



YORUBA FOLK TALE-SONGS AS INDIGENOUS MORAL PEDAGOGY: REIMAGINING ANTI-CORRUPTION DISCOURSES IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA

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Abstract

Indigenous oral traditions have historically functioned as powerful mechanisms for moral instruction, social regulation, and collective identity formation across African societies. However, contemporary scholarship on anti-corruption and socio-political transformation in Nigeria has largely privileged legal, political, and institutional approaches while paying comparatively limited attention to the potential contributions of indigenous cultural systems to ethical reorientation and public accountability. This study examines a Yoruba fictional tale-song associated with Agbalumo (African star apple) as an indigenous framework for interrogating corruption, abuse of power, and social justice in contemporary Nigeria. Drawing on ethnomusicological perspectives and the moral functions of oral literature, the study investigates how the narrative symbolism and lyrical content of the tale-song encode communal values relating to integrity, responsibility, discipline, and equitable justice.

Using qualitative textual analysis and socio-cultural interpretation, the study critically analyses the narrative structure, symbolic representations, and ethical messages embedded in the Agbalumo tale-song within the broader context of Yoruba oral tradition. The findings reveal that the tale-song functions as a moral allegory that condemns greed, selfishness, exploitation, abuse of authority, and the unlawful accumulation of wealth irrespective of social status or political power. The narrative further reflects traditional Yoruba conceptions of accountability, in which communal welfare, justice, and moral responsibility supersede individual privilege and social hierarchy.

The study argues that indigenous moral philosophies and oral traditions remain significant cultural resources for promoting ethical leadership, civic responsibility, and national reorientation in contemporary Nigeria. Rather than advocating a return to pre-modern judicial systems, the paper demonstrates how the ethical principles embedded in Yoruba folk traditions can complement existing institutional anti-corruption mechanisms through moral education and value reorientation. The study contributes to emerging scholarship on indigenous knowledge systems, music, and governance by illustrating the continuing relevance of African oral traditions in addressing contemporary socio-political challenges and advancing sustainable social transformation.

Keywords: Yoruba folk music; oral tradition; indigenous knowledge systems; socio-political transformation; corruption; moral education; ethnomusicology; Nigeria.



Introduction

African societies generally are very rich in folk and fiction tales that border on particular community, a sect or individual in a community and other creatures. The former deals with incidents of note and historic, most times inform folktales that transmit into oral tradition. The later describes imaginary people, community, monarch and events. These transmitted to proverbs, folk or fiction tales and songs which also form the basis for education, norms and values for the oncoming generations. It also instills caution and corrective measure for any misconduct in the societies Yoruba race, which is the focus group in the context of this article: one of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria. The group is found in large concentration in the south-western region of Nigeria. In spite of the global civilisation, Yoruba ethnic group stand out in strong attachment to culture tradition and religion. The same is reflected in most of the indigenous fictional songs of their different societies. However, *Osan agbalumo* are in one among other fictional songs in Akure and its environs, which narrate the demonstration of corrupt practice of the son of a traditional political figure (monarch) in traditional community. The act was at the expense of the steward of the monarch who in turn meted traditional justice on the son of the monarch. Corrupt practices at the Nigerian political system is so alarming, aching and disturbing that the future of the nation in almost all areas; economy, religion, education, administration and services in Federal, state and local governments, home front and so on are endangered. The pronouncement of any government in fixing corruption and ameliorate the integrity of the nation is doubtful. For example, Angaye (2003) quoting General Diya on evidence which revealed the incidence of corruption from individuals who supposed to be enforcing law against corruption thus; a judge went to court with two versions of his verdict to sell to the highest bidder, and the political system was so inefficient and corrupt that the National Assembly in 1993 became the venue where bribes were offered and received openly to the dismay of Nigerians (Concord, June 8, 1994). In addition to inefficiency and corruption, "seekers of political power and wealth have turned thuggery and hired assassins into lucrative jobs without realizing that those who give or carry the sword/gun will die by the sword.

This happens because the emolument attached to almost all political positions in the country is so attractive that citizens' attention has shifted toward becoming political figures to enrich themselves at the expense of the masses. Ambition drives ambitious politicians to engage in reckless actions to get a position as a cos. However, such politicians later log out against the electorates who voted them into the position as representatives, and if any benefit accrues to people, it is because of me. Rather, they concentrate on methods to increase their wealth rather than diminish it. This paper proposes an approach, through a Yoruba fictional tale and song, to eradicating self-centeredness, embezzlement, financial misappropriation, and the exercise of power at the expense of the masses. It also suggests the appropriate measure of discipline for whoever is found guilty of corrupt practice.

