

# Analysis of Ayanbirin Aduke's Musical Performance, Lifestyle and Cultural Themes through Yoruba Traditional Drumming

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### Abstract

The Yoruba drumming represents a foundational element of West African cultural and spiritual life, which functions as a vital conduit for historical preservation, communal engagement, sociological expression and spirituality. However, some of the Yoruba inherent cultural musical traditions and values are hardly documented except through oral history; which can be easily distorted or totally lost as a result of modernisation and more importantly, due to acculturation which is largely driven by foreign culture promoted that is predominantly projected by the Western media. Therefore, this study analysed the musical performance of Ayanbirin Aduke's with regards to her lifestyles and cultural themes through Yoruba traditional drumming. Normative expectations of femininity guided the study through visual aesthetics by the concept of subverting an energetic performance style. The study adopted Content analysis research design through selected performance documentaries and key personality interview conducted during the fieldwork documenting audio and video recordings as well as visual materials including photos and vlogs analyse thematically analysed. Findings revealed that Ayanbirin Aduke's choice of performance costumes were mostly Yoruba traditional and native attires combining of Agbada with Aso-Oke reflecting a challenge to re-defining traditional male-gender norms, also, her ensemble combines a fusion of Yoruba traditional drums; Apala, Sakara, Omele with Western musical instruments; drum-set and keyboard. Lastly, Ayanbirin Aduke's drumming performance and musical narratives depict acts of socio-cultural advocacy and activism through socio-political expression geared towards resistance to corruption, societal moral decadence and grounded in artistic defiance. The study concludes that Ayanbirin Aduke's drumming performance involves strategic use of Yoruba cultural attires of Agbada and Aso-Oke as usual costume that promotes energetic performance style with the use of a deliberate fusion of both traditional and modern musical instruments cum elements of creative cultural work as a nuanced form of activism, that is intertwined with socio-political critique. Hence, the study recommend sustainability of more females in Yoruba cultural drumming field towards promotion and apreservation of the drumming traditions among Yoruba people of Southwest Nigeria.

### Original Research Article

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## Introduction

Drumming is a deeply symbolic and functional art form that outdoes mere musicality in Nigeria and Africa at large. It forms a central component of ritual, communication, entertainment, and social organization. Fadipe (1970) describes drumming as "a patriarchally defined musical tradition that reinforces gender hierarchies in indigenous performance." This definition draws attention to the sociological dimensions of drumming, situating it within systems of power, exclusion, and gender dynamics. Nketia (1975) presented music as a communal and inclusive activity within African societies. While not strictly empirical in a modern sense, his comprehensive

documentation supports the claim that music, including drumming, can transcend rigid gender roles. These observations add weight to the argument that drumming, while culturally coded as male in Yoruba society, is not biologically restricted. Also, in another review the author describes drumming is "an encoded form of communication that uses tonal variation and rhythmic sequences to convey meaning." (Nketia, 1988). With regards to this view, the drum is linguistically potent; especially among the Yoruba and Akan people, The Yoruba traditional talking drum for instance can mimic the tone and pitch of human speech, enabling drummers to

convey proverbs, praises, and messages. Euba (1990) describes drumming as “a performative medium through which sacred and secular domains intersect”.

Furthermore, according to Nzewi and Sello (2005) describes drumming as “a gender-fluid art form undergoing transformation in the hands of modern practitioners.” Here, drumming is understood not as static but as a dynamic and evolving form of expression that can accommodate diverse identities and roles. Again, Ozah (2010) defines drumming as “a percussive expression of cultural identity and historical memory.” In this definition, the drum becomes more than a rhythmic device; it is a vessel for communal values and ancestral knowledge. Drumming, in this context, is an act of remembering and reinforcing communal bonds. These definitions provide multiple entry points into the study of drumming. From its communicative functions to its ritualistic essence, from its embedded gender codes to its present-day redefinitions, drumming occupies a complex space in African cultural studies.

In Nigeria for instance, drumming occupies a revered space within cultural performances and traditional institutions, particularly among the Yoruba, where the talking drum (dundun or Iya Ilu) is not only an instrument but also a language. This implies that drumming has both liturgical and entertainment functions, often occurring in spaces where religion, politics, and festivity merge. The sacredness of the drum in Yoruba traditional religion underscores this point, with certain drums believed to possess spiritual force (ase). Again, the practitioners of the tradition have historically been men, enshrining a patriarchal heritage within the practice (Samuel, 2014). In many Nigerian societies, drumming has long been constructed as a gendered activity, in which male drummers are accorded prestige while female participation is marginalized or altogether excluded (Oikelome, 2021).

