

Yorùbá Proverbs and Musicality

Michael Olutayo Olatunji¹

Abstract

This paper attempted to establish some links between traditional Yorùbá instrumental music and instrumentation or performance with proverbs. Eleven Yorùbá proverbs that reflect either vocal or instrumental performance were collected, categorized and analysed according to their respective functionalities among members of this ethnic group. The analyses revealed that, among other things, Yorùbá proverbs could be used to emphasise the importance of collaboration of music with other performing arts, express a relationship between the musical instrument combination and the concept of family co-existence, uphold the use of musical instruments as a communicative and panegyric tool, and emphasize the universality of Yorùbá aesthetic value on speech and music.

Introduction

Just like in many other Nigerian ethnic groups, music is as vital to the Yorùbá people as air is vital to life. As a matter of fact, music is used in everyday activities of the Yorùbá people, either individually or collectively. Music is a vital tool in the day-to-day living of a Yorùbá man. Although scholars have always emphasised two major functions of music among African peoples, that is, entertainment and information, the roles and uses of music among Africans are too numerous to mention (Delano, 1987; Euba, 1988; Owomoyela, 2005; and Kosemani, 2010). Among the Yorùbá people, for example, music is used to educate (especially the young ones) about almost all the facets of culture and traditions. It is used to praise, entertain and communicate (both in the physical and metaphysical realms). Music is also used extensively in worship and as therapy for the drudgery of routines or to identify the members of a particular occupation or association. Also, like most ethnic groups in Nigeria, the two media through which the sound of music is performed among the Yorùbá people are the musical instruments and the human voice.

¹Michael Olutayo Olatunji is a Lecturer in the Department of Music, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria.

However, there seems to be no clear-cut boundary between vocal and instrumental music in African culture. This is corroborated by Hornbostel (1928:62), who succinctly states that “African music is not conceived without dancing nor African rhythm without drumming, nor the forms of African song without antiphony”. In his analysis of the music performances of some repertoires of the people of central Africa, Akpabot (1975:5) asserts that

...in effect, the vocal performance was a song with words and the xylophonist’s (instrumental) solo a song without words, and since the songs are derived from speech patterns, it is easy to see how the xylophone music could be used to transmit messages.

Therefore, any attempt to conceptualize or analyze Yoruba instrumental music purely as musical sound would amount to belittling its functions. This is because words and music have to be viewed in one context in order for the totality of the musician’s performance to be appreciated.

Apart from those who are found in the Kogi and Kwara states of Nigeria and in some parts of the Republic of Benin, the largest concentration of the Yorùbá people is found in the South-western geo-political zone of Nigeria. This geographical region covers both the African forest and Savannah zones of the West African sub-region. This location is mainly responsible for the inequalities in the distribution of types of musical instruments among the Yorùbá people. While there is an avalanche of both the membranophonic and idiophonic instruments, as a result of the types of animals and trees found therein, chordophones and aerophones are almost scarcely present. These last two categories are usually found in negligible quantities and, in most cases, they are sparsely distributed among certain Yorùbá sub-groups.

In his argument regarding why many black African peoples have no precise noun for music, Francis Bebey (1975:12) asserts *inter alia* that the art of music is so inherent in black African people that it becomes almost superfluous to have a particular noun for it. However, this does not disprove the fact that most African cultures have words to define specific forms such as song, chant, and dance. In the light of this argument,

although the Yorùbá word *eré* could be used for music, it has a wider meaning to cover all aspects of entertainment, which include drama, poetry, masking and dance. This situation notwithstanding, some scholars have tried to coin some words to represent music. Some of these coinages include *ilù àt'orin*, which literally means drumming and singing, *t'ìlù-t'ìfon* (meaning drumming and blowing), and so forth. The inadequacies of all these coinages are obvious.

This study partially agrees with Bebey's argument that no definite noun exists to define the concept of music among among ethnic groups in Africa, including the Yorùbá people. However, it could also be argued that the almost over-distribution of membranophones is, to a large extent, responsible for the use of the generic terminology *ilù* (drum) for most performances of music and *lù* (beat), which in most cases is used as the verb "play" among the Yorùbá people. This argument becomes the framework upon which the combination of the structure, design and approach used in this study is anchored.

