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Abstract

Igba titi is a dramatic performance specially organised by the Queens (Ayabas) in Oyo palace; and specifically arranged to entertain the king of Oyo (Alaafin) and to praise the heroic deeds of his ancestors. This cultural performance was uniquely performed by the King's wives alone while Alaafin dances to the lyric and the Yungba song specially composed for the performance. This paper examines the royal performance of Queens (Ayabas) during the Igbatiti in Oyo palace. The training process for the Ayabas, the paraphernalia involved during the performance and the spectators. The paper adopted historical method and qualitative approach to analyse the data. Both primary and secondary sources were explored. Oral interviews were granted eminent personality in the palace, chiefs, royal kinsmen, and two among the Ayabas so as to elicit more information while relevant books and journal were used. Findings revealed that Igbatiti performance had been an age-long social activity in the Old Oyo Empire and continues till date and performed by the Queens in Oyo palace.

Keywords: Igbatiti, Ayaba (the queens), Oyo palace, Performance, Yungba song

Introduction

Yoruba women occupied a significant place in pre-colonial political and cultural organizations and performed multidimensional tasks in the areas of religion, family life, and the economy. In the distant past, there existed a paucity of data on the contributions of women until the late nineteenth century when some women scholars like Bolanle Awe¹, Larry Denzer², and Nina Mba³ emerged and paid close attention to Women studies. A few scholars have investigated women's contributions in the palace in the past shaping both pre-colonial and post-colonial Yoruba land as interest in this aspect of history has grown recently as can be seen from the increasing number of scholarly publications and students' work on this subject., there is negligible or little scholarly work on

¹ Bolanle Awe, Laray Denzer, and Nina Mba engaged in Women's studies in the nineteenth century

² LaRay Denzer, The International Journal of African Historical Studies, 27, 1. 5-18

³ Nina Mba, in Bolanle Awe(ed) , Nigerian women in Historical Perspectives. Nigeria: Sankore/Bookcraft, 1992, 78



women in the Royal Domain. It is a general belief that Ayabas are just confirmed into the inner court where they sit down to enjoy the affluence of the palace on a daily basis without any multi-task or serious functions. Their freedom is limited when compared with ordinary women in society. They could not move outside the palace except when sent on important assignments. The custom has made people believe that the position of Ayaba though enviable is not desirable. Against this backdrop, the paper explores various training, rudiment, and ethics of the palace they undergo. The beauty and uniqueness of the performance inform this research; the various activities performed by the Ayabas in the palace and how they contributed to and promoted the culture of the kingdom. Arifalo opines that generally, in Yorubaland every individual is emotionally aroused whenever his cognomen and that of his lineage are being chanted. Chanting of praise names helps to spur warlords to deeds on the battlefield. ⁴

Plate 1: *Entrance to the Oyo Palace*



Source: Author

The role of the royal wives (Ayabas cannot be overemphasized in the Yoruba palaces. They are unavoidable vital support factors to Alafin's, peace, prosperity, and long life. They served as life wire and lubricant for the King and without them the palace would have been like a ghost place and many rites would have been in extinction. Finegan a song traditionalist of the Akan Women of Ghana as quoted in Omojola attested to this.⁵ Among the festivals observed in Yoruba land and Oyo in particular, Igbatiti was unique and peculiar because it involves only the royal wives while the king (Alaafin) is the dancer. It is rated as one of the most developed and elaborated oral poetic genres in Africa. ⁶ Akinyemi in his work remarked that the Yoruba generally places a high premium on festivals and it is a platform for social interaction and unification

⁴ S.O. Arifalo, Historical Consciousness in Pre-literate Nigerian Societies. In: Gabriel O. Oguntomisin and Simeon Ademola Ajayi (eds). *Readings in Nigerian History and Culture* (Ibadan, Hope Publications, 2002), 27-28.

⁵ Omojola, B. (2009) 'Song of the King's Wives. Women Power and Performance in the Yoruba Public Sphere in CODESRIA. *Africa Development*. Vol. XXIV (2), p.48.

