Musical Traditions and Performance Practices of the Ajé Festival in Ile-Ife: Continuity and Contemporary Adaptation

Ogunrinade, David Olusegun Adebowale
Department of Music
Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo
ogunrinade@afued.edu.ng

&

Odunuga, Adeola Funmilayo
Department of Music
Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo
odunugafa@afued.edu.ng

&
Ajani, T. Olanrewaju
Department of Religious Studies
Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo
lanrebrobre@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines the history, performance practices, and development of music used in the Ajé Festival from the pre-colonial period to the present. It considers how these sacred musical traditions have survived despite challenges such as Christian missionary influence, Western education, urbanisation, the growth of popular music, and the introduction of foreign musical instruments. The study uses a qualitative ethnomusicological approach, including historical analysis, visual documentation, study of musical instruments, and transcription of selected vocal performances. It also examines the structure and functions of the festival's music. The findings show that the festival has maintained its essential African musical identity through the use of indigenous instruments such as dùndún, bàtá, ìgbìn, agogo, and ṣẹ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀. Other important features include speech-like tonal patterns, call-and-response, praise poetry (oríkì), and oral transmission through apprenticeship and family lineages. The study concludes that modern developments, including digital media, broadcasting, and cultural tourism, have increased the visibility of the Ajé Festival without destroying its cultural identity. The festival therefore demonstrates how Yoruba sacred musical traditions can adapt to modern society while preserving their cultural and religious heritage.

Keywords: Ajé Festival, Ile-Ife, Yoruba Ethnomusicology, Historical Continuity, Oral Transmission, Sacred Music

Introduction

Music plays a fundamental role in Yoruba religious cosmology, political authority, and social organisation. Ile-Ife which is regarded as the spiritual cradle of Yoruba culture and its indigenous festivals serve as living repositories of historical memory, spiritual values, and artistic performance. Among these, the Ajé Festival occupies a significant position, dedicated to honoring Ajé, the Yoruba deity associated with wealth, prosperity, growth, fertility, and trade gains. The Ajé Festival developed from the traditional religious beliefs of the Yoruba people, where music was used as a sacred way of connecting with the gods and strengthening communal spiritual life. Sacred songs, spiritual calls, and traditional drumming were used during worship and ceremonies in honour of Ajé. Royal court music is an important part of the Ajé Festival, during the festival, palace musicians perform praise poetry, genealogical songs, talking-drum music, and other ceremonial music to honour the king (Ooni) and celebrate the heritage of the royal institution because the Ooni of Ife has both political and spiritual authority in Yoruba society. These practices reflected the belief that wealth and prosperity came through divine blessings. Yoruba festivals help preserve these beliefs by passing religious knowledge from one generation to another through repeated songs, rituals, and symbolic performances. The onset of the colonial period introduced profound structural shifts to Yoruba society. The introduction of Western education, Christian missionary efforts, and European governance challenged the public execution and religious validity of indigenous festivals. Missionaries frequently condemned traditional drumming and invocatory chants, aiming to replace indigenous musical heritage with European hymnody. Concurrently, Western educational systems prioritized written notation and European harmonic principles over traditional oral transmission and apprenticeship models. Despite these colonial pressures and subsequent post-colonial transformations such as rapid urbanization, popular music expansion (Jújú, Fújì, Apàlà), and electronic media exposure, the musical traditions of the Ajé Festival have exhibited remarkable resilience. In the contemporary era, while modern sound amplification, digital dissemination, and cultural tourism have expanded the festival's public profile, the core sacred rituals continue to rely on traditional instruments, indigenous tonal structures, and oral modes of transmission. This article addresses Aje Festival not as incidental accompaniment to ritual but as a primary vehicle through which the festival's religious, social, and economic meanings are enacted and transmitted. Understanding this balance is essential for documenting African intangible cultural heritage.

Statement of the Problem

The survival of indigenous African ritual music in contemporary society faces continuous threats from rapid globalization, religious conversion, modern educational curricula, and urban cultural shifts. In many African communities, traditional sacred music has either been heavily secularized or replaced by foreign musical styles. The introduction of foreign instruments, electronic media, and popular commercial genres has fundamentally altered performance practices and reduced the prominence of traditional musical apprenticeship within younger generations. Although the Ajé Festival of Ile-Ife has maintained a continuous presence, there is a critical need to systematically examine how its musical heritage has navigated these socio-historical transformations across different historical epochs. Research specifically on the Aje Festival is limited, and most of the available studies are not focused on music. One of the major studies is by Lawuyi and Olupona (1987), which examined the role of the Aje Festival in wealth, politics, and the position of women among the Ondo people of southwestern Nigeria. Although the study is useful, especially in its discussion of gender and political issues, it focuses on Ondo rather than Ile-Ife. It also mainly discusses the social structure of the festival and gives little attention to its music and musical practices. This study fills the missing gap of the musical tradition and the performance practices. Furthermore, while modern adaptations such as digital archiving, media broadcasts, and cultural tourism enhance the festival's visibility, they also risk altering the authentic context of sacred performance. This study addresses this problem by examining the historical continuity, socio-religious philosophy, organological stability, and structural characteristics of the musical traditions of the Ajé Festival from the pre-colonial period to the contemporary era.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study are:

1. Examine the historical development and trajectory of Ajé Festival music across pre-colonial, colonial, post-colonial, and contemporary eras.
2. Identify and analyze the traditional musical instruments (organology) utilized in the festival and their symbolic, rhythmic, and communicative functions.

3. Investigate the performance practices, musical structures (rhythmic patterns, melodic tonal speech, call-and-response), and oral transmission modes underlying the festival's songs.
4. Evaluate the impact of modern developments including Western education, popular music, digital technology, and cultural tourism on the preservation and continuity of the festival's musical heritage.

