

# WEST AFRICAN JOURNAL OF ARCHAEOLOGY

PUBLISHED ON BEHALF OF THE WEST AFRICAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION.

## EDITORIAL OFFICE:

DEPARTMENT OF ARCHAEOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY  
UNIVERSITY OF IBADAN, NIGERIA.

Telephone: IBADAN 462550-462579 (30 lines) Extensions 1094 & 1330  
Faxes & Telegrams: UNIVERSITY IBADAN (WAJA)



Your Ref: Waja/46/2016

Your Ref: .....

4<sup>th</sup> March, 2016.

Mrs. Ifeoluwa Pogson, Ayo Adeduntan and Abiodun Akande,  
Institute of African Studies,  
University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

Dear Ayo Adeduntan,

### LETTER OF ACCEPTANCE OF YOUR JOINT PAPER FOR PUBLICATION IN WEST AFRICAN JOURNAL OF ARCHAEOLOGY

I write to notify you that your joint paper on "Ritual, Art and/Physics? Seven Rare Wooden Oro Bullroarers in the Collection of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, Nigeria," is accepted for publication in our International Journal of *West African Journal of Archaeology*, Volume 46(1&2), 2016. I congratulate you on this achievement.

Yours faithfully,

Prof David A. Aremu  
Chief Editor.

IBADAN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

# Ritual, Art and/or Physics? Seven Rare Wooden Orò Bullroarers in the Collection of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, Nigeria

Ohioima Ifounu Pogoson, Ayo Adeduntan and Abiodun Akande  
Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, Ibadan

## Abstract

This paper investigates the artistic characteristic features and iconology of Yoruba Orò bullroarer using selected examples of seven Orò bullroarers in the collection of the Museum of the Institute of African Studies (MIAS), University of Ibadan, Nigeria. The ethnographic research design was adopted for the study. It gathered data from in-depth interviews, historical, political, mythological, scholarly submissions and allusions on the socio-religious, cultural importance and associations of orò in Yoruba land, to elucidate traditional and contemporary perspectives about Orò and its iconography. In its conclusion, the paper highlighted the important images commonly depicted on the Orò bullroarer. Some of the images observed are zoomorphic, anthropomorphic, geometric or abstract forms. It further observes that the images on the bullroarer are purposely engineered to conform with the overall process of scientific effect of matter, energy, force and motion to produce the buzzing sound associated with Orò.

## Introduction

As far back as 1880, a body of literature started to emerge on the study of the bullroarer. The bullroarer is commonly a flat wood (occasionally metal), attached to a string, and whirled round to produce a roaring or shrieking noise (Plate 1). The bullroarer has a long history and its application has been secular and religious. In the emerging literature, some scholars discussed it as a musical instrument (Sachs 1929: 10-13; Izikowitz 1935: 208-212), others such as Hanika (1952: 86-88) studied its sound-producing effect, while some others were concerned with the ritual designs found in bullroarer decorations (Guiart 1951; Davidson 1953). The psychoanalytic views of some scholars interpreted the overall form of the bullroarer as being phallic. The most articulate of the psychoanalytic group is the eminent scholar van Baal (Baal Van 1963: 201-214). Early 20th century scholars, such as Frazer, Haddon, Sachs, Schaeffner and von Hornbostel concerned themselves with the wide and global dispersion of the bullroarer. Rather than a monogenesis-diffusionist position, these scholars seem to support a polygenesis explanation for the bullroarer's dissemination. However, Marcuzzi's view of the origin of the bullroarer is quite distinctive; he studied its presence among Afro-Cuban



communities and observed a specific diffusionist trajectory that points in the direction of the Yoruba of southwest Nigeria - whose *Orò* bullroarer this paper addresses - as the place of its origin in the said communities. It is important at this point to mention that the bullroarer is found in many cultures around the world. The fact that the bullroarer is manifested in different; seemingly unconnected, cultures has been one intriguing phenomenon.

### **Types of Orò in Yorubaland**

The word "orò" in the Yoruba language has two distinct meanings. Firstly, it means a series of actions and rituals associated with particular religious rites or ceremonies; hence, we talk of "Orò ile," "Orò iyawo" or "Orò isinku" - which means household ritual, marriage ritual and burial rites, respectively. Nearly every traditional activity in Yorubaland has a ritual accompanying it. The second connotation of the word refers, essentially, to an all-male cult, which functions as a militant machinery of the executive arm of government in many Yoruba traditional communities. The cult is sometimes saddled with the responsibility of carrying out gruesome and brutal assignments. It is also involved in making important executive decisions that affect its domicile community. Fadipe (1991) adds a third connotation and this refers to a traditional deity in certain Yoruba towns such as Iseyin, Ijebu, Oyo and, lately, Sagamu.

