Drumming for the Orisa: (Re)inventing Yoruba Identity in Oyotunji Village

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Abstract
I explore the ways identity is constructed among a group of drummers at Oyotunji Village, South Carolina. Oyotunji Village was founded by Oba Oseijeman I, born Walter King of Detroit, in 1970 with the purpose of providing African-Americans in the United States with a geographical, political, and cultural space to experience African culture. Modeled after Yoruba culture of southwest Nigeria, members of the community practice a religion known as orisa-voodoo. Throughout the year, festivals are held dedicated to various orisa, “deities,” in which the drummers play a crucial role in the religious experience of the orisa-voodoo adherents. An essential part of Yoruba culture, drumming acts as a musical bridge between humans and orisa, enabling orisa-voodoo practitioners to petition the orisa for guidance and intervention in their daily lives. Drumming traditions at Oyotunji Village provide drummers with a repository of cultural knowledge and practices from which to draw, while at the same time offering them a creative outlet capable of reshaping and redefining those very same traditions. I examine various processes of identity formation among the drummers as part of their musical apprenticeship, during which they learn not only how to play the instrument but also about Yoruba culture in general. I employ an analytical framework proposed by Timothy Rice (2003) involving a “subject-centered musical ethnography” within a three-dimensional space of musical experience including time, location, and metaphor.

Keywords: African diaspora, transnationalism, ritual, orisa, Yoruba

Introduction
At the low-walled entrance to a small courtyard, the midday sun beats down on a group of eight male drummers, all in their mid-twenties or younger, bare-chested and sweating as they pound on their drums and percussion instruments, the dundun, the bata, the shekere, and the agogo. The rhythm gradually builds and grows faster, and suddenly the egungun emerges through the gates and onto the dirt road. The egungun, an ancestral spirit represented in the form of a masked dancer, follows the group of drummers as they proceed down the road. As they walk they pass several shrines dedicated to the various orisa worshipped by the villagers and at each shrine the
rhythm changes, sometimes faster or slower, sometimes louder or softer. Each orisa has a particular rhythm, a particular song, a particular dance.

When the group finally arrives at the courtyard of the Ile-Oba, the King’s house, they are joined by a large group of followers singing and dancing in response to the rhythm of the drums. The egungun begins to circle the courtyard as the drumming increases in intensity and in tempo. The masked figure makes several laps, threatening to enter the crowd, but always backing away at the last second, usually guided by one of several figures carrying long sticks that accompany the dancer wherever he goes. Eventually the drummers call the spirit back to the center of the courtyard. Suddenly, the drums stop and a single voice is heard chanting in Yoruba. The drums and the crowd answer together, and the song is continued as the oba and his family make their entrance into the courtyard. Slowly, the royal procession makes its way around the courtyard, and as the oba passes all of those in attendance bow and touch the ground in a show of respect and subservience. Finally, the oba takes his seat at the head of the courtyard, with the rest of his family and head priests and priestesses taking their seats to either side. The drummers take their position to the left of the oba, and with that the festival of Obatala, patron deity of Oyotunji Village and deity of purity and justice, has begun.

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In this article I explore how Yoruba cultural identity is both learned and expressed in a transnational, deterritorialized setting by focusing on the drumming practices and traditions related to the religious practice of orisa-voodoo as it has developed at Oyotunji Village over the past forty years. I explore identity formation and cultural transmission through an examination of the socialization and training processes of a community of drummers. It is important to examine how these drummers form their own social and cultural identities because of the significance of music and rhythm in providing a spiritual and symbolic connection between the orisa and the orisa-voodoo practitioners. As I will demonstrate, worship of the orisa is the cornerstone of not only the religious practice of orisa-voodoo, but in many ways Yoruba social life in general. The drummers at Oyotunji Village play an important and necessary role in the community. Drumming provides a link between the supernatural world and the physical world by acting as a communicative agent that calls down the orisa in order to provide assistance and guidance to orisa-voodoo adherents.

I apply an analytical framework proposed by Timothy Rice (2003) that produces a subject-centered ethnography to explain musical experience. I focus my analysis on one of the Oyotunji Village drummers in order to extrapolate commonalities within the community of study as well as provide a basis for comparisons across cultures. Within this analytical framework I include a description of the types of drums and percussion instruments played, the process involved in initiation into the drumming society, and the role of the drummers in the various religious festivals and events that take place.
Such an analysis results in a subject-centered musical ethnography that positions the individual in a “three-dimensional space of musical experience” as a way of seeking answers to the general question of how individuals experience music in modernity or modern life (Rice 2003:152). Rice posits that a three-dimensional space is useful to analyze the individual music experience for two reasons. First, the use of three or more dimensions creates a “space” that is based on mathematical concepts that can then be used to position the subject within a larger framework of sociocultural understanding. Second, such an analysis sets up an “ideational space for thinking about music, not the place in which musical experience happens” (Rice 2003:159). This is a different concept of space in that it creates a virtual arena in which the physical concept of location, including “place” and “locale” exist along one axis of the model (Rice 2003:159). It is important to point out that while this framework differentiates between such an ideational space and a physical place, this does not exclude the importance of place within the analysis. In fact, as I will show, the physical location of Oyotunji Village is a vital element to be considered in a successful analysis of musical performance and identity creation.

