

BREAKING RHYTHMIC BARRIERS: NIGERIAN FEMALE DRUMMERS AND THE RECLAMATION OF MUSICAL SPACES

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Abstract

This article explores the cultural, social, and political significance of Nigerian female drummers who challenge long-standing gender norms and reclaim traditionally male-dominated musical spaces. Focusing on Aralola Olamuyiwa (Ara) and Blessing Ibrahim (Starblessing), the study highlights how these women navigate cultural expectations, religious restrictions, and institutional barriers to establish themselves as respected drummers within Nigerian music traditions. Drawing on theories of gender performativity (Butler), cultural entrepreneurship (Swedberg, Gehman), and embodiment (Merleau-Ponty, Csordas), the article positions drumming not only as a musical act but also as a site of resistance, identity-making, and social transformation.

Through ethnographic methods including interviews, digital ethnography, and performance analysis, the article uncovers the strategies used by these drummers to assert their presence, build their personal brands, and engage in cultural advocacy. Ara's mastery of the talking drum disrupts the Yorùbá cultural belief systems that have historically excluded women from drumming due to spiritual taboos and patriarchal ideologies. Her innovation in blending traditional rhythms with contemporary styles has created a genre she terms "Gangan Fusion." Starblessing, on the other hand, has leveraged digital platforms to build a global following, utilizing her technical skill on the drum set to assert authority and visibility in genres like gospel, Fuji, and Afrobeats.

The article situates these drummers within broader transnational movements that include women percussionists from Latin America and West Africa. It argues that their careers exemplify the potential of cultural entrepreneurship to drive both cultural preservation and social change. By reframing musical spaces through performance and innovation, Ara and Starblessing demonstrate how embodied musical practices can become powerful tools of resistance and empowerment. Their work not only challenges the hegemonic masculinization of rhythm but also contributes to global conversations on gender equity in music and the dynamic evolution of African musical traditions.

Keywords

Gender Performativity, Drumming, Female Drummers, Embodiment, Cultural Entrepreneurship, Performance, Musical Resistance, Cultural Innovation, Self-Branding.

Introduction

Women can be custodians of culture, too. My drum and I, we are here to stay.

– Kasiva Mutua

In May 2016, news emerged from Ile-Ife, a city integral to the Yoruba people's religious and cultural identity, widely reported through blogs and television. Ile-Ife is traditionally regarded as the birthplace of humanity and the cradle of Yoruba civilization. In a significant cultural development, His Imperial Majesty, Oba Adeyeye Enitan Ogunwusi, the Ooni of Ile-Ife, officially appointed Aralola Olamuyiwa, popularly known as Ara, an accomplished female talking drummer, as the Cultural Ambassador of the Ife Kingdom. The official letter addressed to Ara acknowledged her substantial contributions to the cultural heritage of both Ile-Ife and the broader Yoruba region, entrusting her with the role of promoting and preserving the tradition of the talking drum for future generations.

The importance of this announcement resides in its illustration of an unconventional event: the acknowledgment and celebration of a female drummer by the Ooni of Ile-Ife, the spiritual leader and monarch of the Yoruba people. This recognition serves to challenge the traditionally patriarchal framework of Yoruba society, which is marked by uneven power dynamics between genders, as reflected in its customary institutions and practices, including those related to kingship, masquerades, and religious cults. According to Bode Omojola (2014), these gender relations within the Yorùbá music profession are shaped by a dominant cultural perception favoring male superiority over women. This patriarchal framework creates entrenched gender-based power disparities, resulting in a historical prioritization of male practitioners while often sidelining female participants.

In recent times, the Nigerian music scene has witnessed the rise of female drum set players. Among them, Blessing Ibrahim stands out as a remarkable figure, contributing to the evolving narrative. Her journey highlights not only the challenges and triumphs but also the changing dynamics faced by female instrumentalists in Nigeria. The drum kit, a unique American instrument, emerged alongside the rise of jazz in the early 20th century. In New Orleans, a city celebrated for its cultural diversity, drummers blended African, Caribbean, and European rhythms to create a new form of musical expression (Gioia, 2011). In Nigeria, cultural and spiritual frameworks do not present any inherent justification for the limitation of women's participation in playing the drum set. Consequently, it is essential to explore the various sociocultural and structural factors that may have contributed to the ongoing restriction of women from engaging in this musical practice. Understanding these influences can provide insight into the broader implications of gender roles within the context of Nigerian music and society.

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* provides a useful framework for understanding the challenges and social dynamics faced by female drummers, particularly drum set players, within a historically male-dominated field. The drum set, particularly in popular music genres like rock, jazz, and metal, has traditionally been associated with masculinity due to its physicality, volume, and perceived aggressiveness (Leonard, 2007). This association reflects a gendered *habitus* that positions drumming as an extension of masculine traits such as power, control, and technical mastery while simultaneously framing femininity as incompatible with these characteristics. As Bourdieu (1984) suggests, gendered *habitus* is the product of social conditioning that assigns specific roles and behaviors to people, reinforcing power hierarchies.

Socialization processes often assign gendered meanings to certain activities and roles. From an early age, children are subtly (or explicitly) guided toward 'gender-appropriate' instruments. Girls are often encouraged to play 'feminine' instruments like the piano, flute, or violin, while boys are directed toward 'masculine' instruments like drums or electric guitar. This early socialization shapes a *habitus* where drumming is seen as outside the norm for girls, contributing to fewer female drummers. Drumming requires physical assertiveness and loudness—traits often discouraged in girls through social conditioning. This bodily confidence in occupying space behind the drum kit aligns with the *habitus* of masculinity, making it harder for women to feel a sense of belonging in that role.

Drumming, as mentioned earlier, has historically been perceived as a male-dominated practice in many cultural traditions worldwide. This perception is often rooted in social norms that associate rhythmic power, physicality, and leadership with masculinity. However, women have long played a crucial role in percussive traditions, both as performers and cultural innovators. From the Mapuche Machi women of Chile, who use the kultrún drum in healing rituals (Bacigalupo, 2007), to Obini Bata, who pioneered women participation in Bata drumming in Cuba (Jassey, 2019), female drummers have consistently challenged gendered restrictions in musical spaces. Similarly, in West Africa, drumming traditions such as the Ewe and Akan women's ensembles in Ghana (Burns, 2017) and the Sabar drumming of Senegal (Tang, 2007), illustrate how women negotiate access to percussive performance despite historical exclusions.

