

PERFORMANCE CONTEXTS OF SELECTED YORÙBÁ TRADITIONAL MUSICAL FORMS



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Abstract

This paper investigates the performance contexts of selected Yorùbá traditional musical forms and identifies hidden and neglected cultural facts about the design and organization of the musical forms. Form, in the context of this study, is the intelligible organization of sound in a way that gives meaning to music for communication to take place. Through music, the Yorùbá people express their worldviews, and philosophies, and show reverence to their various deities, however, scholarships are deficient in the study of performance contexts as musical forms determinant. Against this background, this study traces the performance contexts as factors that determine the Yorùbá indigenous song forms. The adopted ethnographic method involves descriptive textual and structural analysis. Secondary data were sourced through libraries and the internet. The implications of the findings for policy and practice were also discussed. This included among others that the contextual and structural analysis should be adopted and form the basis of theories and forms in Nigerian art musical compositions and analysis. The study concluded that performance contexts are the determinant factor of musical forms, therefore, bringing to the limelight one of the yardsticks of theoretical analysis of Yorùbá musicological studies.

Keywords: Contexts, forms, performance, sound.

Introduction

This study explores the performance contexts of selected Yorùbá traditional music as factors that determine their musical forms. Traditional music is the

indigenous music, which has been practiced from time immemorial and it is usually realized within the context of social events. Renowned Musicologists, within the framework of Yorùbá culture, had contributed various musicological discourses and analyses, which had led to a greater understanding of Yorùbá traditional music. However, after several decades of research in Yorùbá traditional music, the question of whether the study actually reflects the performance contexts that birthed the musical forms poses challenges. It has been observed that while scholarly attention concentrated on the analysis of recorded sound, the performance contexts of musical forms received far less scholarly attention. This, therefore, provides the premise for this study. Akpabot (1993) vividly noted this problem that there has been, in many studies of African music; too much of a hurry to analyze a piece of recorded music and not enough attention to the social structures that influence the music sound. This total reliance on music alone has resulted in some debatable theories by scholars. The dilemma that arises in such a process tends to create a dichotomy between the foundation of Yoruba music and the processes of its forms. Therefore, the preoccupation of this paper is on the performance contexts, which is a precursor to the development of Yorùbá traditional musical forms.

Music is an important art that is used in the daily activities of the Yorùbá people. Through music, the Yoruba people express their worldviews, and philosophies, and show reverence to their various deities. Nzewi (1985) observed that “it is a society that ascribes meanings to music” in terms of its sound implications and non-musical essence”. Omojola (1999) in Idolor (2002) remarks that an understanding of the conception of music among Africans would have to be derived from a combination of factors such as the words, the contexts of performance, organized procedures, and the nature and meaning intended in a musical performance. The conceptual background of this study is hinged on the notion that every piece of art is an accurate representation of social realities. Kennedy (1980) submitted that art must depict its subject truly. Therefore, this study focuses on the performance contexts of selected Yoruba traditional musical forms such as; *orin ìgbálá* (burial processional song), *orin orò* (traditional festival song), *ekún iyàwó* (bridal song), and *eré òsùpá* (moonlight play song).

Form, in the context of this study, is the intelligible organization of sound in a way that gives meaning to music for communication to take place. However, the analysis of musical forms without reference to performance contexts makes it impossible to fully realize the musical meanings. From this point of view, the form that a given musical performance takes is determined by the structure of the social ceremony. Moreover, the actual structure of a song depends on the performance context from which it is derived. Hence, Schoenberg (1937:11) declared that ‘form means that a piece of music is organized’. No doubt, a lot of Yoruba art music has been collected and analyzed since the pioneering works of Ulli Beier and William Bascon (1970). Invariably, the need for this study is the near absence of performance contexts and internalized value system of Yorùbá culture in Yorùbá music analysis. The aforementioned are the focus of the study.

The concept of ‘performance’ practice is taken over from the German word ‘Auführungspraxis’, coined in the 19th century, and may be said to cover the mechanics of a performance that defined its style. The serious scholastic study of performance practice belongs to the 20th century, pioneered in England by Arnold Dolmetsch but gathered real momentum only quite recently, especially in African music studies. The study of performance practice aims to pinpoint the style, conventions, and condition of music in order to give the clearest possible view of the composers’ original intentions and expectations. Performance practice in the context of this study denotes the way music is and has been performed. An attempt was made in this study to interpret Yorùbá cultural performance contexts as factors that shape the musical forms buttressing Tracey in Olaleye (2012) that a study of song lyrics of Africans can lead to an understanding of African basic philosophical principles. Against this background, this study investigates the varieties of Yorùbá traditional music and traces the performance contexts in the design and organization of their musical forms.