Traditionally, the art of drumming was passed down patrilineally, often within specific guilds or familial lineages. In such frameworks, women were typically relegated to the roles of singers, dancers, or supporters during performances. Religious and cultural taboos further reinforced these gender roles, with some communities prohibiting women from even touching sacred drums (Samuel, 2014). This exclusion was not merely symbolic; it had practical implications for women’s artistic expression and participation in the preservation and transmission of cultural heritage. Invariably, Yoruba drumming represents a foundational element of West African cultural and spiritual life, which functions as a vital conduit for historical preservation, communal engagement, sociological expression and spirituality. Historically, Yoruba drumming is preserved as a male-

centric cultural tradition that is largely governed by the male lineage and ritual restrictions (Adegbite, 1991). Hence, women have been culturally excluded among Yourubas of the Southwest Nigeria from the traditional musical art form due to spiritual and gendered restrictions (Olaniyan, 2004). However, emerging scholarship works on this discourse shows that women or the females gender are increasingly entering and becoming engaged in traditionally male spaces especially, within the Yoruba indigenous and traditional music (Omojola, 2012).

Consequently, the scenery of traditional music and performance in Nigeria is undergoing transformation and with the rise of gender advocacy movements, urbanization, and globalization, more women are challenging gendered boundaries in music and performance (Akinbo, 2023). One such figure are Ara and Ayanbirin Aduke, both are renowned female talking drummer whose artistry and bold public presence are redefining the possibilities for women in the drumming profession. Ayanbirin Aduke, especially, through her mastery of the talking drum and her active participation in festivals, ceremonies, and social media, is subverting traditional taboos and constructing new narratives around gender and musical agency. Hence their emergence marks a significant cultural shift that warrants scholarly attention. Women like Ayanbirin Aduke are not simply anomalies; they are at the forefront of a quiet revolution within indigenous music. Their work prompts critical questions about agency, tradition, and gender inclusivity.

Scholars have conducted studies on African Women involvement in male-dominated drumming traditions. Some of the studies include the following; The study by Warms (2018) on Oyotunji Village investigated how Yoruba drumming practices are reimagined in the African diaspora. The research showed that drumming is not only central to ritual but also serves as a repository of cultural memory and spiritual communication. Although the context is diasporic, the study affirmed that drumming in Yoruba tradition is traditionally reserved for men, while women assume the role of dancers. Also, Olusegun (2019) explored how Yoruba drums function as spiritual tools in rituals, being personified and revered. While not directly focused on gender, the study provides context for understanding the cultural and spiritual implications of a woman engaging in drumming. Her access to sacred musical forms traditionally reserved for men becomes a site of contestation and empowerment. An empirical ethnographic analysis by Adediran (2020) challenged the idea that Yoruba society is purely patriarchal. The study found that male and female musical roles are often complementary rather than hierarchical.

So also, Ndzuta (2020) study on Pondo women drummers

revealed a similar trend of women transgressing traditional roles in musical performance. Women were not only acknowledged as competent drummers but also served as cultural custodians. Another key empirical study is the analysis of the Burundian decree restricting women from drumming (Chikaonda, 2021). The review on the legal framework highlights how gender-based exclusion can be institutionalized. The study revealed that the regulation of drumming practices via legal means contributes to the reinforcement of patriarchal domination. Further, Akinwale (2022) provided a thorough examination of female Nigerian drummers such as Aralola Olamuyiwa and Blessing Ibrahim; with emphasis on their use of drumming as embodied resistance and tools of social transformation. The study applied the theory of gender performativity, revealing how these women negotiated cultural entrepreneurship, spiritual barriers, and public identity through performance. This disrupts traditional notions that restricted women from authoritative communicative roles in indigenous societies. Euba's performative view supports the argument that women traverses both sacred and secular platforms. Whether performing at religious events or public concerts, they negotiate a space where tradition meets innovation. Their involvement in both spheres challenges the cultural boundaries that once barred female drummers.