In Nigeria, female drummers are actively reshaping the sonic and cultural landscape, challenging long-standing gender norms that have traditionally relegated drumming to men, particularly within Yoruba and Igbo societies. While drumming in Yoruba culture has been historically linked to the all-male Àyàn lineage (Amanda Villepastour, 2010), contemporary female drummers such as Aralola Olumuyiwa and Blessing Ibrahim (Starblessing) are redefining percussive performance through their engagement with both indigenous and popular music traditions. Their contributions not only contest historical exclusions but also aligns with broader global movements where women are reclaiming space in drumming traditions that have been historically gendered as male. By situating Nigerian female drummers within a transnational discourse on gender and percussion, this paper examines how these musicians navigate cultural expectations, professionalization, and musical agency to assert their legitimacy, expand their artistic influence, and foster a global dialogue on gender equity in music.

Musical performances often serve as microcosms of a community's social structure, reflecting broader cultural norms and power dynamics. As performance styles evolve, they provide valuable insight into shifting gender relations and identities within contemporary Nigerian society, highlighting how social change is negotiated and expressed through music (Samuel, 2018). Through a narrative of the experiences of Aralola Olumuyiwa and Blessing Ibrahim, this study explores how these women challenge deeply rooted cultural norms that have historically excluded women from drumming practices in Nigeria. It explores the agency of Nigerian female drummers through the lens of performance and cultural entrepreneurship. I argue that female drummers, by

engaging in musical performance and cultural entrepreneurship strategies, are transforming gendered power structures in Nigerian music culture.

By drawing on Performance theory, we can explore how musical performance, understood as both an embodied act and a socially constructed practice, enables women to challenge gender norms and assert their presence in drumming cultures. Performance theory posits that each of us engages in a performance within our society. Through our clothing choices, conversations, and even the food we consume, we create performances that serve as a signaling system reflecting our status within our social groups. Erving Goffman (1959) defined performance as the array of activities by a participant in a given situation that aims to influence the other participants in any manner. Focusing on one participant's actions as a reference point, we can refer to those who engage with their performance as the audience, observers, or co-participants. Scholars like Judith Butler (1990) have also highlighted how these performances aim to reinforce and communicate our identities within society.

The theory of cultural entrepreneurship, in this study, allows for an analysis of how female drummers negotiate their identities, create new markets for their art, and engage in social and cultural advocacy. According to Gehman and Soubliere (2017), cultural entrepreneurship involves utilizing cultural elements as a tool to legitimize new ventures and create value across diverse and fluid meanings, going beyond simply deploying existing cultural practices to create new ones; essentially, it's a dynamic process of using culture to innovate and generate new ideas with social impact. By drawing on ethnographic interviews, and performance analyses, I delve into the intersections of gender, culture, and music, focusing on the agency of these women as both performers and change-makers. By creating independent career pathways, harnessing digital platforms to expand visibility, innovating new musical styles, positioning drumming as cultural diplomacy and advocacy, these women are establishing their presence in male-dominated spheres and demonstrating the power of cultural entrepreneurship to drive social change, preserve cultural heritage, and create new economic opportunities. Their efforts go beyond personal artistic expression, but it embodies a broader movement that redefines the role of women in Nigerian musical traditions and serves as a model for cultural innovation and gender empowerment in the arts.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing case study methodology to investigate the experiences of Nigerian female drummers Aralola Olamuyiwa and Ibrahim Blessing. By integrating traditional ethnographic methods with online ethnography, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of these cultural entrepreneurs. The case study design facilitates an in-depth exploration of the specific contexts and experiences of Olamuyiwa and Blessing, yielding rich, detailed insights into their journeys as female drummers who challenge cultural norms (Van Burg et al, 2022). This approach is especially effective in capturing the uniqueness and diversity of their experiences within the Nigerian drumming tradition.

In-depth interviews with Olamuyiwa and Blessing are integral to the data collection process. These semi-structured interviews create opportunities to delve into their personal narratives, the challenges they have encountered, and the strategies they have employed to establish themselves in a male-dominated field. The interviews facilitate a nuanced understanding of their motivations, experiences, and viewpoints on cultural entrepreneurship. Additionally, participant observation during performances, rehearsals, and cultural events complements the interview data. This method allows the researcher to directly engage with and observe the dynamics of female drumming in various contexts, yielding valuable insights into the interactions between the drummers, their audiences, and the broader cultural environment.

In acknowledgment of the significance of digital spaces in modern cultural practices, this research incorporates online ethnography (Galloway et al., 2017). This approach involves analyzing social media platforms, particularly the digital presence of Starblessing, to gain insights into how these drummers leverage online spaces for self-promotion, community building, and the challenge of traditional norms. Online ethnography facilitates real-time observation of interactions and investigates how these drummers navigate digital environments to enhance their careers and cultural impact. Additionally, content analysis of media coverage related to Olamuyiwa and Blessing provides further context, shedding light on public perceptions and representations of female drummers within Nigerian society. This analysis is instrumental in understanding the broader cultural narratives surrounding their work and the reception of female drummers in both traditional and contemporary contexts.

The combination of these methods allows for interpretation of data, enhancing the validity and reliability of the findings. By integrating traditional ethnographic approaches with digital methods, the research captures a holistic picture of the experiences and strategies of these female drummers as they navigate and reshape cultural spaces. This methodology aligns with the principles of cultural entrepreneurship research, which emphasizes the importance of understanding the contextual, relational, and processual aspects of entrepreneurial activities in cultural domains (Wang, 2022). It allows for a nuanced exploration of how these women identify opportunities, create value, and drive change within the Nigerian drumming tradition.

Gender, Performance, and Drumming in Nigeria

The concepts of gender and culture are deeply intertwined and have significant real-world impacts on our lives (Lewis, 2003). In many Nigerian cultures, particularly within Yorùbá drumming, gender presents a complex and evolving discourse that challenges traditional patriarchal norms while revealing the shifting dynamics of gender roles in contemporary Nigerian society. This drumming tradition is intricately woven into Yoruba cosmology and religious practices, particularly within Òrìṣà worship and various social ceremonies. While drumming is celebrated for its capacity to connect the human and spiritual realms, its performance and transmission are influenced by deeply rooted gender norms.