In order to address this call for a repositioning of theoretical understanding and analysis, Rice proposes a focus on the individual musical experience by starting with the viewpoint that “we are all individual music cultures” (Slobin 1993:ix, qtd. in Rice 2003:156). Furthermore, the individual may be viewed as a wholly social and self-reflexive being interacting in time and space with a community of others, each occupying their own individual subject positions within the same, and sometimes across, cultural or social boundaries.

When positioned in such a way, individual experience is not limited solely to that individual, but is instead acted upon and acts upon a world occupied by that individual as well as others who are present. Through this encounter and these experiences the self is continually (re)formed, eventually ending in not only self-awareness, but perhaps more importantly, in the awareness of others (Gadamer 1975). What becomes the focus of the analysis is not necessarily the individual, but instead the ways “we get ourselves from others” (Bakhtin 1990 in Rice 2003). The foundation for a subject-centered musical ethnography, then, is this “self-reflexive project of self-identity in modernity, understood as a social process” (Rice 2003:158), a social process that is brought about through modernity’s removal of the limitations placed on individuals through tradition by allowing them to venture outside of those traditions by seeking out new sites of identity formation (Giddens 1991). Of interest in this case is that the community members at Oyotunji Village have taken advantage of this very shift in order to consciously choose a “traditional” society upon which to base their social and religious practices, in effect using (post)modernity to return to tradition.

For the Yoruba of western Nigeria, music is an integral and all-pervasive part of their culture. “Without it, the people cannot properly create poetry, record history, educate children, celebrate at festivals, praise or abuse, entertain, marry, or even die”
(Bankole et al. 1975:48). Oyotunji Village, the setting of the scene described earlier, is not located in southwestern Nigeria, traditional home of the Yoruba people. For that matter, it is not even located in Africa. In fact, Oyotunji Village is located in the South Carolina Lowcountry, not far from the South Carolina-Georgia border. Oyotunji Village was founded in 1970 as an attempt to create an African space in the United States. The community models itself primarily after the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria, attempting to recreate the culture in every way possible. The driving goal of the founder of the community, Oba Ofuntola Oseijeman Adelabu Adefunmi (1928–2005), was to provide a place for African Americans to recapture and reclaim their African identity (Hunt 1979).

One aspect that defines Yoruba culture perhaps more than any other is the religious practice of orisa devotion. All Yoruba are aligned with a specific orisa that is said to “own” their head. Exactly which orisa owns a person’s head is determined through a divination ritual known as Ifa. It is believed that before a person is born, they choose their destiny and their alignment with a particular orisa that will guide them and influence them throughout their lives. After they are born they forget this, which is why divination is required to reveal the appropriate orisa for that person. By divining the orisa that “owns” the head, the orisa-voodoo practitioner knows who it is that will provide them assistance and guidance when needed and properly petitioned. It is in this way that music, and drumming in particular, becomes such an integral and vital part of the practice of orisa-voodoo. Performing certain songs on drum and percussion instruments accompanied by singing and chanting allows for the adherent to successfully communicate with the orisa in order to receive help, guidance, or healing. A number of festivals and ritual events take place throughout the year dedicated to the most influential deities, such as Shango, Oya, and Ogun. These ritual events enable members of the Oyotunji community to reaffirm and recapture their Yoruba identity as descendants of the African diaspora. Specifically, the drums and percussion provide a rhythmic framework for the sequence of events and create an atmosphere conducive to worship.

Many scholars have written about the importance of music within a cultural context, and particularly within a religious context, to many social, cultural, and ethnic groups in West Africa in general, and in Nigeria specifically, which geographically encompasses most of traditional Yorubaland (Adegbite 1988; Bankole et al. 1975; Bascom 1969; Chernoff 1979; Drewal 1992; Klein 2007; Herskovits 1958; Waterman 1990). Many of these studies focus on drums and percussion, and the rhythmic properties of the music those instruments create, due to the overwhelming presence and emphasis on percussion-driven musical composition. In the case of the Yoruba, this importance is due to two factors in particular. The first is the technique employed in Yoruba drumming that enables a drummer of sufficient skill and dexterity to literally “talk” with his drum. This is possible because Yoruba is a tonal language, and the specific drums used by Yoruba drummers allow them to mimic the tonal utterances in order to approximate actual speech. The second involves the religious practices
associated with orisa worship. Fundamental to any form of orisa devotion is a symbolic communication with the supernatural, achieved through a combination of call-and-response chants, ritualized forms of dance, and drumming. Of these three components, the drumming dictates much of what takes place and determines the pace at which it will occur. This statement is not meant to undermine or diminish the importance of the singing and dancing, but rather aimed at explicitly positioning drumming, and by extension drummers as performers, as worthy of study and ethnographic research.

