

# **Music and Tonal Communication: Decoding and Conserving the Agidigbo Instrument in Apala Music**

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## **Abstract**

*The Agidigbo is a major melo-rhythmic instrument of the Apala music, used by Yoruba musicians to achieve speech surrogate due to the tonal inflection of the Yoruba language. While it is somewhat easier in Yoruba vocal music to employ the three phonemic tones - low, mid and high for word intelligibility, the musicians must however adapt these tones in playing the melo-rhythmic instruments for adequate communication. This is because among Africans, there is often a tonal communication relished between the musicians and the listeners. While literature abounds on tonal communication in Yoruba music, with overt concentration on the 'talking drums', there is paucity of academic research on the tonal communication of the Agidigbo. This study thus examines the communicative attributes of the Agidigbo, with musical and contextual analysis of its decoded communications. Oral interviews and bibliographical evidences were used to elicit information. Content analysis was used to process the musical and tonal data generated in the Agidigbo music. This study establishes that although Yoruba musicians are entertainers, they are also regarded as custodians of moral law and habitually encode messages in their music, with its decoding entrusted to their enlightened faithfuls. This is evident in the Agidigbo, an instrument particularly used by the Yoruba people for musical, socio-cultural and linguistic communication. Significantly, this study aids the understanding and decoding of this indigenous instrumental heritage. This paper thus argues for more musicological research on this communicative instrument towards its globalization and conservation.*

**Keywords:** *Agidigbo, Conservation, Decoding, Melo-Rhythmic, Tonal-Communication*

## **Introduction**

Music to the Yoruba of Southwest Nigeria serves as a medium for communicating and commemorating their rich culture. Music accompanies virtually all their cycle of life events and through it, the socio-cultural way of life are conserved. Music has been a veritable medium of language use and development in every culture (Abubakre, 2008), serving as a traditional (indigenous) communication system (Omojola, 1989; Osho, 2011). According to Odoemelam et al (2015), African communication system has its in-built cultural preservative potentials, hence the

meaning of a word and its interpretation is usually reflected in the cultural norms (Nwarukweh, 2015). Yoruba music, according to Olusoji (2008), Olaleye (2012) and Oludare (2015) are word bound, with the tonal inflection of the language influencing its melody through the low, mid and high phonemic tones. Linguists, such as Akinlabi (2004), Fajobi (2005) and Abubakre (2008) have written on the relationship between speech tone and word formation in Yoruba language, known as Phonology. Phonology is the “systematic use of sound to encode meaning in any spoken human language” (Webster, 2015). Hence, while vocal music are more common and somewhat easier for the musicians to employ the sounds of the low, mid and high phonemic tones for word intelligibility, instrumental music are often performed with textual connotations for decoding the sound meaning, such as the konkolo rhythm. Whereas the Yoruba vocalists use words tonally in communicating the message in the music, the instrumentalist playing the melo-rhythmic instruments must however adapt the phonemic tones for adequate tonal communication. These ‘speech surrogate’ instruments thus are able to ‘talk’ to the natives. Examples include the Goje in Sakara music, the Iya ilu in most Yoruba genres and the Agidigbo in Apala music.

### **Origin of the Apala Music**

Apala is a socio-religious music with a prominent instrumental part and a vocal accompaniment rooted in Yoruba philosophy and poetry. It developed, as a non-liturgical Islamic music used during Muslim festivals, from Were and Waka musical forms, used by Muslim youths to wake up the faithfuls to eat ‘saari’ (early morning meal) during the Ramadan fast, and welcome pilgrims back from the hajj pilgrimage in Mecca (Frishkopf, 2008; Omojola, 2012; Oludare, 2014). However, with the infusion of traditional musical elements, vocal and instrumental styles, Apala was born and performed in the social context of both the Yoruba Muslims and non-Muslims. It was popularized by exponents such as Haruna Ishola, Ayinla Omowura, Ligali Mukaiba, Ajadi Ilorin, while contemporary practitioners include Musiliu Haruna Ishola, Y.K. Ajadi, Femi Lewis, etc. (Olusoji, 2008; Ajetunmobi and Adepoju, 2013). The instrumental ensemble of Apala consists of the Iya-ilu, omele ilu, Akuba, Sekere and Agidigbo (Lasisi, 2012; Omojola, 2012 and Vidal, 2012). Apala musicians, like most Yoruba traditional music, make use of the music for commemorative and panegyric functions, as well as serve as custodians of moral law and social critics. The instrumentalists communicate by taking advantage of the tonality of the Yoruba language. However, the musicians are sometimes discrete with their communications and in such cases habitually encode messages in their instrumental music using the language’s phonemic tone system, with its decoding

entrusted to their enlightened audience. While both the Iya-ilu and Agidigbo are melo-rhythmic instruments used as speech surrogates by the Yorubas, the latter is uniquely identified with Apala music.