Nigerian folk music

Traditional music, as practiced in Nigeria before the country came under European influence, is characterized by the combination of singing with some form of accompaniment (Euba, 1977, p. 1). Folk or traditional songs have existed in all African societies long before the advent of Europeans. It is an aspect of a nation's oral tradition used to address issues that concern the community's native people. The use and function of any folksong are peculiar to the community of its origin. However, a common feature is that it borders on the community's socio-cultural and political issues. Centuries ago, folksongs were associated with rural community life, with a specific aim and objective that informed individuals' moral and ethical growth and community development. These ideals are upheld in African communities, especially among the Yoruba of south-western Nigeria, for generations until the advent of civilization and modernization. Although the influence of the civilization seemed to render the Nigerian cultural system valueless, in the 20th century, the pattern of dissemination changed with greater emphasis on written transmission and especially on recordings (Adenle, 2011, p. 6). This means that the moral and ethical functions of folksongs in Yorubaland have not changed despite the heavy influence but have undergone modification as a result of the westernization of culture, ideals, and education. Adenle (2011:6) further asserted that this aspect of modification has enabled folksongs to be made available to diverse countries around the world and to gain wider coverage.

However, the process of transmitting and inculcating the ideals, values, and norms of the society to generations through oral tradition actually have been of great assistance to the Yoruba folks anywhere they found themselves

This for them has served the purpose which the prevalence society they lived in was established for and so, fable stories, folksongs, myth and legends were kept alive in the minds of the younger generation through storytelling and rote-learning to enrich the social and moral life of the people and ensuring the continuity of their culture (Adenle, 2011, p. 7). Suffice it to mention at this junction that fiction song originated from fictio tny or tale, a type of oral literature (in the context of this paper) that describes imaginary people and events, whose plot takes place as real, located in a setting. Fictional tales, songs, and folk tales are treated alike in African societies. These are essential because of the functional roles they play in people's lives, since no African musical typology exists in a vacuum. Therefore, an African culture that grows from a background where ideals, norms, values, and belief systems are taught would be guided by these virtues at any socio-political status. In Africa, it is believed that whoever is saddled with any responsibility in society must be of integrity. It is expected of such an individual to stand clear of corruption and indiscipline, in order to preserve his good name and to defend the course for which they were selected. To this end, a Yoruba proverb says *alaso ala kii joko ni'so elepo*, that is, the wearer of a white dress does not sit in a palm oil stall, Olatunde (2005:174).

The remembrance and adherence to the various tales and songs, rich in knowledge, traditional skills, norms, values, and belief systems, can reorient individuals in the corridors of power within government parastatals and also prevent further corruption in society. It also provides appropriate disciplinary measures for culprits involved in corrupt practices. The folkloric song adapted in this paper.

The description of Agbalumo

African cherry or African Star Apple is a local fruit called Agbalumo among the Yoruba of the Southwest, Udara among the Igbo in the South, and Utien in the Northern parts of Nigeria (Adams, n.d.). The beautiful, sweet, yellowish fruit is consumed everywhere in Nigeria. Agbalumo is a seasonal fruit harvested between February and April (see Freiden, 2015). However, it becomes sweet after fully maturing and drops by itself, especially when rain falls on the tree while the fruit is developing. This happens at the inception of the rainy season in March. It is not proper to pluck unripe Agbalumo from the tree to avoid a sour slapping sensation when it is consumed. In the olden days, nobody plucked African cherry fruits for the consciousness of their sourness. In contemporary times, it is a common practice to pluck it from the tree. Suffice it to say that the branches of the tree are even cut down, to enable desperate individuals, who make money from the fruit, to pluck the unripe and immature ones and sell to people who consume it (ordinarily or) because of the benefits and high nutritious value in it, but do not have free access to the source. The Agbalumo tree is commonly very tall. It is a canopy tree about 30-40m in height. Large-diameter trees have impressive, spreading crowns. It requires a moist climate wherever it grows.