Oikelome (2021) critical stance on gender hierarchy is perhaps the most directly relevant to this study. By taking center stage in a formerly exclusionary tradition, women contest and redefines patriarchal norms. Ayanbirin Aduke's visibility and success foreground the gender politics that have shaped and are now being reshaped within Yoruba drumming. Nzewi and Sello (2005) concept of gender-fluid artistry positions Ayanbirin within a transformative moment in African music. She exemplifies the emergent generation of artists whose work reflects fluid identities and inclusive practices. Her success signals a broader cultural shift towards embracing diversity in traditional arts.

Invariably, Yoruba drumming has been traditionally male-dominated, but emerging female drummers are redefining such cultural participation. One of such female figures that has emerged as one of the foremost Yoruba traditional drumming circle is Olayinka Racheal Omotayo popular known with her stage name as; Ayanbirin Aduke; who has become well known in the Yoruba cultural drumming career. Further, Yoruba drumming is grounded in the Yoruba philosophical view that performance is "both sacred and communal". This foundational concept elevates Ayanbirin Aduke's creative work beyond a mere spectacle to a ritualistic act of spiritual engagement and collective expression. Again, Ayanbirin Aduke's performance is contextualized within a framework of "socio-political

expression and artistic defiance"; reflecting an ideological space and philosophical framework through which her creative work geared towards cultural activist can be understood. Consequently, The study provides a guide on how to interpret the gender dynamics of Ayanbirin Aduke's artistic practice, her choices of costume and how stage presence actively challenge and redefine traditional gender roles within Yoruba drumming. Further, the article situates Ayanbirin Aduke's contributions within this shifting cultural landscape, examining how her personal journey challenges traditional barriers and expands the cultural horizons of Yoruba drumming.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The Yoruba drumming represents a foundational element of West African cultural and spiritual life, which functions as a vital conduit for historical preservation, communal engagement, sociological expression and spirituality. However, some of the Yoruba inherent cultural musical traditions and values are hardly documented except through oral history; which can be easily distorted or totally lost as a result of modernisation and more importantly, due to acculturation which is largely driven by the influence of foreign culture promoted by Western media. Even though, many scholars have reported on emergency of Women in traditional drumming practice, however, a comprehensive focus on individual pioneers such as Ayanbirin Aduke remains sparse.

Therefore, this study provides a guide on how to interpret the gender dynamics of Ayanbirin Aduke's artistic practice, her choices of costume and how stage presence actively challenge and redefine traditional gender roles within Yoruba drumming. The study also examines the intersection of gender, tradition, and transformation in Yoruba drumming with a focus on the experiences of Ayanbirin Aduke (Olayinka Racheal Omotayo). Yoruba drumming has been traditionally male-dominated, but emerging female drummers are redefining cultural participation. Using qualitative methods, the study examines Aduke's narrative to highlight how resilience and creativity challenge entrenched patriarchal norms, thus transforming Yoruba drumming into a space of inclusion, advocacy, and cultural preservation.

### **Aim and Objectives of the Study**

The aim of the study is to appraise the musical performance of Ayanbirin Aduke's creative works with regards to her lifestyles and cultural themes through Yoruba cultural and musical drumming; while the objectives are to:

1. identify the costumes and dressing styles of Ayanbirin Aduke as a Yoruba traditional drummer,

2. identify Yoruba cultural drumming instruments' deployment by Ayanbirin Aduke towards her musical performances,
3. ascertain advocacy themes in Ayanbirin Aduke's Yoruba cultural rumming and musical performance,

### Research Questions

1. What are the costumes and dressing styles of Ayanbirin Aduke as a Yoruba traditional drummer?
2. What are the Yoruba cultural drumming instruments' deployment by Ayanbirin Aduke towards her musical performances?
3. What are the advocacy themes in Ayanbirin Aduke's Yoruba cultural rumming and musical performance?

### Methodology

**Research Design:** The study adopted Content analysis research design through preview of selected performances most especially, Felabration concert as well as documentaries and key personality in-depth interview with the drummer; Ayanbirin Aduke which was conducted during the fieldwork.

**Description of the Research Instrument:** Two research instruments were used for data collection; they are Youruba Drumming Core Themes Coding Sheet (YoDCoTCoS) and Key Personality In-depth Interview Guide (KPIIG) which were structured in accordance with the research objectives and questions.