This paper is specifically concerned with the second usage. This usage has a further inflection in which the deity is represented with a wooden, or sometimes metal, blade-like instrument that is used during the rites of the orò cult. For clarity, the proper noun "Orò" is used in referring to the deity and activities associated with it while the common noun "oro" (italicized) refers to the bullroarer artefact itself. Orò is represented by the bullroarer which makes a weird, eerie and buzzing sound. This sound is produced when a string is attached to the flat paddle-shaped bullroarer (oro), and whirled or swung round vigorously.

This paper investigates the iconography and, as a matter of exigency, the iconology of the selected rare samples of the Orò bullroarer in the collection of the Museum of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, Ibadan. It intends to draw from historical, political, mythological and scholarly submissions and allusions on the socio-cultural associations of the orò. Interviews with Orò worshippers also serve to elucidate contemporary perceptions of its iconography.

### **The Role of Orò in Yorubaland**

Among both the Egba and the Ijebu Yoruba people, Orò is intimately linked with the Ògbóni cult/fraternity, also an executive arm of many traditional Yoruba society



government. Orò is an indigenous institution, similar to today's National Senate. In Egbaland as in Ijebuland, according to Solanke (1998), an Egba elder observed that the primary motive underlying the Oro institution was religious as well as political, the latter because it was also used as an instrument of an arm of government (Ògbóni) for the execution of some decisions. Orò draws its rank and file from young, strong and virile men in the community. Fadipe (1991), while commenting on the close association between the Ògbóni and Orò, noted that the Ògbóni fraternity in every community felt the need for an expeditious and vigorous handling of certain classes of offences, disorder and crimes; gruesome processes they felt must not be witnessed by women. To achieve the required privacy for such action, Orò activities are set off by the whirling of the bullroarer, which produces an eerie warning sound that drives away non-initiates especially women. This exclusion of women is also meant to increase respect for men by the women-folk. Therefore, on days set aside for Orò, women are not allowed to show themselves in public.

An oral tradition of the origin of Orò, according to Baale Jabata, a traditional Yoruba village-head in Oyo, maintains that originally both Orò and Egungun were inseparable friends who decided to seek their fortune in the world outside their community. In due time, they became successful but while *Egungun* judiciously saved his own wealth, Orò was extravagant. After a while *Egungun* left for his original home and his prosperous arrival back home was celebrated with pomp and fanfare, a situation which is still re-enacted in present-day *egungun* festivals and ceremonies. When Orò, on the other hand, returned home poor and wretched, he made his appearance at night. He was naked except for a string fixed on a flat board that hung from his neck. And with this instrument he brought home, Orò started to make a weird and frightening buzzing sound to announce his arrival. This sent fear and terror through everyone hearing it. He then went to the king's palace where the Alaafin, the paramount ruler, designated the Baale of Jabata to take care of Orò and to allow no woman see his nakedness. This is the reason why Orò is regarded as the Alaafin's personal deity. It is believed that Alaafin Atiba brought Orò and its cult from Oyo Ile to the Oyo Atiba.

Opoku (1978) also observed that the Orò festival of the Yoruba is similar to that of the *egungun*; it too represents the ancestors. He noted that their similarity and divergence is emphasized in Yoruba oral tradition in which Orò and *Egungun* are portrayed as close associates. Unlike *egungun* however, Orò makes its appearance mostly at night. Today, in places where Orò appears in the daytime, it is totally masked and females are forbidden to see it. Simpson (1980) affirmed that unlike *Egungun*, Orò is purely a deity of men; hence, the saying "awo egungun l'obirin le



se, awo gelede l'obinrin le wo; b'obinrin foju k'Orò, Orò agbe” (meaning egungun and gelede are cults women can be involved in, any recalcitrant woman who tries to see *Orò* will be carried off).