Figure 1: Fresh Agbalumo fruits when it has not been brake



Figure 2: Fresh Agbalumo fruits when it brakes

Agbalumo fictional tale

There existed an Oba (monarch) in a rural community who was very rich and honorable. He had many wives, male and female servants, and chiefs and counselors. In those days, Obas were highly honored and respected. In fact, they were regarded as the owners of all things; Land, trees, women, farm products, etc., whatsoever they do or say, no one dared to change or alter it, come what may. This monarch had a sole Alumo, who also had a male servant attached to him to run errands. Alumo used the servant and would not, on any day, favor him with any of the king's palace shares allotted to him. The servant used an extra hour to work for his own daily needs. One of these was the cherry tree, which he planted to produce for him, from which he had his meal. The servant often brought the cherry fruits to the palace and gave them to Alumo. Alumo became very interested in the fruit that he could not control his appetite again, and as a result, he had to go secretly to his servant's farm to pluck cherry fruits. When the servant learned that an unknown person used to pluck fruit from the tree, he tried to identify who it might be, but to no avail. However, he consulted an herbalist about how to catch the thief. The herbalist prepared him a charm, which he wore on the tree that whosoever climbed it would not be able to come down again. Unknown to Alumo, who went there one day to pluck fruit, climbed the tree and took as much as he could, but was unable to climb down until people started gathering to find out who the thief was. Surprisingly, to the villagers, it was the prince of the community who always stole his servant's product. The servant did not spare the culprit in his judgment. He, picked up his song in call and response form, thus:

Call	Response
<i>Osan gb'alumo aree</i>	<i>Alumo jeje o</i>
<i>Osan gb'alumo aree</i>	<i>Alumo jeje o</i>
<i>O pe k'alumo tiije</i>	<i>Alumo jeje o</i>
<i>O pe k'alumo tii mo</i>	<i>Alumo jeje o</i>
<i>E me fokonikan ya gbo</i>	<i>Alumo jeje o</i>
<i>Osan gb'alumo aree</i>	<i>Alumo jeje o</i>
<i>Osan gb'alumo aree</i>	<i>Alumo jeje o</i>



Interpretation

Osan take Alumo up, take Alumo up. For a long time, he had been enjoying dining and winning. He would never invite anyone to give dine Osan take Alumo up, take Alumo up.

It is interesting to note that as the song continued, the tree began to shoot up, with Prince on top of it. As a result, the tree started to be a beggar for mercy, but he would not listen to him, owing to the principle that justice must bark and bite.

Textual analysis

Discipline in the rural and traditional setting is always statutory. There are laid down rules and measures of punishment for offenders, depending on the offenses committed, especially when they involve moral sanity. Every member of African societies is aware of the consequences of misconduct and therefore refrains from engaging in offensive acts. However, the textual analysis of the above song shows that, since the culprit had been caught in the act of plucking or stealing the Agbalumo fruit from the tree, he could not come down from the tree, and the tree must grow taller. At this, he was vulnerable to the danger of falling and dying without remedy. The implication is that anyone found to be acting contrary to societal norms and values, especially when the behavior or misconduct has negative consequences for human development. The community where the evil was perpetrated would mete out the appropriate punishment on the perpetrator. Sometimes, the measure of punishment could be by reference. In the past, death and excommunication were common measures of punishment for culprits, regardless of their family or social attachments. This, perhaps, was the historical incident that gave rise to the coinage of Agbalumo as the Yoruba name for the fruit.

Level of corruption in Nigeria

The level in the Nigerian system at this time seems unquantifiable, unable to capture almost every level of human existence in the nation, including families and the spiritual institutions where sanity is expected to be high. This heart-aching cankerworm, which some individuals see as a normal or practice, is indeed ruining the nation. The main focus of this paper concerns those who found themselves (whether by election, appointment, or career) in the corridors of power and who also use this position to amass wealth illegitimately. The degree of this menace is very high at all levels of governance in Nigeria, from the local to the federal government. They unlawfully and wrongfully use these positions and indecent characters to procure some benefits for themselves at the expense and right of workers and others who are at their mercy. Information Nigeria (2013) comments that:

Corruption has been refined to the extent that it earned the country an avoidable disrepute and painted its image with a life stigma. The country's position as the second-most corrupt in the world warrants total abstinence, but the opposite is true: it is progressing by the day. The major problem, which drives the others, is the leadership.

These leaders and their close allies had, at one time or another, looted the Nigerian treasury and logged such monies in foreign bank accounts. This is for no other reason than their selfish interest and wealth accumulation. For example, the World Bank published the names of some serving and former Presidents/Heads of State and governors who laundered money in London, Switzerland, the USA, and Germany. Nigerians have been patiently looking up to the government of the serving President, General Muhammadu Buhari, who has been busy apprehending and prosecuting looters for a better Nigeria.

