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KOLA NUT DIVINATION IN BATA DRUMMING PERFORMANCES IN OYO, NIGERIA

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Abstract

In the cultural landscape of Oyo, Nigeria, Bata music ensembles are revered for their vibrant performances and spiritual significance. While existing scholarship has examined Bata music's performative elements, the role of Kola nut divination in mediating spiritual guidance remains understudied. Preliminary ethnographic data from suggests that many consider Kola nut rituals indispensable for performance efficacy, underscoring its cultural centrality. Drawing on ritual and performance theory, this qualitative study—combining ethnographic interviews and participant observation—investigates how Bata musicians employ Kola nut to seek divine direction. Findings indicate that Kola nut is perceived as a conduit for spiritual communication, offering musicians guidance, protection and artistic inspiration. This article is a contribution to enrich understanding of Yoruba traditional arts and their enduring sacred dimensions.

Keywords: Kola nut, Bata, Oyo, divination, performance

1. Introduction

In Yoruba musical traditions, performance is rarely purely artistic; it is often a conduit for spiritual dialogue. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Bata drumming ensembles of Oyo, Nigeria, where the Kola nut (*obi abata*) serves as a sacred mediator between musicians and the divine. While ethnomusicologists have analysed Bata's polyrhythmic structures and social functions (Euba, 1990; Omojola, 2012), the ritual use of Kola nut—a practice musicians describe as foundational to performance efficacy—remains unexplored. This study bridges that gap by interrogating how Kola nut divination shapes Bata performances, drawing on performance theory (Schechner, 2003) and Indigenous ontologies (Oyěwùmí, 1997) to challenge Western binaries separating "ritual" from "music". Through ethnographic fieldwork with Bata practitioners in Oyo, I demonstrate that Kola nutrituals are not preliminary to performance but constitutive of it, enabling musicians to negotiate ancestral guidance, artistic inspiration, and communal accountability. Indeed, centering on Yoruba

perspectives on materiality and sound, this research contributes to debates on agency in musical objects and decolonising ethnomusicological methodologies.

2. Theoretical Framework

At the heart of this study lies an essential question: how does the Kola nut ritual transform musical performance into a sacred act? To answer this, we turn to the rich theoretical intersections between ritual and performance studies, which together provide a lens for understanding the spiritual dimensions of Bata drumming in Oyo. These frameworks help us move beyond Western binaries that separate art from religion, instead revealing how Yoruba musical practice embodies what Schechner (2003) calls the "ritual-performance continuum"—a space where ceremony and artistry are inseparable.

The work of Turner (1969) offers foundational insights into the ritual processes underlying Bata performances. Turner's concepts of liminality and *communitas* are particularly illuminating when examining the Kola nut ceremony. The moment when musicians gather to split the Kola and interpret its lobes represents a liminal threshold—a sacred pause between the mundane and the divine. Here, drummers exist in what Turner would describe as an "anti-structural" state, where normal social hierarchies are temporarily suspended as performers prepare to channel ancestral voices through their drums. The Kola nut, in this context, is not merely an object but what Yoruba scholars like Abiodun (2014) would recognise as a mediator of *àṣẹ* (divine authority), transforming the musicians into intermediaries between the human and spiritual worlds.

The theory of ritualisation by Bell (1992) further deepens understanding of how the Kola nut ceremony distinguishes Bata drumming from ordinary musical acts. Bell argues that rituals gain power through what she terms "the strategy of ritualisation"—deliberate, formalised actions that differentiate sacred acts from everyday behaviour. The precise way the Kola nut is presented, broken, and shared among Bata musicians follows an ancient protocol that signals the sacred nature of their craft. These gestures are performative acts that, following Bell's framework, both embody and reinforce the spiritual hierarchy of the performance space.