**Method of Data Collection:** The coding sheet was used through previews of the videos of the selected stage performances while in-depth interview was conducted with key informant herself. Thus, the in-depth interview conducted with Ayanbirin Aduke provided firsthand insights into her artistic practices and philosophical basis of her traditional drumming style which offers deep perspectives that might not be captured through content analysis conducted through selected performance reviews alone.

**Method of Data Analysis:** Thematic analysis was eventually, conducted using audio and video recordings as well as visual materials including photos and vlogs analysis. Also, the analysis is based on specific performances which provides a rich source of qualitative data for a nuanced appraisal of the drummer's creative works in the field of Yoruba cultural and musical drumming.

### Results and Discussion of Findings Research Question

**One:** What are the costumes and dressing styles of Ayanbirin Aduke as a Yoruba traditional drummer?

Ayanbirin Aduke's usual and deliberate choice of

performance costumes were mostly Yoruba traditional and native attires; with combinations of Agbada and Aso-Oke; which are "typically associated with male authority". The combinations also reflects a deliberate act of challenging and re-defining traditional gender norms within the male-dominated field of Yoruba drumming profession and practice. Extracts from the in-depth interview further revealed that she often uses "bogus costumes to depict the bigness in her petite body," which is intentionally symbolic as a metaphorical assertion of a powerful presence that transcends her physical frame. Such aesthetic decision functions as a form of performative semiotics, where the male-associated signifier (the costume) is re-appropriated to represent a new signified; female authority, strength and agency.



**Fig. 1: Ayanbirin Aduke on Stage Dressed in Yoruba Native Agbada**

**Research Question Two:** What are the Yoruba cultural drumming instruments' deployment by Ayanbirin Aduke towards her musical performances?

Ayanbirin Aduke's ensemble combined traditional Yoruba drums; including three pieces of Apala, two pieces of Sakara and one Omele drum with Western musical instruments of a drum-set and keyboard. Thus, Ayanbirin Aduke's artistic strategy exemplifies a "deliberate fusion of traditional and contemporary musical elements". This hybridization created a "poly-phonic texture that resonated with multiple layers of meaning". Hence, the dynamics of hybridized approach is not merely a stylistic choice but an adaptive strategy for cultural endurance.

**Research Question Three:** What are the advocacy themes in Ayanbirin Aduke's Yoruba cultural rumming and musical performance?

Ayanbirin Aduke's use of Yoruba folk music and proverbs in most of her performances which served as "linguistic and cultural anchors" that transmitted ancestral knowledge while simultaneously addressing contemporary issues, thereby maintaining a "dialogic relationship between tradition and modernity". Therefore, Ayanbirin Aduke's drumming performance and musical narratives depict acts of socio-cultural advocacy and activism through socio-political expression geared towards resistance to corruption, societal moral decadence and grounded in artistic defiance. This directly mirroring the ideological framework laid down by African and Caribbean music legends such as Fela Anikulapo-Kuti of Nigeria and Bob Marley of Jamaica. Consequently, Ayanbirin Aduke employed her music as a "critical mirror, confronting the audience with the stark realities of national hardship and failed leadership". The performance explicitly addressed "the youth and the leaders of the nation; Nigeria in general, "fore-grounding the artiste's role as a vital mediator of social critique and national dialogue.

## Discussion of Findings

Finding on research question one revealed that Ayanbirin Aduke's choice of performance costumes were mostly Yoruba traditional and native attires; with a combination of Agbada and Aso-Oke; which reflects a deliberate act of challenging and re-defining traditional gender norms within the male-dominated field of Yoruba drumming profession and practice. This is most evident in the strategic use of visual aesthetics and performance style. Furthermore, Ayanbirin Aduke's energetic performance style according to her is a conscious act of defiance. Thus, by "going into extra because she is a woman and most audience expects less from her" she actively disrupts conventional notions of gender performance. This submission aligned with the assertion of Adegbite (1992) on incursion of female gender into the male-dominated traditional drumming. Hence, Ayanbirin Aduke's embodied expression, which combines strength and cultural awareness, becomes a "radical reclaiming of space" within a traditionally male domain and a political statement on the visibility and agency of women in traditional performance spaces. Again, the technical mastery of Ayanbirin Aduke as a talking drummer in her ability to 'speak' through drumming elevates her status from mere performer to orator, capable of addressing audiences in symbolic language. This also align with the findings of Olaniyan 2004; Samuel, 2021).