I begin with a description of Oyatunji Village social structure and cosmology. I describe the basic tenets of the religious system of orisa-voodoo and its function within the community of Oyotunji Village and within the larger community of Yoruba revivalists across the country. I also explain the role and function of the societies known as egbe, specifically as they relate to the social and cultural positioning of the community of drummers. Next I explore the role of drumming at Oyotunji Village and its importance within the community and to the adherents of orisa-voodoo. I conclude by bringing all of these elements together to offer a synthesis of identity formation within the drumming community at Oyotunji Village and link this “subcultural” identity (Rice 2003) to a larger network of Yoruba revivalist practitioners and communities located throughout the United States and around the globe. By employing Rice’s analytical model I intend to show that ritual drumming at Oyotunji Village is a crucial part of the process of transnational identity formation not only for the musician but also for the practitioner, by musically creating a space for communication with the orisa and the completion of a successful ritual event.

**Village Social Structure and Cosmology**

There are two fundamental sociopolitical institutions that govern and structure the social lives and religious beliefs of Yoruba revivalists at Oyotunji Village and throughout the network of satellite communities. The first are the social societies known as egbes, which organize the constituents according to criteria including gender, orisa affiliation, and (in the case of the drummers) role within the community. The second is the religious system of orisa-voodoo that serves as the primary unifying agent that motivates all of the daily actions of its adherents and acts as the spiritual connection between Yoruba revivalists in the United States and around the world and African-born Yoruba.

**Orisa-voodoo**

Orisa-voodoo is a belief system based on the religious practices of the Yoruba of Western Nigeria and Eastern Benin. It is but one of several varieties of orisa devotion, many of which are popular throughout the Caribbean and Latin America. Other examples include Lucumi in Cuba, Vodun in Haiti, and Candomblé in Brazil (Lefever 2000). One notable difference between orisa-voodoo and many of the other syncretic religions of the African diaspora is the conscious removal of any references to
Catholicism that is so closely associated with these other traditions. It is this purposeful attempt to return to a more “traditional” African belief system that is one of the cornerstones of the community’s existence.

However, this does not mean that orisa-voodoo is a “pure” or homogenous tradition. As the name given to the set of practices that comprise this particular version of orisa devotion suggests (“voodoo” being an Anglicized spelling of “vodun”), there are other cultural elements evident in the ritual practices conducted at Oyotunji Village. One reason for this is directly related to the initial establishment of the community in 1970. Oba Adefunmi I, the founder of Oyotunji Village, was an African-American from Detroit, Michigan who became the first African-American to be initiated into the cult of Obatala in Matanzas, Cuba in 1959. Before founding the village he had returned to the United States to Harlem, New York where he founded a Lucumi temple and began introducing and initiating people? Or the African-American community? to orisa devotion and Yoruba cultural practices. It was only after he became heavily involved in the Black Nationalist movement that he and his followers began to expunge particular Catholic elements, such as the recognition of Catholic saints, from their ritual practices. This process was not complete, as there are still certain elements drawn from Lucumi practices still evident today, such as certain instruments that are played during rituals and, indeed, the very structure of the festival weekends.

In addition to Afro-Cuban elements, there are also other examples of cultural and social life at Oyotunji Village that, although African in origin, are not necessarily Yoruba in origin. This is evident in much of the visual art that is displayed throughout the village that is of East or Central African origin (Omari 1991). The most striking example of this, however, is the annual festival held in honor of Damballah Hwedo, a serpent deity associated with Haitian vodun and having Dahomean origins.

This heterogeneous set of practices and traits is not accidental. It is part of a deliberate and ongoing cultural exchange that is fostered by regular trips of orisa-voodoo practitioners, including the oba and his family, to the Caribbean, South America, and Africa. There are also many visitors to Oyotunji Village by orisa devotees from those same areas that attend the festivals, deliver talks, and conduct workshops dealing with various aspects of orisa devotion. There is also a thriving online community that allows for orisa devotees from around the world to discuss, debate, share, and exchange ideas and practices related to orisa devotion in all its forms.

The cosmology of orisa-voodoo acknowledges a supreme being, Olodumare, who resides above and is quite removed from the everyday lives of the people. Instead of directly worshipping this Supreme Being focus is placed on the worship of the orisa, conceived of alternately as deities, fields of energy, or spiritual embodiments of geographical and phenomenological features including rivers, mountains, wind, and thunder. Various accounts have numbered these orisa at 200, 401, 800, and more, but for the purposes of this paper it is necessary only to address the primary orisa worshipped at Oyotunji Village. In addition to the orisa, there is also a great deal of
importance placed on the veneration of the ancestors, represented in the physical world in the form of the egungun. It is the desire to communicate with these orisa and egungun in order to give offerings and praise that creates the need for the drummers at Oyotunji Village. I will demonstrate that the role of the drummer and the importance of musical performance in a festival setting is a crucial element for not only the success of the festival, but also for the creation and maintenance of identity within a larger diasporic community. In other words, for the devotees to successfully convey their praise and devotion to the orisa and their respect and love for the egungun, they rely on the rhythms provided by the drummers to establish a symbolic link between the physical world and the spiritual world.