⁶ Finnegan, R. (1970) *Oral Poetry*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

among the people.⁷ Igbatiti festival has a special connection with the politics of the palace as it involves the favorites of the king in the palace. It was one of the festive moments for the Alaafin as his Ayabas performed and he watched with good admiration while others such as palace guards, friends, and invited guests served as spectators. This festival can only be performed in the palace, unlike many other festivals such as Masquerade (Egungun) Oro cult or Beere festival which is performed in public.

Methodology

The paper uses primary and secondary sources by adopting a qualitative historical method. Interviews were granted to eminent personalities in the palace, some chiefs, royal kingsmen, and two among the Ayabas. The younger of Alaafin Adeyemi III, perhaps, owing to the influence of Westernization showed interest in the topic and the elderly ones that were interested could not be easily approached except on the king's approval. Mr. Bolaji Akeusola was a (close ally to the palace and Alaafin's chief photographer) and also my degree students.⁸ He granted me access to the pictures taken during one of the recent Igbatiti performances in the palace. I was also granted an interview by one of the palace Chiefs, Chief P. O. Ogunmola (Otun of Oyo)⁹ Prince Ayo Ladigbolu¹⁰, and some other close relatives to Alaafin Adeyemi III. Other materials relied on are secondary sources such as textbooks and journals. The indirect observation technique was also adopted. Some of the royal children who lived outside the palace were interviewed and an explanation was given to them they also performed by Igbatiti while my friends and I constituted the audience.

Igbatiti performance

Igbatiti is a cultural activity that has to do with cultural performance which is specially organized and uniquely performed by the Ayabas (king's wives) in Oyo palace, a dramatic and acrobatic dance performed by the Queen and is specially designed and re-enacted to entertain the king and to praise the heroic deeds of his ancestors and to promote the cultural heritage of the kingdom. The kind of song rendered during the festival is called 'Yungba'.¹¹ This royal performance is unique and exclusively to Oyo Palace among other royal palaces in Yorubaland. The performance dates back to the era of the old Oyo Empire and this type of historical event has been carefully preserved in Oyo palace. According to Chief Ogunmola, the practice had been in existence and the practice continued even when the present Oyo (Atiba) was established.¹²

⁷Akinyemi, A. (2000) "Yoruba Palace Poetry within the context of change".

⁸ Mr. Bolaji Akeusola was the senior photographer in Oyo Palace during the era of Oba Olayiwola Adeyemi III

⁹ Oral interview with Chief P.O. Ogunmola (Otun of Oyo) in his residence on 21/5/23, before his demise.

¹⁰ Prince Ayo Ladigbolu was a retired Methodist Bishop, a royal lineage of Oba Ladigbolu, and a close ally to the late Alaafin.

¹¹ Yungba song was a specially composed song sung during Igbatiti's performance in the palace.

¹² P.O. Ogunmola, A New Perspective to the History of Oyo Empire.

The kings' wives often entertained Alaafin at victory during war or lifted his spirit when they observed that he was not happy or encouraged him when facing challenges. The practice continued when the new Oyo was established in 1837. Igbatiti means beating of calabash. As it implies, it is a performance that involves the beating of a big calabash turned upside down over a calabash filled with water. The calabashes were of varying sizes and were beating to the rhythm of its accompanied Yungba song. Olukoju in his work explains that Yungba and Igbatiti could be performed at the same ceremony, but sometimes, Yungba are performed without being accompanied by calabash beating.¹³ Igbatiti is performed only by royal wives and this makes a collection of data for the study a herculean task because access to Ayabas was not easy for an outsider. I had to look for a female guide, an elderly statesman, and a palace chief who granted me an audience to interview them on the topic.

Igbatiti Performance Style

The uniqueness and peculiarity of the performance attract the attention of this paper. Each time the Queens (Ayabas) are set for the festival, they are seated around the calabashes on the mat. Performing through a full ensemble of Igbatiti, the rings (*oruka*) are worn around the fingers to produce a more effective sound as they beat the calabashes.