Research Questions

1. How did the musical traditions of the Ajé Festival in Ile-Ife evolved and maintained through historical continuity from the pre-colonial era to the contemporary period?
2. What are the principal traditional instruments used during the Ajé Festival, and what are their specific organological, symbolic, and communicative roles?
3. What are the structural characteristics, performance practices, and transmission methods that define the vocal and instrumental music of the festival?
4. How have external factors such as colonial missionary activities, Western education, urban migration, digital dissemination, and cultural tourism affected the sacred music of the Ajé Festival?

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical models within ethnomusicology and cultural anthropology: Euba's Theory of Creative Adaptation and African Music Aesthetics and Vidal's Framework of Musical Continuity and Change. In Euba's Theory of Creative Adaptation and African Music Aesthetics, Euba (1990) posits that Yoruba music maintains structural integrity during periods of socio-cultural change through a process of "creative adaptation" rather than replacement. He notes that Yoruba percussion instruments function as speech surrogates by reproducing the linguistic tonal patterns of the Yoruba language. Furthermore, he argues that Yoruba ritual music derives its efficacy primarily from its spiritual and functional roles rather than purely aesthetic concerns. This theory explains how musicians in the Ajé Festival incorporate modern staging, amplified sound, and secular media without abandoning the core rhythmic patterns, tonal principles, and sacred functions of traditional ensembles. The second

theory is the Vidal's Framework of Musical Continuity and Change. Vidal (2012) asserts that Yoruba musical identity in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is sustained through dynamic adaptation, allowing traditional forms to absorb external socio-political shifts while preserving fundamental cultural values. He emphasizes that royal court music, praise poetry (oríkì), and ritual drumming preserve historical consciousness and institutional authority even when relocated to public spaces. Applied to this study, Vidal's framework clarifies how the Ajé Festival navigated colonial suppression, Western educational dominance, and post-colonial urbanization by preserving its sacred musical core within traditional lineages and chieftaincy institutions. Complementing these models is the UNESCO (2003) Intangible Cultural Heritage Framework, which highlights that the survival of living heritage depends on active community participation, oral transmission, and continuous social relevance within changing environments.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative ethnomusicological research design, combining historical-analytical narrative with ethnographic documentation and structural musical analysis. This multi-methodological approach allows for a comprehensive assessment of both historical continuity and musical performance mechanics.

Data Sources and Collection

Data for this study were gathered through primary and secondary sources:

Primary Sources: (i) Visual and Iconographic Documentation: Photographic data capturing ritual processions, royal court attendance by the Ooni of Ife, carrying of sacred cowry baskets, and performance contexts in Ile-Ife. (ii) Organological Observation: Direct examination of traditional percussion instruments, including the dùndún (talking drum), bàtá ensemble (ìyá ìlù), ìgbìn, agogo (double iron gong), and ṣẹ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀ (beaded gourd rattle). (iii) Musical Transcriptions: Transcription and notation of vocal performances, chants, and call-and-response structures (e.g., Tete de, Aje Olokun; Olu woro Ji woro; Aje wa mi; Aje jowo ya le mi; Bi mo ti'n pe; Ere ka re le mi; Lati jo ta ti'n sa je; Osa mi gbe mi o; Aje o, Aje o; Omi tutu) into standard staff notation.

Secondary Sources: Published academic literature, scholarly books, and journal articles on Yoruba musicology, history, and religious studies by prominent scholars such as Euba (1990), Vidal (2012), Adegbite (1988), Nketia (1974), Peel (2000), Waterman (1990), Daramola (2005), Omojola (2012), Abimbola (1976), and Barber (1991).

Data Analysis

The collected data were systematically analyzed using:

1. Historical-Analytical Method: Evaluating the contextual evolution of the festival across the pre-colonial, colonial, post-colonial, and contemporary periods.

2. Organological and Functional Analysis: Categorizing musical instruments, their physical construction, symbolic meanings, speech-surrogate capabilities, and performance roles.

Literature Review

Aje in Yoruba language means wealth, thus the meaning of the Aje festival is Festival of Wealth. The day of the Aje is recognized on Monday, 'Ojo Aje', in Yoruba parlance. In the practice of the Aje Festival, business men and women would purchase a white pigeon, which is symbolic of purity and peace. The Ooni leads the procession to the 'Idi Aje' the shrine where the Aje deity resides; after prayers with the pigeon at the 'Idi Aje', the bird is set free. The mythical meaning of the Aje relates to those who are successful in business. And to ensure that there is more wealth in business, it is important to pray for this wealth. Alhassan (2020) noted that, on the festival day, market women and men displayed their farm product, foodstuffs, goods, and products for the array of visitors and tourists who came in their numbers to Ife to enjoy the sights and sound of this festival. Many in their hundreds including residents, entertainers, tourists and royal fathers come together to celebrate with the Ooni of Ife. He further reported the acclamation of the Iyaloja General of Nigeria, Chief (Mrs.) Shade Tinubu-Ojo that Aje Festival is one of the peculiar Yoruba deities with great economic potentials assuring the audience that the Aje festival will give the economy a lift. Alhassan (2020) noted that the Coordinator of the festival, Princess Toyin Kolade, showed immense appreciation to the Ooni for supporting cultural tourism which will give a boost to the nation's economy. Commenting on the festival, the Ooni said, "we celebrate the spirit of wealth and market profitability (Aje), in which we recognize the beginning of the first market (Oja Ife), the second largest festival in Ife and all of Yoruba land, with direct

connection to the survival of all humanity. This year, the redistribution of wealth will be eminent and it is my prayer that you partake of it. *Ajé a gbe gbogbo wa*!" (May Aje profit all of us). Ooni also noted during the festival that Aje festival has been in Ife for thousands of years and it is of great positive influence on the world's economy.