Performance theory, particularly the work of Conquergood (1985) and Schechner (1985), allows an extension of these ritual insights into the realm of embodied practice. Conquergood's notion of performance as "embodied epistemology" resonates strongly with Bata traditions, where knowledge is not simply learned but lived through the body. As Omojola (2012) has shown in Yoruba musical traditions, the body becomes an instrument of cultural memory. Schechner's concept of "restored behaviour" explains how Bata performances, though seemingly spontaneous, are actually carefully reconstructed from deep cultural memory, what Yoruba practitioners might refer to as *itàn* (oral historical tradition).

This theoretical synthesis finds particular resonance in the work of Yoruba scholars like Olajubu (2003) and Oyěwùmí (1997), who have challenged Western epistemological divisions between art and spirituality. The Kola nut ceremony does not precede the musical act in Yoruba understanding; it initiates it. This perspective aligns with what Adedeji (2007) describes as the "seamless ritual-performance matrix" in Yoruba traditional arts. The breaking of the kola is already performance, and the drumming that follows is equally ritual—a perspective that challenges Western performance models that position ritual as merely preliminary to the main event.

3. Review of Related Literature

3.1 Historical Foundations of Oyo

The historical roots of Oyo trace back to the sacred city of Ilé-Ifè, widely regarded as the cradle of Yorùbá civilisation. According to oral traditions documented by Ògúnniṣi (2012), Oyo's founders migrated from Ilé-Ifè around 500 BCE, establishing a new kingdom that would become one of the most

influential in precolonial Yorùbáland. Central to this origin narrative is the legendary figure of Ọ̀rànmíyàn, the warrior son of Odùduwà (the progenitor of the Yorùbá people). The Ọyọ foundation myth recounts how Ọ̀rànmíyàn was summoned by his uncle, Kísírù, to aid in a military campaign against adversaries in Egypt (Ọ̀gúnńíyì, 2012). After Ọ̀rànmíyàn's decisive victory, Kísírù—awed by his nephew's prowess—offered him kingship over a new domain. In a pivotal ritual act, Kísírù enchanted a python to guide Ọ̀rànmíyàn to the site of this future kingdom. The serpent's disappearance at a marshy location (referred to as *ilẹ̀ tónyọ́*, "the slipping ground") marked the sacred founding of Ọyọ (Ọ̀gúnńíyì, 2012). This etiological myth does not only explain Ọyọ's toponymy but also embeds the city's legitimacy within the broader Yorùbá cosmological order, linking it to Ilé-Ifè's spiritual authority.

3.2 Spirituality as Ontological Foundation in African Musical Performance

African musical traditions emerge from cosmological frameworks where sound itself constitutes sacred power. As Nketia (1974) profoundly observes, "In African societies, music is not simply an art form but a vibrational conduit between visible and invisible realities" (p. 25). This ontological perspective fundamentally challenges Western Cartesian divisions between sacred/secular performance. The Yoruba concept of *àṣẹ* - the divine life force that animates all existence (Abiodun, 2014) - manifests particularly through Bata drumming, where complex polyrhythms become coded spiritual language. As Omibiyi-Obidike (2001) demonstrates, specific Bata rhythms like *Ọ̀gúndá méjì* serve dual functions as both musical patterns and oracular messages from Šàngó.

The ritual potency of African music performance has been extensively theorised. The characterisation of drumming as "liturgy" by Chernoff (1979, p. 137) finds particular resonance in Bata traditions, where the *Ìyáàlù* (mother drum) functions as what Olajubu (2003) terms an "ancestral telephone" - its skin stretched over wooden frame becoming a membrane between worlds. This aligns with broader Pan-African patterns observed by Djedje (2008) in Mande jeliya and Akan fontomfrom ensembles, where master drummers undergo spiritual apprenticeships to mediate collective memory.

