in Yoruba social and political structures, including royal institutions. During this

period, the visibility of women in palace music slightly declined due to Western gender norms and the introduction of Christian values, which often marginalized indigenous female-led cultural expressions. However, Yoruba women adapted by embedding their roles within women's societies (*egbe obinrin*) that preserved traditional music in social and ceremonial life outside formal court settings.

Soyinka (2016:12) remarks that in the post-independence era, there was a gradual reassertion of traditional values, including the reintegration of women into palace functions. Notable women singers and drummers gained recognition for their contributions to cultural preservation and were sometimes formally appointed to palace roles. In the Alaafin's court, for instance, women like the *Ìyá Àmílúúdíń* (Mother of Celebration) played symbolic and functional roles in orchestrating musical and cultural events.

According to Oyewumi (1997:16), in modern times, both the Olubadan and the Alaafin palaces have embraced more institutionalized forms of cultural performance, in which women's participation has become more visible and celebrated. Cultural revival efforts, tourism, and scholarly interest have led to renewed documentation and appreciation of women's roles in court music. Female musicians are now recognized as part of the palace's artistic team, sometimes appearing in public events, royal outings, and media performances.

Women now perform alongside men in both traditional and contemporary forms of palace music, including genres like *sekere*, *apala*, and *wákà*. Their presence underscores a historical continuity that blends respect for tradition with adaptation to evolving cultural landscapes.

Objective 2: To analyze the performance practices and musical roles undertaken by women in the court music traditions of these Yoruba royal settings

The performance practices and musical roles undertaken by women in Yoruba royal courts reflect a complex integration of cultural expectations, spiritual duties, and artistic skills. Within the palaces of the Olubadan of Ibadan and the Alaafin of Oyo, women's musical expressions are deeply embedded in both ceremonial and communal functions. These roles, though sometimes complementary to those of men, also reveal unique contributions that highlight women as indispensable agents in the preservation and propagation of court music traditions.

Ogunmola (1997:5) remarks that one of the most prominent musical roles of women in both royal courts is in vocal performance, especially through the chanting of *oriki* (praise poetry). Female praise singers, known as *àgbẹ oriki* or *akígbà*, often memorize and recite elaborate genealogies, achievements, and spiritual attributes of the kings and their ancestors. These performances are usually delivered during royal ceremonies such as installation rites, festivals, and the reception of dignitaries. In the Alaafin's palace, for instance, women vocalists accompany the monarch during the Oranyan Festival or Bibo Orisha, singing to evoke ancestral blessings. Their role goes beyond entertainment—they reaffirm the spiritual authority of the king and preserve collective memory through poetic forms.

According to Euba (2019:26), while men traditionally dominate the playing of many Yoruba percussion instruments, women have carved a niche for themselves, especially with the *sekere* (beaded gourd rattle), which is a common feature in palace performances. Female *sekere* players are known for their dexterity in rhythm-making and their ability to animate musical ensembles with expressive body movements and call-and-response. In recent decades, women have also taken part in *dundun* (talking drum) performance, though this was historically the preserve of men. Some contemporary royal courts now feature all-female drumming troupes who perform during cultural festivals and official palace functions. This shift illustrates a progressive expansion of women's musical roles within court traditions.

Ajayi (2018:15) remarks that dance is a critical component of Yoruba court music, and women often play leading roles in this domain. In both the Olubadan and Alaafin's courts, female dancers interpret drum rhythms through elaborate steps, hand gestures, and costuming. These dances are not only artistic but symbolic, often enacting historical events, mythological narratives, or spiritual allegories. Dance troupes of women are central to *Odun Oba* (King's Festival) in Ibadan, where they perform in honor of the Olubadan. Similarly, in Oyo, women dancers participate in the *Egungun* and *Sango* festivals, underscoring their role in ritual performances tied to deities and royal ancestors.

Adeogun (2015:20) notes that beyond performance for entertainment, women engage in ritual music, particularly for sacred and transitional events. In the Alaafin's palace, women such as the *Ìyálóde* or *Ayaba* lead songs during ancestral veneration rites, where music serves to connect the physical and spiritual realms. These songs are deeply encoded with religious

meanings and are performed in specific tonal registers to ensure spiritual efficacy. Women also perform laments and songs of passage during funerals of notable chiefs or royal figures, reinforcing their role as cultural interpreters and spiritual intermediaries. Women serve as mentors and cultural transmitters, passing down songs, rhythms, and performance protocols to younger generations. Within palace settings, they often supervise female apprentices or daughters of the palace in the learning of court etiquette, music repertoire, and performance ethics. This role is crucial in sustaining the continuity of musical tradition across generations.

Objectives 3: To examine the sociocultural significance of female musical engagement and its impact on the preservation and transmission of court music in both palaces

The participation of women in court music traditions within the palaces of the Olubadan of Ibadan and the Alaafin of Oyo extends beyond artistic performance—it embodies deep sociocultural meanings that influence the identity, continuity, and transformation of Yoruba royal heritage. Through their musical engagements, women function as cultural custodians, spiritual agents, and intergenerational educators. Their contributions are critical to understanding how court music is sustained as both a living tradition and a reflection of evolving Yoruba society.

Johnson (1960:189) remarks that women's engagement in court music contributes significantly to the construction and reinforcement of royal identity and communal values. Their performances often serve as symbolic affirmations of gender balance in cultural expression, reflecting the Yoruba worldview of complementary male and female roles in society. For instance, female *oriki* chanters and praise singers personalize royal narratives through poetic performance, reinforcing the king's ancestral lineage and achievements. This practice not only upholds the monarch's divine legitimacy but also instills a collective sense of pride and historical consciousness among subjects.