Vidal (2012) notes that Yoruba royal music helps preserve historical knowledge and strengthen the authority of traditional rulers. Similarly, Adegbite (1988) explains that palace musicians preserve oral traditions through praise singing and the use of talking drums for communication. He emphasized that the use of the drum is not limited to the Yoruba royal families and traditional rulers alone; nearly every Yoruba Orisa also has his own special drum ensemble and often this drum group is said to be the group particular deity enjoyed, danced, or listened to during his earthly life. Thus, the significance of drums and their liturgical function, especially in ritual ceremonies, cannot be over-emphasized. Apart from accompanying songs and chants which the devotees of the orisa use during ritual and ceremonial occasions, drums also provide the medium through which the worshippers are in constant ecstatic communication and communion with their gods. The Ajé Festival has remained an important communal celebration in Ile-Ife which bring people together to honour their shared history, beliefs, and cultural heritage.



Music is central to the festival, accompanying ritual dances, communal singing, praise performances, and other ceremonial activities that foster active community participation. Music in this context performs several simultaneous functions: it invokes the presence of the deity

through call-and-response incantation, it marks and structures the processional movement from palace to shrine, and it binds the community of devotees and onlookers into a shared performative experience. These functions requires attention both to the internal logic of the ritual repertoire and to the broader social changes urbanisation, religious pluralism, and the growing framing of indigenous festivals as cultural-tourism assets that are reshaping how, and by whom, this repertoire is performed and sustained. Music was central to the authority of the Ooni of Ife, whose political and spiritual leadership was celebrated through specialized court music, praise poetry (oríkì), genealogical chants, and talking drum performances. These performances transmit cultural values, historical traditions, and indigenous knowledge from one generation to the next. Despite urbanisation and increased participation by people from outside Ile-Ife, the festival has retained its communal character. Families, age groups, occupational guilds, traditional worshippers, and cultural associations continue to play active roles in the celebration, highlighting the enduring importance of music in strengthening social cohesion and preserving the cultural heritage of the Ajé Festival.



Traditional musical instruments are among the most enduring features of the musical heritage of the Ajé Festival in Ile-Ife. Instruments such as the dùndún, bàtá, ìgbìn, agogo, sekèrè, àrà, and various indigenous rattles accompany ritual songs, praise chants, processions, and ceremonial dances performed during the festival. In addition to providing musical accompaniment, these

instruments hold important symbolic and spiritual meanings within Yoruba religious practice. They are regarded as mediums through which communication is established between the physical and spiritual realms. Euba (1990) notes that Yoruba percussion instruments function as extensions of speech because they reproduce the tonal patterns of the Yoruba language, while Nketia (1974) identifies indigenous musical instruments as essential elements of African musical identity.



Pre Colonial Period

Historically, the pre-colonial era established the sacred baseline for Ajé Festival music; during this period, musical performances were essential acts of worship that facilitated communication between human beings, ancestors, and the divine realm through sacrifices, prayers, invocations, and royal court ceremonies. The Aje Festival, celebrated annually in Ile-Ife, Osun State, occupies a distinctive yet understudied place within the ritual calendar of the Yoruba people. The festival draws worshippers, traditional title-holders, and increasingly the wider public into a sequence of rites centred on the Aje shrine at Enuwa Square. Since its reinvigoration under the reign of Ooni Adeyeye Enitan Ogunwusi, the festival has grown in visibility, drawing state and media attention alongside its established devotional following. Yet while festivals such as Olojo and other festivals have attracted sustained scholarly interest, the musical traditions embedded within Aje

worship its praise chants, incantatory forms, instrumentation, and processional performance remain comparatively unexamined in the ethnomusicological literature.

Colonial Period

The colonial period marked a significant turning point in the history of Yoruba society, as political, educational, and religious changes influenced many aspects of indigenous cultural life. The activities of Christian missionaries, the introduction of colonial administration, and the spread of Western education challenged the continued practice of traditional religions and festivals, while encouraging the adoption of European cultural and religious values. Peel (2000) observes that these developments brought about fundamental changes in Yoruba religious life through missionary activities and colonial institutions, many of which weakened the public expression of indigenous beliefs and practices. In spite of these challenges, the Ajé Festival continued to preserve its musical heritage and cultural significance within the community. Traditional musical practices, including ritual drumming, praise singing, indigenous dance, and ceremonial performances, remained central to the celebration, even though some public displays became less frequent in communities where missionary influence was particularly strong. The continued observance of these musical traditions reflects the ability of the festival to adjust to changing historical circumstances while maintaining the cultural values and ritual practices that have long defined its identity.

Christian missionary activities during the colonial period had a significant impact on the practice of indigenous festivals among the Yoruba. Missionaries discouraged converts from participating in traditional religious ceremonies and condemned ritual music, including drumming and invocatory chants associated with indigenous deities, as incompatible with Christian worship. Peel (2000) notes that missionary efforts sought not only religious conversion but also the replacement of indigenous musical traditions with European hymnody and liturgical practices. The custodians of the Ajé Festival in Ile-Ife preserved its sacred musical traditions within indigenous religious communities despite these influences. As Waterman (1990) observes, Yoruba musical traditions-maintained continuity by adapting to changing religious circumstances while retaining their distinctive musical forms and ceremonial functions. The introduction of Western education during the colonial period brought new approaches to musical instruction, including staff notation, European harmonic principles, choral singing, and

classroom-based teaching methods. These approaches contrasted with the indigenous system through which the music of the Ajé Festival had long been preserved and transmitted orally from experienced performers to younger generations.

Although formal education contributed to the spread of Western musical knowledge, it also reduced the prominence of many indigenous musical traditions within educational institutions. Nevertheless, the musical heritage of the Ajé Festival has continued to be sustained through traditional means such as apprenticeship, observation, active participation in festival performances, and oral instruction within families and traditional religious communities. These indigenous methods have remained central to the preservation and continuity of the festival's musical traditions across generations.