Musical Instruments and Instrumentation in Yorùbá Proverbs

The proverb could be defined as a varied oral literary form of expression. It could also be in the form of aphorisms, wise sayings, and axioms. Therefore, it is not out of place to assert that the cumulative realism of daily experiences is expressed through proverbs. Yorùbá proverbs are usually made of short sentences, loaded with deep words of wisdom, and borne out of the experiences of the elders in the society. Hidden in these short sentences are deep meanings which demand some knowledge of the oral tradition to decode and comprehend. Yorùbá proverbs can be mono-clausal, bi-clausal or multi-clausal in structure. Among other things, proverbs are used to facilitate an easy comprehension of the cogent points and ideas in a speech.

Most Yorùbá proverbs are predicated on the past experiences of the elders with regard to the relationships between friends, husbands and wives as well as between parents and children. Some proverbs also reflect the lives and behavioral patterns among animals such as mammals, birds, fishes and insects. Yet others are derived from folktales and oracle verses

(*ese ifá*). This experiential concept of proverbs ensures that they are held in high esteem among the Yorùbá to the extent that such sayings are generally believed to be the property of the elders. Indeed, it is believed that regardless of the high level of wisdom or intelligence attained by a young person – even if comparable to that of an elderly person – his experiences cannot match those of the elders. This is reflected in the Yorùbá proverb that says:

Bómodé bá láso bí àgbà
Kò lè lákùsà bí àgbà.

Even though a lad has the same number of “clothes” as an elderly person,

The number of his “rags” will not be the same as that which pertains to the elderly man.

Here, the use of both clothes and rags is symbolic: while the former represents intelligence, the latter stands for experience. Clearly, the Yorùbá strongly believe that experience is superior to intelligence; in fact, experience is considered as the “elder brother” of intelligence.

Be that as it may, whenever any young person is identified to be able to use a wide range of proverbs, he is usually accorded respect by both old and young members of his family and community. However, it is considered a great insult and an act of disrespect for a young person to use proverbs in his speech without paying homage to the elders. The homage may come either before or after a proverb or a chain of proverbs is said. If a person chooses to pay homage before saying any proverb, he will start with a short phrase like:

Èyìn àgbàlagbà le máa n so pé...

It is you elders that do say that...

Even in a situation where the speaker considers himself to be among the oldest people in that particular gathering, he is still expected to pay

homage to the fore-fathers by saying:

Àwon baba wa ni wón máa n so wípé...

Our fathers would always say that...

When the homage comes after the proverb(s), the speaker can say:

Kí òwe jé ti èyin àgbà o

You elders, proverbs are your property

Or he may choose to say:

Tótó, ó se bí òwe o

I pay homage for using proverbs

Or

N kò tó òwe pa níwájú èyin àgbà o

You elders, I'm not worthy to use proverbs in your presence.

Tradition demands that the elders around acknowledge the speaker's homage by saying:

Wà á pa òmíràn/Wà á rí òmíràn pa.

You will have another opportunity.

Analysis of Findings

As already stated, this paper attempts to examine some Yorùbá proverbs, and also through analysis, establish some links between traditional Yorùbá instrumental music and instrumentation or performance with proverbs. We shall begin with an analysis of a proverb that reflects the Yorùbá concept of performance of music, which in most cases include dancing:

(i) *Ìròmi tí n jó lójú omi,*

Onílù rè wà nísàlè odò.

A water insect that dances on the water surface
has its musicians located on the river bed.

This proverb substantiates Hornbostel's claim, which is corroborated by Akpabot, that there is strictly speaking no absolute music. Rather, in most cases, the ensemble performance of music is usually accompanied with dancing, and sometimes singing. However, the use of the singular noun for the drummer in the Yorùbá text does not suggest a solo performance. Rather, this proverb emphasises the idea that a musical group is identified and called by the name of its leader. Hence, we hear such statements as "we are inviting Odòlayé Àrèmu to come and perform" or "Ògúndàre Fóyánmu played for them last week".

The proverb in (i) above is used on an occasion when someone who ordinarily could not achieve any feat on his own is boasting or challenging a more powerful fellow to a duel just because he has support from elsewhere. In most cases, the powerful person or group that sponsors the "weak" person is un-identified or concealed from the general public and is only known to the person who is being sponsored.