3.3 Ritual Objects in African Music: Conduits of the Sacred

Material objects—from the carved surfaces of drums to the sacred geometry of divination tools—serve as vital intermediaries in African musical spirituality, transforming ordinary performance into extraordinary communion with the divine. Scholars such as Thompson (1974) and Abiodun (2014) have demonstrated how these objects function as "vessels of *àṣẹ*" (divine power), actively shaping and sanctifying musical performances. Across the continent, we see striking examples of this phenomenon: among the Dagara people of Ghana, the *Dàgàrà xylophone* is ritually awakened through animal sacrifices, its wooden keys believed to resonate with spiritual force only after this consecration (Chernoff, 1997). Similarly, the Shona of Zimbabwe regard the *mbira dzavadzimu* not merely as an instrument but as a medium through which ancestral voices speak during bira ceremonies, its metallic tines plucked to summon the living presence of the dead (Berliner, 1993). This perspective does not only underscore the centrality of material culture in African musical spirituality but also brings an invitation us to reconsider how objects like the Kola nut, often overlooked in Western performance studies, are in fact *active participants* in the ritual-musical event.

3.4 Ritual-Performance Continuum in Yoruba Traditions

The Yoruba worldview resists the compartmentalisation of artistic expression and spiritual practice, presenting instead a seamless integration where music *is* ritual and ritual *is* performance. This ontological unity has been extensively documented by scholars of Yoruba culture. Omojola (2012) captures this elegantly in his assertion that Yoruba drumming "does not accompany ritual; it *is* ritual"

(p. 47), a perspective rooted in the understanding that sound—particularly the sacred rhythms of the Bata ensemble—constitutes a form of divine speech. Idowu (1962) further substantiates this in his seminal work on orisa worship, demonstrating how Yoruba musical performances are never merely artistic displays but acts of "sound sacrifice" (*ohun èbò*), where every strike of the drum skin and every vibration in the air carries intentionality toward the spiritual realm.

This dissolution of boundaries between sacred act and artistic expression finds theoretical resonance with the concept of the "ritual-performance continuum" by Schechner (2003) which posits that all performance exists on a spectrum between efficacy (ritual's power to transform) and entertainment.

4. Methodology

This study adopts an immersive ethnographic approach to examine how Kola nut rituals structure the inseparable relationship between sacred practice and musical performance in Yoruba Bata traditions. Grounded in Indigenous research methodologies (Chilisa, 2019), I engaged in 12 months of participatory fieldwork (2022-2023) with the Ayangalu Bata Ensemble in Oyo, Nigeria, under the guidance of master drummer. Recognising the limitations of Western observational frameworks (Smith, 2012), I underwent basic training in Bata drumming—not merely to collect data, but to embody what Oyěwùmí (2015) terms "epistemic participation," where knowledge emerges through ritualised doing rather than detached analysis.

For performance documentation, I video-recorded 17 complete Bata events—from pre-ritual preparations to post-performance reflections—capturing approximately 48 hours of footage. Using multi-angle filming, I focused on three critical dimensions: (1) the precise choreography of Kola nutdivination (*itéfá*), particularly the handling and interpretation of lobes; (2) the somatic transitions in drummers' bodies as they moved from ritual to performance states; and (3) audience responses at these threshold moments, where communal energy shifted palpably. Complementing this, I conducted 23 semi-structured interviews in Yoruba and English, employing what Kovach (2009) identifies as Indigenous dialogic methods. These conversations—with lead drummers (*awọ̀n olùbàtá*), ritual specialists (*awọ̀n babaláwo*), ensemble members and elder listeners (*awọ̀n àgbà*)—were less Question and Answer sessions than shared reflections, often unfolding during post-performance palm wine gatherings. My field notes followed Adébiśí's (2021) "oríkì annotation" system: the left page recorded objective observations (The kola broke into three lobes; the drummer inhaled sharply), while the right page held my interpretations, later cross-verified with practitioners in what Dei (2017) calls "reciprocal validation" sessions. To analyse this rich data, I adapted the performance phase model by Schechner (2003) through a Yoruba lens: Pre-performance, performance and post-performance phases through Kola nut divination, spiritual embodiment and ritual gratitude respectively.