The colonial period introduced a variety of European musical instruments into Yoruba musical practice, including brass instruments, guitars, accordions, pipe organs, keyboards, and, in more recent times, electronic instruments. These instruments gradually became part of secular celebrations and social entertainment connected with many Yoruba festivals. However, within the Ajé Festival, they have not displaced the indigenous percussion ensembles that accompany ritual ceremonies. Traditional instruments such as the dùndún, bàtá, ìgbìn, agogo, and sekèrè continue to play central roles in sacred performances because of their ritual, symbolic, and cultural significance. As Euba (1990) observes, Yoruba musicians have demonstrated a remarkable ability to incorporate foreign musical influences without abandoning the indigenous rhythmic patterns, tonal principles, and performance practices that characterise Yoruba musical traditions. Consequently, while modern instruments may occasionally accompany entertainment and non-ritual aspects of the festival, the sacred ceremonies remain firmly rooted in the use of traditional instruments, whose spiritual and cultural functions cannot be readily replaced.

The continued celebration of the Ajé Festival during the colonial period reflects the resilience of Yoruba cultural and religious traditions in the face of external pressures for cultural and religious assimilation. Instead of abandoning indigenous musical practices, festival participants incorporated selected foreign influences while preserving the ritual significance and cultural functions of music within the festival. According to Daramola (2005), Yoruba festivals serve as important repositories of indigenous knowledge, preserving religious beliefs, historical memory, and communal values through recurring ritual performances. In the same vein, Vidal (2012)

observes that the continuity of Yoruba musical traditions is sustained through a process of adaptation that allows change without undermining essential cultural values. The continued use of indigenous drumming ensembles, ritual chants, praise poetry, tonal language, communal participation, and oral methods of musical transmission during the Ajé Festival demonstrates that, despite the social and cultural changes introduced during the colonial period, the festival has retained its fundamental African musical identity. This enduring continuity highlights the ability of Yoruba musical traditions to respond to historical change while maintaining their cultural and ritual significance.



Post-colonial Period

In the wake of Nigeria's independence in 1960, the Ajé Festival in Ile-Ife entered a new era of cultural visibility and renewed significance. During this period, the festival continued to preserve its traditional musical practices while responding to changing social and cultural conditions. The music remained central to ritual observances and communal celebrations, retaining indigenous drumming ensembles, oríkì (praise poetry), ritual chants, tonal language, and active community participation. Although the festival became more visible through cultural programmes and public celebrations, its musical traditions continued to reflect the indigenous values and ritual practices that have long characterised the Ajé Festival in Ile-Ife. The emergence and expansion of Yoruba popular music genres such as jújú, fújì, àpàlà, sákárà, and later Afrobeat significantly influenced the musical environment surrounding the Ajé Festival. These genres borrowed extensively from

indigenous rhythmic structures, drum language, call-and-response techniques, and praise singing that have long characterised Yoruba ritual music. Waterman (1990) argues that Yoruba popular music developed through creative adaptation of traditional performance practices rather than their replacement. Euba (1990) likewise notes that indigenous musical aesthetics remain the structural foundation of many modern Yoruba musical forms. Although amplified instruments, stage performances, and commercial recordings have become increasingly visible during the social aspects of the festival, the sacred ceremonies continue to rely on traditional musical forms. Consequently, popular music has broadened the cultural appeal of the festival while preserving its indigenous musical essence.

Urban migration has influenced participation in the Ajé Festival while preserving its cultural and musical importance. Many Yoruba people who have relocated from Ile-Ife to cities such as Lagos, Ibadan, Abuja, and other urban centres return each year to take part in the festival, while others participate through Yoruba cultural associations in their places of residence. This movement has encouraged interaction between rural and urban musical practices and strengthened cultural awareness among younger generations. According to Omojola (2012), urbanisation has provided opportunities for indigenous music to flourish in new social settings while retaining its traditional foundations. Although urban life has introduced some changes to festival performances, the core musical elements of the Ajé Festival, including traditional drumming, ritual chants, and ceremonial dances, continue to occupy a central place in the celebration, reflecting the enduring continuity of Yoruba cultural heritage.

The documentation and dissemination of festival performances have also contributed to the preservation of its musical heritage by creating lasting records of traditions that were once passed down mainly through oral transmission. While media exposure has influenced the presentation and organisation of the festival, its essential musical features, including ritual drumming, praise chanting, indigenous dance, and communal participation, continue to preserve the traditional performance practices that define the Ajé Festival. The growing interest in African cultural heritage in recent decades has led to a renewed appreciation of indigenous festivals such as the Ajé Festival in Ile-Ife. Traditional institutions, cultural organisations, scholars, and community leaders have continued to promote the festival as an important expression of Yoruba history, identity, and indigenous knowledge. These efforts have strengthened awareness of the cultural

and historical significance of the festival while encouraging its preservation for future generations. The Ajé Festival has therefore remained an important platform for preserving Yoruba customs, beliefs, and artistic traditions. Its musical performances, including ritual drumming, praise chanting, singing, and dance, continue to serve as vital means through which cultural values and traditional knowledge are transmitted from one generation to another.