The next set of four proverbs reflects the relationship between the combination of Yorùbá musical instruments for performance (instrumentation) and the concept of family co-existence.

(ii) *Akorin-i-ni-elégbè, bí eni tí n jó àsán kan ilù ni ó rí.*

A singer without people to chorus in response

is like somebody who dances to a single drum (Dáramólá
2004:30).

Musically speaking, the summation of divergent sonorities of various instruments often culminates in a unique "orchestra colour" of any instrumental ensemble among the Yorùbá people. Also, the co-ordination of multilateral rhythmic ostinati and improvisation often produce a complex result, which leads, guides, and guards the dancer's steps during performance.

This proverb brings into focus the Yorùbá concept of instrumentation during performance which on many occasions include dancing. It is believed that no single drum is capable of providing a complete focus or direction for the dancer. According to Dáramólá, “during performance, one drum means nothing without the others”. Hence, the drum is perceived as a reflection of the concept of *ebí* or *àjobí* (family) among the Yorùbá people. Collective responsibility forms the basis for co-existence among members of any family. Therefore, the proverb is used to encourage teamwork among members of a family or community. It is also used to promote the concept of division of labour as well as leadership and followership among members.

(iii) *Bilù bá pé igba, agogo ni í borí won.*

In the midst of several drums, the sound of *Agogo* is very prominently audible.

Agogo, a metallic gong, has a high carrying power which is considered even stronger than the combination of that of the other drums in an ensemble. This is so because of *Agogo*'s strong numerous overtones. This proverb emphasises the concept of leadership and followership in any Yorùbá community life. It also captures the concept of division of labour, which is very vital to mutual co-existence among members of a community.

(iv) *Orí alu-opón kì í gún*

Esè alu-iyá-ilù kì í tólè.

The head of an *Opón* player is always bowed,

The legs of a (*dùndún*) master drummer are always crooked.

This proverb reveals the effects of the differences in both the age and the areas of concentration between the players of the two instruments mentioned above. It is believed that playing in a *Dùndún* ensemble starts from the *Opón*, which is also known as *Gúdúgúdú*. This graduation from playing the *Opón* to performing in a *Dùndún* ensemble vividly reflects the different priorities and interests between a mother and her child (*iyá n ronú, omo n rokà*). Therefore, in most cases, the youngest and the least experienced drummer plays the *Opón*. In fact, an *Opón* player is always

placed in front of the master drummer or any other highly experienced drummer of the group who constantly corrects the novice anytime he misses his rhythmic lines. Such correction is effected by striking him on the head with the beater (*Kòngó*).

This arduous task of maintaining a faultless rhythmic ostinato is responsible for the *Opón* player constantly keeping his eyes on the membrane surface of his drum. To exacerbate his situation, this surface is demarcated into two parts (to produce two separate pitches) by a wax. Therefore, in keeping his eyes on the membrane, the *Opón* player's head is bowed almost throughout the period of performance. On the other hand, the master-drummer is the one saddled with the responsibility of reciting poetry, *oríkì* or *oríkì-orílè*, pertaining to individuals or the community, respectively. This task requires him to pull the tensioning thongs (*osán*) surrounding his drums more often. It also requires the support of his legs in order to achieve "a perfect voice of the drum". In trying to achieve all these, the master-drummer's legs, apart from being constantly on the move, always assume a limping position.

However, just as the above argument is true when considering ensemble performance, we also need to state here that, among the Yorùbá people, some occasions do call for the performance of a solo instrument. But it bears mentioning that the latter occasions do not call for dancing; they are like other contexts where a poet specialist in any of the chant modes of the Yorùbá (*ìjálá*, *ìyèrè-ìfá*, *èsà*, *ràrà*, and *ekún-ìyàwó*) performs a *capella* in praise of a member or a group of people in the society. Similarly, an instrumentalist can use any instrument that is capable of being used as a speech surrogate to render a solo performance. Such a performance can be in the form of a recitation of individuals' *oríkì* (praise or genealogy) or the transmission of messages to a group of individuals or the entire community and even beyond. Among the Yorùbá, only instruments in three categories (idiophones, membranophones, and chordophones) are capable of playing this communicative role. Common examples include the village or town crier's gong (*Agogo*), the *Ògìdìgbó* (war) drum, and the *Ekùtù* (a kind of flute found mostly among hunters). For acoustic reasons, the chordophone, despite its dearth among the Yorùbá people, may not be fit for this crucial role of an open-air transmission of signals and messages

which most often requires a high level carrying power to cover a radius of several kilometres.