Plate 2: *Ayaba in action during Igbatiti performance*

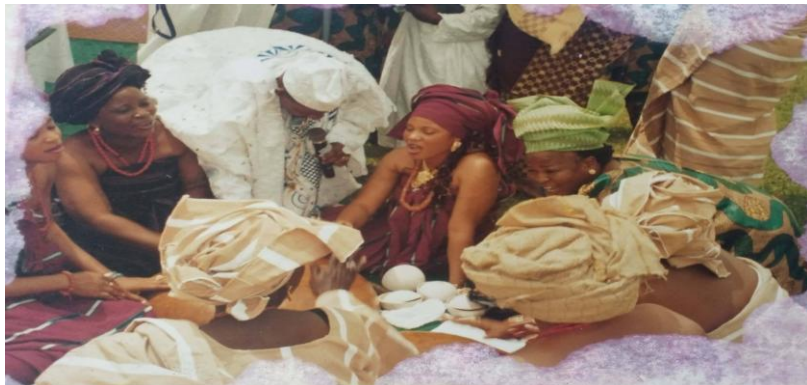


Source: Author

¹³ Olukoju, E.O (1978). The place of chants in Yoruba Traditional Yoruba Oral Literature. Ph.D Thesis, University of Ibadan. Ibadan. Igbatiti Performance Style

As shown in the picture, Igbatiti must be performed while sitting down on the mat with their two laps gripping the mortar firmly. The significance of the position is said to be customary, for women when saluting their husband or superior, thus their kneeling or sitting is a sign of respect for the king. At the sitting/kneeling position the drum is artistically beaten with Yungba songs being recited to complement each other. Every Yoruba oral poetry genre has a distinctive vocal style and is noted for its tone of performance. The performance of Igbatiti performance shows that the palace women are very intelligent and creative and are not idle or a burden to the king but the performance rite shows that they are well organized in a manner that facilitates the elevation of women beyond the domestic affairs; the performance also expresses the often domain of king's wives as exalted that explain their position of social responsibility in the palace affairs. This work reveals that Ayabas had a great influence on the king's disposition and condition. The festival was occasionally performed to entertain the king and to make him happy.

Plate3: *Alaafin Adeyemi praying for the Ayabas*



Source: Author

Igbatiti Song (Yungba) and the Oral Chant in the Palace

According to Omojola, historical and oral sources pointed to the vibrancy of musical ensembles as an integral part of palace protocol in ancient Yoruba palaces.¹⁴ The functions of such ensembles include routine activities like saluting the king and royal dignitaries as well as announcing the imminent

¹⁴ Omojola, B. (2009) 'Song of the King's Wives. Women Power and Performance in the Yoruba Public Sphere in CODESRIA. Africa Development. Vol. XXIV (2), p.48.

arrival of visitors which constitute the uniqueness of the palace in Yoruba land. This scene was performed by the talking drummers and bulge players who continue to function daily. Igbatiti songs and chants are especially composed for the king to affirm the supremacy of the political authority of Alaafin. The (Ayabas) sing in the presence of the Alaafin and the chiefs and other spectators as Ayabas perform and display before him expressing their gratitude to the king or counting them worthy of serving him. The Ayabas sing to praise the king's love and for them. The act was performed as a form of entertainment to gladden the king's heart. Some of the songs that are sung by the Ayabas are written below as collected from the Ayabas and some chiefs in the palace through secondary sources. The collection from the incumbent Alaafin depicts the present Alaafin

Plate 4: Alaafin Adeyemi III spraying money for the Queens (Ayabas)



Source: Author

	<u>Meaning</u>
<i>Lile:</i> Layiwola Atanda Emi letori e ku o Ojoun poo mo onjo	<i>Lead:</i> Layiwola, Layiwola Atanda I can die because of you you certainly dance very well
<i>Egbe:</i> Ojoun poo mo onjo Layiwola	<i>Chorus:</i> You certainly dance very <u>well</u> Layiwola
<i>Lile:</i> Kokoro nje o latese wuyewuye	<i>Lead:</i> I can see you moving your <u>feet</u> majestically
<i>Egbe:</i> O joun poo mo <u>jo</u> Layiwola	<i>Chorus:</i> You certainly dance very <u>well</u> Layiwola
<i>Lile:</i> 'Layiwola, Oba <u>wa</u>	<i>Lead:</i> 'Layiwola, our King
<i>Egbe:</i> Atanda l'oba <u>wa</u>	<i>Chorus:</i> Atanda is our king
<i>Lile:</i> Layiwola oyayi pupo	<i>Lead:</i> You are admirable
<i>Egbe:</i> Atanda rewa loba	<i>Chorus:</i> Atanda is a handsome king