The three primary phases of a typical festival at Oyotunji Village consist of a bembe the night before the festival day, the Egungun Parade on the day of the festival, and the appearance of the Oba followed by another, more formal bembe to close the festival. The bembe is a ritual where drummers and singers play specific rhythms and sing specific chants for each individual orisa. This is another example of the connections that exist between the Cuban-based practice of Lucumi and orisa-voodoo, as the bembe is borrowed from Lucumi practices and not directly associated with orisa devotion in Yorubaland. Each song is accompanied by the members of the orisa’s egbe dancing in front of the oba and the altar dedicated to the festival’s honored orisa. The Egungun Parade is always performed before a festival in order to first give thanks to the ancestors. Described in the introduction to this article, the parade consists of a processional in which the official drummers of the village lead the masqueraded egungun through the village, stopping at each of the individual orisa shrines located throughout the village. This culminates in the courtyard of the afin, at which point the Oba emerges from his compound and assumes his throne in the courtyard. The culmination of the festival takes the basic form of the earlier bembe, but with less of a casual and social atmosphere and more directed towards the ultimate goal of calling down the orisa in order to give thanks and praise and to request intervention in whatever areas of one’s life that may need to be addressed, whether spiritual, physical, or mental. The end result being a general feeling best summed up in Victor Turner’s classic description of communitas (1969).

The Egbe

If orisa-voodoo serves as a religious system influencing the spiritual lives of the residents of Oyotunji Village, then the social institution of the egbe serves as the social, political, and economic system that governs their day-to-day lives. In fact the two are intertwined on many levels, and not only serve to structure daily life in the village, but also to maintain and reinforce the political and spiritual ties felt among members of the satellite Oyotunji communities previously mentioned. Through membership in these societies, members of the community establish a connection to their ruling orisa and the other community members aligned with that deity. Equally important are the
relationships formed between members of the other societies whose membership are based on gender, social standing, or civic duty. Another important function of the egbe is to reinforce various gender and age norms with regards to eligibility for membership into a specific society. Such distinctions are made as a further attempt at “capturing” what many orisa-voodoo practitioners referred to in my conversations with them as “the culture,” meaning all things associated with the Yoruba. This apparent reification of the culture concept was viewed not as limiting or confining, but rather as a way of (re)inventing and (re)defining Yoruba culture from a transnational perspective.

According to William Bascom (1969:48-49), in Nigeria these societies developed, possibly out of childhood associations, basically as social clubs consisting of members who were generally the same sex, age, and social standing. Usually these clubs would rely on the guidance of elder men and women, referred to as the “father” and “mother” of the society. These societies primarily gathered together for feasts that took place during festival events. Later on, these informal clubs evolved into more formal social institutions holding monthly meetings, collecting membership dues, and electing society officials. While Bascom placed these types of clubs in a slightly different category than the various religious cults dedicated to specific orisa also observed at that time, he classified both as social institutions capable of cutting across kinship lines in order to forge new social, political, and religious connections among members of various clans and villages. The egbes at Oyotunji Village serve the functions of both of the categories used by Bascom in that they act as social institutions that cross kinship boundaries and serve as religious cult groups dedicated to specific orisa worshipped at the Village.

At Oyotunji Village today, these egbes operate as “fundamentally spiritual institutions that are concretized through rituals productive of relationships of obligation. Both spiritual and social ties are manifest through multiple groupings of organizations that constitute lateral networks” (Clarke 2007:728). Furthermore, these societies work on a deeper level within Oyotunji Village and across a transnational network of Yoruba revivalist communities to connect them through common African ancestry. Of particular importance within this transnational network are Egbe Akinkoju, the men’s society, and Egbe Moremi, the women’s society. These two societies serve as extra-local nodes of community belonging and participation through which ties to both Oyotunji Village and Yorubaland in Africa are negotiated, tested, and concretized through political, economic, and spiritual allegiance.

The society of drummers operates primarily at the local level of village society as a structuring agent for the drummers in the community. All of the members of the drumming society either reside permanently in the village or in the nearby communities of Beaufort, Sheldon, or Savannah and are present at all of the festival events in order to perform as part of the ritual events. While official membership in the society numbers around fifteen active members, the number of drummers who actually perform at festival events is usually between six and ten, depending on the particular orisa
honored and the choice of instrumentation for the performance. Initiation into this society is typically concurrent with initiation into Egbe Akinkoju. Egbe Akinkoju exists mainly to teach and reinforce male gender roles observed within the village that are taken to be a direct reflection of traditional Yoruba cultural norms and behavior. It is through membership in the drum society that the drummers establish their identity and status as gatekeepers responsible for the success of the festival events through establishing a spiritual connection between the orisa and those in attendance.