### **The Agidigbo Instrument and Tonal Communication**

The Agidigbo is a tuned idiophone belonging to the plucked lamellophone family (prongophone) and also known in other African countries as Mbira, Sanza, Ikemba, to mention a few (Vidal, 2012; Echezona, 1981). It is the major melo-rhythmic instrument of Apala music of the Yoruba people of Nigeria, which serves a dual function of maintaining a rhythmic ostinato with the song as well as providing melodic accompaniment and interludes. It was first used as the principal instrument in the indigenous Agidigbo music of the Yorubas in the 1920s, from which the genre got its name (Vidal, 2012). However, with the decline of the music and the emergence of popular genres such as Juju and Apala music in the 1930s, the Agidigbo players ventured into other musical styles, with the instrument finding solace and eventually incorporated into Apala music due to its tone quality and melo-rhythmic role matching the nature of Apala music. Scholars such as Olusoji (2008), Lasisi (2012) and Ajetunmobi and Adepoju (2013) report that the instrument has four or five metal strips, built on a large acoustic box. These metal strips are bent upwards, with three of the strips tuned to the low, mid and high tones employed in Yoruba language, which makes it easily imitate the speech tones of the language. This melo-rhythmic instrument hence communicate through the tonality of the Yoruba language, which are decoded only by those that understand its linguistic phonology. The instrument is most popular in the Ibadan and Ijebu areas of Yoruba land. Musicians such as Adeolu Akinsanya, Haruna Ishola, Fatai Rolling Dollar, Ebenezer Obey and many others fostered its popularization.

This study thus focus on the communicative attributes of the Agidigbo instrument as used in the Yoruba Apala music. It examines how the people understands (decode) its tonal communication, while arguing for the preservation of this cultural heritage.

### **Method**

This study is a qualitative research. The study adopts the descriptive research design and content analysis for the interpretation of data, which includes the musical, contextual, tuning, performance technique and communicative attributes of the Agidigbo instrument as used in Apala music. The research area includes Ibadan, Abeokuta and Oworonṣoki in Oyo, Ogun and Lagos States respectively.

The key informants include Mr. Segun Akinbowale (an Apala music practitioner from an Àyàn family in Ibadan), Mr. Ademola George (a Lagos based juju musician from Ogun state) and Chief Ambali Adetunji (a renowned Yoruba music marketer, with record label signing of Apala musicians). The music of Haruna Ìshòlá, Àyìnlá Ọmọwùrà and Àyìnlá Ọmọ Aláyàn were selected for our discography, due to their major contribution to the development and preservation of the genre, as well as their preservation of the Agidigbo and authentic style of Apala in their music. Data for this research were extracted from a combination of primary and secondary sources. The primary data collected from the fieldwork include musical and linguistic (contextual) information, elicited through key informants, oral interviews and observation methods, used in assessing the musical and contextual style of the Agidigbo music. The instruments used for accessing data include audio-visual recording gadgets and the use of 'Finale' software for notating the music. Secondary data were obtained through bibliographical evidences, which were also used to verify and establish the authenticity of the primary data in the study's analyses.

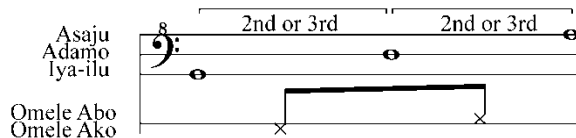
## **Results and Discussion**

### **Tuning and Performance Style of the Agidigbo**

The Agidigbo has a wooden resonator box upon which five thin metal strips are mounted, with shakers for additional percussive sound. It appears and is played like the piano, with both hands. While the left hand plays the two lower rhythmic metal tongues, the right hand plays the three upper melodic tongues. The instrument is placed on the laps in sitting position or carried with a rope attached to the body worn around the neck, suspending it at the abdomen level (fig. 1). In our fieldwork, we observed that the best players use as many fingers as possible to play the metal tongues, while also either tapping the sides of the box with finger rings or the surface with the thumb to complement its rhythmic patterns. We also observed that the metal tongues are intentionally bent upwards to give room for their vibration and facilitate continuous resonance. The totality of the melodic and rhythmic harmony gives it its unique acoustic timbre with soothing and sonorous tones. The metal strips are named in Yoruba, according to the percussive function they perform and in accordance with the dundun ensemble. From the left to the right of the player, the strips are called 'omele ako', 'omele abo', 'Ìyá-ìlù', 'Àdàmò' and 'Asájú'. The omele abo is left out in the case of a four strip Agidigbo. While the first two only play percussive rhythms with often indefinite tuning, the Ìyá-ìlù, Àdàmò and Asájú are tuned to the low, mid and high phonemic tones (fig. 2). In our modified staff notation below, the top three lines (from bottom to top) represent the low, mid and high notes of the Ìyá-ìlù, Àdàmò

and Asájú respectively. The notes below and above the lowest line are for the Omele ako and abo.