Again, finding on research question two revealed that Ayanbirin Aduke's fusion of traditional with Western musical instruments in which her ensemble combines traditional Yoruba drums that made up of; three pieces of Apala, two pieces of Sakara and one Omele drum with

modern instruments of a drum-set and keyboard. For instance, Ayanbirin Aduke's creativity of "trying to syncronice her style with contemporary Afro-beat style of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti" forced a creative adaptation that resulted in a performance capable of resonating with contemporary audiences while retaining its cultural integrity. This demonstrates that cultural forms must be dynamic and responsive to remain relevant, and that artistic hybridization can be a powerful means of ensuring the survival and continued relevance of traditional practices. The reflects the impact of globalisation on African and indeed Yoruba traditional music as postulated by (Akimbo, 2023).

Lastly, finding on research question three revealed that Ayanbirin Aduke's drumming performance and musical narratives depict acts of socio-cultural advocacy and activism through socio-political expression geared towards resistance to corruption, societal moral decadence and grounded in artistic defiance. Also, a unique and significant aspect of Ayanbirin Aduke's activism is its spiritual dimension. In the face of political failure, her performance directed the audience to a spiritual source of hope and intervention, Eledumare, "whom to call for help since Nigerian leaders have failed the citizens most especially, the youths". The finding is in agreement of Olaniyan (2004) who assert that Yoruba traditional drumming is associated with spirituality and sacredness.

The finding also, demonstrates a distinct form of protest that is culturally and spiritually grounded, affirming the power of traditional belief systems as a source of strength and resilience in times of national crisis. It is a form of activism that calls for spiritual recourse in addition to social introspection, distinguishing her work from purely secular protest. Ayanbirin Aduke's performance itself is a multi-layered transformative event. Beyond being a spectacle, it is described as a "ritualistic act" through the spiritual invocation of Eledumare, which reinforces the Yoruba philosophical view that performance is sacred. Musical performance is also a "therapeutic and affirming process for both performer and audience".

This is particularly resonant in the context of Ayanbirin Aduke's own emotional navigation of her public perception; oscillating between feeling "different and special" and sometimes undervalued. The stage becomes a site of self-affirmation, where her artistic expression validates her unique purpose more importantly, as a female drummer in a gender-dominated field (Oloola, 2012). This personal authenticity then serves as a catalyst for a chain of transformations. The individual's emotional and spiritual journey fuels the performance, which then creates a communal bond, which in turn becomes the foundation for the performance to function as a "vehicle for cultural

preservation and societal transformation". Moreover, Samuel (2021) ethnographic research on female dùndún drummers, including Àyánbìnrin, provided deep insights into how women strategically adopt drumming identities and stage personas to claim cultural space. This challenges the stereotypical relegation of women to singing or dancing and supports the argument for reconceptualizing gender roles in Yoruba drumming as exemplified by Ayanbirin Aduke. The concept of "gendered space transgressors" and the act of renaming (e.g., Àyánbìnrin Aduke) accentuate the subversive agency female drummers exercise within a male-dominated field. This helps reframe Ayanbirin Aduke's participation not as deviant but as a continuation of Yoruba gender logic adapted to modern settings

## Conclusion

This study concludes that Ayanbirin Aduke's performance involves strategic use of Yoruba native attires as usual costumes, promotes energetic performance style, and a deliberate fusion of musical elements. She not only reclaims space within a male-dominated field but also provides a compelling model for female agency. Ayanbirin Aduke's cultural creative work is a nuanced form of activism, one that intertwines socio-political critique with spiritual invocation, offering a unique and culturally grounded response to national hardship. Ultimately, Aduke's performance is a "performative ritual of resistance, reflection and renewal", affirming the enduring power of musical performance as a vital vehicle for cultural preservation and societal transformation.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommends as follows:

1. Sustainability of more females in Yoruba cultural drumming towards promotion and a preservation of the drumming traditions among Yoruba people of Southwest Nigeria.
2. Further scholarship ethnographic research be conducted to explore the experiences of other female Yoruba drummers.
3. Lastly, cultural institutions, government agencies, policymakers and cultural entrust should recognize and support traditional performance forms not merely as entertainment, but as vital platforms for social dialogue, gender empowerment, and community resilience that provide support for female artistes like Ayanbirin Aduke

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