The effect of corruption on Nigerian workers

Unfortunately, rogues vying for political offices are inborn kleptomaniacs nursing the intention of acquiring wealth and looting the public treasury in the guise of showing dividends of democracy (Information Nigeria, 2013). They mount up window-dressing projects that cannot stand the test of time. Propaganda and deceit of the masses fill them, just to cover up their evil acts, continuing in looting the government treasury for their selfish satisfaction, thinking they cannot be discovered.

The most painful and disheartening practice of these government figures is the inconsiderate attitude towards the suffering of the masses and their insensitivity to workers' yearnings for the legitimate rights they are due. In the hard and biting conditions in which the workers are enmeshed, they roam sick, some even die in service, unable to pay their children's school and rent, how much more complete their abandoned housing meets. These workers are the backbone of the governments at all levels, working tirelessly to uplift national standards, yet they are made to suffer



unnecessarily. Retirees, who have also worked all their lives, contributing to the nation's development in one capacity or another, eagerly await payment of their dues. Which may not be real until they die

The occupiers of elected or appointed positions fail in many of their normal obligations to society, claiming that funds are unavailable. A fund that was not available for workers' welfare becomes overdrawn when these leaders need it for their personal use. They serve only themselves, not the mandate of their election or appointment. Therefore, the corruption level where these leaders operate is untellable.

Way to eradicating corruption

Although corruption is not rooted solely in Nigeria, it is experienced worldwide, including in developed countries. The Nigerian case is a special type of primitive accumulation of wealth (Adeleke, 2016, p. 80). From inception, corruption has been a major cause of power change, especially during the time of military rule. For example, late Major Nzeogwu staged his coup d'etat because public service was rife with corruption, and politicians/public servants were receiving 10 percent kickbacks on all awarded contracts. He stated during the 1966 coup that his intention and those of his colleagues were to rid the country of irresponsible politicians, incompetent and corrupt bureaucrats, restore respectability and accountability to the Nigerian public service (Njoku, 2010)

Subsequent governments in Nigeria did not remain mute about this menace. They, in their effort to curb corruption, established anti-corruption agencies such as the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) in 2000 and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) in 2003. The EFCC, in particular, is charged with investigating financial crimes such as advance fee fraud (popularly known in Nigeria as 419) and money laundering. People of repute were chosen to head these bodies with the hope that society will become better if the 'bad' persons are removed and replaced with 'good' persons, Ayeyemi (2013:73).

From the foregoing, the role of African traditional norms, values, and beliefs cannot be overemphasized and are very germane to curbing misdeeds in cultural societies where they are used. Individuals whose background is not isolated from these virtues will always be consciously maintaining them, intending to protect the good image of the family and the society they come from. Folksongs of varying levels of appreciation in African society serve as keys that keep culture carriers abreast of the learned societal ideals. Therefore, 'folksongs bring the feeling of patriotism', Allen (1962). To this end, a Yoruba adage cautions all citizenry that: omo ti a to ninu ogba kii si isu yo, that is, a child trained in an ideal environment does not misbehave in public.

The traditional method of curbing misdeeds can minimize corruption in today's Nigeria. In the past among Yoruba of southwest Nigeria, for example, if anyone is caught stealing another man's property or having illicit affair with a friend's or brother's wife, he could be asked to swear by a deity-ogun, sango, ayelala and others which can kill suddenly or be made to take concussion that would attest to the evil that he had perpetrated and face the wrath of the deity without any remedy. This was done to sanitize society from evil deeds.

Although we are in the modern age, civilization has, to some extent, swept away this traditional pattern of curbing misconduct. From what is happening among political and career leaders in Nigeria, it is clear that corruption has not been addressed. The Buhari-Osinbajo government has indeed been making serious efforts since its inception (May, 2015) to eradicate corruption from this nation. However, despite this effort, looters are being discovered almost daily. It is pathetic to express the opinion of this author that the anti-corruption crusade in the nation seems to be partisan; it looks as if there are some 'sacred cows' (either they are still serving or have been one time or the other in a political or career position) who cannot be prosecuted for this menace. Social media reveals these personalities every moment of the day. Heart-throb of reports on this cankerworm is that, after the looting and looters were exposed, arrest and detention carried out, not much is heard about them again, or the looters would be moving about and expressing themselves freely.