The next set of three proverbs under consideration deals with the Yorùbá concept of using a musical instrument either as a communicative or panegyric tool.

(v) *Ajá tí yóó sonù, kì í gbó fèrè ode.*

A dog that is bound to get lost will not hearken to the hunter's whistle.

When hunting for game, hunters do communicate with one another or with their dogs, either by whistling or by playing the *Ekùtù*, an aerophonic instrument. It is believed that any trained hunter or dog should be capable of discerning the meaning of any call or signal conveyed at such a time. But should a dog get immersed in its pursuit of game when a signal is transmitted to end the endeavour and for every hunter and dog to come together to return home, such a dog will eventually lose its way in the bush and will not be able to return home.

This proverb is used when someone is identified as taking the wrong step in dealing with an issue. Tradition demands that such a member should be warned severally by other members of the family or the entire community, especially the elders, who are the carriers of culture. But in a situation where the person is intransigent, in spite of all the efforts of other members, he should be responsible for a calamity that is bound to befall him afterwards.

(vi) *Olè tó gbé kàkàkí oba,
níbo ni yóó gbé fon ón?*

The thief that steals the king's bugle

Where is he going to blow it? (Dáramólá 2004: 32)

Kàkàkí, a long valveless fanfare trumpet, probably a borrowed instrument from the Hausa/Fulani musical culture, has now formed part of some Yorùbá Obas' (kings') paraphernalia, especially the traditional rulers of Òyó-Yorùbá descent. Because of the royal dignity which this instrument carries, it would be inappropriate for anyone who steals it to play it either for himself or for another person who is not an Oba. The implication here

is that the instrument is useless if it is not played for an Oba. This proverb is used to discourage anyone who is trying to obtain something, or who has aspires to a position to which, ordinarily, he is not entitled. According to Dáramólá, the proverb is also used “as a warrant for people to desist from embarking on unprofitable ventures” because “the gold is not useful for the pigs”.

(vii) *Bí òwe bí òwe là n lùlù ògidigbó,*

Ológbón ní í jó o

Òmòrán ní í mò ón.

Ògidigbó drum is cryptically played like a proverb

It is wise men that dance to it

It is informed men that discern it (Olátúnjí, 1984:170)

Ògidigbó is a drum of war, which is played to send signals and calls to warriors at the battlefield. The ability of any warrior to discern or decode the meaning of the signals of this instrument is very vital to his tactical approach and maneuvers in warfare. This proverb brings into focus the importance of interjecting conversations with proverbs among the Yorùbá people. It is also used to warn the audience to be very attentive in order to get the import of the conversation. It is therefore implied that those who are versed in proverbs are usually endowed with wisdom and understanding, especially in verbal communication (Dáramólá 2004:29).

Although the next two Yorùbá proverbs have the same meaning and implications, they are presented differently. While the first one represents the usual or direct way of deploying the proverb in speech by an average Yorùbá person, the second one suggests some level of embellishment or vocal aesthetics – as discussed earlier in this study. The three aesthetic elements (puns, heteronyms, and onomatopoeias) utilized in Yoruba poetry are present in the second proverb.

(viii) *Tí Bàtá bá n dún ládùúnjù,*

Yíya ní í ya.

When a Bàtá drum is played continuously at its highest pitch,

The tearing of its membrane is imminent.

(ix) *Tó bá ti pé tí Bàtá tí n pelá, tí n pelá,
Ó ti setán tí yóó pe gbègìrì.*

When a Bàtá calls *ilá* for too long a time,
Very soon it will call *gbègìrì*.

Ilá (okro) is one of the draw-soups (*obèéyò*) in Yorùbá delicacies. One of the characteristics of any obeeyo is to facilitate a smooth transference of morsels or lumps of principal food (such as *iyán, èbà, àmàlà and fùfù*) from the mouth through the throat to the stomach for easy digestion by the appropriate enzymes. Also, there seems to be an interesting curling movement of the hand after scooping the obeeyo with a morsel of food. Although *gbègìrì* (beans) soup could also go with any of the meals mentioned above, it does not make for as smooth a swallow as does *obèéyò*. Moreover, *gbègìrì* (beans) soup does not call for the characteristic gesture of “wrapping” the morsel with the soup..

