



## Analysing Socio-Religious Significance of the *Igbìn* Drum in the *Ọbàtálá* Festival

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### Cite this article in APA

Ajayi, O. V., & Oladosu, O. A. (2022). Analysing socio-religious significance of the *Igbìn* drum in the *Ọbàtálá* festival. *Journal of history and cultural studies*, 1 (1), 32-40. <https://doi.org/10.51317/jhcs.v3i1.761>



A publication of Editon Consortium Publishing (online)

### Article history

Received: 2022-08-08

Accepted: 2022-09-08

Published: 2022-10-09

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### Abstract

This article explores the socio-religious significance of the *Igbìn* drum in the *Ọbàtálá* festival, a central celebration within a Yoruba religious community. The *Igbìn* drum embodies the spiritual essence of its adherents and the broader Yoruba culture. It holds profound semiotic importance, shaping the interpretation of rites of passage among devotees. This study highlights the drum's socio-religious role and underscores its cultural value to the Yoruba people, aiming to illuminate its core symbolic meaning through semiotic analysis. The research employs a descriptive methodology, incorporating interviews, observations, and personal experiences. Yoruba indigenous religion comes alive through festivals, which vividly express the community's cultural and religious identities, lived experiences, and spiritual practices. These festivals serve as a dynamic social context for displaying Yoruba religious traditions. The *Ọbàtálá* festival, in particular, features symbolic actions, rituals, iconography, and gestures that collectively manifest the worship tenets and socio-cultural experiences of the adherents. It is important, at this juncture, to document that *the Igbìn* drum, in its own case, exhibits the acts of spiritual manifestation in ritual passages. It invokes the presence of deities, fostering a profound connection between the divine and festival participants, thus enriching the spiritual and communal experience.

**Key terms:** Culture, divinity, mythology, socio-cultural, socio-religious.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Socio-religious appraisal can be effectively analysed through a detailed description of the social environment. According to Aluko (2014), the social environment is characterised by a variety of elements, including norms, values, customs, traditions, thoughts, family systems, attitudes, philosophies, and the collective experiences of individuals within a specific setting. These elements represent diverse forms of cultural expression within any given society.

Culture, in this context, is a fundamental determinant of the psyche and behaviour of people in a particular social environment. It shapes and influences human actions through the norms embedded within that society. As culture acts as a guiding force, the norms associated with belief practices become emblematic of the social and cultural systems in place. They provide the frameworks and guidelines for human interactions and behaviours. Therefore, the socio-religious dimensions of a society are deeply intertwined with its cultural norms and practices, which collectively shape and direct human behaviour within that context.

Robert (1993, p. 120) asserts that "religion is always social", emphasising the inherent connection between religion and social structures. By this, he suggests that every religious concept, experience, or practice is expressed through social forms. These forms can be seen in group formation, ritual practice, spiritual knowledge and religious symbol.

Group formation is where religious experiences often lead to the creation of communities or groups that share common beliefs and practices. These groups provide a social structure within which religious ideas are nurtured and practised. Ritual practices underline a situation where ritual embraces collective actions that reinforce religious beliefs and bind individuals within a community. Ritual, in this case, serves as a formal expression of religious concepts and facilitates social cohesion. Spiritual knowledge is about religious teachings and spiritual insights that are often disseminated and shared within groups, contributing to the collective wisdom and understanding of the community. Religious symbols denote how symbols play a crucial role in representing and communicating religious ideas and values. They become part of the social fabric, influencing and reflecting the collective identity of religious groups.

This perspective highlights a reciprocal relationship between society and religion. Religious values become an integral part of the broader culture formed by the society, while religious motivations contribute to the character and social cohesion of individuals (Adelowo, 2001). This creates a symbiotic relationship where religion influences societal norms and values, and society, in turn, shapes and reforms religious practices and beliefs (Adelowo, 2001).