Figure 1. Drummers at Oyotunji Village, South Carolina perform during Odun Sango in 2011 (photo by Colin Townsend).

Drumming at Oyotunji Village, South Carolina

Having provided a brief historical, social and cultural background, I turn now to an analysis of the drummer’s role in the performance of identity in a ritual context. I approach this analysis by relating the experiences of Olafemi, a drummer I met during my first trip to Oyotunji Village. Olafemi is fairly typical in regards to demographic descriptions of the drummers at Oyotunji. He is an African-American male in his early twenties who was born in Beaufort, South Carolina, located approximately twenty miles
from the village. He is also typical of many of the younger drummers in the community in that he represents a new generation of “Yoruba revivalists” (Clarke 2004); he was raised in the culture of Oyotunji Village as the son of two members of the community who both joined in the early years of the village’s formation.

Unlike the majority of festival participants who are either not fully initiated into the community or had been initiated in their adulthood, Olafemi was raised at Oyotunji Village since birth. He was, to return to Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975), thrust into a symbolic and physical world in which to forge his own self-awareness as well as his awareness of others. Using Rice’s three dimensions of time, metaphor, and location, I position this social process of identity formation within the context of ritual drumming at festival events in order to further what Rice terms as an endeavor to “bring some narrative coherence to the complex and seemingly fragmented world that many” anthropologists and ethnomusicologists seek to explore (2003:157).

My decision to focus my analysis on Olafemi was not one that I made prior to or even during my fieldwork experience, but instead was one that developed naturally during my analysis of the data I had collected after my period of fieldwork was over. As stated previously, he was not the only drummer that I interviewed or interacted with, but he was the one with whom I had the most contact, my “key cultural consultant” in the traditional anthropological sense. While the following analysis does center on Olafemi’s experiences and interpretations of drumming at Oyotunji Village, I also introduce data gathered from other informants during my fieldwork. I believe this is a necessary tactic in order to effectively analyze Olafemi’s subjective positioning as a member of the community in the process of creating and negotiating identity. Moreover, his status as a lifelong member of both Oyotunji Village and the drum society serves to illustrate the dual nature of drumming at Oyotunji as both a mechanism for creating and maintaining identity as well as a necessary component of religious practice.

Mapping Olafemi’s subjective positioning within this setting means elaborating on some general perceptions of drummers and drumming within the context of orisa-voodoo praxis and Oyotunji Village social structure. Although at times problematic, Oyotunji Village positions itself as a representation of Yoruba culture and society in a transnational, deterritorialized setting in the United States (Clarke 2004 and 2007; Eason 1999; Hunt 1979; Lefever 2000; Omari 1997). Such a position encompasses all aspects of cultural and religious practice.

**Time: The Evolution of Instrument Choice at Oyotunji Village**

Turning now to the first axis in Rice’s model of musical experience, time, one can begin to situate the ethnographic subject, Olafemi, within this framework. Rice describes two fundamental ways to view the concept of time, as chronological and historical and as experiential and phenomenological. While the former allows for the positioning of musical experience along a forward-moving linear progression, the latter allows for theoretical exploration forwards and backwards along this axis to compare
and explore musical experiences in specific incidences and contexts (Rice 2003:162). In other words, while one interpretation allows for a historical analysis of change and continuity, the other looks at the particular experience of the individual in a musical setting with the knowledge that each particular experience will change not only for the individual involved, but also for those other individuals involved in the same musical experience.

The first application, historical and chronological, allows for a timeline of drumming traditions at Oyotunji Village that reflects choice of instruments played during ritual and festival settings. The choice and selection of drums and percussion instruments at Oyotunji Village has changed several times over the years since its founding in 1970. Olafemi stated that he remembered as a child growing up at Oyotunji, they would play “on some of the weirdest things... different cross breeds of drums, but that was just part of the whole process.” When I first interviewed him in 2007, Oba Adefunmi II, himself a drummer and member of the drumming society, elaborated further on how this process began and was carried out.

You have to remember what Oyotunji is and what it stands for. It is the first attempt by Africans born in America to reclaim their traditional African stories or subjects. And in doing that, because it [the African diaspora] ... has been – in no place [has] the African culture been stamped out worse than in America, you understand? In America it’s been totally obliterated, stamped out. We had to go through different stages of development when it came to drum playing and drum making. Before my team [of drummers] took over, there were drummers who played these round, double-headed, almost tom-tom like drums, like an Indian tom. Heavy wood with thick cowhide, and we would play these those with two sticks.