Methods and Material Sources

This study adopted ethnographic methods that include interviews, observations, and discussions, textual and musical analysis. The archival sources include the analysis of Yorùbá traditional chants and praise poetry, linguistics evidence, historical evidence, hereditary dynasties analysis, and musical artifacts. The in-depth interview consists of 10 interviewees from

different ethnic-minority and locations that belong to the Yorùbá family lineage, in Ibadan, Ogun, Osun, and Kwara State in southwestern Nigeria. The interviewees are southwest residents from birth that have in-depth knowledge of Yoruba music and selected songs. The interview oral discussion guides were used to obtain the information. The analysis of music, chants, and praise poetry is similar to Titus (2018) that music has the power to educate about current burning issues on national policies and that people's socio-political lives are embedded in their music. The hereditary dynasties include the study of various Yorùbá gods and deities that are still being worshiped to date. Besides, the study analyses (*orin igbálá*) burial processional song, (*orin orò*) *orò* festival song, (*orin ekún iyàwó*) bridal song, and (*orin eré òsùpá*) (moonlight song). The yardsticks of the consciously selected performance contexts were based on their prominence, importance, and relevance in Yorùbá community history.

Orin igbálá: Yorùbá Burial Processional Song

The burial ceremony among the Yorùbá people is an important occasion that calls for music-making known as burial processional dirge. The funeral dirge is a lament in poetic form by mourners for the departed loved one. In Yorùbá land, the dirge is a stylistic form of expression that is governed by specific poetic recitative conventions and performance procedures. The call and response between the lead cantor, usually the village herbalist (*babaláwo*), and the general chorus response give birth to an A B form of the music. During the procession, the leader sings the dirge of the dead, while others chorus in response. However, the lead cantor is free to change the recitation at will or as the 'spirits' demand. In such an occasion, this performance context of the music naturally determines the forms of the music and leads to graph representation as follows:



Graph interpretation: “IC” means Incantation Call and “DR” means Dirge Response)

This type of form uses incantation call and dirge response forms. However, there may be some overlapping of recitation and chorus singing. The solemn atmosphere created by the event of death is also reflected in the solemn-like music. The following is a typical musical example of a Yorùbá burial song.

Musical Example 1

I - le ko - ko nta-gbe, i - le ko - ko nta-gbe, O - gun-a-re i - le ko - ko - nta-gbe

Solo: Home is the final destination, final destination **Chorus:** of *Ogunare*, home is your final destination

Orin Orò: Oro Festival Song

'Orò' is celebrated to ward off evil occurrences in Yorùbá land. It is also to pray for a bountiful harvest on the farm as well as to pray for rain and general peace of mind in society. *Orò* songs are meant to invoke *orò* spirit and serve to regulate good conduct. The initiated members of the group, who remain anonymous, have a well-organized network of songs about the major happenings in society. Music is a very important activity of the cults. Each song is clearly distinguished from each other, and every member of the group usually participates in the chorus rendition. Besides, in order to keep the identity of members, both *orò* and '*majowú*' (*orò*'s wife) with all devotees usually alter their voices during rendition in the responses. These acts of keeping their identity through voice gags usually lead to call and response hush tone musical form. The following musical example was recorded at *ipájà* village, *Yewa* in Ogun State.

Musical Example 2

Voices: Be-bo-lo, be-bo-lo e - Ma ri wo se-bi a-gan o, ka - sai be bo lo

Oro : Wom Wom wom wom

Evil will depart with the power of sacrifice, evil will surely depart with the sacrifice.

Interpretation of Yorùbá Text in the Staff above

It is time for you to proceed to your husband's home.

Your ancestors will go with you

Lineal Recitative / Bride Cry and Prayer Forms

Chorus	
Bride cry	Hii hii hii hii hiii hiii hiii hii hi hi hi hiii
Prayer	p p p p p p p p p p p p

Eré òsùpá (Moonlight Game Song)

Yoruba children love to turn any physical movement, object, or environmental circumstances into play songs. The children usually make references to circumstances like birth, animals, weather, and even their parents. The following musical example, subject to variation, is a Yorùbá children's game song.