Ipele II

Lile: Layiwola Oko Iku

Egbe: Tiku o gbodo pa

Lile: Layiwola oko arun

Egbe: Ti arun ko gbodo se

Lile: Layiwola gba yii pupo

Egbe: Atanda loba tiwa

Lile: Layiwola kade o pe lori

Egbe: Atanda ki bata o pe lese

Set II

Lead: Layiwola, the master of death

Chorus: Death dare not kill you

Lead: Layiwola the husband of disease

Chorus: Disease dare not inflict

Lead: Layiwola man of integrity

Chorus: Atanda is our worthy king

Lead: May Olayiwola live long

Chorus: Atanda, may your reign be
PROSPEROUS.

These and many other songs are chanted in praise of the incumbent Alaafin during the igbatiti festival. Other chants that are collected from the royal family members are written below with references made to Alaafin Ladigbolu's majesty, flamboyance, and affluence as a royal father during his tenure. The other song that follows after was sung to praise Alaafin Gbadegesin Ajeigbe. Ladigbolu reigned between 1956 and 1965. He was the son of the former Alaafin Asiyanni Ladigbolu who reigned from 1911 to 1944.

Lile (chorus)

Gbadegesin Alabi fowo tire ko
eeyan ire jo
Okoleatu ni 'Badan
Gbadegesin Alabi ko mo Ede
Ti fi i soko ara Ede
Bee ni ko mo Ejigbo
Ti fil soko ara Ejigbo
Ko mo Imokin
Ti fi soko ara Imokin

Egbe (chorus)

Gbadegesin Alabi
Ohun to wu o olowo nii' fowo re ra

Meaning: The above chant eulogies Alaafin Gbadegesin; for his good sense of administration pleasantries, personality, and kindness which endeared him to his subject. The oral chant reveals the popularity of the king during his time, his fame and wealth exposed him to marry different caliber of women outside his domain. These greetings are often employed to salute the Alaafin to acknowledge his power and the extent to which he was respected and revered by his subjects. The king's best characteristics, his royalty, courage, diplomacy, and ancestry were usually emphasized in the song over his less flattering attributes. During igbatiti performance, negative words or dirty utterances are not allowed.

Below are other eulogies that depict the royal qualities of Alaaḥin Ajeigbe (1956-1968) and Alaaḥin Asiyanbi Ladigbolu between 1911 and 1944. Source: as given by one of the Ladigbolu grandsons, Taiwo Ladigbolu.¹⁵

¹⁵ Oral interview with Mr. Taiwo Ladigbolu, a grandson of Prince Alhaji Ladigbolu on 21/11/24

'Atobatele Asiyانبola Ladigbolu
Omo Agboluaje, Omo Ajoru ke riri
Omo oberiri - lookun
Omo Osupa-le-ani ni-o-gun
Omo owo e ba too ko lo tun un se
Omo Abiodun
Omo Ogun-eranko-ni-wo
Oba o-gun-efon ni-patako idi

Meaning

Who already like a king had an abundance of everything Asiyانبi is also known as Ladigbolu a descendant of Agboluaje, offspring of he who rises in the middle of the night and radiates a great light (through his costly and shining apparel gloriously in the dark, offspring of one who often says "the moon appears in the sky and we complain about his appearance. He, whose hand we can reach it should hasten to straighten it, offspring of the late king Abiodun. He rides the animal on the horn; he rides leisurely on the buffalo's back.

During the Igbatiti performance, the queens appeared essential in Yoruba traditional attire (Aso-ofi). The Ayabas tied Aso-ofi around the chest with a beautifully adorned hairstyle neatly weaved and decorated with beads. The dress was uniformly worn by all participating Ayabas.