Application of the Agbalumo method of judgment

The modern method of prosecuting suspected criminals worldwide is through the 'court'. This is also to avoid animalistic, jungle-style justice and to preserve lives and property. In the bid to authenticate the law, justice is most times delayed or otherwise. Godfatherism, ethnic, political, and religious bonds and relationships of any kind could cause the law to look the other way, thereby instigating a manipulation of justice.



In traditional society, manipulation, though, cannot be totally ruled out; strict culture carriers stand firm for justice to avoid the wrath of the gods, according to their beliefs. In the bid to maintain cultural purity, ordained by the gods, all culprits of any indiscipline and corruption would adequately face the consequence of their misdeeds.

Before concluding this article, please point out that there cannot but be mixed culture, especially the Western culture, which has already influenced about eighty percent (80%) of Nigerians in the dimension of influencing their continued stay in power. Nonetheless, many individuals from societies across Nigeria still maintain the norms, values, and beliefs they grew up with. These people are very few in the corridors of power, and if they were once there, they might have pulled out rather than sell their conscience for the illegal acquisition of wealth.

From the beginning, the adoption of the agbalumo system of judgment and punishment is highly needed in Nigeria at this critical period, especially given the economy's deep engagement in corruption. This is necessary, owing to the fact that the politicians and the career officers are responsible for the situation Nigeria finds herself in. In the present national predicament, lootings from the treasury have been discovered in both foreign and local bank accounts of individuals. Money is stored in storehouses (water tanks), locked away and underground, in the houses of leaders who should be examples to the coming generations. Nation builders turn to caterpillar, destroying what some people have built.

Nigeria should be sanitized by applying the philosophy of the song text of agbalumo to some individuals in the presidency, through the local government, and even parastatals who are found to be culprits in this discourse. This will serve as a deterrent to those who are nursing the ambition with the idea of ruling at any level of governance, and looting the treasury with impunity.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Yoruba fictional tale-songs constitute more than artistic expressions or instruments of entertainment; they function as indigenous knowledge systems through which moral values, communal ethics, and mechanisms of social accountability are transmitted across generations. Through a critical analysis of the Agbalumo tale-song, the paper has shown how oral musical traditions encode cultural philosophies that condemn greed, abuse of power, injustice, and the illicit accumulation of wealth while promoting integrity, communal responsibility, and ethical leadership. These findings reaffirm the enduring relevance of African oral traditions as repositories of indigenous governance principles capable of informing contemporary discussions on socio-political transformation.

Beyond documenting the cultural significance of the Agbalumo narrative, this study contributes to the growing body of scholarship in ethnomusicology, oral literature, and indigenous knowledge studies by demonstrating that folk music can serve as an important medium for civic education, value reorientation, and public discourse on governance. Rather than advocating the literal restoration of traditional judicial practices, the study argues that the ethical philosophies embedded in Yoruba folk traditions can complement existing institutional frameworks for combating corruption through moral education, character formation, and community-centred approaches to accountability. This perspective broadens current debates on anti-corruption strategies by highlighting the importance of culturally grounded solutions alongside legal and institutional reforms.

The study also has important policy implications. Educational institutions, cultural organizations, and government agencies responsible for civic orientation should recognise indigenous musical traditions as valuable resources for promoting ethical citizenship and responsible leadership. Integrating selected Yoruba folk narratives and songs into music education, civic education, and cultural preservation programmes could strengthen value-based learning while fostering greater appreciation of Nigeria's rich indigenous heritage. Such initiatives would not only contribute to cultural sustainability but also encourage a more ethically conscious citizenry.

Nevertheless, the present study is limited by its reliance on qualitative textual and socio-cultural analysis of a single Yoruba fictional tale-song. Consequently, the findings cannot be generalized to the diverse body of Nigerian folk traditions without further empirical investigation. Future research should adopt comparative ethnographic approaches involving multiple ethnic groups, oral traditions, and performance contexts across Nigeria and other African societies. In addition, interdisciplinary studies combining ethnomusicology, anthropology, political science, and behavioural research would provide deeper insights into the effectiveness of indigenous cultural practices in promoting ethical behaviour and influencing public attitudes toward governance.



Ultimately, the paper argues that meaningful socio-political transformation in Nigeria requires more than institutional reforms and legal sanctions; it also depends on the revitalisation of indigenous ethical systems that cultivate integrity, social responsibility, and collective accountability. Yoruba folk tale-songs, exemplified by the Agbalumo narrative, remain enduring cultural resources whose moral philosophies can contribute significantly to contemporary efforts aimed at building transparent governance, strengthening civic values, and fostering sustainable national development.

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