5. Presentation of Data and Discussion of Findings

5.1 The Performance Techniques of Bata drums of Oyo

Ìyá-ìlù (Master Drum)

The Iya- Ilu drum is hung across the neck via the shoulder by a broad decorated strap called Àgbékó. This drum produces two basic fixed tones but "variations or alternation of pitches is achieved through muting and damping". The *Ojú- ojú* which is the bigger surface is dubbed with an ointment called *Ida* to dampen the sound and it is played with bare hands, the right hand while the smaller surface (*Ṣáṣá*) is played with a skin strap called *Bílàlà*, also with the left hand, it can produce three different tones. As the primary instrument, the role of talking is assigned to *Ìyá- ilù*, even though the enunciation is not clear but other secondary instruments such as *Omele-Akọ* and *Omele-Bàtá* complement it to make a clear meaning. It also gives directives to other members of the group.



Figure 1: Ìyá-ìlù (Master Drum) showing

Omele-Abo

Like the ìyá-ìlù drum, it is hung across the neck via the shoulder by a broad decorated strap called Àgbékó. It complements the effort of Ìyá-Ìlù in making a clear speech by completing any sentence made by Ìyá-Ìlù. For example, one Yorùbá adage that says, “Kòlèè panimó, b’Òlórùnbátí’òtáènihànníkòlèèPanimó. (It cannot kill one again, if God has shown one his enemy, it cannot kill one again). Because of the right tone of the first phrase, kòlèè panimó, *Omele-Abo* would take this phrase, while *B’òlórùnbátí’òtáènihanni*, the master drum would conveniently produce it because of its deep sound and secondly move to the secondary rhythm with other accompanying drums.

Omele- Akọ

Unlike the Ìyá- ìlù and Omele-Abo, Omele-Akọ is hung on the neck vertically and it is beaten at one side only, which is the bigger side by a strap leather ‘Bílálà’. The role is to give an ostinato rhythm to the ensemble.



Figure 2: Omele-Akọ being held

Omele-Bàtá

Omele-Bàtá is made up of three faces, each face consists of different sounds and it is beaten with both hands using leather straps called *Bílálà*.



Figure 3: Omele-Bàtá being held by a drummer

5.2 The spiritual role of Kola nut in the performance of Bata music ensemble

A ritual according to Vidal (2008) is a sequence of activities involving gesture, words, actions or revered objects. Ritual may be prescribed by the tradition of a community, including a religion community. In another hands, a spiritual ritual may be any repetitive and patterned behaviour that is prescribed by or tied to a religious institution, belief, or custom, often with the intention of communicating with deity or supernatural power. Ofose (2001) comments that “people report that they see the spirit in ponds, caves, groves, mountain or outside their village, dancing singing, herding cattle, working in their field or nursing their children. One respondent for instance intimated:

When I split the kola, my hands are already drumming prayers. When I play, the drumsticks become kola lobes speaking to gods.

Some spirits appear in people’s dream, especially to diviners, priests, medicine-men and rain maker to impart some information. These personages may also consult the spirit as part of their normal training and practice”.

Before the two Bàtá drums can be brought out for performance, a ritual has to be made to appease to the spirit or ancestors of the two communities and *Obì* (Kola nut) is to be used for the ritual. One respondent said this:

The kola’s bitterness on my tongue wakes up the àṣẹ in my belly. By the time I play, it is not me drumming—it is the kola’s voice moving through my arms.

The type of Kola nut used is called *Obì-Àbàtá* which is common among the Yorùbás. Yorùbá so much believe in *Obì*, that is why they always say: *Ọdọdún làá ríOrógbó, Ọdọdún làá ríawùsá, ọdọdún là áríomọ obilóriàtẹ*. (Bitter kola is seen yearly, Walnut is seen annually and Kola nut is also seen annually in its pod).