Training for the Ayabas

Arifalo asserts that in the palaces and compounds of traditional kings or chiefs, there were established complex methods of preserving and transmitting the history and traditions of people. In Oyo palace for example offices are established whose holders carry the responsibility of consciously preserving official historical accounts of the society and because of their important roles these traditional historians are carefully trained and their offices are nearly always hereditary. Ogunbunmi in one of her works referred to them as traditional historians who are skillful in panegyric citation of the past Alaafin.

In Oyo palace the kings maintain what Biobaku calls professional oral historians- the palace framers, the ballad singers, the Arokin, and the Onirara.¹⁶ These are the categories of people who trained some of the Ayaba in the palace. Most of these Ayabas neither had prior knowledge of the oral chant before they got married to the king; nor had anything to do with the palace affairs until they found themselves in the royal domain. The younger Ayabas are specially trained by the elder Ayabas headed by Lyamode. Iyamode is the eldest woman in the palace and is well-versed in all the norms and ethics of the palace. She was among the Ayabas but the mother of the palace. Among the elderly Ayabas who also trained younger ones are Ayaba Abibat Adeyemi (the oldest among the Ayabas), Ayaba Raimat Adeyemi Iya file-koto, (the second eldest), and Ayaba

¹⁶ S.O. Biobaku, Sources of Yoruba History, Oxford:: Clarendon Press, 1970

Barrister Basirat Adeyemi.¹⁷ The teachers' are usually experienced chanters especially the wives of former king who had performed for their husband while the 'pupils' are the wives of the king. In Yoruba palace tradition, there is no limit to the number of wives a king could acquire in fact the number depicts his glory, wealth and often added glamour to his domain.

Hence, there is continuity in the tradition, as new Ayaba arrives. Iyamode was a prominent teacher in this act (a high female palace official) Johnson explains that teachers instruct pupils under Iyamode's strict supervision. Aside, from the Igbatiti chant, other songs such as Yungba, oral poetry, and 'Orin olori' are also taught in the palace.¹⁸ Iyamode could be categorized as professional flatter in a subtle way who taught the Ayaba to praise and exhort by recounting the monumental and illustrious deeds and the great magnificence of their forebears.

Curriculum

The curriculum (though not formally outlined) is often strictly followed by Iyamode that trains the Ayabas. The curriculum included teaching the names and history of the royal lineages, memorizing praise songs, oral chant, yungba song poetry (Oriki), and palace ethics dos and dons of the palace, taboos, and tradition. Igbatiti pupils are the wives of the king. Johnson also noted how important the training was and commented thus: Their teachers come to (Iyamode's apartment three times daily lasting for three months or more until the learners are perfect in their studies. Small corporal punishments such as twisting of the ears and cracks on the heads are not spared on these occasions they are not quick at catching words or their memory (fail) (s) them. Once the art was mastered, they became master in their own right and could assume the responsibility of teaching others in the future.¹⁹

All of Alaafin Lamidi's wives could recite or chant any of the deities both in the palace and on public occasions. Olatunji in his work opines that the festival serves as a means of entertainment among the Yorubas. The music and dances associated with the festival gladden the heart of the merriment. He further explains that the Yoruba festival is an opportunity to express their culture through the music played, the food served and the dresses that are worn²⁰ Igbatiti performance serves as a means of entertainment for the king and his guests. The cultural performance displayed the costumes; the rendition with a special sonorous voice produced was an added glamour.

Festivals have spiritual value in Yoruba land. It was a way of paying vows and the expression of gratitude to gods and goddesses. Igbatiti performance is specially organized to eulogise the king and his ancestors, at each occasion,

¹⁷ These are the three names of the Ayabas that were interviewed on Igbatiti performance. Late Alafin Olayiwola Lamidi Adeyemi III had many wives but only three were interviewed

¹⁸ Iyamode was a high female palace official. One of her duties was to train the Queens on the rudiments and ethics of the palace. Yungba is a traditional song specially sung during Igbatiti's performance in the palace.

¹⁹ The information was revealed in the course of interviews with the wives.

²⁰ Olatunji, O. O. (1984) Features of Yoruba Oral Poetry Ibadan. Ibadan. University Press.