Traditionally, Yorùbá drumming, especially the dùndún drumming tradition, has been predominantly a male practice, deeply entrenched in spiritual and cultural beliefs. The art of drumming is intricately linked to Àyàn, a revered deity known as the god of drumming. Àyànagalu is considered the first drum maker and drummer among the Yorùbá, and following his death, he was deified as Orisa Àyàn, or simply Àyàn, the god of drumming. According to Olawale Famule (2021), when a highly skilled Yorùbá drummer delivers an exceptional performance, elders who are well-versed in the subtleties of drum language (*òṃòṛàn*) often express their admiration from afar by invoking a traditional blessing: “May Àyàn, the deity of drumming, prosper and protect you!” (*Àyàn ó gbè ó!*). This spiritual connection to the drum has historically enhanced the status of male drummers, granting them a distinctive position within Yorùbá society, along with considerable social and cultural influence. The patriarchal structure of Yorùbá society has played a significant role in shaping the gender dynamics of drumming.

Eluyefa (2015) further clarifies that male children from Àyàn families are automatically expected to inherit the skills and responsibilities of drumming, which perpetuates male dominance in this art form. This tradition is reinforced by the belief that women's monthly cycles render them unfit and unclean for drumming, an idea likely perpetuated to uphold male control over this culturally significant practice. Furthermore, since bata drums are linked to a deity characterized by toughness and volatility, a woman playing the drum is perceived as lacking the necessary masculinity to perform in the Sango ritual. In this context, feminine energy is regarded as earthbound, while masculine energy is considered heavenly. Therefore, as the drums are intended to channel heavenly energy (Orisa) to the earth, the privilege of performing lies exclusively with men. Additionally, the belief that women are more vulnerable to spirit possession further reinforces the rationale for assigning drumming responsibilities solely to men. In Samuel's words:

“Women are restricted from participating in some specific musical activities. Though, they can freely sing without inhibition, especially at occasions such as funerals, weddings or other ceremonial events. They are rarely known to play membranophonic drums. Consequently, it is not customary to find female drummers of either Dundun or Bàtá, two prominent drum ensembles in Yorùbá land (Samuel, 2014 p.29).”

In a similar vein, C. Aluede & E. Aluede (2021) highlighted the cultural practices of the Esan people in Edo State, where the use of the mother drum in the Ijieghe, a dance performed by women, is prohibited. This restriction arises from the belief that permitting women to play the drum would undermine the traditional distinctions between the roles of husbands and wives. The drum is seen as a symbol of masculinity among the Esan people, and women are not expected to strike it, as it would imply an encroachment on male authority. Consequently, women are not permitted to play drums, even in all-female ensembles where drums are essential; instead, men are drummers for the women. This situation underscores how many Nigerian musical traditions and cultural practices are organized along gender lines.

Versatility in the art of drumming, especially within the context of Yoruba culture, is not solely determined by technical drumming skills. Rather, it is contingent upon a variety of critical factors, including a comprehensive understanding of the Yorùbá language, a familiarity with Yorùbá oral literature, and an appreciation of Yoruba history and the historical experiences of its people (Ogunyemi, 2022). Traditional Dùndún and Bata performances are fundamentally structured around three core components: instrumental, vocal, and dance elements. Within this framework, the role of instrumentalists is predominantly filled by men, while women are primarily represented in the vocal ensemble. However, it is noteworthy that both genders engage actively in the dance aspects of the performances, highlighting a collaborative cultural expression. There are also exceptions to gender roles in singing. *Ijala*, a Yoruba musical genre traditionally performed by Yoruba hunters, serves as an example of music where men are involved in singing. *Ijala* is commonly referred to as hunters' poetry. This genre is performed on various ceremonial occasions, including burials, housewarming events, naming ceremonies, and rituals dedicated to the worship of Ogun, the Yoruba deity of iron, warfare, and craftsmanship. *Ijala* is deeply intertwined with the veneration of Orisa Ogun, reflecting the deity's attributes and significance within Yoruba cosmology. According to Yoruba oral tradition, Ogun himself was closely associated with *Ijala* music during his lifetime, making it a distinctive hallmark of his identity. As a result, his devotees and worshippers continue to perform *Ijala* as an integral aspect of his worship and commemoration.

Reinterpreting Musical Spaces

The exclusion of women from drumming in Nigeria may be analyzed using Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity. This theory posits that gender is not an innate identity but rather a set of performed actions that uphold societal norms and expectations. By engaging in drumming, an act traditionally coded as masculine, female drummers disrupt hegemonic gender norms, embodying a form of resistance that subverts dominant narratives of femininity and musicality. This aligns with Raewyn Connell's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity, which explains how patriarchal power structures maintain male dominance in cultural spaces. Female drummers actively contest these structures by asserting their presence in performance settings where they have historically been marginalized. Samuel (2014) notes that specific cultic and ritual activities occur in 'sacred' sites which often hold unique spiritual significance for women, leading to their exclusion from these spaces. Furthermore, there is a prevalent belief that women are particularly vulnerable to spiritual assaults during public performances. Male drummers who neglect to take protective measures, such as employing powerful charms, may expose themselves to these spiritual risks. It is commonly believed among male drummers that the physical well-being of female drummers, particularly regarding their reproductive health, tends to decline over time, making them more vulnerable to supernatural disturbances (Samuel, 2014).

However, Oyeronkẹ Oyẹwumi's (1997) critique of Western gender frameworks in Yoruba society provides a crucial perspective. Oyẹwumi argues that precolonial Yoruba culture did not operate on rigid gender binaries, suggesting that contemporary restrictions on female drumming are in part a colonial imposition rather than an indigenous Yoruba norm. As stated by Samuel (2018), the assignment of musical roles based on gender in the organization of musical events does not suggest that one gender is inherently superior or has an advantage over the other. Margaret Drewal (1992) also challenges the assumption that gender roles in African performance automatically imply male dominance. Instead, an alternative perspective is offered, which suggests that gender in performance is not always structured in binary opposition but often operates through complementarity. This means that while men and women have distinct roles, their contributions are interdependent rather than hierarchical. Yorùbá spiritual and religious traditions provide key examples of this complementarity.