This is a supplication for long life that affords individual grace to be seen every year during the festival. The efficacy of this prayer according to Yorùbá hinges on the ability of bitter kola, walnut and Kola nut to surface and produce seeds annually. The prayer will not be answered if only the bitter Kola, walnuts

and Kola nut do not produce seed one year. Being perennial crop, there is high tendency that they will surely bear seeds every year. A seed of Kola nut consists of two to six cotyledons, i.e natural separation to a fractional unit. The four cotyledons is used for any rituals. Before the Bata drum is brought out *Obi* is used to consult the ancestors of the Bata drums for them to have a successful outing. The leader of the group takes the seed of cotyledons and throws it on the ground, there are two positions that the *Obi* can fall into. The cotyledon either faces the ground (closed) or faces up (open). According to Elúwólé (2018, p.165), “there are five positions *Obi* can take during its use for divination and they are as follows - Àlááfíà (Peace), Èta-iwà (Uncertainty), Èjì-ìfẹ (Yes), Òkànràn(No) and Òyẹkú (Capital NO).

Àlááfíà

In an oral interview with Èjìogbè (the Olóri Awo of Èkitì) which has been corroborated by Chief Aléjì (The Olóri Awo of Òyó), Àlááfíà is when all the four segments of the Kola nut are open which means they face upward on the ground. Like the respondent indicated:

Before we play, the kola is our map. When it breaks into four lobes, we know Šàngó says ‘Open the roads!’—then we play the Ògúndá méjì rhythm with full force. But three lobes? We soften the Ìyáàlù. The kola does not lie.

The implication of this is that, the outing will be so successful and peaceful. Àlááfíà means peace, no hindrance of any sort.



Figure 4: Àlááfíà

Èta-iwà

Èta-iwà is when there segments/cotyledon open and one closed. This means the state of UNCERTAINTY. The whole four segments are not in agreement. This means if Bata drummers go out. They may not have a good outing.



Figure 5: Èta-iwà

Èjì-ìfẹ́

Two segments/cotyledons open two closed, this is considered as YES answer that is, it comes with balance and stability. The very structure of this position supports its supreme equilibrium.



Figure 6: Èjì-ìfẹ́

Ọkànràn

One segment/cotyledon opens and three closed, the implication of this is that, the answer is no, the divination foresees obstacles on their ways of the Bàtá drummers which may bring catastrophe if they should go out.



Figure 7: Ọkànràn

Ọyẹkú

Ọyẹkú is when all the segment/cotyledon closed, the implication of this is CAPITAL NO. Etawa and Ọkànràn can still be recast to the position of Àlááfíà or Èjì-ìfẹ́, but the leader has to pronounce a lot of incantations for supplication to reverse the negative deeds.



Figure 8: Ọyẹkú

6. Conclusion

This study has illuminated how the Kola nut (*obi abata*) functions as far more than a ritual prop in Yoruba Bata traditions—it is the spiritual compass that guides, sanctifies, and transforms musical performance into divine communion. Our findings reveal that for Bata musicians in Oyo, the act of splitting kola lobes before performance constitutes a sacred epistemology, a way of *knowing through ritual* that precedes and shapes the act of *sounding through drumming*. The kola's materiality—its bitterness, its lobes, its fragmentation—becomes the physical medium through which *àṣẹ* (divine authority) flows into the musical event, collapsing Western distinctions between preparation and performance, between artist and priest. At its core, this research demonstrates that Kola nutdivination is neither superstition nor mere tradition, but what Yoruba practitioners term *ògúndá wíwá* (the search for cosmic alignment). When 85% of interviewed musicians insisted they "cannot play without kola" (Field Notes, 2023), they articulated an ontological truth: the ritual *is* the first note of the performance. This aligns with the assertion by Idowu (1962) that Yoruba artistic practices are "prayers in motion," while challenging the ritual performance continuum by Schechner (2003) stressing that these elements are not points on a spectrum but intertwined dimensions of a single sacred act.

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