Contemporary Era

The Ajé Festival stands as a vivid example of how indigenous traditions can thrive within a rapidly changing contemporary society. While modern innovations such as improved event organisation, advanced sound systems, sponsorship, and wider public participation have enhanced the celebration, they have not altered its sacred ritual foundations. Today, the festival attracts a diverse audience comprising traditional worshippers, cultural scholars, tourists, and members of the Yoruba diaspora. Nevertheless, its musical traditions continue to preserve their indigenous character through traditional drumming, tonal language, oral performance, and communal participation. This enduring balance between continuity and adaptation demonstrates the resilience of the Ajé Festival in safeguarding its African musical heritage while embracing contemporary realities. Digital technology has helped in the preservation and dissemination of the musical traditions associated with the Ajé Festival. Performances are now recorded, archived, live-streamed, and shared through social media platforms, online video services, and digital repositories, thereby extending the festival's audience beyond Ile-Ife. It has created new opportunities for safeguarding African musical heritage. Although digital dissemination has altered methods of access and documentation, it has not fundamentally changed the indigenous musical content of the festival. Traditional songs, drumming patterns, praise poetry, and ritual performances continue to reflect longstanding Yoruba aesthetic principles while reaching wider audiences through contemporary communication technologies.



The interaction between traditional Yoruba music and contemporary global musical styles has encouraged the development of fusion genres that incorporate elements of jazz, gospel, hip-hop, Afrobeat, and contemporary African popular music. Musicians increasingly combine indigenous percussion, drum language, and praise poetry with modern harmonic structures and electronic instrumentation. Nevertheless, Euba (1990) argues that Yoruba musical creativity has historically depended upon adaptation without abandoning indigenous aesthetic principles. The musical traditions of the Ajé Festival illustrate this process by incorporating selected contemporary influences while preserving ritual chants, indigenous rhythms, tonal organisation, and communal performance practices. Thus, fusion represents musical evolution rather than cultural discontinuity.

The Ajé Festival has increasingly become a significant instrument for preserving Yoruba intangible cultural heritage while promoting cultural tourism within Ile-Ife and Osun State. Traditional rulers, cultural organisations, scholars, government agencies, and local communities have intensified efforts to document, promote, and safeguard the festival's musical traditions as valuable expressions of African civilisation. UNESCO (2003) emphasises that intangible cultural heritage survives through active community participation, continuous transmission, and cultural relevance within changing societies. Similarly, Vidal (2012) and Daramola (2005) maintain that indigenous festivals preserve historical consciousness by sustaining traditional music, ritual performance, and oral knowledge systems. Although tourism has introduced new audiences and economic opportunities, the festival continues to maintain its sacred musical foundations through

indigenous drumming, praise chanting, communal participation, ritual dance, oral transmission, and traditional instrumentation. The historical development of the Ajé Festival therefore demonstrates continuity within change, illustrating how Yoruba musical traditions have successfully adapted to post-colonial modernity while retaining the essential African characteristics that define their cultural identity.



Instrumentation

The Ajé Festival in Ile-Ife make use of indigenous Yoruba musical instruments; the instruments play an important role in its ritual and cultural performances. Prominent instrument used are the Bàtá drums, Dùndún (talking drum), ìgbìn drums, agogo (double iron gong), ṣẹ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀ (beaded gourd rattle), and àkùbà (hand-held rattles). The instruments are used in accompanying ritual chants, praise songs, processional performances, and traditional dances offered in honour of Ajé, the Yoruba deity associated with wealth and prosperity. Each instrument performs a specific musical function within the ensemble. The Dùndún conveys messages through its speech-like tonal patterns, the agogo provides rhythmic direction, while the rattles and other percussion instruments reinforce the rhythmic structure. In time past, the instruments have experienced gradual development while preserving their indigenous character. Traditional methods of construction, which rely on materials such as carved wood, animal skin, gourds, and forged iron.

Musical instruments play an essential role in the celebration of the Ajé Festival in Ile-Ife. The instrument are used in accompany the singers, dancers, praise chanting, ritual performances, and other ceremonial activities, while reinforcing the religious and cultural significance of the festival. The principal traditional musical instruments used in Ajé Festival include the Dùndún, Bàtá, Agogo, Sèkèrè, and various indigenous rattles.

(a) Talking Drum (Dùndún): The talking drum, particularly the gangan or dundun, is a cornerstone of Yorùbá festivals, including Ajé festival. This hourglass-shaped drum, played with a curved stick, is renowned for its ability to mimic the tonal patterns of Yorùbá speech. During the festival, it communicates messages, announce rituals praise deity and signals key moments.



(b) Bàtá Drums: The Bàtá drum ensemble, consisting of multiple drums of varying sizes (such as the Iya Ilu, the lead drum, and smaller accompanying drums), is another vital instrument. Associated with spiritual and royal contexts in Yorùbá culture, bata drums are used during Ajé Festival processions. It is use to accompany dancers, support chants, energize performers. Their deep, resonant tones accompany incantations and praise songs, honoring Ajé sacrifice and connecting the physical celebration to its spiritual roots.



(c) Sèkèrè (Rattle) The Sèkèrè, a gourd wrapped with a net of beads or shells, adds a rhythmic, rattling layer to the festival's music. Played by shaking or striking, it complements the drums and provides texture to the soundscape. In the Aje Festival, the Sèkèrè underscores communal singing and dancing, enhancing the joyous mood following solemn rituals. Its bright, percussive sound is a staple in Yorùbá celebrations, symbolizing unity and festivity.



Performance Practice

The performance practice of the Ajé Festival in Ile-Ife, Osun State, combines music, dance, and ritual to express its religious and cultural meaning. Vocal performances, mainly in Yoruba, include praise songs, invocations, chants, and call-and-response singing led by priests,

priestesses, or lead singers. These songs honor Ajé as the deity of wealth and prosperity. Dance is central to the festival and serves as both ritual and communal expression. Devotees, performers, and masquerades move with the music to show reverence, gratitude, and celebration. The festival ensemble includes musicians, singers, dancers, and ritual officiants. The master drummer directs the performance, while other instrumentalists play Yoruba instruments such as the bàtá, dùndún, ìgbìn, agogo, and ṣẹ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀. Although many festival activities now take place in public spaces outside the palace, the presence of the Ooni and palace chiefs still gives the festival its traditional character. Royal court music therefore remains an important part of the Ajé Festival, connecting present-day celebrations with long-standing Yoruba cultural and ceremonial traditions.