**Ex. 1 Notation of the Tuning of the Metal Strips of the Agidigbo**



The different Agidigbo encountered in the field showed a relative tuning system. Both the makers and players tune the tongues to subjective pitches, albeit the ‘Ìyá-ìlù, Àdàmò and Asájú’ sounding higher than each other, with the Ìyá-ìlù the lowest. The tongues are tuned either a tone or a third apart, with a fifth between the lowest and highest strip. We did not come across any tuning below a major second or above a major third apart. This affirms that in Yoruba music, the smallest intervallic distance between speech melodies are a full tone (second) and a range of a third up to a fifth between the low and high speech tones (Vidal, 2012; Olaleye, 2012; Oludare, 2015).

As a melo-rhythmic instrument, the Agidigbo’s main function is to give melodic accompaniment in an ostinato style and a complete melodic phrase (song) while playing solo interludes. However, it also takes advantage of its percussive nature to add rhythmic support to the music. The dexterity of the player to perfectly blend a sonorous melodic line with a steady rhythmic pattern marks the difference between the professionalism of one player from another and the unique melodic, rhythmic and implied harmonic content of its musical style and performance.

**Ex. 2 Agidigbo Melo-Rhythmic Accompaniment**

Three musical examples (a, b, c) showing Agidigbo melo-rhythmic accompaniment. Each example consists of a melodic line and a rhythmic line with 'x' marks. Example (a) is in 4/4 time, (b) is in 12/8 time, and (c) is in 4/4 time.



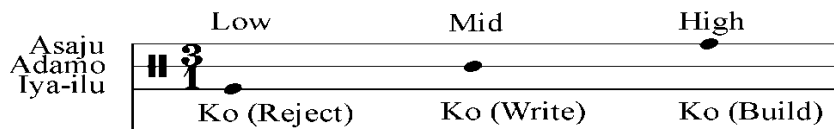
This complex interweaving of a melodic and rhythmic part on a single instrument and the implied harmonic timbre earned the Agidigbo its awe among the Yorubas and the player regarded as a master instrumentalist, like the Iya-ilu player known as a master drummer.

**Communicative Attributes of the Agidigbo**

The Yoruba language, like most sub-Saharan African languages, has tonal inflections which influence its speech melody. In a tonal language, a word may have different meanings depending on the pitch used to intone it, with its tonal structure indicated by diacritics (accents) placed on top of vowels to give meaning to the contexts. These tonal inflections have a semantic function, which is a vital factor in the analysis of the tonal communication features of the Yoruba language, that is, it aids in distinguishing between words of different meaning, albeit phonetically identical (Akinlabi, 2004; Fajobi, 2005). For example, a one syllable word can only have three phonemic tone, hence a minimum of three different meaning, which will be played on the Ìyá-ìlù, Àdàmò and Aró metal strips of the Agidigbo respectively. An example is given below.

**Ex. 3 Intonation of Word Meanings and their Speech Melody on the Agidigbo**

Kò (Low) - Reject      Ko (Mid) – Write      Kó (High) – Build



In Yoruba music, there is often a communication relished between the musicians and the listeners. These communication serve convoluted functions as it can be musical (entertainment), linguistic (use of language) and extra-musical (panegyric and commemorative use). Although musical communication in instrumental music is a global phenomenon, such as in the Western program and impressionistic music, nevertheless in Agidigbo melo-rhythmic music, this can only be efficiently achieved by a good understanding of the language’s morphology, the melodic and rhythmic influence and the extra-musical connotations. The Webster dictionary defines morphology as “a study and

description of word formation...in language” (2015). Hence, by morphology we mean how the Agidigbo player creatively achieve word intelligibility in the ‘Apala’ music. By melodic and rhythmic influence we mean how the melodic and rhythmic elements conform to the linguistic attributes; that is the expected speech melody and rhythm enshrined in the language. Lastly, by extra-musical attributes we mean how the Agidigbo player formulate or appropriate existing Yoruba words and play it tonally to commune ‘socio-cultural’ messages discernable by the people. These may range from ordinary reenactment of proverbs, myths, histories, cultures or wordplay (Falola and Genova, 2005), denigration of vices or acts by public figures, government or derisive gestures to rivals (Olusoji, 2008; Ibekwe, 2013), to romantic advancement to individuals and communication of secrecy of cultic or secular affiliations. Hence, the systematic use of the Yoruba phonemic sound to encode word meanings through tonal communication in the music of the Agidigbo instrument. These tripartite phenomenon of the interaction between the musical, linguistic and extra-musical elements encompasses and substantiates the communicative attributes of the Agidigbo in Apala music (ex. 4).