Samuel (2018) distinctly illustrates gender explanations within the Yorùbá culture through the naming and assignment of roles to musical instruments. These classifications are influenced by various factors, including size, pitch, and timbre. Structural roles are determined along gender lines, with the female typically occupying the lead (coordinating) position. In musical groups, it's a widespread convention for the lead drums to take on a unique, non-musical function by acting as speech surrogates. The names and roles designated to different drums in an ensemble often reflect familial and gender dynamics. For instance, the lead drum is typically referred to as *Iya-ilu* [mother drum], while supporting drums are called *omele abo* [female child] and *omele ako* [male child]. This gender symbolism in instrument naming demonstrates the complex interplay between masculine and feminine elements in Yorùbá musical culture (Oludare, 2018).

In ritual contexts, men and women often perform equally significant roles, and in some cases, they may even cross gender boundaries to enact roles traditionally associated with the opposite gender (Ajibade, 2013). For example, women were described as holding the highest public offices in pre-colonial Yoruba societies (Mba, 1982). According to Agbalajobi (2017), women played a significant role in the political landscape through various institutions, including the *Iyalode* [King of the women] and the *Erelu-Ogboni*. Their involvement as palace priestesses in Oyo, along with their participation in the Ogboni societies of Abeokuta and Ijebu, placed them at the core of judicial processes that influenced societal governance. Beyond managing their own affairs with efficacy, these women also undertook executive responsibilities that had significant influence on the wider community. This fluidity suggests that gender in Yorùbá performance is more dynamic than rigidly asymmetrical structures might imply. Omojola (2014) further reinforces this view, arguing that rather than interpreting gendered performance spaces as sites of contestation or inequality, they should be understood as spaces where both genders contribute in meaningful, albeit different, ways. According to Olupemi Oludare (2018), the significance of feminist balance within the Yorùbá ethos is evident in the existence of female counterparts to their male equivalents across various aspects of society, including deities (Òyá, Òṣun), royalty (Olórì, Ìyá-Àfin), professions (Ìyálójà, Yẹyẹ), family roles (Mama, Ìyálẹ̀), and the arts (Wákà, Èkún Ìyàwó). In Yorùbá social structure, masculinity is considered incomplete without its feminine counterpart. For instance, patriarchal *Òrìṣà* [deities] have matriarchal counterparts; a king without *Olórì* [wives] is not held in high regard; a man without a wife is not seen as truly successful, and a family without both male and female children is often perceived as incomplete (Olarinmoye, 2013). Consequently, the reverence for motherhood is deeply embedded in Yorùbá culture, symbolizing the goddess as the creator, the mother of all, and the source of life and prosperity—an acknowledgment of her essential leadership in both creative and procreative capacities. Similarly, in precolonial Igbo society, women played an integral role in the networks of political organization. Van Allen (1972) posits that women developed their power systems to tackle issues relevant to their experiences, including market regulations. These structures were governed by a female official known as the *Omu*, who led an independent council of female elders that operated alongside the male-dominated council of the *Obi* [chief or king].

Performance as Resistance: The Embodied Politics of Drumming

Drumming, across various cultures, serves as more than merely a musical practice; it represents an embodied form of resistance, a method for reclaiming identity, and a significant arena for political and social contestation. It is not solely an auditory experience but an embodied performance that conveys rich social meaning. According to Bruce Benson (2011), music is perceived temporally by fully embodied beings, suggesting that the experience of music engages both the physical and mental dimensions. Similarly, Madison and Hamera (2006) conceptualize performance as an embodied process that incorporates aspects of political economy, cultural continuity, self-construction, and interpersonal interaction. This viewpoint highlights the essential physicality and materiality that characterize performance. For Nigerian female drummers, this embodied experience acquires additional layers of significance as they use their bodies to challenge societal expectations.

In *'Phenomenology of Perception'* (1962), Merleau-Ponty contends that the body is not merely an object within the world but serves as the primary means by which we engage with it. His concept of bodily intentionality posits that knowledge and meaning emerge through bodily action rather than being externally imposed through a cognitive framework. When considering drumming, rhythm and movement cultivate a form of embodied knowledge and political expression that transcends linguistic representation. In this context, drumming acts as an extension of the body's interaction with the world, facilitating the articulation of resistance through rhythmic expression.

Thomas Csordas (1993) builds on Merleau-Ponty's ideas by situating embodiment within the cultural sphere. In *Somatic Modes of Attention* (2002), Csordas conceptualizes embodiment as a mode of being in the world shaped by cultural practices. He highlights somatic modes of attention, referring to the culturally specific ways individuals perceive and engage with their own bodies and those of others. Drumming, in this light, emerges as a profoundly embodied practice that conveys cultural identity, solidarity, and resistance. Through shared rhythms, drummers harmonize with one another's bodily presence, reinforcing a collective embodied experience of defiance and resilience.

The history of drumming as resistance is marked by colonial attempts to suppress its power. In the Americas, enslaved Africans used drumming to retain cultural memory and resist oppression, leading to restrictive laws against drumming (e.g., the 1740 Negro Act in South Carolina). Frantz Fanon (1961) and Achille Mbembe (2001) argue that colonialism sought to control not just space and bodies but also rhythms and sonic expressions. However, the resilience of African rhythmic traditions in the Caribbean and Latin America illustrates what Paul Gilroy (1993) calls the Black Atlantic, a transnational space of cultural resistance. For example, capoeira's percussive rhythm (berimbau) in Brazil was integral to disguising martial arts as dance, symbolizing resistance against colonial rule (Assuncao, 2004). In drumming, physicality through rhythm, movement, and sonic power, becomes an assertion of agency. Nigerian female drummers, through their embodied performances, redefine the space of the drummer as one that is not inherently male but open to renegotiation. Drumming, as a sonic and physical act, enables Nigerian female drummers to reconfigure cultural expectations and assert their rightful place within Nigeria's musical landscape.