After a period of time, the drums being used were gradually replaced by more drums and percussion instruments of African origin, including the introduction of the shekere (a large gourd covered with strung beads or shells), the agogo (a paired set of conical bells usually made of steel or iron), and most notably the djembe (a single-headed goblet shaped drum of West African origin capable of producing several tones ranging from a deep bass tone to a high “slap” tone). This choice of drum was part of a larger trend in the evolution of drum selection during the mid-1970s that marked a conscious shift towards playing more traditional African drums in an attempt to “become more traditional with the drumming style,” according to Oba Adefunmi II.

In the early-1980s, the bata drums made their first appearance in festival performances. The bata are a set of three double-headed, hourglass shaped drums of Yoruba origin used in many ritual performances and most closely associated with the orisa Sango. Once again Oba Adefunmi II explained to me during an interview that the
use of this particular type of drum was a conscience choice made on the part of the drummers, as well as other elders and priests in the village (interview 2007).

All of the sudden, everybody was playing djembes here. And one of the chiefs said, well, wait a minute, you know, the djembe beat is hot and it’s nice and it’s on fire, but you know these are not Yoruba drums. The gods and ancestors do not speak through these drums. Even though we are all African, when it comes down to a particular ethnicity then, just like you have a particular ethnicity, you have a particular food, culture, and everything. And so that’s why we had to rigorously get back into Yoruba drumming, because, you know, the djembe almost became a fad thing, you know, everybody plays a djembe. This is good, because drumming is therapeutic, but at the same time they should understand what they are playing and what they are getting into.

Olafemi echoed this need to play Yoruba drums in order to communicate with Yoruba deities. As he told me, he feels that the drum and percussion instruments played at Oyotunji are based on choices that enhance and facilitate communication with the orisa in ritual and festival settings. These choices as expressed in historical and chronological time have a direct effect on the second application of time, experiential and phenomenological. If instrument choice is perceived as having a direct influence over the ability to communicate with the orisa, and by extension over the ability to successfully perform in his role as a drummer, it follows that the musical experience of the earlier generations of drummers would have differed from that of Olafemi and the current members of the egbe. This was confirmed by Olafemi when he expressed to me his opinion that the current drummers at Oyotunji had “really got the drums down to a ‘T’ now” with regards to their instrumental inventory. He went on to explain how the addition of other Yoruba drums, including the dundun and the junjun, has enabled the drummers to play specific drums that are associated with specific orisa, something not possible for the earlier generations of drummers.

This process of instrument selection is another example of the continual dialogue that takes place between orisa-vooodoo practitioners, Yoruba from Africa, and other transnational communities of Yoruba. The decisions to include certain types of drums and exclude others have been based on the circulation of cultural knowledge made possible by a modern world system that facilitates the exchange of ideas and practices through physical and digital means. Whether it is by traveling to Yorubaland, receiving Yoruba guests at Oyotunji Village, or watching and disseminating videos online through sites like YouTube, drumming practices at Oyotunji Village are a direct result of a global circulation of knowledge.

The symbolic importance of these additional drum choices allow the drummers to communicate with the orisa in a deeper, more specialized, and ultimately more
meaningful way. However, choice of drum is not the only factor that influences the ability of the drummers to call upon the orisa. Equally important are the rhythms played and the ways in which they are employed. In order to further analyze how this communication takes place, and more specifically Olafemi’s role as a drummer within that process, I move now to the second dimension in Rice’s model, metaphor.

Metaphor: Playing for the People, Speaking to the Orisa

The second dimension of Rice’s model, metaphor, expressed in the form of “A is B,” or in this instance, “music is x,” serves as a means of exploring the fundamental nature of music and providing a basis for discourse on musical behaviors and the strategies used to express them (2003:163). Rice draws on the works of I.A. Richards and Max Black, who separately define metaphors as more than words or rhetorical devices. Instead they are to be viewed as statements that simultaneously highlight and downplay certain aspects of both “primary” and “subsidiary” subjects while broadening the meanings and understandings of both (2003:164). Rice also focuses on the ways metaphor, when perceived as truth, acts to guide both the thoughts and actions of individuals in a society and shape their worldview (Lakoff and Johnson 1980a in Rice 2003:164). This view allows for the exploration of music as a social instrument capable of informing social behavior and acting as a repository for cultural knowledge.

Although he lists several different musical metaphors that may complement musical ethnographic research, I employ only two of them here, music-as-social behavior and music-as-symbolic system. The first metaphor, music-as-social behavior, considers music to be a reflection of the musician’s social structure and practice. Because music is created, performed, and interpreted by individuals within these structures, every performance is, in effect, also a performance of “existing or emergent social structures and social relations” (Rice 2003:166). These performances may represent either past or present structures, alternatives to existing structures, or possibilities for new interpretations of structure.