#### **Decoding the Agidigbo Musical Samples**

The Agidigbo, as earlier mentioned, functions as a speech surrogate instrument. It employs the phonemic tones of the Yoruba language for its tonal communication. The players achieve this by playing the appropriate metal tongue, either the Ìyá-ìlù, Àdàmò or Asájú to form (encode) words or speech, which can only be translated (decoded) by having a knowledge of the Yoruba language. We will now engage in the melodic analysis of Agidigbo musical samples from excerpts of the selected Apala musicians, with contextual interpretations of words/ speech formations through the three phonemic tones and their literal meaning.

**Ex. 4 Musical Excerpts of Tonal Communication of the Agidigbo**

Word Intonation: Ìwà ire ni ñkan. Òbá à lówó lówó tóju sèkèrè lo, iwà ire ni ñkan

Agidigbo Tonality: L L MMM L M L H L H H H HM L L L M L L MMM L M

Translation: Good character is virtue. No matter how rich you are, good character is virtue

Word Intonation: L’ówe l’ówe là lùlù Àgídìgbo. Ológbón lón jo, àwon òmòràn ló mo ìtúnmo rè

Agidigbo Tonality: H M H M L L L L H L M M H H H M L M L L L H M L H M L

Translation: The Agidigbo is played in proverbs. The wise dance to it, the knowledgeable understand it



Word Intonation:	Wá gbé mi lékè. Èdùmàrè wá gbé mi lékè abínú eni, wá gbé mi lékè
Agidigbo Tonality:	H H M H L L L L L H H M H L M H H M M H H M H L
Translation:	Give me victory. O God give me victory over those that hate me, give me victory
Word Intonation:	Tapá tesè ní ó wo mi. Ológiní tóní òhun ó pà àgùntàn je, tapá tesè ní ó wo mi
Agidigbo Tonality:	M H M L H H M M M H L H H H L M H L L L L M M H M L H H M M
Translation:	His limbs will enter the water. The Cat that wants to kill the lamb, his limbs will be wet
Word Intonation:	Yokolú yokolú, kò wa tán bí, iyàwó gb'óko sán lè okó yo ké
Agidigbo Tonality:	M M H M M H L M H H L L H H M H L M H M H
Translation:	Yokolú yokolú, it serves you right. The wife wrestles down the husband, he gets a hunch back
Word Intonation:	Ifá ní ó pa olúwa è je. Omodé tó fojú èkùró wo Òrúnmilà, ifá ó p'olúwa è je
Agidigbo Tonality:	M H H H M M H M L M M M H H M H L M H M L H L L M H H M H M L M
Translation:	Ifá will kill the person. A young person that ridicules Òrúnmilà. Ifá will kill him

Each Yoruba word must be intoned correctly to give their different meaning and combined appropriately to achieve speech intelligibility. The Agidigbo player must therefore play the intonation of each words in order for the listeners to decipher their meaning and understand the message in the music.

### Conclusion

The Agidigbo is a melo-rhythmic instrument used in Yoruba Apala music. It employs the tonal inflection of the language in its music with textual connotations, thus serving as a speech surrogate via tonal communication. The contextual description of Yoruba word intonation and how the Agidigbo translates (encode) the words by playing the appropriate combination of the Ìyá-ìlù, Àdàmò or Asájú tongues to communicate the correct meaning shows that the tonal communication achievable on this speech surrogate instrument can only be decoded by those that not only understand the language, but also the music,

speech formation and the philosophical and socio-cultural way of life of the Yoruba people. Hence, the need for the preservation and more research of this communicative musical instrument and cultural heritage. The revelations in this study accentuates the need for music and communication policy makers to promote, embolden and sustain scholarship in African communication systems, as African indigenous music and communication system have a direct relationship with her traditional and global development potentials.

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Appendix



Fig. (1) The Agidigbo

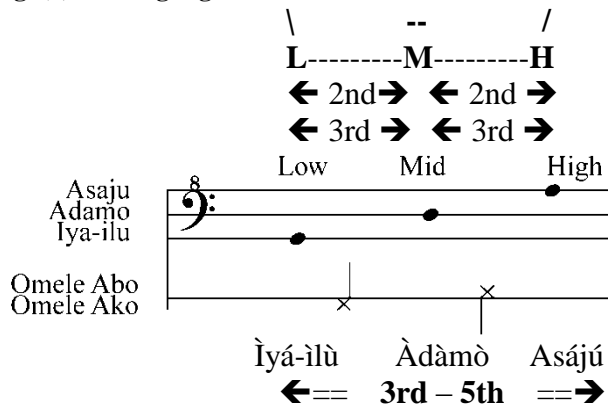


Fig. (2) The Agidigbo Tuning