Daramola and Jeje (1970) pointed out that *Orò*, like other Yoruba ancestral deities, cannot have its face exposed and that is why it seldom comes out in the daytime. *Orò* worshippers believe strongly in the deity's potential healing capabilities. According to Olapade (1980), *Orò* is the deity whose bullroarer drives evil away. Simpson (1980) further explained that although women are not allowed to participate in *Orò* worship in any form, their husbands or male relatives may offer sacrifices on their behalf. Worshippers of *Orò* believe the deity can prevent epidemics and infant mortality.

The *Orò* cult is popularly held to be a male-only affair. This belief, not only excludes women from participating in the rites, but they are also forbidden from witnessing any of its activities. According to Peel (2002):

*“[the] brute fact of gender control was most evident when Orò “came out” in the town on such occasions as chiefs' funerals, assemblies to decide issues of war and peace, consultations of Ifa on affairs of state, major public sacrifices etc.; for then women had to stay indoors, under pain of death.” (144).*

As pointed out by Marcuzzi (2010), the prominence of male participation in *Orò* might have been informed by two considerations: one, the strength and agility required to whirl the *orò* in order to produce the desired sound (and at the same time moving from one place to another); two, the audacity and strength required to subdue and put to death an unwilling person being brought to justice by the *Orò*. This is a sexist perspective that presupposes that women are weak.

Dundes (1976) wrote that the bullroarer in most of the cultures in which it is found “has specific association with males” and the rites that are connected with it “are kept secret from females” He, however, argued that the origin of the bullroarer is actually female. Even though the bullroarer as an object is often viewed as a ritual analogue of the male genitalia, Dundes reasoned that this does not in any way point to a patriarchal origin, for “women are surely aware of the existence and nature of the male phallus [anyway].” Dundes' ultimate position is that “whatever the bullroarer represents, it was once (first) in the possession of women, not men!”

### **Orò and Women in Yorubaland**

It has been suggested that the notion of *Orò* as a taboo for women emanated from,  
*West Afri. Journ of Arch. Vol. 46 (2) 2016*



relatively speaking, a recent reconceptualization of Yoruba worldview, especially after contact with Islam and Christianity. Washington (2014) argued that Orò does not actually proscribe the participation of women, but of the uninitiated: "It would be more accurate to say that if the uninitiated see Orò they will be carried away, because anyone – male or female – who is not a member of Orò who violates the curfew or enters the sacred grove will be consumed by Orò." Washington (2014) further contended that Orò actively involves women. *Ogboni*, the body that supervises Orò activities, was built on the idea that the "woman" as "mother" is supreme, and is reflected in codifications such as breasts and the earth. As Washington further noted, some women participated actively in the activities of the *Ògbóni*; and their membership of the *Ògbóni* therefore guaranteed them access to the secrets of Orò. Citing Ojo in Washington (2014) maintained that in northeastern Yorubaland "women past childbearing age are initiated into the Orò cult. The initiated members share the same room as the young male initiates."

Awareness of the possibility of female participation and expression in Orò will serve to enhance our reading of not only the rituals but also the material culture they produce. A closer look at some of the Orò artefacts considered in this paper reveals an artistic consciousness that is apprehensive of female anatomy, adornment and spirituality as sites of power. In "Orò" [Plates 4 and 7], the figures with round heavy midriffs suggests pregnancy, a metaphor for reproduction central to *gelede* - the Yoruba mask performance meant to placate *àjé* (witches). Some of the images [Plate 6] bear coiffures that look effeminate, although they can also be understood as special tonsures that some males have on their heads in certain ritual contexts. The slit in the crotch of the human representation in Plate 7 unequivocally images the vagina, one of the most sacred female parts, and certainly the most rhetorically understated part of the human body.

### **Yoruba Bullroarers in the Collection of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, Nigeria**

Seven unique examples of Yoruba bullroarers are in the collection of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, Nigeria, their iconology and physical qualities will constitute the discussion in this section of the paper. The Institute started active collection of material culture from all over Africa shortly after its foundation in 1962. Until quite recently, the envious objects in the collection were as varied in types as were their numbers. From architectural house and verandah posts to flywhisks and Ifa/*Ògbóni* objects, the collection was the envy of many universities and museums. Unfortunately, pillages and lack of care as a result of poor funding have adversely depleted the collection. Notwithstanding, quite a number of valuable objects such as the Orò that this paper considers still remain in the art collection of the Institute and it is for this reason that the authors plan a



systematic study of the remaining artefacts in the collection.

