

Yorùbá Traditional Marriage Masters of Ceremonies (Alága), As Agents of Continuity and Change in Yorùbá Nuptial Performance

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Introduction

Marriage ceremony is an important Yorùbá tradition that reveals the people's uniqueness and rich culture. It is an occasion that both families of the bride and the groom look forward to; music plays a major role in making it colourful, entertaining and lively. Traditional marriage ceremonies are accompanied with singing, dancing and merrymaking. In Yorùbáland, marriage is the union between male and female, it is a very important institution among the Yorùbá. Ajibade (2009) notes that there are three life rites among Yorùbá people: naming, marriage and burial. The Yorùbá place a great value on marriage institution; it is an important institution in their cultural milieu and matrices. Ajibade further asserts that:

Marriage is the cultural and symbolic event that gives meaning to people's experiences. Among the Yorùbá, marriage is unique and gamuts of practices associated with it are interpretative. (2009:49).

Nuptial music is an old tradition of the Yorùbá; it has its root in Yorùbá rich culture. It plays a very important role in making marriage ceremonies interesting. It is a significant



feature of traditional and contemporary marriage rite. In the past, the bride sang the bridal poetry called *ẹ̀kún iyàwó*, and housewives known as *iyàwó ilé* performed nuptial songs. Faniyi (1974:698) observes that the performance of the nuptial poetry known as *ẹ̀kún iyàwó* in Yorùbáland is gradually going into extinction.



Fig. 1: An *Alága* demonstrating during a traditional marriage ceremony

In recent times, nuptial performances in Yòrùbáland have experienced some changes. These changes are initiated by Yorùbá nuptial Masters of Ceremonies referred to as *alága idúró* and *alága ijókòó*. The *alága idúró* is the Master of Ceremony representing the groom's family, and *alága ijókòó* is the Master of Ceremony for the bride's family. They are very prominent people in the contemporary Yorùbá traditional engagements, and are chosen by the families of the bride and the groom. The *alága idúró* leads the family of the prospective groom to the house of the prospective bride.



This paper focuses on the activities, performances and contributions of Yorùbá nuptial Masters of Ceremonies to the continuity and change in Òyó Yorùbá nuptial musical performances. The Masters of Ceremonies have introduced new dimensions of music, theatre and dance into Yorùbá nuptial ceremonies. They train their apprentices, and these have contributed to the preservation of Yorùbá marriage music. As a result, they have been able to modify and preserve the Yorùbá traditional nuptial performance. They have also helped to reproduce Yorùbá traditional marriage music by adaptation of the old traditional marriage music with popular music to fit into the Yorùbá contemporary society.

Masters of Ceremonies as Agents of Continuity in Yorùbá Culture

Through theatrical displays, music, dance, gesticulations and demonstrations; masters of ceremonies reveal Yorùbá cultural beliefs. African theatre performance is a culture indicator which reveals the cultural belief and identity of the people. The traditional masters of ceremonies expose the culture of the Yorùbá about marriage, parental blessings and respect for parents and the elders. Through this, they help in the continuity of Yorùbá epithalamium belief in parental blessings.



Fig. 2: The groom and his friends prostrating for the parents of the bride

In the traditional society, it was not the norm for a lady to elope with a man; parental blessings were highly esteemed. Yorùbá traditional marriage masters of ceremonies sing various songs that reveal the belief of the Yorùbá about marriage. Ajibade (2009) in his book *Finding Female Voice A Social-cultural Appraisal of Yorùbá Nuptial Poetry*, exposes the importance of good behavioural traits in Yorùbá society; he reveals that dyed dress had less quality than other materials like the traditional attire called *òfí*. A lady considered to be wayward would be bought dyed dress for her wedding ceremony; a folksong was composed to reflect this:

Song 1:

kànpálà ni ẹ rà fun un

Buy her dyed clothing

Kànpálà ni ẹ rà fun un

Buy her dyed clothing

omọ tí ò gbọ̀ tí ìyá, tí ò gbọ̀ tí Bàbá

The disobedient child



Kànpálà ni ẹ rà fun un
- (Ajibade 2009:59).