Cultural Entrepreneurship and Digital Expansion

While feminist and performance theories help explain why female drummers engage in these acts of resistance, cultural entrepreneurship provides insight into how they navigate the industry and carve out sustainable careers. Cultural entrepreneurship emerged as a significant field of study within cultural economics, sociology, and arts management. It refers to the process by which individuals and organizations leverage cultural resources to create economic, social, and artistic value. The concept of cultural entrepreneurship provides insight into how female drummers navigate the industry and carve out sustainable careers, intersection of business, culture, and innovation. According to Richard Swedberg (2006), cultural entrepreneurs use symbolic, artistic, and social capital to generate new forms of cultural expression while achieving economic sustainability. Cultural entrepreneurship is described as the creation of innovative combinations that lead to something new and valued within the culture. Cultural entrepreneurs operate at the intersection of art, commerce, and social change, introducing new forms of cultural expression that gain social and economic traction (Scott, 2012). The distinction between cultural and traditional entrepreneurship lies in its emphasis on intangible assets, such as identity, heritage, and artistic value (Rae, 2015). Lech Suwala (2015) characterizes the personality of cultural entrepreneurs as embodying a pioneering spirit, a willingness to take risks, and a profound obsession with achieving self-fulfillment and independence. In essence, successful cultural entrepreneurs are driven by the desire to innovate and distinguish themselves from the crowd. They emphasize concepts over statistics, find a balance between solitude and social engagement, commit to lifelong learning, and, above all, nurture a fun atmosphere that encourages a free exchange of ideas.

What mechanisms do cultural entrepreneurs employ to catalyze new cultural practices? First is the introduction of hybrid cultural forms. Cultural entrepreneurs often merge diverse traditions, creating hybrid cultural expressions that transcend geographical and historical boundaries (García Canclini, 1995). For instance, hip-hop's global diffusion demonstrates how cultural entrepreneurs integrate local traditions with global music trends, forming new cultural identities (Pennycook, 2007). Secondly, there is the institutionalization of new cultural norms.

Through strategic engagement with institutions, cultural entrepreneurs legitimize novel cultural practices. Pierre Bourdieu's (1993) theory of cultural fields highlights how entrepreneurs negotiate power structures to secure institutional recognition. The rise of Afrobeats as a global music genre exemplifies this process, where African cultural entrepreneurs successfully positioned the genre within mainstream music industries (Osumare, 2020). Another approach to cultural change is the ability to leverage on digital and social media. The digital era has amplified the influence of cultural entrepreneurs by providing platforms for cultural dissemination. Henry Jenkins (2006) describes participatory culture as a key enabler, where entrepreneurs utilize social media to create, distribute, and validate cultural innovations. YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram have facilitated the emergence of new dance styles, fashion trends, and linguistic expressions that reshape popular culture (Burgess & Green, 2018). As Patrik Wikstrom (2020) observes, these technological shifts have reconfigured the relationship between artists, audiences, and revenue streams. Women in music have particularly benefited from direct-to-fan models, utilizing digital platforms to build sustainable careers outside of traditional industry constraints (Baym, 2018). David Hesmondhalgh (2013) also stated that these digital environments foster participatory culture, enabling artists to bypass traditional gatekeepers while developing sustainable business models. Furthermore, Cultural entrepreneurs in music often engage in activism and community-building. For instance, hip-hop artists have historically used their platforms to address social issues, blending cultural expression with entrepreneurial strategies (Rose, 1994). Female musicians, including Rihanna and Alicia Keys, have combined their artistic careers with philanthropic ventures and social justice advocacy, demonstrating the intersection of cultural entrepreneurship and activism (Whiteley, 2000).

A defining feature of cultural entrepreneurship is its emphasis on networks and partnerships. Collaborative approaches foster innovation, resource-sharing, and cross-disciplinary engagement. According to Lange et al. (2008), cultural entrepreneurs gain significant advantages from creative clusters and cultural networks that enhance collective knowledge production. Female musicians often engage in collaborative initiatives to support other women in the industry. Programs such as *She Is the Music* and *Women in Music* offer platforms for female artists, producers, and executives to collaborate, share resources, and create opportunities that address historical exclusion (Leonard, 2007). *She Is the Music* (SITM) is a nonprofit organization committed to increasing the presence of women in music, spanning roles such as songwriters, producers, engineers, artists, and industry professionals. As a global network, SITM serves as a unifying force for women across the industry, working to create meaningful impact on an international scale. *Women in Music*, on the other hand, is dedicated to promoting the advancement of women in the musical arts by fostering awareness, equity, diversity, and cultural representation. Through education, support, empowerment, and recognition, the organization works to create opportunities for women in various aspects of the music industry.

Furthermore, the digital age has significantly expanded these collaborative opportunities. Online collaboration tools have enabled female artists to work together across geographical boundaries. A survey by Soundplate (2024), a record label and music marketing platform, revealed that nearly 70% of independent artists have collaborated with others they've never met in person. This trend exemplifies how technology facilitates successful music collaborations that reach broader audiences. For instance, Venezuelan singer-songwriter Emy Perez collaborated entirely online with UK producer Klensify, demonstrating how artists at different career stages and from diverse genres can create music together despite geographical distances.

Aralola Olamuyiwa: The Trailblazer

Aralola Olamuyiwa, popularly known as Ara, is a pioneering Nigerian female talking drummer who has made significant contributions to the world of traditional African music. Born on January 23, 1975, in Lagos State, Nigeria, Ara hails from Ondo State and grew up in a music-loving family that appreciated excellence. Influenced by her father's passion for music and her mother's connection to tradition, as descendants of Alaafin Abiodun Atiba, she began engaging with drums, and Yoruba cultural practices early in life.

Ara's journey into musical excellence began at the tender age of five when she attended Ogun festival with her family during the festivities. At her great-grandfather's palace, she encountered an elderly man who was holding the *Iya Ilu* [Mother drum]. She requested that she play the drum. Smiling, the man gave her the drum. She struck it and, in her words, "the sound never left me." By the age of ten, she had already written her first song, showcasing her early talent and marking the beginning of a lifelong relationship with rhythm and melody. She spent much of her childhood in Warri, Delta State, where she attended various schools before briefly studying law at the University of Ilorin and later English Language at Ambrose Ali University Ekpoma. Her early career was characterized by performances at family gatherings, school events, and local corporate functions. These grassroots beginnings quickly evolved as her natural flair and technical prowess on the talking drum became undeniable. Her breakthrough came with the release of her debut video "Which One You Dey" around 1998–1999, establishing her presence in Nigeria's vibrant music scene.