Plate 1 is a carved wood Orò bullroarer. The carving is a flat wood with an overall oblong shape. On one side the Orò bears a high relief figure of a standing male. The figure covers a considerable amount of space on the picture plane, not leaving unnecessary negative space. It is balanced within the picture plane. The figure is depicted with its arms extended down at its sides in what appears a usual standing human position. It has an oval head with round, bulging eyeballs. The lips are represented in a very low, almost flat, relief. The head is supported by a thick cylindrical neck, the torso is just slightly wider and longer than the neck. Almost all its features are in low reliefs. The legs are thin cylindrical forms, running from the torso to the feet. In contrast to the relief forms of other parts of the figure, the rendition of the genitals and feet of the figure compels attention, as they are carved in high reliefs, and thus appear almost in the round. The hole where strings are attached for swinging, is drilled on the upper part.

The posture of the figure does not seem to suggest any special genuflection, as it is simply standing upright. The masculinity of the figure may however be suggestive of the disposition of the Orò membership towards the male. The nudity of the figure conforms to many other Yoruba traditional and religion wood carvings. Indeed, the carved erect phallus on the figure is typical of Yoruba nude figures (especially represented on male ibeji figures). Important to mention is that there is a band around the upper part of the head of the figure, and there appears to be a crest, of an unknown stylistic and cultural provenance, attached at the front. The unsophisticated carving style of the figure is not characteristic of typical Yoruba wood carvings; thus there is an impression that the bullroarer might not be the work



Plate 1

The bullroarer in plate 2 has an overall oblong shape; its lower part is wider than the upper part, the point where the hole for swinging the roarer is drilled. At the centre of the oblong style, a figure is depicted standing with its arms stretched out horizontally. The stretched arms span the two sides of the bullroarer. The head of this figure is obviously large when compared with other body parts. The eyes are carved in high relief, but the nose and mouth are rendered in low relief. The torso is flat and rendered without the usual body contours. It is not clear whether the figure is a male or female as its sex organs or other features of identification are not depicted. However, because of the absence of breasts and elaborate coiffure, the usual characteristic features of Yoruba wood carvings of female figures, it is safe to suggest that the figure is a male. Another possible reason why this figure is likely to be male is that the Orò cult, to which the bullroarer belongs, is a male dominant cult. This can be further corroborated as inferred in a Yoruba folk-song already mentioned earlier.

At the upper part of the bullroarer is a carved horizontal ridge spanning its two edges. It is not clear if this isolated ridge has any connection with the figure, but its position and shape appear to be intended to enhance or vary the sound production of the instrument.



Plate 2



**Plate 3** is a typical example of *Orò* bullroarer. It has an oblong shape measuring about 45 cm. A snake is carved at the centre of the piece, and is depicted lying vertically from the top to the bottom of the farthest points of the oblong, spanning the entire length. The snake is carved in a continuous zig-zag shape from head to tail. At the tail end is the hole for attaching strings.

Snakes are common features in Yoruba wood carving. They are rendered on many objects and in different positions. Sometimes they are depicted in a spiral or concentric position, a context which suggests continuity and a perpetual Yoruba world. At other times they are depicted in the zig-zag manner as found on this roarer. When depicted in this form, it suggests the speedy but slippery movement of the snake. It also suggests virility. In the context of the *Orò* cult this may be a pointer to the powers associated with the cult.



Plate 3

Images depicted on the *Orò* roarer in Plate 4 is an unusual combination of low and sunken-reliefs. On the front side of the roarer is a low relief and on the other side is a sunken negative of the corresponding low relief. Carved on the bas relief side, at the top of the usual oblong, are interlocking circles or what might be a chain of two locks. This is followed by a carved human figure, depicted up to the chest level. Right after the figure, downwards, is a large relief circle that appears to be another head but it has no facial features. The large circle (assumed to be a human head) rests on a cylindrical relief (assumed to be the neck) and a torso with arms.

It is important to note that the sunken relief is rather uncommon in Yoruba wood-carving traditions. They are mostly employed to carve a few domestic utilitarian and religious objects. For example, sunken relief method is used for the carvings of the hollows in *opon ayo*, *opon ifa*, trays, the cup of *agere ifa* and a few other items. In all these examples, the sunken relief carving method is employed to carve out the hollows that will serve in holding items. In the roarer in plate 6, however, the sunken relief on a side is merely an inversion of the image on the other side of the bullroarer and therefore may not be functional.