The Yoruba believe that the Bata drum, as well as some other drum ensembles such as the *Gbèdu* and the *Ògidìgbó*, are limited in their ability to act as speech surrogates when compared with some other instruments such as the *Dùndún*. Indeed, the Yorùbá usually refer to the *Bàtá* drum as *akólòlò* (stammerer) because no member of the *Bàtá* ensemble is capable of saying a complete sentence accurately. However, this limitation is a result of the design of the instrument. The construction of the *Bàtá* is different from that of the *Dùndún*, which is built in such a way that pressure is exerted on the thongs (*osán*) to increase the tension of the membrane and thus raise the pitch of the drum note. But the *Bàtá*'s “tensioning thongs” are bound to the body of the drum by leather straps, thus giving each of the two membranes both a constant tension and a note of the fixed pitch (King 1961: 2). Therefore, in order to make up for this lapse, the hocket technique is employed by *Bàtá* players whereby the syllables in a sentence are shared appropriately among the members of the ensemble. The expertise for doing this is gained through the oral tradition of drum playing.

Yorùbá orthography identifies three major tone marks, namely the low

(usually called *doh* and represented by \, the middle (referred to as *re* and represented by -), and the high (referred to as *me* and represented by /) tones. These are, invariably, the first three pitches of a major scale of solfa notation in music. The limitation of the *Bàtá* becomes glaring in its inability to sound or “pronounce” the low tone (*doh*) perfectly. Therefore, it stays on the two other pitches (*re* and *me*) most often. If we are careful enough to look critically at the construction of the sentence of the second proverb, we will notice that, apart from the first syllable in the *Bàtá* (which is aligned with the low tone) and the three syllables of *gbègìrì* (beans soup), which symbolise the sound of a broken membrane of the drum, every other syllable depicts the *Bàtá* sound mentioned above, that is, an interchange of the middle (*re*) and the high (*me*) tones. Also, the repetition of the phrase, *tí n pelá* is a reflection of the African (and indeed Yorùbá) musical concept of utilizing ostinati in a bid to construct a virile multilineal rhythmic and melodic phrase.

The argument here can be approached musically and aesthetically. Musically speaking, the sound dimension is often given much prominence in any discourse of music. In fact, one of the several definitions of music is that “it is a play with sound”. But music is not an all-sound endeavour. Rather, music is a combination of both sound and silence. Any student of the Rudiments of Music knows that, in terms of value, a note (the symbol used to represent sound) has a corresponding rest (the symbol used to represent silence), with which it shares the same value. Therefore, just as a no-sound endeavour is not music, so also will an all-sound endeavour be inconceivable and artistically deficient.

The aesthetic judgement of any Yorùbá traditional music is predicated on two major criteria: fidelity to (oral) tradition and improvisation. A situation where one of these criteria is absent will result in either “good music but bad performance” or vice versa. Therefore, when a *Bàtá* player decides to go for either an all-sound endeavour, which, by implication, means sticking to the traditional (*ponlá ponlá* or *pelá pelá*) sound of *Bàtá* in a continuous rapidity, there is bound to be a rise in temperature on the surface of the membrane which will eventually lead to its breakage.

This proverb is always used to check excesses and simultaneously to

encourage and promote moderation in any human endeavour. It is also used to warn any individual or a group of individuals against oppressive and tyrannical tendencies, the end result of which is believed to be self-destruction or extinction.

The last set of two proverbs strongly emphasises the Yoruba concept of mutual co-existence within a nuclear or extended family setting as well as among other members of the community.

(x) *Sèkèrè kò se é fòpá lù,*

Jagunjugun kò se é foba mú.

Just as *Sèkèrè* is not played with a wand,

a war commander cannot be forcefully arrested.