Further, Robert (1993, p. 120) identifies that "religion is bound with the way we live, talk, and learn in groups." This suggests that religious practices and beliefs are intertwined with daily social interactions and learning processes. Religious groups, therefore, are not isolated entities but are deeply embedded in the way people engage with each other and their environment. This perspective underscores the role of religious groups as fundamental to shaping and being shaped by the social contexts in which they exist. Robert thus identified the religious group as:

*A set of people whose interpersonal relations complete for one another the symbolic expression of religious experience. Since the group itself is a religious symbol, it also stimulates further experience (Robert, 1993, p. 120).*

According to Olupona (2011), the devotees of *Ọ̀bàtálá* constitute a socio-religious entity within the larger Ile-Ife community. He identified myths, rituals, ceremonies and worldview of the group as the elements that proclaim their sub-cultural identity. These elements symbolically represent their religious experience, which makes them distinct from other religious groups within the Yoruba community. In this case, *the Igbìn* drum is here identified as the product that manifests the importance of the aforementioned elements.

With this in view, *Igbìn* drum symbolically represents the religious group of *Ọ̀bàtálá* as it determines the dimension in which they live, talk and learn within the Yoruba society. This drum, in the context of social drama, stimulates the experience of the religious group and provides guidelines for the conduct of actions and standards in their interpersonal relations. This indication is what this work intends to pursue by analogically extrapolating its socio-religious analysis within the festival.

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

There are several works written on *Ọ̀bàtálá* as the arch divinity of the Yoruba. Elebuibon (1998) focuses on the *oríkìs* of *Ọ̀bàtálá*. His work documented various attributes and events connected to Obatala as divinely portrayed by *Odu Ifa* (Ifa Corpus). His narrative gave a mythical exploration of the deity, as underlined by the Ifa corpus. Olupona (2011) makes use of phenomenological appraisal to dissect the identity, ritual, and power in the festival of *Ọ̀bàtálá* and Yemoo, the wife of *Ọ̀bàtálá*.

The cosmology of the Orisa was painstakingly done as his narrative gave an insight into the religion and historical record of the deity. Miguel (2004) analysed the historical facts of *Ọ̀bàtálá* from a diasporic dimension. Miguel explains the religion of *Ọ̀bàtálá* from the Santería point of view with the aim of showcasing the devotee as an important religious group. Ologundudu (2008) provides the account of *Ọ̀bàtálá* in a brief and succinct manner. He made reference to the practical worship of *Ọ̀bàtálá Orisa* with remarks on the efforts of the past worshippers. These works and many more have concentrated their efforts on the personality of the deity, with less attention paid to the importance of its drum in his worship and festival. This study will therefore make an established statement on the symbolic importance of the drum.

## Theoretical Framework

In this work, the semiotic method will be employed to analyse the role of language and symbols within Yoruba culture. This approach emphasises the significance of both the context of situation and the context of culture in interpreting the meaning of texts (Adeosun, 2013). According to this method, language serves as a reflection of social processes within a society through the use of symbols and signs. In the context of the Yoruba language, which is highly context-dependent, understanding these symbols and signs requires a deep appreciation of their cultural and situational contexts. Adeosun (2013) further identifies the semiotic method as one that acknowledges the shared meanings among users of signs and interprets these signs based on their worldview. Therefore, this paper will explore how drums are utilised to convey ideas and emotions within Yoruba religion and culture, focusing on the symbols and signs involved.

Phenomenological methods will also be used in the understanding of the tradition, and it will allow the understanding of the essence of this indigenous drum in the festival.

## 3.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The Mythology of *Ọ̀bàtálá*

*Ọ̀bàtálá*, who is also considered as *Òrìṣà-nlá*, is classified within the categories of primordial divinities. *Ọ̀bàtálá* and other divinities in this category are believed to be the divinities of heaven since they were with the Supreme Being from the creation of the universe, and they usually partook in the creative work. Lucas (1948) notes that *Ọ̀bàtálá* belongs to the animistic system and commands the worship and respect of a large number of Yoruba. It, thus, shows that in Ejigbo, *Ọ̀bàtálá* became '*òrìṣà Ogiyan*'. In Ikire, *Ọ̀bàtálá* became *òrìṣà Ìkire*. In Olúgbón, it became *Òrìṣà Olúgbón*. The deity is also referred to as *Òrìṣà ògìyán*, *Òrìṣà funfun* and *Ajaguna* in some other parts of the Yorubaland (Ologundudu, 2008).