The haphazard arrangement of forms in this plate could be because the work is probably unfinished or that it was carved by an amateur artist. This arrangement can also be a result of the artist's attempt to carve a comprehensive composition of figures, rather than the usual few element compositions.



Plate 4



Depicted in Plate 5 is a human head in a moderately high relief. The head is placed at the lower side of the oblong-shaped roarer, occupying the lower half. The depicted head is elongated and has elaborate coiffure. The eyes are large, round and bulging while the nose is angular, with the nostrils rendered diagonally to the left and right. The mouth is slightly opened as if the lips are in a whistling position. The hanger of the roarer is drilled at the lower end of the oblong, just at the base of the depicted head.



Plate 5

On plate 6 is a figure with elaborate hairdo. The figure which may likely be female, stretches its hands to the edges of the bullroarer. It wears abaja Yoruba facial marks. The entire figure is limited to the upper part of the bullroarer. The peculiarity of the figure in Plate 7 is its round heavy midriffs which has earlier been said to suggest pregnancy, a metaphor for reproduction, central to gelede.

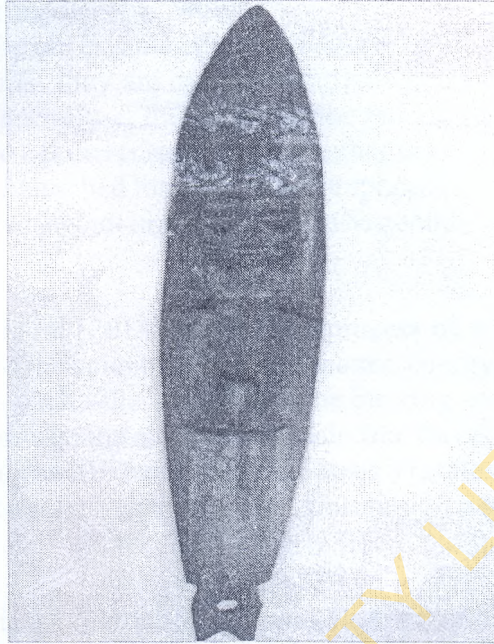


Plate 6



Plate 7



## Discussion and Conclusion

Generally speaking, the observable common features of bullroarers are that they all have long oblong shape; they are carved with flat wood, with or without images depicted on them, especially at the centre of the wood, leaving empty flat wood blades at the sides; and a hole is usually drilled either at the top or bottom (this is the point where strings are attached for swinging and spinning). Important to mention is that the images depicted are not limited; they can be zoomorphic, anthropomorphic, geometric or abstract.

According to Idowu Farai (2014), the overall process of sound production of the bullroarer is a result of the scientific effect of matter, energy, force and motion and the way they relate to each other to produce the buzzing sound when the roarer is vigorously whirled through the air. The flat blade-like form of the bullroarer and its relative light weight allow it to cut through the air as it rotates and spins, whirling up and down in the air at a relatively high speed, thus producing the shrieking buzzing sound of the orò.

When the bullroarer is spun around, two possible oscillations can be detected; the first is the orbiting of the bullroarer around the person whirling it, and the second is the spinning of the bullroarer itself, occasioned by the thin edges of the blade. The wind hits the bullroarer, and as it goes round the person swinging it, it also spins. It will be observed that the decorative elements on the bullroarers are centrally placed. This is so designed to achieve the two oscillations. Having the figures centrally concentrates weight at the centre of a thin sheet of wood, therefore pivoting the wood for a spin.

This weight acts in two capacities; one, it gives the needed weight for the wood to be able to take an orbital trajectory course and, at the same time, pivot the bullroarer while it is orbiting, so the thin edges can spin in the manner of an aeroplane's propeller fan.

Much more, the positioning of the string-holes, at either of the extreme end of the roarer is meant to throw the entire weight of the wood into the air, consistently stabilizing and continuously producing sound. If the hole is drilled at the centre, the bullroarer will, likely, not orbit and spin at the same time and will therefore not produce any consistent sound.

Notwithstanding what the images may symbolize, the characteristic raised or/and sunken reliefs of the images on the surfaces of the roarer serve as stabilizers that assist its orbiting and spinning in the process of oscillations. The orbiting and



spinning produce varying sounds depending on the size of the bullroarer and the speed which it is spun by the human agent. The architecture of the bullroarer is simply a technology. This equally accounts for the reason why it is a toy in many western countries.