Alaafin would dance to the music produced and even go ahead to spray his Queens (Ayabas) to express his appreciation to them. It also serves as a unifying force among the Ayabas as they rehearse together, dress uniformly, and plan together for the performance. This paved the way for cooperation and mutual relationships among the people. Those who are connected by spiritual links tend to be loyal and faithful to one another. They developed a sense of belongings which foster unity and a festival serves as a unifying force among the Ayabas and it promotes mutual understanding. It also serves as a means of acculturation, preserving and promoting cultural heritage, it also imparts informal education to the younger generations through the recitation of oral genres, chants and it arouses their interest to learn how to beat calabash, dancing steps, and other protocols that precede the festival.

Social change and its impact on Igbatiti performance

Njoku opines that in any situation of historical change, there is continuity.²¹ A society is subjected to constant processes of change and adaptation. Among the external influences that daily rock the wheel of African tradition are European civilization, globalization, and many others. There is no dispute the fact that royal patronage is on a daily basis while new models of entertainment such as tourism (tourist centers), relaxation center, and modern sports activities have crept in and replaced the traditional ways. Traditional forms of entertainment are being eroded and replaced with relaxation provided by radio, television home video, and many other modern indoor games. The Palace domain is not an exception to these modern facilities. This was what Dasylyva describes as inter-cultural influences. ²²The impact of Western Education and foreign religions and culture are devastating to African tradition. The new trend contributed immensely to the declining popularity of Igbatiti and Yungba in the palace. It was often practiced in those days but now it is not as often as it used to be in those days. It could be a result of the intricacies it involved such as training, practicing, and learning processes.

Igbatiti Uniqueness and Peculiarities

The performance is relatively different from other forms of festivals performed in Yorubaland. As earlier mentioned the festival is exclusive to the palace and performed only by the Ayabas. Alaafin is the major dancer while the invited guest serves as the spectators who watched with keen interest. The Ayabas served as the chanters and the drummers. Aside from, the Igbatiti festival, Yungba and orin ayaba (King's Wives song) have social similarities. They are rare royal court music and the) differ from other royal poetry. They are mainly cultivated and practiced in Oyo, the royal base of Alaafin. The official royal bands in most parts of Africa are predominantly female and restricted to the palace. Igbatiti with Yungba could not be performed by anybody else except those approved by the tradition (royal wives). On the other hand, Yungba could be performed for other royal chiefs and is traditionally permitted in Bashorun

²¹ Njoku Onmuka (2004), Economic History of Nigeria, 19th & 20th Centuries Nigeria Magnet enterprises.

²² A.D. Dasylyva, Folklore, Oral Traditions and Oral Literature, Culture and Customs of the Yoruba. 139-58, 2017.

(head of the Oyo Mesi (king's maker) and second in command to Alaafin. It could also be performed in the following palace domain.

Plate 5: *The Sekere Drummers Entertaining the King*



Source : Authjor

Alapinni by virtue and his traditional office was the head of religious affairs. The custodians of oral history also drummed and sang to 'Sekere' beating in praise of past and incumbent Alaafin. One of the areas where the Monarch featured prominently in cultural activities was the Igbatiti festival in the palace.²³

Conclusion

The importance and role of women in African traditional festivals cannot be overemphasized if given the desired attention. Women in the royal domain participate in various cultural functions and their contributions should not be glossed over in African terrain. This traditional festival such as Igbatiti, Yungba, and orin ayaba depicts women, intellectual ability, a creativity, hence, it desires International Publication. It promotes Yoruba cultural heritage, unearths the royal women's contribution to socio-cultural activities in the palace, and also encourages the young ladies in the palace.

Igbatiti has been an age-long palace tradition practiced since the existence of the first old Oyo-Ile courtier music with socio-cultural functions, is a form of royal entertainment, and a repository of Alaafin royal songs. If given wide publicity, it might enjoy cultural relevance. The festival could serve as an International Cultural Festival (ICF) which people from other parts of the world would come and witness through which the economy of the town can be boosted. Since the festival is educative and informative (through the oral chant) it could also be promoted if the modern media houses would publicize through special programmes involving the chanters, and the royal band involvement. There is no doubt that the Igbatiti festival is unique, didactic, and informative.

²³ The sekere crew in the picture is the group that entertains the king during an outing or festival.