Ara's decision to embrace the talking drum, a revered instrument capable of mimicking human speech and conveying complex rhythms, was a bold move against prevailing gender norms. Early in her career, she faced skepticism, threats, and resistance. In interviews, she has candidly recounted moments of being disregarded or

underestimated simply because she was a woman in a domain steeped in patriarchal traditions. As a consequence of taking up the talking drum, she was told she would not bear a child, and that her cooking would be sour. According to her, she learned the drums by just observing because male drummers refused to teach her. Despite these challenges, Ara's determination not only allowed her to excel but also paved the way for future generations of female percussionists.

Ara's relentless commitment to her craft has garnered her numerous accolades and opportunities on both local and international stages. She worked with Stevie Wonder on his album "*A Time to Love*" and has performed alongside a variety of renowned artists, including Wyclef Jean, Wesley Snipes, All 4 One, Femi Kuti, King Sunny Ade, Angelique Kidjo, the late Brenda Fassie, Wizkid, Davido, Tiwa Savage, Seun Kuti, Dbanj, and 2Baba, to name a few. She has been honored with accolades from various organizations, including the Nigerian Musicians Association (NMA), the Performing Musicians Association of Nigeria (PMAN), the Association of Mobile Entertainment Networks (AMEN), as well as entities within the tourism and cultural sectors in Nigeria. She has represented Nigeria at the UNESCO headquarters in France many times during the International Women's Day celebration. In 2004, she was awarded the key to the city of Miami for her pioneering efforts in popularizing traditional drumming among women. In recognition of her contributions to breaking stereotypes in the drumming industry, Ara received the Trailblazer Award from Rohan Hepkins, the Mayor of Yeadon Borough, Delaware County, Pennsylvania, in 2024. This award honors her role in creating new opportunities for aspiring women in Nigeria and around the globe. She has also performed for dignitaries including the late Queen Elizabeth II of England, Bill Clinton, and several Nigerian presidents.

Ara has not only excelled as a performer but also redefined what it means to be a cultural entrepreneur in Nigeria. Recognizing the need for a sustainable platform for female drummers, she has leveraged her brand 'Ara' to organize the World Female Drummers Festival, an initiative aimed at uniting female percussionists globally, featuring workshops, command performances, seminars, and talent hunts. This festival is designed to empower women and shift cultural perceptions about drumming. She is currently working on a legacy project called Ara Drum Heritage Center. This center will focus on preserving traditional drumming, nurturing creative skills, and promoting a deep sense of cultural pride. By blending traditional Yoruba rhythms with contemporary sounds, Ara has created a unique musical genre that reinterprets the talking drum for modern audiences. This genre she calls "Gangan Fusion." She has become an inspiration to many aspiring female drummers in Nigeria and beyond, showing that it is possible to challenge the status quo and succeed in fields traditionally dominated by men.

Aralola Olamuyiwa's story is a remarkable testament to resilience, innovation, and cultural pride. Her extraordinary journey, from a young girl captivated by the rhythms of her heritage to a globally recognized icon, continues to inspire and empower others. It exemplifies how determination and creativity can transform even the most deeply entrenched traditions for a more inclusive future. Throughout her career, Ara has embodied her stage name, which means 'wonder' in Yoruba. She remains a true wonder, both on and off the stage, skillfully playing her instrument while proudly representing her culture with excellence. Her journey serves as an inspiration to many, demonstrating that with passion, dedication, and resilience, it is possible to overcome barriers and achieve greatness in any field, irrespective of gender or societal norms.

Blessing Ibrahim: Digital Age Disruptor

Blessing Ibrahim, widely recognized as Starblessing, has rapidly emerged as a viral drumset performer whose artistry transcends conventional boundaries. From a young age, Starblessing was enchanted by the resonant power of rhythm, a passion that soon evolved into an unyielding drive to master the drumset. What began as a personal exploration of sound transformed into a dynamic career, one that saw her capturing the attention of audiences on social media and beyond with her electrifying performances.

Blessing Ibrahim was born on May 28, 1999, in the city of Lokoja, Kogi State in the North Central region of Nigeria. As the youngest of three siblings, she navigated her early years with a fervent desire to pursue her musical dreams despite encountering familial and societal discouragement. Growing up in an Islamic region in the Confluence State, Starblessing faced numerous obstacles in her pursuit of music. The religious atmosphere in Lokoja has reinforced cultural stereotypes that can be a hindrance for girls pursuing a career in drumming. With lack of support from her family, who viewed her musical aspirations with skepticism, she found herself constantly challenged to prove her dedication and talent. In her words, she stated:

It got to a point, there was a school that's in my area, a music academy. I always wanted to be a student of that academy...my church wanted to send about 10 instrumentalists to the music school, to learn and improve themselves. I was always crying and telling them to add my name, but they said no that I was going to waste the time and money and waste that slot because obviously, it's not OK for a lady to be playing drums... because as a lady I'm not supposed to be doing that, because that field is meant for guys alone. I told my mum I wanted her to register me in that school and then she denied...She was like...she would have to use that money to register me in a Fashion school (Blessing Ibrahim, Interview, March 17, 2024).

Despite the pressure to conform to conventional paths, she remained steadfast in her commitment to drumming, rejecting alternative career suggestions such as entering the fashion business. Starblessing's hard work paid off in 2016 when she earned a scholarship to attend Planet Shakers Music Academy in Lokoja. There, she refined her drumming skills with expert guidance, unlocking her full potential as a musician. This experience equipped her with the tools and knowledge she needed to excel in her chosen field. In 2019 she pursued a bachelor's degree in archeology at the Federal University of Lokoja. In 2022, she married Ademola Sanjo, a multi-instrumentalist, and together they embarked on a joint venture, establishing a music academy, a place where aspiring musicians can realize their dreams. The academy currently has attracted over 85 students for in-person lessons and an additional 30 online students.