Musical Structure

The musical structure of the Ajé Festival in Ile-Ife, Osun State, is distinguished by its rich rhythmic and melodic patterns, which are ingrained in Yoruba musical traditions. Rhythm is provided by an ensemble of indigenous percussion instruments such as the Bàtá, Dùndún, Agogo, and Sẹ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀. The instruments create interlocking rhythmic patterns that guide the singing, dancing, and ritual activities. The melodies are simple, repetitive, and based on the tonal nature of the Yoruba language. This allows the worshippers to participate easily in the performance.

The melodic patterns also support prayers, praise singing, and invocations to Ajé, while maintaining the spiritual atmosphere required for the festival's religious ceremonies. Another musical structure is the use of call-and-response and improvisation. The lead singer or priest begins a musical phrase, which is answered by the chorus in a responsive pattern, encouraging active participation from the community. This call-and-response style strengthens communication between performers and worshippers while reinforcing the communal nature of the festival. Improvisation is also common, especially among lead singers and master drummers, who creatively introduce new lyrical expressions, rhythmic variations, and drum signals according to the mood of the occasion or the reactions of participants. These elements make each performance lively, interactive, and unique while preserving the traditional musical identity of the Ajé Festival.

Transmission

The musical traditions of the Ajé Festival in Ile-Ife, Osun State, are primarily transmitted through oral tradition, which has remained the principal means of preserving the festival's cultural and religious heritage. Songs, chants, drum patterns, praise poetry, and ritual procedures are passed from one generation to another by word of mouth rather than through written notation. Elder musicians, priests, priestesses, and experienced performers teach younger participants through observation, repetition, and active participation during festival preparations and performances. This oral method ensures that the language, meanings, and spiritual significance of the music are preserved within the Yoruba cultural context. The transmission of the festival's musical knowledge is also sustained through apprenticeship and family lineage. Training is oral and participatory. Young members learn by observing elders while performing. There is no written notation; all knowledge is transmitted through practice. Musical knowledge and ritual responsibilities are inherited within families who are traditionally associated with the worship of Ajé, this allow their children to learn from parents at their early age.

Philosophy

The philosophy of the Ajé Festival is ingrained in communalism and spirituality, reflecting core Yoruba beliefs about the relationship between individuals, the community, and the divine. The festival emphasizes collective participation, as families, age groups, traditional leaders, priests,

musicians, and worshippers come together to honour Ajé, the deity associated with wealth, prosperity, and abundance. Through communal worship, music, dance, and ritual activities, participants strengthen social unity, mutual support, and a shared cultural identity. Spiritually, the festival expresses the belief that prosperity and well-being are gifts from the divine, and that maintaining a harmonious relationship with Ajé through prayers, sacrifices, and sacred music attracts blessings, protection, and economic success for the community. The festival also promotes morality by encouraging ethical behaviour and responsible living within society.

Aje Festival Songs

The songs, chants, and praise poetry performed during the celebration often convey moral teachings that emphasize honesty, diligence, generosity, respect for elders, and obedience to cultural traditions. In this way, the Ajé Festival serves not only as a religious and cultural event but also as a means of reinforcing the moral values that sustain peaceful coexistence and social development in Ile-Ife and the wider Yoruba community. Below are some excerpts of the festival songs.

Song 1: Tetede Aje Olokun

Text	**Translation**
Tetede Aje olokun	Come early Aje owner of the ocean
Tetede Aje olosa o	Come early, Aje owner of the lagoon
Ajewole mi tetede	My Ajewole please arrive early
Tetede Aje olokun	Come early Aje owner of the ocean
Tetede Aje olosa o	Come early, owner of the lagoon
Ajewole mi tetede	My Ajewole please arrive early

Song 2: *Osa mi gbe mi o*

Text	**Translation**
Osa mi gbe mi o	I'm supported with the goddess
Ade mi gbe mi o	My crown supports me
Mo lowo mo ni nkan	I have money, I have things
Osa mi gbe mi o	I'm supported with the goddess

Song 3: Omi tutu, Omi tutu aje

Text	**Translation**
Omi tutu, Omi tutu aje	Cold water, Aje cold water
Omi tutu, Omi Ero	Cold water, healing water
Omi tutu wa fi bala ile	Cold water for calming homes
Omi tutu, Omi tutu aje	Cold water, Aje cold water

The song above song expresses ritual affirmation and personal satisfaction derived from alignment with divine forces. It also show the adoration of the worshippers on the goddess and the affiliation of Aje with the water goddess. In this way, the Ajé Festival serves not only as a religious and cultural event but also as a means of reinforcing the moral values that sustain peaceful coexistence and social development in Ile-Ife and the wider Yoruba community.

Cultural Identity

The Ajé Festival in Ile-Ife, Osun State, is a significant expression of Yoruba cultural identity, reflecting the community's ethnic symbols and long-standing traditions. The festival incorporates symbolic elements such as traditional attire, sacred shrines, indigenous musical instruments, ritual objects, and the Yoruba language in songs and chants. These symbols represent the people's historical connection to Ajé, the deity of wealth and prosperity, and affirm the cultural heritage of Ile-Ife as the ancestral home of the Yoruba. Through music, dance, and ceremonial performances, participants preserve and celebrate their ethnic identity while demonstrating pride in their customs, beliefs, and indigenous knowledge. The festival also promotes important Yoruba values that guide individual and communal life. Through its songs, rituals, and public celebrations, the Ajé Festival emphasizes values such as respect for elders, communal cooperation, hard work, honesty, generosity, and reverence for traditional institutions. The performances encourage participants to uphold moral conduct and maintain harmonious relationships within the community. By reinforcing these cultural values, the festival not only preserves the identity of the Yoruba people but also strengthens social cohesion and ensures that their customs and traditions are transmitted to future generations.