*Ọ̀bàtálá* is one of the most important Orisa worshipped all over Yorubaland. According to Elebuibon (1998), *Ọ̀bàtálá* is referred to as *Oosala*. He described him as the artist of Olodumare. Olupona (2011) described him as the fashioner whose responsibility is to mould human beings out of clay with the divine power given him by the supreme being.

Idowu (1966) indicated that *Ọ̀bàtálá* is an ancient deity. This was corroborated by Obalesu, the *Ọ̀bàtálá* priest (Oral Interview, 2021). The priest narrated that *Ọ̀bàtálá* is an important deity in the Yoruba pantheon because he holds a significant role as a divine messenger. According to the priest, God expressed a special fondness for *Ọ̀bàtálá* because of his wisdom, advanced age, and attentive nature. When the earth was created, God entrusted *Ọ̀bàtálá* with the crucial responsibility of bringing it into existence. To accomplish this task, *Ọ̀bàtálá* is also called *alabalase* (the proposer who wields the sceptre). From Idowu's (1966) narrative, *Ọ̀bàtálá* was invested with this authority by Olodumare when he was sent down to the world for him to fit in the work of creation and ordering of the earth's trappings. What he gave him is *Odu*, which endowed him with the attributes of supreme authority to speak, act, and be implicitly obeyed. The *Odu* involves ase "the sceptre". It is this sceptre that every king of Ile-Ife must receive from him as command of their office at every installation. Idowu, therefore, noted that *Obatala* represents the idea of ritual and ethical purity, and therefore the demands and sanctions of high morality.

However, the myths about *Ọ̀bàtálá* show that he is the creator divinity as he was commissioned by the Supreme Deity to create the solid earth, equip it, and mould the physical form of man. He also represents the vice-gerent of *Ọ̀lórún* (the Yoruba Supreme God). He enjoins uniformity of colour in respect of his worship. His worshipper must wear white cloth and eat white food, using shea butter instead of palm oil in their food.

### *Igbìn* Drum of *Ọ̀bàtálá* Festival in Ile-Ife

*Igbìn* drum is the type of drum which *Ọ̀bàtálá* dances to. The connection of *Ọ̀bàtálá* to this drum, as narrated by Elebuibon (1998) in the story tagged *òrìṣà gbẹ̀bẹ̀*, has a mythical interpretation.

*Igbìn* drum symbolises the wife of *Ọ̀bàtálá*, otherwise called *Òrìṣànlá*. *Ọ̀bàtálá* showed a lot of preference for *Igbìn* (her wife). *Igbìn* was noted to be very neat and cared for her husband and his temple. This gave her more recognition from *Ọ̀bàtálá* than any of his other wives. This is noted in *Ifá* recital presented by Elebuibon (1998):

*Oníkelejíke Èjikelejíke Adifá*      *Oníkelejíke Èjikelejíke* (divine)  
*Fún ìgbìn tí ʒe obínrin òrìʒà.*      For *ìgbìn* the wife of *òrìʒà*

This preference later developed ego and arrogance in *Igbìn*, as she felt indispensable that her husband could not do without her. She left the house and made her husband search for her. This development reflected a change in the activities that used to make *Ọ̀bàtálá's* temple a centre of spiritual sensation. Both *Igbìn* and *Ọ̀bàtálá* later found that they could not do without each other and thus made both of them seek spiritual advice. *Ọ̀bàtálá*, after consulting his diviner, was asked to appease his *Òkè Ìpònrí* (the personal god ancestor) with many snails so that his wife would come and beg him. *Ọ̀bàtálá* performed this sacrifice only for *ìgbìn* to later become sober and submissive to the extent that she could not leave *Ọ̀bàtálá's* shrine again. The following chant was referred to as the dramatic rapport that ensued from the misunderstanding:

- (a) *Awo abikókó létí aʒo*      Ifa priest, the-one-with-the knot at edge of clothes,  
*Adifá fún Ọ̀sálá òsèrèmàgbò*      performed divination for *Ọ̀sálá òsèrèmàgbò*  
*Tí i ʒe oḳo Ìgbìn* (Eleuibon 1998, p. 55)      The husband of *Ìgbìn*
- (b) *Òrìʒà gbẹ̀bẹ̀*      *Òrìʒà* listen to the appeal  
*Oníkelejíke*      *Oníkelejíke*  
*Òrìʒà gbẹ̀bẹ̀*      *Òrìʒà* listen to the appeal  
*Oníkelejíke*      *Oníkelejíke*  
*Òrìʒà ni ma sin.* (Eleuibon 1998, p. 57)      It is *òrìʒà* whom I shall worship.

It is noted in this story that the name of a woman recognised as *Ọ̀bàtálá's* wife was *ìgbìn*. This name is now dedicated to the kettle drum of the *òrìʒà* deity. The sound produced by this drum is what the *òrìʒà* dances to at the shrine of *Ogboni*, *Ọ̀bàtálá* or *Ifá* today.

## The Symbolic Analysis of the Drum of *Ọ̀bàtálá* Festival

*Ọ̀bàtálá* is characterised by several ideas of ritual and ethical purity. These characteristics allowed the essence of morality to be attached to his cult. His image or symbol, which represents *Olódumarè* on earth, is guided by this purity, and this influences the level of spirituality in materials that are used in connection with the worship in his shrine. The festival is held in January every year in *Ilé-Ifẹ̀*. *Ọ̀bàtálá* was a passionate and joyful deity. His festival is in commemoration of his joyous mood. He was commonly referred to in the saying thus:

*Ọ̀kúnrin bọ̀rọ̀kọ̀tọ̀ tẹ̀'pá ọ̀jé*      The handsome man with a lead staff  
*Ó sùn sílé fọ̀jé tikùn*      He slept at home and locked his door with a lead

*Ọ̀jé* (lead), according to *Ọ̀balésù*, in *Ọ̀bàtálá* worship, is a symbol of identity. The lead symbolises one of *Ọ̀bàtálá's* wives, *Yemòó*. *Yemòó* was considered the most beloved of *Ọ̀bàtálá's* wives, and whenever he went on errand, he used to turn his wife into a walking staff. This shows the passionate love he had for her. As well, he made use of the staff to seal his door while sleeping. This indicates a close rapport between *Yemòó* and *Ọ̀bàtálá*. The use of *Ọ̀jé* could be viewed in line with the ritual denotation of *Ọ̀bàtálá* in '*Oríkì*' and songs, which drums signal to people. This signal represents so many intuitions in *Ọ̀bàtálá's* worship,

and this is connected to spiritual mediation between the worshippers and the *Igbìn* drum, which is the drum of *Ọbàtálá* in this regard. It is a symbol of spiritual and religious connectivity during the festival of *Ọbàtálá*. Its use re-established an age-long tradition recorded through the mythical knowledge and wisdom attached to the cult of the *òrìṣà*. The *òrìṣà* in his wisdom is noted with the attributes of calmness, purity and tolerance. These attributes influence his cohabitation with other *òrìṣà*.



**Figure 1: *Igbìn* and the symbol of *Yemoo*, *Ọbàtálá*'s wife (source: *Obatala Shrine*, 20/05/2013)**

This connection asserts the facts made by De Silva (2006, p. 18) that "in any ritual, the drum asserts a group's power to give to their *òrìṣà*, and propagate its tradition". This tradition, though being an age-long one, is still reasserted through the efforts of the followers and adherents of *Ọbàtálá* in every festival. *Igbìn* drum in the ritual processes of the festival "survives on the practices of habitus of a lifestyle that includes enormous repetition, implantation, and dedication".