Bye her dyed clothing

Yorùbá people also believe in the family of the husband taking adequate care of the wife; this is also revealed in the masters of ceremonies' performance. In Yorùbáland, women married to members of the same family are called housewives (*ìyàwó ilé*). In the traditional society, women married to the members of the groom's family, that is the *ìyàwó ilé* of the groom's family, performed nuptial songs and must sing satisfactorily declaring in their songs that they would take care of the bride; before the *ìyàwó ilé* of the bride's family would release the bride to the groom's family (Ajibade 2009:52). Masters of ceremonies perform music that advocates for the groom's family members to take care of the bride, and this have helped in the preservation of Yorùbá cultural belief in caring for their brides. Brides are called *Ìyàwó*, it is the responsibility of every member of the groom's family to take care of a woman married to any member of their family.

In the traditional society, the prospective bride at evenings would go to older women in the community to learn nuptial poetry and songs she would perform on her wedding day. The nuptial poetry and songs teach good behaviour to enhance healthy relationship with members of her husband's family and her neighbours. Masters of Ceremonies can be regarded as African theatre practitioners that have helped to preserve some Yorùbá marriage cultural beliefs and traditions and have enhanced continuity in Yorùbá nuptial performances.

Their performances teach the bride respect and honour for the members of her husband’s family. They pass across their messages not only to the couple, but also to other people present at the ceremony.

The text of a song is a culture indicator; it reveals people’s philosophy, beliefs, and ways of life and expression of day-to-day lifestyle. In the African traditional society, music was used to transmit information and cultural values; it was used to encourage people to emulate good deeds and shun evil deeds (Nketia, 1974). From the foregoing, it can be deduced that musicians in the African society are culture carriers; the traditional Yorùbá marriage masters of ceremonies reveal Yorùbá culture, traditions and beliefs. In-laws are called *àna* in Yorùbáland. In-laws from the bride’s family are highly respected by the groom’s family members; there is a proverb in Yorùbá language that says “*ẹ̀ní fún ni lómọ ti parí oore,*” meaning that the person who gives you his daughter has being most kind. For example, the following song reveals Yorùbá belief in respect for the bride’s family members.

À-ná ké-ré À-ná tò-bi

À-ná ké-ré À-ná tò-bi Ì-dọ bá lẹ l'a fí k'á na

Song 2

Àna kéré àna tóbi, idòbálẹ̀ là n fí n kána

Whether your in- law is small or great, you prostrate to greet him.



Change as a Result of Drama Introduced into Nuptial Performance

African theatre is encompassing; it reveals the life style and culture of the people which include the people's conduct of marriage. The involvement of contemporary masters of ceremonies in Yorùbá traditional engagement started in Lagos state of Nigeria in the late 1980s. A major transformation which Masters of Ceremonies have introduced into nuptial performance is the elaboration of the theatre performance in Yorùbá epithalamium. In the Yorùbá traditional society, the characteristics of theatre: music, drama and dance, have always been part of epithalamium performance. Dramas that take place between *iyàwó ilé* (housewives) of the groom's and bride's families are theatrical in nature. Masters of Ceremonies have helped to elaborate on these epithalamium cultures.

Yorùbá traditional marriage masters of ceremonies have introduced elaborate dramas that reveal different stages of marriage ceremonies. Through dancing, acting and singing, different stages of engagement performance are dramatised. *Alága* gesticulates and displays different body messages. Performance includes spoken words, exhibit of behaviour and feelings that create response from participants and audience (Barber 2007:1445). They are the essential personnel in Yorùbá traditional marriage ceremonies that add fun and reveal different actions and stages of Yorùbá traditional marriage processions. Although the dramas they act are unscripted, the audience are active participants in the drama. The process of Yorùbá traditional engagements are as follows:



Stage1: Arrival of Groom's Family

Songs are rendered at every stage of the epithalamium performance. The Master of Ceremony of the groom's family (*Alága idúró*), that is the Master of Ceremony on standing, leads the grooms family to the bride's house with singing and dancing.