Olafemi’s performance of drumming at Oyotunji Village encapsulates all three of these possibilities. In many ways, the very existence of Oyotunji Village here in the United States offers both an alternative and a new direction for social structure. The purpose of Oyotunji Village is to provide an avenue for African Americans to explore their African heritage through experiencing a particular culture on whatever level they may choose, whether it be full-fledged initiation into the community or simply coming to the village once for a guided tour and to witness an Egungun Parade. In this capacity Olafemi and the rest of the drummers act as “cultural ambassadors” to those coming to the village, perhaps for the first time. As Yvonne Daniel discusses in her analysis of the dance practices of Santeria, “the physical body becomes the social body, both the repository of knowledge from the collective memory of a variety of African ethnic groups, and the sensitized reactor of modern transnational culture” (2001:353). If the same can be said of the musicians accompanying these dancers, then by hearing
Yoruba rhythms dedicated to Yoruba orisa and ancestors, visitors to Oyotunji Village are able to witness firsthand an integral and crucial aspect of Yoruba culture.

Olafemi’s position as a drummer is also a reflection of past and present Yoruba social structure in that he is male. It is traditional in Yoruba society that in a ritual context, the men drum and the women dance (Adegbite 1988; Bankole et al. 1975; Bascom 1969). This rule holds true at Oyotunji Village as well. As Olafemi explained it to me, not all African, or even West African, drumming traditions observe these restrictions, but the traditional Yoruba belief as it is interpreted at Oyotunji Villages holds that drumming in festivals and drumming dedicated to orisa is restricted to males. I witnessed this firsthand on several occasions during my visits to the festivals. While there were occasions when a few of the elder priestesses played either a bell or some type of shaker (a hollow gourd or can filled with dry beans or rice to produce a rattling sound when shaken), at no time have I ever witnessed a female playing any type of drum during the festivals. It was not surprising then, when I learned that initiation to the drum society is often times simultaneous with initiation into Egbe Akinkoju (the all-male society), and that part of that initiation entails learning several basic rhythms on both drums and percussion. In this way, Oyotunji Village reflects a traditional aspect of Yoruba culture that ties into the basis of all their religious practices, even though it is not necessarily a reflection of modern Yoruba practices as they exist in Africa.

Music-as-symbolic system deals directly with the communicative properties of drumming at Oyotunji Village. This metaphor relates to the idea that “music can have referential meanings to things, ideas, worlds, and experiences outside the music itself” (Rice 2003:166). Without exception, every person that I spoke with at Oyotunji Village, when asked about the role of drumming during festival events, told me that the purpose of the drumming was to communicate with the orisa, or in the case of the Egungun Parades, with the ancestors. As Olafemi puts it, “The drums call the spirits down.” The rhythms of the drums, together with the movements of the dancers and the chants of the singers, communicate with the orisa to please them in such a way that they will positively influence the lives of the devotees. This notion of communicating with the spirit world brings with it a heavy responsibility for the drummers. As I previously mentioned, each person is aligned to a specific orisa, and it is that orisa that profoundly impacts that person’s own identity formation and development. Because it is essential for the practitioner to maintain this identity through regular communication with the orisa, the drummer’s job of facilitating that connection is all-important.

Each orisa is said to have its own rhythm, its own dance, and in some cases its own drum. Olafemi told me that it requires all three elements, the drumming, dancing, and singing, to come together in just the right way to call down the orisa. This idea is reflected in the importance of the group over the individual in Yoruba drumming. In fact, in some ways the greatest motivation for a drummer is social in nature, in that there is a desire to conform to social expectations and please the group (Bankole et al. 1975:50). This ideal is partly reflected in Olafemi’s comments that only drumming in a group
allowed such communication with the orisa, and that playing alone was simply “practice.”

**Location: Local Routes and Transnational Roots of Cultural Identity**

The third dimension of Rice’s model, location, allows for the positioning of the ethnographic subject along a continuum of spatial constructs, what Edward Soja refers to as nested “locales” that “provide settings of interaction... Locales are nested at many different scales and this multilayered hierarchy of locales is recognizable both as social construct and a vital part of being-in-the-world” (Soja 1989:148-149 qtd. in Rice 2003: 160). These various “nodes” may vary with each application and may influence the subject’s musical experience while simultaneously helping to construct these locales through musical practice. Rice proposes the following categories of location: individual, subcultural, local, regional, national, areal, diasporic, global, and virtual. I employ the categories of subcultural, local, and diasporic to situate Olafemi within his particular social world. I have chosen these three locations not because they are the only ones applicable to this analysis, but because they most strongly correlate to his drumming practices. The primary role of the drummer at Oyotunji Village is to perform during ritual events held at the village (local) in order to facilitate orisa-voodoo practitioners (subcultural) communication with the orisa as part of the performance of Yoruba identity (transnational).