The continued practices in which the *Igbìn* drum is used in the festival showcased the lifestyle of the participants and the worshippers in the attitude of implementing and dedicating their continuous loyalty to the cult. The drum creates an atmosphere which orders a transforming social drama. This is identified in the liminal stage, considered by Turner (Arbuckle, 2010) in tripartite stages of life. The liminality is an ideal stage during which people relate to fellow ritual participants or to deity/spirits in at least a symbolical or ecstatic oneness considered to be *communitas*. This development allows the worshippers to connect to the ancestors and the living. The music of the drum during the annual rites of the festival always reunites both the secular and the sacred. These connections are made possible through the appeasement and worship which invoke the divinities.

Vidal (2012) noted that *Igbìn* drums during the annual *Ọbàtálá* festival generally play an invocation calling on the God to come and accept the offerings and prayers of the devotees. The leading vocal of the drum in this festival influences the atmosphere in which the devotees exhibit their movement gently and gracefully. This, according to Vidal, identifies *Ọbàtálá* divinity's nature and personality. This nature is found in calmness, tolerance, and purity, which the devotees also follow. This text is explained below:

## Yoruba text

Òrìṣà! Ètì! Èni olà!  
A-f-ọjọ'-gbogbo-tóbi;  
Ó tóbi, kò se é gbé;  
Bàntà-banta n'nú àlà  
Ó sùn n'nú àlà;  
Ó jí n'nú àlà'  
Ó t'ínú àlà dide

## English Text.

Òrìṣà, the immovable, the noble One!  
He-who-lives-daily-in gorgeous-greatness  
He is so mighty that he cannot be lifted,  
Immence in white robes!  
He sleeps in white clothes,  
He wakes up in white clothes,  
He rises in white clothes.

The drum lyrics, thus, dictate the tempo and nature of the rituals through which the festival activities are maintained. The nature of the activity is a stereotype of the personality of the òrìṣà. This nature is always dictated by the occurrence and recurrence of the *Igbìn* drums at the level of ritual engagement; this nature is always signaling through the recognition of symbols attached to the cult. In the statement of the aforementioned text, there is "*Èni Olá*" (the noble one) '*Ètì*' (immovable) '*Ò sùn nínú àlà*', '*ó jí nínú àlà*', '*ó tinú àlà dide*' (immense in white robes). All these symbolise the personality of *Ọbàtálá*, and through that personality, drums invoke the spirit of the deity for acceptance of the offering of prayers. In another fact, the invocations of ritual words are done within the lyrics of the *Igbìn* drum. These words show the magnitude of the òrìṣà to give the response needed for the success of the ritual. Apart from this, the words of the drum allow a social rapport between the participants and the devotees in the way the beat of the drum responds to the atmosphere of the festivals. The dance and complete response of the drum allow the participants to exhibit the ritual dance needed for such an occasion. The message of the drum is as follows:

*Olúfón gbobì je, gbobì*

*Òrìṣà gbobì je, gbobì*

*Baba arúgbó gbobì je, gbobì*

*Òrìṣà gbobì je, gbobì* (Vidal, 2012, p. 277)

Olúfón, please, accept kolanut, accept it.

Òrìṣà, please accept kolanut, accept it.

Old father, please, accept kolanut, accept it.

Òrìṣà, please, accept kolanut, accept it.

The titles attached to these songs identify the ability and authority which the devotees ascribed to the òrìṣà during the festival. It shows that *Ọbàtálá* holds a greater link to *Olódùmarè*. '*Bàbárúgbó*' in the context of the song identifies him as the ancient kingly father. The òrìṣà in the context of the song gives him the credence of *Alábàálàṣe*, one who proposes and also disposes. The '*Olúfón*' is a medium of his earthly representation, which acknowledges him with the work of creation and ordering of the earth's trappings. The uses of the above titles are symbols that the drum dwells upon to stimulate and influence the spirit of the Òrìṣà towards the success of the ritual during the festival. The resounding of the drum pushes the devotees into spiritual ecstasy and thus allows a scenario of spirit seizure, which allows a divine manifestation.