Musical Example 4

E-kun me - ran, Mee, O to - ri bo gbo Mee O to-run bo-gba,

Mee ko-ma-le-mu o, Mee O-ju e - kun_pon i - ru e - kun_ le

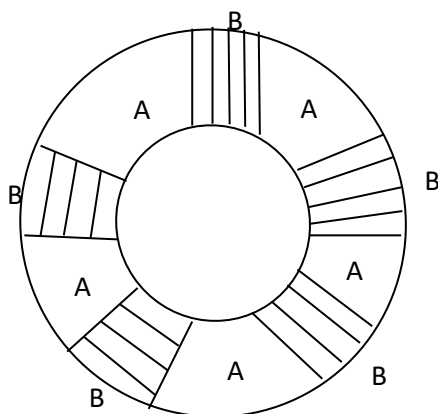
Interpretation of Yoruba Text in the Staff

A tiger chases a goat	... mee
The goat enters the bush	... mee
Later, the goat enters the garden	... mee
Tiger keeps chasing the goat	... mee
Tiger could not succeed	... mee
The tiger is disappointed	... mee

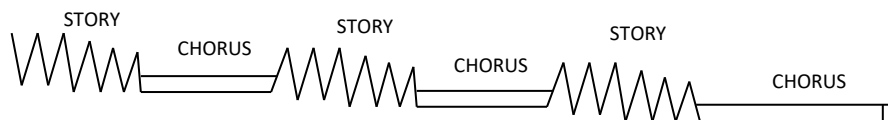
The children form a circle; one child represents a tiger and another child represents a goat. They run to chase each other in and out of the circle. The circle of children gives way at intervals for the goat to escape and enter the circle at will. The song stops when the tiger catches the goat. The song can be repeated with different sets of children representing tigers and goats at

other rounds. The song is a Yoruba children's game song, which may be repeated as many times as possible. In the above game song, the children form a circle, with one of them acting as the lion (B in the circle) chasing a goat (A in the circle), the play must as well go-round.

Children's Game Song (Round / Circle Musical Form)



The several repetitions give the 'round' form while the response 'mee' (goat) gives the nonsense syllable form. Round Musical Form/Nonsensical Syllable musical forms are also found in the Moonlight story song. The moonlight story or folktale is usually led by an elderly man/woman with little children forming his congregation. Usually, in order to spice up the story, the moonlight story songs are added. This leisure kind of relaxation among the Yoruba people usually results in 'song call' and 'nonsense syllable response' musical forms.



Theorizing Yoruba Musical Forms

Form constitutes a major aspect of traditional music compositions that already exist in all the elements of Yorùbá music. These qualities are largely attributable to the closeness between the arts of music and its usefulness in performance contexts. In consequence, the followings are the varieties of Yorùbá musical forms and the performance contexts that determine their forms.

Music Genres	Performance Contexts Poetic Genres	Musical Forms
<i>Orin ìgbálá</i> (Burial Procession)	Song Lyrics	Incantation/dirge response form
<i>Orin orò</i> (Orò Song)	Recitative Poetry	A mystic-weird choral song interpolates with spoken words form.
<i>Ekún iyàwó</i> (bridal cry)	Recitative Poetry	Lineal Recitation/bridal Cry Form
<i>Eré òsùpá</i> (Moonlight game)	Myth, Riddles, Folktale	A – B Forms, Round/Circle Forms.

The above is the summary of performance contexts, poetic genres, and the Yorùbá musical forms. However, Ekwueme (2001:19) opined that the limitation imposed by this form of music by its repetitive and monotonous nature is obvious, the limitation in structural organization imposed by the strict call-and-response form would make it virtually impossible for a composer today to create a reasonably artistic piece of music for contemporary international consumption. Meanwhile, a deliberate creative effort to develop the folksong is required for the realization of art music suitable for contemplative purposes. The new approach in this study should make use of such musical dynamism in the Yorùbá indigenous to be as per with the like, fugal form, organum, counterpoint, polyphony, suite, hocket, ostinato, canon, rondo, and other harmonic principles. One of the major contributions of this study is the detailed research into the nitty-gritty of the intricacies of Yorùbá traditional musical forms. What is needed is a creative continuum of the above traditional song forms with deliberate development

into the art form. This in essence will make the Yorùbá art music composition culturally relevant and meet the international standard.

The main thrust of this research is found in the foregoing submissions of the renowned scholar. Therefore, with the above-listed traditional musical forms, the art music composition is set to be culturally relevant. The listed forms are the traditional Yorùbá musical form derived from performance context, which may be useful for Nigerian art music composers. The indigenization of art musical forms could help to pacify the yearnings, aspirations, and sensibility of the masses musically and the art music compositions will be culturally relevant.

Conclusion

This study has discussed the major aspects of Yorùbá traditional musical forms from the highlights of performance context as factors that give birth to musical forms. The study established the concept of performance practice as an important revelation of Yoruba musical form and a pointer to the ‘meaning’ of Yorùbá traditional music. Yorùbá music is meaningful when it refers to things outside itself, evoking association, social events, and connotations relative to the world of ideas, emphatics, and physical activities. On the other hand, an appreciation and articulation of the order of the forms make it possible to have a deeper understanding of Yorùbá traditional music.

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