Starblessing garnered attention for her impressive drum covers and performances, which she often shares on social media platforms. In her pursuit of musical excellence, Blessing has had the opportunity to collaborate with Nigerian gospel acts such as Adeyinka Alaseyori, Jamaican saxophonist Tru and she is featured in drum clinics and festivals across Nigeria. She currently performs with the Planetshakers band at various events across the North Central region of the country, further cementing her reputation as a formidable force in Nigerian music. Starblessing is not only focused on her own growth as a musician but also on sharing her knowledge with others. She creates educational content for aspiring drummers, including videos on beginner rudiments and useful techniques for new players. This commitment to education helps foster the next generation of drummers and contributes to the broader drumming community.

Blessing Ibrahim continues to be an active and influential figure in the Nigerian drumming scene. Her performances, collaborations, and educational efforts contribute to her growing reputation as one of Africa's top female drum set players. Through her work, Starblessing is inspiring other young musicians, particularly women, to pursue their passion for drumming and make their mark in the music industry.

A Comparative Analysis of both Drummers

The emergence of Nigerian female drummers like Aralola Olamuyiwa and Blessing Ibrahim (popularly known as Starblessing) in traditionally male-dominated musical spaces marks a significant shift in cultural perceptions of gender roles in music. Their careers exemplify cultural entrepreneurship, as they have navigated socio-cultural barriers to establish themselves as prominent drummers, leveraging their artistry to challenge entrenched norms and create new opportunities for women in Nigerian music.

If Your Love Cannot be Moved

Chorus Excerpt

Stevie Wonder/Kim Burrell

$\text{♩} = 103$

The musical score for 'If Your Love Cannot be Moved' (Chorus Excerpt) by Stevie Wonder and Kim Burrell is presented in two systems. The tempo is marked as $\text{♩} = 103$. The score includes parts for Melody, Piano, Electric Bass, Talking Drum, and Drum Kit. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats). The first system shows the initial part of the chorus, and the second system shows a continuation with a triplet of eighth notes in the piano and talking drum parts. The drum kit part features a complex pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes.

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Fig. 1: Talking drum pattern for *If Your Love Cannot be Moved*

gender roles in music. Their careers exemplify cultural entrepreneurship, as they have navigated socio-cultural barriers to establish themselves as prominent drummers, leveraging their artistry to challenge entrenched norms and create new opportunities for women in Nigerian music. This comparative analysis explores how both drummers have strategically engaged cultural entrepreneurship, used performance as a form of resistance, and redefined perceptions of women's roles in drumming traditions.

Aralola Olamuyiwa is recognized as Nigeria's first female talking drummer, an achievement that directly confronted patriarchal structures in Yoruba drumming culture. She challenged male-dominated traditions by mastering the talking drum, a prestigious instrument central to Yoruba musical heritage. Ara's success can be attributed to her ability to fuse traditional drumming with contemporary sounds, making her performances palatable to both indigenous and global audiences. For instance, in the song, "If Your Love Cannot Be Moved" by Stevie Wonder and Kim Burrell from the album, *A Time to Love*, Ara recorded three Yoruba drums: the Gangan (Talking Drum), Iya Ilu, and Bata. This addition enriched the existing layers of rhythm established by the song's rhythm section. In the excerpt below (Fig. 1), Ara

crafts a steady talking drum groove for three bars before transitioning into triplets in the fourth bar, a rhythmic figure that departs from the underlying subdivision of the beat. Rhythmic deviation, in this case, is a tool to assert her dominance as a talking drummer in the world of African percussion. The following transcription provides a sketch of the chorus, emphasizing the talking drum parts as performed by Ara.

In her exploration of Yoruba colloquial expressions conveyed through the talking drums, Ara effectively illustrates the enduring presence and significance of female drummers within the Yoruba culture. During her performance at *My Culture and I* (Reelenttv, 2020, 20:05), she articulated a pivotal statement regarding the role and contributions of female drummers in the context of this musical form.

“E wo wa, e wo wa, e wo wa e tun wa wo.
E wo wa, e wo wa, e wo wa e tun wa wo.
Awa ki i s’omo k’omo ti n da’le ru, e wo wa e tun wa wo.”

The interpretation

“Look at us, Look at us, look and pay attention.
Look at us, Look at us, look and pay attention.
We are not trouble-making children, look and pay attention.”

The lyrical structure of this colloquial expression, as exemplified by the Ara’s performance, can be compared to the AAB form characteristic of the 12-bar blues. More broadly, rhythm and language serve as instrumental devices that amplify both narrative depth and emotional resonance within her message: female talking drummers are here to stay, female talking drummers are not troublemakers.

Blessing Ibrahim carved a niche for herself in Afrobeats, rhythmic elements from Fuji, and gospel drumming. Unlike Ara, who directly engaged with traditional Yoruba drumming, Starblessing positioned herself within contemporary and popular music genres, utilizing digital media and social platforms to amplify her presence. She has built an international reputation by collaborating with renowned musicians, performing drum covers of popular songs, and creating content that resonates with the Nigerian and International drumming community, thus bypassing traditional gatekeepers and redefining the spaces available to female drummers. A notable example of her talent is her cover of ‘Risky,’ a song by Nigerian pop star Davido, showcased on Instagram. In this performance, she demonstrated her dexterity on the drums, establishing a compelling groove that included variations and catchy melodic fills, followed by a four-bar improvisation that asserted her musicality and rhythmic proficiency. (See Fig. 2 & 3)