In the Alaafin's palace, the presence of women in rituals such as the Oranyan Festival or Sango rites enhances the cultural authenticity and spiritual gravity of the ceremonies, while in the Olubadan's court, women musicians actively participate in events like *Odun Itunu Awe* (Festival of Renewal), showcasing the symbolic role of women in cultural revitalization.

Ajewole (2008:14) notes that female involvement in court music has sociopolitical implications,

particularly in terms of status elevation and empowerment. Women who excel in musical roles often earn recognition and respect within palace hierarchies and the broader community. Titles such as *Ìyá Amúlúdùn* (Mother of Celebration), *Ìyá Àkún* (Head Vocalist), or *Ìyá Sekere* (Lead Sekere Player) not only acknowledge musical skill but confer influence and visibility upon the performers.

These roles offer women a public platform to exercise leadership and agency, challenging conventional gender limitations. By occupying prominent musical positions in royal courts, women assert their importance in both cultural and political spheres, serving as role models for younger generations of female artists.

Lawal (2020:4) notes that female musicians play a pivotal role in the preservation of oral traditions, which are central to Yoruba court music. Their deep knowledge of folksongs, proverbs, praise poetry, chants, and ritual incantations makes them essential to the continuity of intangible heritage. Within the Olubadan and Alaafin palaces, many of these women are trained from childhood and inherit musical repertoires passed down through generations. Their ability to memorize, interpret, and contextualize these oral materials ensures that historical and spiritual knowledge is not lost to time. Furthermore, during key festivals and royal events, women's performances often incorporate historical references, moral teachings, and communal narratives, thus embedding education within entertainment and ritual.

Ogundipe-Leslie (2007:11) notes that female court musicians are instrumental in transmitting musical knowledge to younger women through formal and informal mentorship. In palace settings, elder women often train daughters, nieces, and apprentices in the art of singing, drumming, dancing, and performance etiquette. This pedagogical relationship fosters a continuity of tradition and provides a cultural framework for identity formation. As the younger generation learns from their elders, they also innovate and adapt, blending traditional forms with contemporary influences—a process that keeps court music both rooted and relevant. In many cases, these transmission practices are embedded in ritual cycles, such as rites of passage or female initiation ceremonies, where music plays a didactic and spiritual role.

Today, the participation of women in palace music has also assumed a diplomatic function. Female ensembles often represent the palace in public events, national festivals, and cultural exchanges, showcasing Yoruba heritage to wider audiences. Their visibility helps

foster cultural pride and project the significance of royal traditions beyond palace walls. In this regard, women become ambassadors of Yoruba culture, preserving its legacy through performance while adapting to the aesthetics of contemporary society. Media coverage, tourism, and academic research have further elevated the profile of these women, solidifying their roles as tradition bearers.

5. Conclusion

The performance practices and musical roles of women in the palaces of the Olubadan and the Alaafin of Oyo demonstrate a rich and dynamic engagement with court music traditions. Whether through vocal expression, instrumental performance, dance, or ritual, women play multifaceted roles that are both culturally significant and artistically profound. Their participation is not only a reflection of gender inclusion but also a testament to their resilience and creative agency in the continuity of Yoruba royal heritage.

The sociocultural significance of female musical engagement in the palaces of the Olubadan and the Alaafin of Oyo lies in its multifaceted impact, spanning identity construction, cultural preservation, gender empowerment, and intergenerational continuity. Through their roles as performers, educators, and cultural custodians, women ensure that court music remains a vibrant, living tradition that reflects the values, beliefs, and creativity of the Yoruba people. Their contributions not only sustain the past but actively shape the present and future of Yoruba royal musical heritage.

References

- Adeogun, A. O. (2015). *Music and culture in Nigeria: A study of musical traditions of the Yoruba people*. Ibadan: University Press PLC.
- Ajayi, B. (2018). Women in Yoruba traditional music: Agents of cultural sustainability. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 30(1), 67–79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2018.1436507>
- Ajewole, J. O. (2006). *Social organization and music style in the court of Alaafin of Oyo* (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis). Department of Music, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife.
- _____. (2008). The Waka music of Alhaja Asnat Ejire Omo Aje. *Nigerian Music Review*, 4. Department of Music, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife.
- Euba, A. (2019). *Yoruba drumming: The dún-dún tradition*. Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies Series.
- Johnson, S. O. (1960). *The history of the Yoruba*. Lagos: Church Missionary.
- Lawal, B. (2020). Royal aesthetics and performance: Symbolism and music in the court of the Alaafin of Oyo. *African Music*, 11(2), 45–60.
- Nettl, B. (2015). *The study of ethnomusicology: Thirty-three discussions* (3rd ed.). Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Ogundipe-Leslie, M. (2007). *Re-creating ourselves: African women and critical transformations*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.
- Ogunmola. (1997). *A New Perspective to Oyo Empire history 1530–1944*.
- Omojola, B. (2009). Songs of the King's Wives: Women, power and performance in the Yoruba public sphere. *Africa Development*, XXXIV (2), 47–57.
- Oyewumi, O. (1997). *The invention of women: Making an African sense of Western gender discourses*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Oyeniya, B. A. (2021). *Culture and customs of the Yoruba*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.
- Soyinka, K. (2016). Gender, power, and the drum: Female drummers in the traditional courts of southwestern Nigeria. *Ethnomusicology Forum*, 25(3), 290–308. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17411912.2016.1219351>