Fig 3: The Alága idúró leading the groom's family members to the venue of the traditional engagement

On the engagement day, the bride's family will be seated, while the groom's family will assemble to go to the bride's house to ask for her hand in marriage. *Alága idúró*, the spokesperson of the groom's family, leads the groom and his family members to the prospective bride's house with singing and dancing. The following is an example of songs sung.



Ẹ-bí re re le bí à wa

Ẹ-bí re re le bí à wa ò ẹ-bí re re a fi ké ke ré
 mọ sẹ O-lú wa ẹ-bí re re a si tún dà-gbà si nú i-mọ
 lẹ ẹ-bí re re a t'Ò ba ja ye l'o mo ma ri a ẹ-bí
 re re a mà s'ò rí i re ò-ré o o-rí i re__

Song 3

Ẹbí rere lẹbí àwa ò
 A ti kékeré mọ 'sẹ Olúwa

A si tún dàgbà si 'nú ìmọlẹ

A t'Ò bá jayé l'omọ Mèrì

Translation

We are from a good family
 from our youths we know the
 works of God

We also grow in the light of
 God

We are enjoying the
 blessings of Mary's Son

When the groom's family members get to the bride's house, *Alága ijókòó*, the spokesperson for the bride's family, will welcome them. The groom's spokesperson, *Alága idúró*, then sings a song which portrays a picture of someone knocking at the door; they are not limited to a particular song because they have varieties of songs in their repertoire.

Song 4 *Onílẹ a kágò ká tó wọlé*

This means greetings to the occupants of this house. The bride's spokesperson may respond by asking them who they are and

what their mission is. The spokesperson of the groom will, in turn, respond through songs to tell them their mission and where they came from.

Song 5

Àwa ebii rere lódé o

Àwa lode

Tí ẹ bá gbọ ijó ta yò lode

Àwa lode

Òdòdó kan ñbẹ ní àgbàlá we have come to pluck a rose

yín tí a wá já

Translation

we members of good family
have arrived

we have arrived

our shout of joy and dance
says we have come

we have arrived

we have come to pluck a rose
flower in your compound

The bride's spokesperson can tell someone to bring a flower from the compound to give to the groom's family; then the spokesperson of the groom's family will respond by singing a song:

'*Òdòdó abẹmí ní a wá já*', translated as 'we have come to pluck a living rose', which means, a human being. She then mentions the name of the bride to be. For the purpose of this study, Níkẹẹ is used as the name of the bride.

Music, drama and dance play prominent role in modern Yorùbá engagements. It is used as a medium of communication. The *Alagas* are trained men and women who stand-in for the families of the bride and the groom, and usually, go to traditional marriage ceremonies with drummers that play talking drums.



Stages 2: The Presentation of the Marriage Proposal

The next activity will be the presentation of the marriage proposal in form of a letter; which will be read by a member of the bride’s family.



Fig. 4: Marriage proposal beautifully decorated

Usually, a young lady who is not yet married reads out the letter, and this can be ushered in with songs such as;

Song 6;

*Ati gba lẹ̀tá ayò,
Ati gba lẹ̀tá ayò
Ati gba lẹ̀tá ayò,
Àwa ò ní sẹ̀rú ayé mó*

Translation

We have received a letter of joy
We have received a letter of joy
We have received a letter of joy
We are no longer be slaves in the world

An acceptance letter will be given back to the groom’s family to state that they have accepted the marriage proposal. When the acceptance is being taken back by the groom’s spokesperson to the groom’s family, she then sings a song to

show that she has come back safely having delivered the message successfully:

Song 7

Àbò ré o Daddy
Àbò ré o mummy,
A jí sẹ t'ẹ rán wa
Àbò ré o Daddy

Translation

This is the reply daddy
 This is the reply mummy
 We have delivered your message
 This is the reply daddy

Àbò ré o dádì

À - bọ ré o dá - ò ò à - bọ ré o mọ -
 mì a jí sẹ tẹ rán wa à - bọ ré o dá - ò ò

Stage 3: The Arrival of the Groom

The next activity is the arrival of the groom in the Bride's house. The arrival of the groom at the scene of the engagement ceremony is marked with various songs to usher in the groom. Songs as;