The bullroarer has been documented as being present in many communities all around the world. It has also been said that in many of the places it is found, it is mostly associated with religious worship. However, it is observed here in this paper that its architecture is designed based on the laws of physics and it is proposed that its ubiquity in time and space is due to the fact that common physical laws apply and is discoverable everywhere around the globe. Coupled with this is the fact that the shrieking sound of the bullroarer can instill fear in the hearer; this may be a reason why it has been mostly employed as an instrument of religion, especially in ancient communities where religion was shrouded in mystery and used as an instrument of fear and control.

The bullroarer is a product of art based on the scientific study of matter, energy, force and motion but utilized as sacred paraphernalia of religious worship.

## References

- Adeduntan, A. 2008. "Calling Aje Witch in Order to Hang Her: Patriarchal Definition and Redefinition of Female Power." *Global African Spirituality*. T. Babawale and A. Alao (eds). Lagos, Malthouse. 182-194.
- Afolabi, S.O. 1998. "Orò Festival Music in Oyo Town." Masters of Art dissertation submitted to the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, Ibadan.
- Ayeni, O. 1975. *Traditional Festival*. Ibadan, Oxford University Press.
- Baal, J. Van 1963. "The Cult of the Bull-Roarer in Australia and Southern New Guinea." *Bijdr. Taal, Land-Volkenk*. 119, 201-214.
- Daramola, O. and Jeje, A. 1970. *Awon Asa Ati Orisa Ile Yoruba*. Ibadan, Onibonoje Press.
- Davidson, Daniel Sutherland 1953. "The Possible Source and Antiquity of the Slate Churingas of Western Australia." *Proc. Am. Phil. Soc.* 97, 194-213.
- Dundes, A. 1976. *A Psychoanalytic Study of the Bullroarer*. *Man [New Series]* 11.2: 220-238.
- Fadipe, N.A. 1991. *The Sociology of the Yoruba*. F.O. Okediji and O.O. Okediji (eds.) Ibadan, Ibadan University Press.
- Farai, I. (2014). Personal communication with Professor Idowu Farai of the Department of Physics, University of Ibadan, Ibadan.



- Frazer, J. G. 1901. "On Some Ceremonies of the Central Australian Tribes. Rep. Australs. Ass. Advan. Sci. 8, 312-21.
- Guiart, Jean 1951. "Rhombes et tjurungas australiens: etudes des motifs decoratifs et de leur symblique." *Etud. Melanes.* N.S. 3:5, 45-57.
- Haddon, Alfred 1898. "The Bull-Roarer." *The Study of Man.* London, John Murray.
- Hanika, Josef 1952. "Der r-Laut in Fruchtbarkeitsriten und das Schwirholz." *Bayer. Jb. Volksk* 1952, 79-90.
- Izikowitz, Karl Gustav 1935. *Musical and Other Sound Instruments of the South American Indians.* Goteborg, Elanders Boktryckeri Aktiebolag.
- Johnson, S. 1921. *The History of the Yorubas.* Lagos, C.S.S. Bookshop.
- Mabogunje, A. and Omer Cooper, J.D. 1971. *Owu in Yoruba History.* Ibadan, University Press.
- Marcuzzi, M. 2010. "The Bullroarer Cult in Cuba." *Latin American Music Review.* Vol. 31, No. 2. Pp. 151-181.
- Ogunba, O. 1973. *Yoruba Traditional Religion.* Ibadan, Ibadan University Press.
- Olapade, O. 1987. "Ife Traditional Festivals." *Nigeria Magazine*, Vol. 55, No 3.
- Opoku, K.A. 1978. *West African Traditional Religions.* Accra, Fep International Private Limited.
- Peel, J.D.Y. 2000. *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba.* Bloomington: Indiana U.P.
- Peel, J.D.Y. 2002. "Gender in Yoruba Religious Change." *Journal of Religion in Africa* 32.2: 136-166.
- Sachs, Curt 1921. *Geist und Werden der Musikinstrumente.* Berlin, Dietrich Reimer.
- Simpson, G.E. 1980. *Yoruba Religion and Medicine.* Ibadan.
- Washington, T. 2005. *Our Mothers, Our Powers, Our Texts: Manifestations of Àjé in Africana Literature.* Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana U.P.
- Washington, T. 2014. *The Architects of Existence: Àjé in Yoruba Cosmology, Ontology and Orature.* Orifin, Oya's Tornado.