According to Rice, the subcultural consists of “parts of societies, defined socially by gender, class, race, ethnicity, age, occupation, interests, and so on” (2003:161). The drummer’s society easily satisfies these criteria. As a member of the drumming society, Olafemi has identified himself as a drummer at Oyotunji Village and with membership accepts all of the responsibilities inherent in that position. Although not the only society in which he is a member, when viewed in relation to the importance of drumming for the success of the festivals it may be his most important and influential role within the community.

The local level of location is taken as the social or cultural unit traditionally explored by most social scientists, that being a particular people, culture, society, or village (Rice 2003:162). It is this level that typically allows for interpersonal communication and interaction, and proved to be the level I most frequently observed these drumming traditions at work. While Rice suggests that the physical location of the musical performance belongs in the subcultural level, I place physical location at the village level, which I believe in this situation is a more appropriate fit owing to the importance placed on the establishment of Oyotunji Village as a physical space for orisa-voodoo practitioners and others to visit. Drumming at Oyotunji Village is not meant solely for the members of the drum society, but rather performed by the egbe members for the benefit of all of those in attendance. As such, the musical performances I observed all took place within the physical boundaries of the village...
either as a part of a festival or during a festival weekend. I address this level of location primarily to position Oyotunji Village within the larger location of the diasporic.

The diasporic level “refers to the sense of connectedness among populations with a common origin but dispersed widely across the globe” (Rice 2003:162). It is at this level that we can gain a wider perspective of Olafemi’s and Oyotunji Village’s place within a larger network of Yoruba reviverist communities spread out across the United States, including the ways in which the spiritual experiences manifested through the observance of festival events at the village echo throughout the entire network of social and political connections Kamari Clarke (2004, 2007) is referring to in her treatment of these Yoruba reviverist communities. She maintains that these “relationships between and among transnational orisa cultural producers reflect disjunctures and conjunctures in cultural production” reflecting what she terms as “‘discontinuities’ and ‘continuities’ that are simultaneously operative and form the basis for contemporary transnational heritage movements that involve a physical or spiritual or symbolic ‘return’ to a homeland” (2007:729). Furthermore, these patterns in time and space are both “recursive” and “transformative” in that they require devotees to essentially transform themselves into agents who are allied and regulated according to new meanings they themselves help to create, often times reinforcing but just as often subverting those same categories that act to shape them.

Figure 2. A sign, depicting a drummer, located outside the main entrance to Oyotunji Village, South Carolina (photo by Colin Townsend).
Conclusion

Using Rice's model of a subject-centered musical ethnography that positions the individual in a “three-dimensional space of musical experience” it is possible to situate Olafemi within a space of musical performance and identity. He exists in a particular time that is a point on a processual continuum of conscious decision making regarding instrument choice and musical composition, geared toward effecting a greater degree of communication between deity and human. These metaphors of music-as-social behavior and music-as-symbolic system are viewed as taking place within a nested set of locales ranging from the individual to the diasporic as part of an interconnected web of like-minded spiritual and cultural practitioners. In constructing this analysis, I am not attempting to reduce the cultural practices, religious beliefs, or life experiences of any one individual to a set of coordinates on a graph. Rather, I employ an analytical model geared towards creating a clearer picture and a better understanding of the musical experience as it affects both the individual and the group at any given point along those three axes.

Drumming during festival events at Oyotunji Village is one of three components, along with singing and dancing, that is needed to properly communicate with the orisa and thus constitute a successful ritual event. Drumming is unique among these three components in that it acts as a rhythmic base and musical bridge between the singing and dancing. Not only do the drummers “play” the rhythms to which the dancers perform, but they also “speak” the words that the singers are chanting. It is in this way that the drums, and the drummers themselves, unite the singing and dancing in order to call upon the orisa and to honor the egungun.

Olafemi and the other drummers at Oyotunji Village act as agents of cultural transmission and (re)invention through their drumming traditions and practices, including choice of instrument and musical composition. While they have maintained “traditional” Yoruba practices by intentionally playing drums and percussion of Yoruba origin as well as playing rhythms based on those played by Yoruba drummers, they have also altered these traditions in ways that constitute a distinct “Oyotunji” sound. In this way, Olafemi and his fellow drummers construct their identities by learning traditions passed on to them from earlier generations of drummers while at the same time altering those traditions and practices in their own ways. Examples of this can be seen in the addition of other types of drums and percussion into their collection, such as the conga or the djembe, and can be heard in the rhythmic compositions that incorporate other musical traditions including Afro-Cuban and Southern spiritualist influences. These practices and techniques are circulated throughout a larger network of Yoruba revivalist communities through the attendance of practitioners at festival events, or through performances by the Oyotunji drummers outside of the village. Through the use of Rice’s analytical framework I have demonstrated that ritual drumming at Oyotunji Village is a crucial part of the process of transnational identity formation for both the musician and the practitioner, by musically creating a space for
communication with the orisa and the completion of a successful ritual event. Drumming at Oyotunji Village serves as a rhythmic and symbolic vehicle through which cultural traditions and social identities are (re)formulated and (re)invented.

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