Song 8

Ọkọ ìyàwó tẹ lẹ ò mọ ré o,
tẹ lẹ ò mọ

Translation

This is the bridegroom
 which you said
 you do not know,

Ọ-kọ ì-yà-wó tẹ lẹ ò mọ ré

Ọ-kọ ì-yà-wó tẹ_ lẹ ò mọ ré o_ tẹ_ lẹ ò mò



The groom arrives at the celebration in the company of his friends. He is then told to prostrate for his parents, and as he prostrates, his parents pray for him, and this song is sung:

Song 9

Translation

<i>E ṣé èyìn òbí mi,</i>	Thank you my parents,
<i>E fún mi ní èkọ́ o</i>	You gave me sound education,
<i>E tún ṣe gbéyàwó fún mi</i>	You also sponsored my wedding,
<i>E ṣé o èyìn òbí mi</i>	Thank you my parents.

The groom’s representative sings this song on his behalf to show his appreciation to his parents for sending him to school and bearing his marriage ceremony. When the groom makes effort to stand up, this song is sung;

Song 10

Translation

<i>E fàdúrà gbe dìde,</i>	Lift him up with prayer,
<i>Oko iyàwó dọbálẹ̀,</i>	the groom prostrates,
<i>E fàdúrà gbe dìde.</i>	Lift him up with prayer.

È f’à-dú-rà gbe dìde

È f’à - dú-rà gbe dì de ọ-kọ i - yà-wó

dọ bá lẹ̀ e f’à dú rà gbe dì de

The activities of the Masters of Ceremonies, in the Yorùbá contemporary society reveal Yorùbá belief in the importance of parental blessings. In the traditional society the bride sang the nuptial poetry in request for parental blessings.

Masters of Ceremonies through the medium of music have helped in the continuity of this culture.

Stage 4: The Arrival of the Bride

The arrival of the bride is announced with singing, drumming and dancing.

Song 11

Ìyàwó tẹ̀ẹ̀ lé ò mò ré o tẹ̀ẹ̀ lé ò mò

Translation

This is the wife you said
you do not know

Song 12

O yege Adéníkèé O yege

Tóyè rí ọ lómọge

Ó sì gbé ọ ní 'yàwó ò

Adéníkèé o yege

Translation

You have succeeded Adéníkèé,
Toye sees you as a virtuous woman
and decides to marry you
You have succeeded.

O ye ge

O ye ge — Adéníké O ye ge — O ye ge — Adéníké Oyege Jéùgbéóló

mo ge Ó sì gbé o ní 'yà wó ò — A-dé-ni-ké o-ye ge —

Stage 5: Engagement

Engagement items are used as symbols of prayers for the couple. Each item of the things brought in by the groom's family members is symbolic, for example honey stands for sweetness, it is used as a symbol of prayer for joy for the couple. The engagement items are brought in by the housewives



of the groom's family; when the items are brought in, masters of ceremonies sing related songs to show the activity that is taking place at the moment. A song like this could be sung:

Song 13

E wá woun t'okọ iyàwó gbé wá;

E wá woun t'okọ iyàwó gbé wá

Ó fowó rẹ ra ohun tó dára

Ó gbé lọ sílé àna rẹ

Translation

Come and see what the groom has brought

Come and see what the bride groom has brought

he has spent his money on beautiful items

and brought them to the house of his in-laws



Fig. 5: Engagement items



In the Yorùbá traditional society, the worship of deities was involved in traditional marriage. The Ifá divination was consulted to know the future of the prospective couple. The advent of Christianity and Islamic religions has brought a lot of changes into traditional marriage. Masters of Ceremonies sing Christian and Islamic socio-religious songs at marriage ceremonies. The bride is asked to pick an item that is most important to her from the gifts brought in; she picks the Bible or Quran depending on her religious belief, and this song is sung:

Song 14

Translation

Bibèlì ni n ó ma gbé o
àjé ò l'ágbára lórí rẹ
oşó ò l'ágbára lórí rẹ
Bibèlì ni e
Bibèlì ni n ó ma gbé

It is the Bible I will consult
witches cannot overcome it
wizards cannot overcome it
it is the Bible
it is the Bible I will consult

Bíbèlì mi ni unó ma gbé ò

98 *Bí-bé-lì mi ni unó ma gbé ò à-jé ò l'ágbára ló-rí rẹ o-só kò l'ágbára*

103 *ló rí rẹ Bí-bé-lì mi o o Bí-bé-lì mi ni unó ma gbé*

Stage 6: Presentation of Ring

The groom presents the engagement ring to the bride. It should be noted that songs and dramatisation accompany this stage

Stage 7: Introduction of Family Members

Song 15

Translation



Báyì làwa n k'ána wa This is how we prostrate to
greet our in-laws
Là n kána wa , là n kána wa greet our in-laws, greet our
in-laws

The family members of the groom go in to greet the family members of the prospective wife while this song is sang;

E wólẹ̀ fágba, Àgbà ní n gba ni Reverence the elders, for
they are the ones who can
save us.

During introduction, song that reveal that is on introduction is sung; for example;

Song 16

Translation

Èniyàn ló n mú ní m'òniyàn people get to know one another,
èniyàn ló n mú ní m'òniyàn people get to know one another,
Níkẹ̀ ló mú wa mọ̀ yín o Níkẹ̀ introduced you to us
èniyàn ló n mú ní m'òniyàn people get to know one another

Èniyàn ló n mú ní m'òniyàn 1

È - niyàn lón mú ní ní m'òniyàn è - niyàn lónmúní ní m'òniyàn

Ní-ke ló múní m'òyín o ___ è - niyàn lón múní n m'ò-ni-yàn ___

When the mother and father of the bride and the groom are introduced, songs like these are sung;

Song 17

Translation

Ìyá ni wúrà iyebiye Mother is a precious treasure

Tí a kò le fowó rà; That cannot be procured with money

Changes in nuptial performance due to introduction of more elaborate dances

Music and dance go hand in hand; dance has always been part and parcel of human activities, and exists in all societies. The origin of dance is unknown but must have existed from time immemorial. Abbe (2007:4) explains that Nigerian dances are traceable to their tradition and ways of life. Yorùbá traditional marriage is full of artistic creativities; the contemporary masters of ceremonies spice traditional marriage ceremonies with colourful and dramatic activities. Dance is very important to the Yorùbá people of Southwestern Nigeria. The masters of ceremonies use dance, and other forms of medium to reveal the importance of marriage to the Yorùbá; and have become agents of continuity in Yorùbá nuptial performance.

Change in Yorùbá Traditional Marriage through Musical Performances

Yorùbá masters of ceremonies, through their performances, pass vital information to their audience. They compose music to suit the different stages of traditional marriage ceremonies. They mix the old traditional songs with the new, thereby creating an atmosphere of joy. They use the mediums of music, drama and dance to spice the occasion. Music as a form of language for expression with an expositional interpretation of emotion which conveys messages that ordinary word cannot effectively communicate. The language of music must be



studied in terms of their aims, objectives and contents in order to understand the message (Nketia, 1974).

Conclusion

In conclusion, in the Yorùbá traditional society, brides performed nuptial poetry called *ẹkún iyàwó*. However, *Ẹkún Ìyàwó* in the contemporary society is gradually going into extinction and is now transformed by the activities of contemporary masters of ceremonies, called *alágas*. The *Alágas* through their various activities of singing, dancing and drama, are agents of change in Yorùbá traditional nuptial performance in the contemporary Yorùbá society. Yorùbá contemporary marriage masters of ceremonies can be regarded as performers. Through dramatic performances, artistic displays and music that involve the participation of the audience, they reveal different stages of Yorùbá engagement ceremonies. With the use of the elements of African theatre such as music, dance and drama, they have been able to initiate continuity and change in Yorùbá nuptial performance.

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