The use of *the Igbìn* drum and *ẹwọ* (metal drum) is highly holistic to *Ọbàtálá*. *Ọbalésú*, during an interview, explained that the drum must be beaten at least once a year, and the non-compliance with this signal brings a great implication. The implication shows that the entire community is in a state of bereavement. The drum is significant in the ritual performance of the rite of passage for members. During the naming rite, the drum must be beaten to the hearing of the child. In the ritual ceremony of members, the drum must also be beaten as a final farewell wish for the deceased, and this gives an uninterrupted passage to the ancestral region.

The use of this drum on these occasions is established upon the fact that the drum must have been revitalised with materials like obi (*kolanut*), goat (*ewúre*), snail (*Igbìn*), dry rat, dry fish, aṣọ funfun (white cloth) and shea-butter (*òrí*). The song rendered through the drum is a form of lamentation (*arò*). The lamentation is mostly not a form of emotional sorrow but a goodwill emotion. Most songs rendered in lamentation are as follows:

*O tó de ò de oo* From one occasion to the other  
*O tó de ò de* From one occasion to another  
*O tó de ò de o* From one occasion to another

This song announces the itinerary of *Ọbàtálá* in his social and spiritual walk.

*Olúmogbe ò mo gbe o* Olumogbe I call  
*Arámogbe à n bọ o* The inhabitant of mogbe, we are on our way.

This is a lyric that sends a signal and alert to the inhabitants of Mogbe city, to show that a ritual is about to take place in their territory. Mogbe was the ancient domicile of *Ọbàtálá* during his days. Whenever this song and the *Igbìn* drum sound, it indicates that a particular ritual performance is coming up. In the festival, this song is prevalent.

*Olóko àlò ló yẹ risà* The owner of this farm, it is white that befits òrìṣà  
*Ládépé yẹ ẹbọra o* Ladepe befits the spirits  
*Olóko jòwú ròkòkò* Farm owner, heavy rain is coming  
*Ó sọlé dahoro* This can destroy entire house.

The song is a lamentation done in commemoration of *Ọbàtálá* after he had turned to stone relics. It, thus, signals an important connection to the deity during the festival. It serves to be the medium of inviting the spirit of *Ọbàtálá* during the festival.

(a) *Onílé mi sọdún* House owner is celebrating his festival  
*Yésí sà rí gbọ́* Who have not heard  
*Arálé gbogbo* All inhabitants of the home  
*Ẹ kú àrìsùn* Have an interesting vigil

(b) *Ọba ee yé O* The king listens  
*Olúre síwọ̀ ẹgbìn* Olure stop beating ẹgbìn drum  
*Kárelé o* Let's go home  
*Òníaré Òníaré*

The first song in this category announces the *Ọbàtálá* festival. The song identifies *Ọbàtálá* as the landlord who must be celebrated and adored. The second song is a signal to *Ọbàtálá* in which the message of bereavement was passed to him. The drummer was asked to stop beating the *Igbìn* drum because the beloved son of *Ọbàtálá*, who was "òníaré", had passed on. All these songs thus remain a platform through which spirituality, social and ritual engagements are performed in the festival of *Ọbàtálá*.

## 4.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The *Ọbàtálá* indigenous drum, in the process of the analysis, therefore shows that it serves as media of socialisation that influence values that affirm cultural identities. The use of drum languages presents innovative words for petition, supplication and acceptance in religious ways. Its use helps to interpret the minds of the participants in a dramatic way. Overall, this drum exhibits the acts of spiritual manifestation in ritual passages. It activates the spirits of deities in festivals and thus motivates the connection between them and the participants. This shows its ritual emblem. *Igbìn*, as an indigenous drum, personifies the interest of the worshippers symbolically as it influences the acts of the gods. The influences allow the goodwill of the gods to be extended to the people by authenticating their prayer requests in various ways.

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