Sèkèrè, a gourd rattle musical instrument of the Yorùbá people, is played by shaking the instrument or by beating it with one hand while holding it with the other. Since it is made from a gourd surrounded by nets of beads, any attempt to beat it with a strong object such as a wand or a metallic object would cause the gourd and the beads to break. The implication is that this would cause disharmony in the otherwise peaceful co-existence between the gourd and the beads surrounding it. In the same manner, any attempt to forcefully arrest a war commander would lead to chaos or pandemonium and, sometimes anarchy in the community. This is because unless there is a breakdown of law and order, no warrior will obey any order to arrest his commander. Even if the warriors' camp has been polarised, a situation which often leads to factionalisation, an outbreak of civil war is very likely if the commander is to be captured and arrested.

This proverb is used to discourage those who are trying to embark on missions or tasks that the society believes to be impossible. It is also used to discourage a misplacement of priorities by any individual or group. However, the proverb could be used to encourage people to show respect for those in positions of authority to ensure a continuous harmonious co-existence.

(xi) *Òtá n lùlù ibàjé*

Olórun oba ni kò jé kó dún.

The enemy is always playing derogatory music,
It is the Almighty God that dissipates the sound.

This proverb is used mostly to address colleagues and counterparts that are fond of running other people down or tarnishing other people's reputation. Such treacherous people are sometimes referred to as "friends like enemies" (*òré bí òtá*) or "enemies like friends" (*òtá bí òré*). The text of the proverb makes it emphatically clear that attempts by detractors or opponents, often faceless or anonymous persons who engage in blackmail and defamation of character, will always prove abortive, if their would-be victims depend on the greater power of God. This conceptualization also emphasises the belief of the Yorùbá people in the supernatural ability of the Almighty God, the creator of the universe, to save and deliver the just from the hands of oppressors.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to analyse some Yorùbá proverbs that are predicated on either the functionalities or combination of musical instruments. The study has also attempted to account for the significant instances of the lexemes of music, as well as levels of musicality or musicianship in/of Yoruba proverbs. This combination, among other things, is employed to guard and guide the dancers during any performance. The veracity of Akpabot's (1975:5) claim that to Africans, there is no clear-cut boundary between instrumental and vocal music is also confirmed. This point is predicated upon the fact that the medium of transmission notwithstanding, the raw material for music in the two media is song. While the Yorùbá consider their vocal music as songs with words, they consider their instrumental music as songs without words.

It is also revealed that some Yorùbá proverbs may be presented in two forms, that is, either in a direct or in an embellished form. Also, proverbs may be presented by an instrument either in an ensemble or as an instrumental solo performance. While the latter is almost an exclusive characteristic of most Yorùbá aerophones, only those membranophones that are capable of producing several pitches through tensioning can

achieve this task. The generality of the membranophones depend heavily on the use of the technique of hocketing – a technique by which the syllables in a proverb are distributed among some or all the instruments in a particular ensemble.

We need to state here that very little scholarship exists on music and proverbs. Therefore, it is strongly suggested that more research should be carried out in this area in order to generate a rich scholarship in several other specialised areas of music.

References

- Adégbíté, Adémólá (2003) "Proverbs and Conflicts among Yorùbá Popular Musicians". *Nigerian Music Review*. No. 4, 25-32.
- Akpabot, S. Ekpe (1975) *Ibibio Music in Nigerian Culture*. U.S.A: Michigan State University Press.
- Bebey, Francis (1975) *African Music: A People's Art*. (trs.) Bennett Josephine. New York: Lawrence Hill & Co.
- Dáramólá, Yòmí (2004) "Yorùbá Proverbs in the Perspective of Music" *Proverbium: Yearbook of International Scholarship*. Vol. 21. (ed.) Mieder, Wolfgang. Vermont: The University of Vermont, 27-34.
- King, Anthony (1961) *Yorùbá Sacred Music from Èkìtì*. Ìbàdàn: University of Ìbàdàn Press.
- Kosemani, Supo. (2010) *Owe L'esin Oro*. Ibadan: Yew Books.
- Nketia, J.H.K. (1975) *The Music of Africa*. London: Victor Gollancz.
- Olátúnjí, O.O. (1984) *Features of Yorùbá Oral Poetry*. Ìbàdàn: University Press Limited.
- Owomoyela, Oyekan. *Yoruba Proverbs*. Lincoln & London: University of Press Nebraska Press, 2005.
- Sadie, Stantley (ed.) (1980) *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Vols. 9 & 13. London: Macmillan Publishers.