Contemporary Adaptation

The Ajé Festival in Ile-Ife, Osun State, has experienced contemporary adaptations through various modern influences while retaining its traditional religious and cultural foundations. Advances in technology have introduced the use of sound systems, microphones, digital recording, and social media platforms to promote the festival and reach wider audiences. Increased participation by tourists, researchers, and cultural organizations has also expanded the festival's visibility beyond the local community. In addition, improved transportation and media coverage have made the celebration more accessible, contributing to the preservation and appreciation of Yoruba cultural heritage on both national and international levels. The festival has also embraced innovations that enhance its organization and presentation without undermining its authenticity. Modern event planning, documentation through photography and video recording, and collaboration with cultural institutions have helped preserve its musical and ritual traditions for future generations. Younger musicians and performers sometimes incorporate contemporary performance techniques and improved instrument construction while maintaining the traditional rhythms, songs, and ceremonial practices of the festival. These adaptations demonstrate the ability of the Ajé Festival to remain culturally relevant in a changing society while continuing to uphold the values, beliefs, and musical heritage of the Yoruba people in Ile-Ife.

Conclusion

Through the theoretical lens of creative adaptation and dynamic continuity, the Ajé Festival illustrates that modernity and traditional preservation are not mutually exclusive. Contemporary innovations such as digital dissemination, media broadcasting, sound amplification, and cultural tourism have expanded the public profile and global reach of the celebration without eroding its sacred baseline. The ritual ceremonies remain firmly grounded in Yoruba speech-surrogate tonal patterns, praise poetry (oríkì), call-and-response vocal structures, and divine reverence. Ultimately, the Ajé Festival stands as a vibrant model for safeguarding African intangible cultural heritage, proving that living musical traditions can actively engage with contemporary society while steadfastly honoring their ancestral origins.

References

Abimbola, W. (1976). Ifá: An exposition of Ifá literary corpus. Oxford University Press.

Adegbite, A. (1988). The drum and its role in Yoruba religion. Journal of Religion in Africa. 18 (1), 15-26.

Alhassan, A. (2020). Ile-Ife agog as it celebrates festival of wealth https://dailytrust.com/ile-ife-agog-as-it-celebrates-festival-of-wealth/

Barber, K. (1991). I could speak until tomorrow: Oriki, women and the past in a Yoruba town. Edinburgh University Press.

Daramola, Y. (2005). Yoruba indigenous festivals and cultural heritage. Concept Publications.

Drewal, H. J., Drewal, M. T., & Abiodun, R. (1989). Yoruba: Nine centuries of African art and thought. The Center for African Art.

Euba, A. (1990). Yoruba drumming: The dundun tradition. Iwalewa-Haus.

Idowu, E. B. (1962). Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba belief. Longman.

Jayeola, F. D. (2015). Indigenous music in Nigeria: Its role towards national development. FUNAI Journal of Humanities and Social Science. Vol 1, Issue 2. Pg. 102-109.

Lawuyi, O.B., & Olupona, J.K. (1987). Making sense of the Aje Festival: Wealth politics and the status of women among the Ondo of Southwestern Nigeria. Accessed 03102026 from https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:155398425

Nketia, J. H. K. (1974). The music of Africa. W. W. Norton & Company.

Omojola, B. (1995). Nigerian art music: With an introduction to Yoruba music. IFRA.

Omojola, B. (2012). Yoruba music in the twentieth century: Identity, agency, and performance practice. Obafemi Awolowo University Press.

Peel, J. D. Y. (2000). Religious encounter and the making of the Yoruba. Indiana University Press.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. (2003). Convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage. UNESCO.

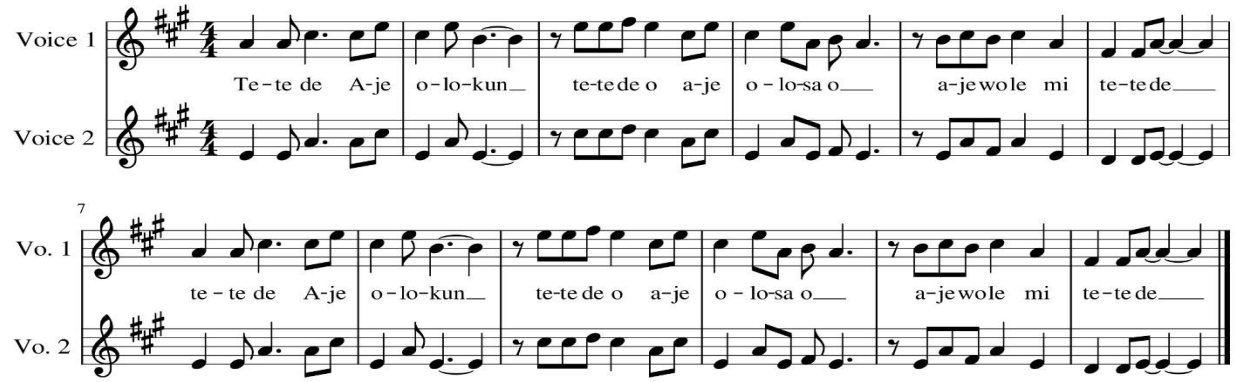
Vidal, A. O. (2012). Selected topics on Nigerian music. General nature, history and musicology/music education. Ile Ife. IMEF African Music Publishers.

Waterman, C. A. (1990). Jùjú: A social history and ethnography of an African popular music. University of Chicago Press.