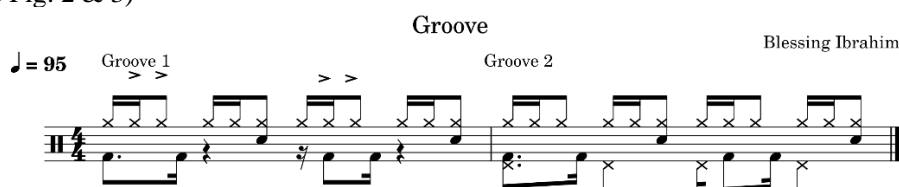


Fig. 2: Blessing’s groove on *Risky* by Davido

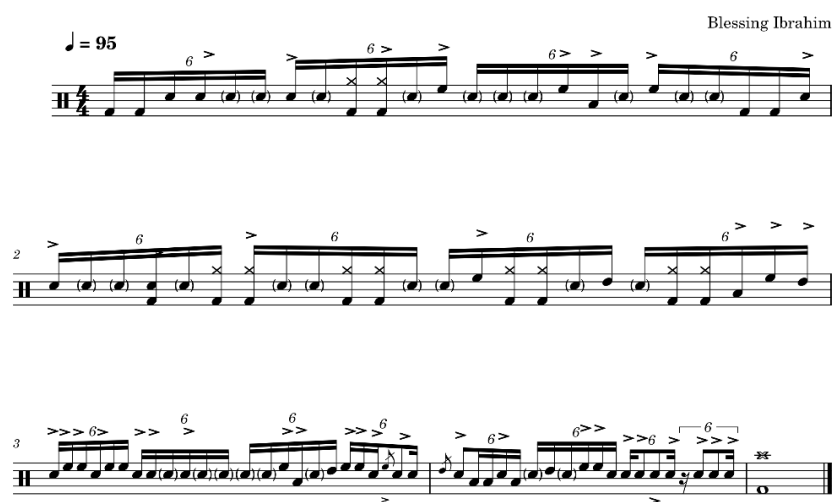


Fig. 3: Blessing's Four Bar Improvisation on *Risky* by Davido

As you can see in Fig 3, the four bar improvisation by Starblessing is characterized by using sextuplets (16th note triplets) orchestrated around the kit. By so doing, she establishes herself mastery of rhythm and by extension, the instrument. Similar to Ara, she also engages the tool rhythmic deviation in her performance. In an interview with Toch Sticks Music (2023, 14:49), she emphasized the importance of ‘building’ yourself to a level where people are willing to pay to work with you. For Starblessing, achieving success as a drum set musician fundamentally hinges on cultivating technical proficiency. She posits that such a foundation enhances individual skill and significantly increases the likelihood of encountering diverse opportunities, if one remains consistent.

The concept of cultural entrepreneurship, which entails the strategic use of cultural capital to create economic and social value, is central to understanding how these drummers have sustained their careers (Beckman & Essig, 2012). Ara and Starblessing have engaged in this form of entrepreneurship by branding themselves not just as musicians but as cultural icons and educators. Both drummers have been able to cultivate a distinct public persona for both commercial and cultural purposes; this is what S Khamis et al (2017) refers to as self-branding. Self-branding has become increasingly important for musicians in the digital age. As Claudia Arruda & Puente de la Vega (2024, p.550) notes, “Building a musician's personal brand on social networks has become important in recent years, since it allows them to stand out in an industry that is constantly changing.” Social media platforms provide artists with direct channels to cultivate their public image and connect with audiences. Furthermore, Khamis *et al* (2017), self-branding involves the deliberate crafting of an individual's public image to accrue commercial gain and cultural capital. Central to this process is the cultivation of a unique selling point, akin to the branding strategies employed by commercial products. In essence, individuals engage in self-branding to establish themselves as recognizable and marketable entities within their respective industries, leveraging their distinctive qualities and narratives to differentiate themselves from their peers (Khamis *et al*, 2017). This approach allows cultural entrepreneurs to effectively navigate competitive landscapes and position themselves for success in an increasingly saturated market, while also contributing to the broader cultural discourse and identity formation within society.

Ara has expanded her influence beyond performance by engaging in advocacy for women’s empowerment in the arts. She has established drumming workshops and mentorship programs for young women interested in percussion, demonstrating a commitment to fostering a new generation of female drummers. By doing so, she transforms drumming from a male-exclusive tradition into a platform for women's artistic expression and financial empowerment (Banks 2019). Starblessing, on the other hand, has capitalized on digital technology to enhance her reach. She has carefully crafted an online persona that highlights her technical expertise and dynamic stage presence, making her a recognizable figure in both local and international music circles. Through social media, she engages in transnational collaborations and educates a global audience about the significance of female drummers in Nigerian music. Her strategic use of digital platforms exemplifies how modern cultural entrepreneurs leverage technology to challenge structural inequalities and expand their market base (Lobato & Thomas 2015).

Both drummers employ musical performance as a form of resistance against restrictive gender norms. Their performances serve as public assertions of female agency within musical spaces historically dominated by men. Drawing from Butler’s (1990) theory of performativity, one can argue that each performance by Ara and Starblessing acts as a reiteration of gender roles, but in a way that subverts expectations and redefines norms. Ara’s incorporation of storytelling and theatrical elements in her drumming performances reinforces her position as both a musician and a cultural activist. She often frames her performances within a larger narrative of female empowerment, thus challenging the notion that women should be passive cultural participants. Her ability to blend traditional Yoruba music with contemporary influences also allows her to navigate multiple musical spaces while maintaining the authenticity of her cultural heritage. Starblessing’s performances, on the other hand, are deeply rooted in technical prowess and showmanship. Her presence on stage disrupts the stereotype that drumming is a purely masculine endeavor. By engaging in high-energy performances alongside male musicians in Afrobeats and gospel settings, she normalizes female participation in drumming and expands the possibilities for future generations of women in music.

Conclusion

Through their careers, both Ara and Starblessing have effectively redefined the roles women can occupy within Nigerian musical traditions. They challenge the notion that women are only vocalists or dancers, asserting instead that they can be master instrumentalists, innovators, and educators in their own right. Moreover, their success contributes to broader conversations on gender equity in African music. Their ability to transcend cultural limitations demonstrates that musical traditions are not static but constantly evolving to reflect contemporary social realities. By embracing cultural entrepreneurship, engaging in strategic self-branding, utilizing digital platforms, and incorporating resistance into their performances, these drummers serve as powerful symbols of change in Nigeria’s music industry.

The cases of Aralola Olamuyiwa and Blessing Ibrahim (Starblessing) illustrate the resilience and innovation of Nigerian female drummers in the face of gender-based exclusion. Their careers highlight how cultural entrepreneurship can serve as a pathway for overcoming barriers, allowing women to assert their presence

in traditionally male-dominated musical spaces. Through their performances, they challenge gender norms and redefine perceptions of women's roles in music, ensuring that future generations of female musicians have greater access to artistic opportunities. Their contributions not only enrich Nigeria's musical heritage but also serve as critical interventions in the broader discourse on gender and music in Africa.

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