APPENDIX I

MUSICAL NOTATION

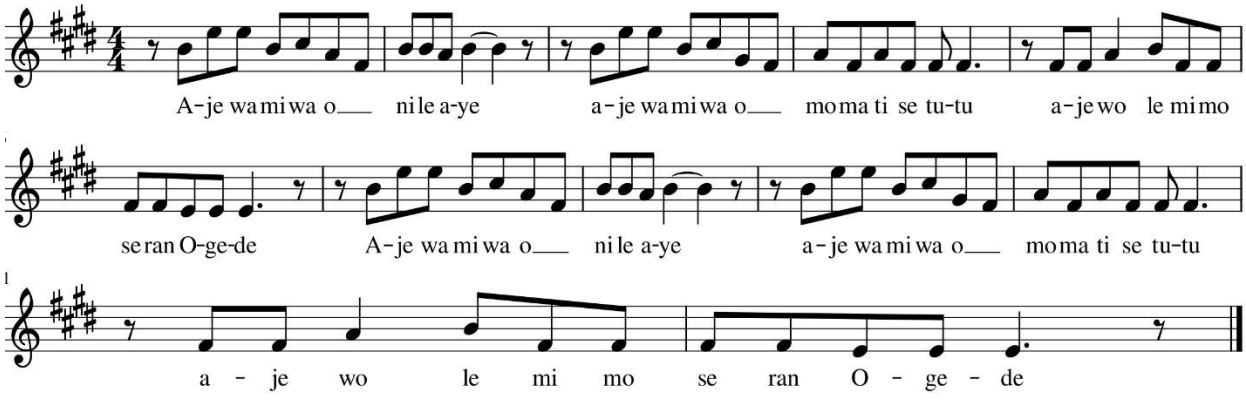
Song 1. Tete de, Aje Olokun



Song 2. Olu woro Ji woro



Song 3. Aje wa mi




Song 4. Aje jowo ya le mi
A-je jowo ya le mi
mope o a-je o
mofe lo-wo a-je o
Jo wo ya le mi
Jo wo ya le mi
6
mofe lo-la a-je o
mofe dolo ki-ki a-je o
Jo wo ya le mi
Jo wo ya le mi
Jo wo ya le mi
11
mofe ko - le a-je'o
mo pe o a-je o
Jo wo ya le mi
Jo wo ya le mi
Song 5. Bi mo ti'n pe
Call
Response
Bimo ti'n pe
Bimo ti'n pe
bi miti'n pe i-ya
be_lo'n je
be_lo'n je
10
call
Resp.
millo-ke o-ja bi moti'n peya milo-ke o-ja Bimo ti'n pe
be_ lo'n je
be_ lo'n je
19
call
Resp.
bi mi ti'n pe i-ya mi llo - ke o-ja be_ lo'n je
be_ lo'n je
be_ lo'n je

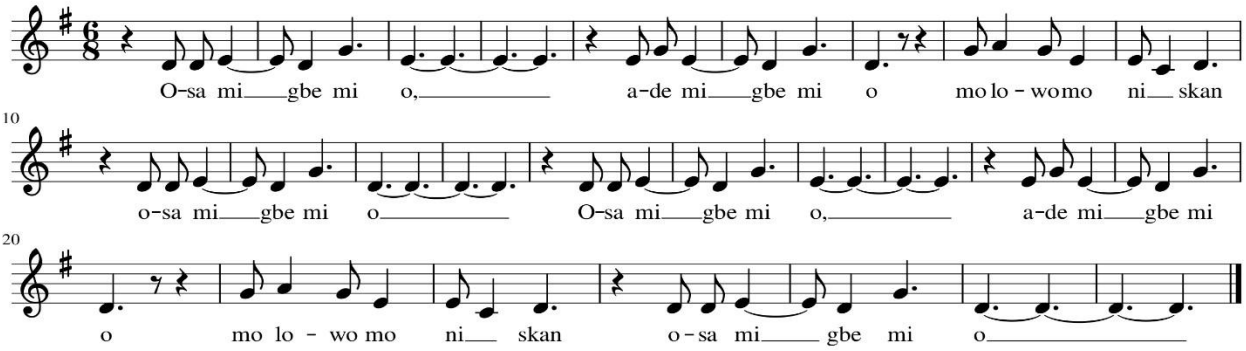
Song 6. Ere ka re le mi



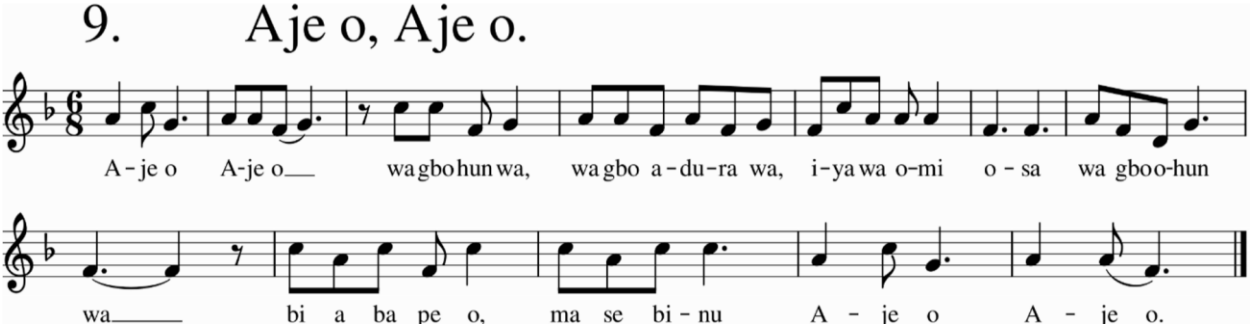
Song 7. Lati jo ta ti'n sa je



Song 8. Osa mi gbe mi o



9. Aje o, Aje o.



10. Omi tutu


O-mi tu-tu o - mi tu-tu a-je o - mi tu-tu a-je fi
o-mi tu-tu o-mi e-ro o-mi e-ro
8
o - mi tu - tu wa fi ba - la i - le
o - mi tu - tu o - mi a - je