

Yoruba Indigenous Music as a Medium of Communication in Yoruba Traditional Religious Sacrifices

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Abstract

Human beings are spiritual creatures with instincts and consciousness that are usually communicated through the medium of music in worship, prayer and sacrifices. Music is the agglomeration of physical and spiritual experiences of human beings which are extremely diverse and expressed through the sound of music. Therefore, traditional music and sacrifice are indivisible twin-sisters that occupy a uniquely central position in religious traditions all over the world. In Yoruba traditional belief system, music serves as a medium of communication through which sacrifices are transported to the throne of God. The centralization of music in sacrifice, among the Yoruba's, is not in doubt because all the sacrificial wishes are made known to gods through the sound of indigenous music. This study critiques Yoruba traditional music as a means of transporting sacrifices to the presence of God. An attempt is made to analyze the various circumstances in traditional religion that demand sacrifice with musical accompaniments. This study relied on two different ethnographic methodologies of data gathering, which are observation techniques and key informant methods. The direct observation of Yoruba musical performances during sacrifice exposes the researchers to various methods of performances, and the key informants enable the researchers to have access to important places, performances and sacred information and objects. The sources of data are both primary and secondary. Primary data was collected through direct observation of music performances, and secondary data were sourced through libraries and recorded music. The study adopted the qualitative method in the presentation and analysis of data. This study interprets the Yoruba cultural practices as factors that shape the musical forms and proffers answers to the research question: what is the place and role of traditional music in the Yoruba traditional religious sacrifices?

Keywords: Yoruba Indigenous Music, Medium of Communication, Traditional Religion, Sacrifice

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1. Introduction

In his down-to-earth and utilitarian reflections on African religion and music, Awolalu (1979) succinctly captured the premise of this paper thus:

West African peoples are fond of singing. Music and dancing, therefore, play an important role in worship. In religion, each divinity has his special songs and sacred dances. At such times, the singing and dancing penetrate wholly into the very being of the worshipper, and the force and energy with which they are performed provide an outlet for the worshippers' enthusiasm for the divinity so worshipped. A possessed devotee may give a message from the divinity.

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The foregoing is unique evidence of an indispensable aspect of indigenous music in religious communication and observances. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to examine the interrelationship of Yoruba traditional music as a medium of communication in religious sacrifices among the Yoruba of Western Nigeria. There have been significant works done on religious sacrifices, and yet a lot is undone, especially in the area of traditional music. Research evidence in this scholastic study includes Awolalu, 1968/1978/1979; Fadipe, 1970; Mbiti, 1970; Idowu, 1973, 1976 1993; and Parrinda, 1978; to mention a few. All these in-depth academic studies confirmed the existence of the worship of various gods and appeasement through sacrifice in Yoruba cosmology. A significant number of these works were historical, analytical, descriptive, theoretical, and also in the form of traditional theology. This study documents and fills the missing gap in the previous research studies thus: provides researchers with the missing insights and structure of core Yoruba traditional music before the forces of change sweeps the songs into oblivion and most importantly, an understanding and articulation of various typologies through staff notation and analysis of Yoruba music are useful to musicologists and invariably positioning Yoruba music in the right perspective in the global world of academic study.

Music is what Oyetoro (1992) summed up to mean a sound language that is more powerful than speech-language in communicating, arresting attention and audience as well as eliciting actions and attitudinal change of serious spiritual, emotional, and philosophical feelings or perceptions. This postulation gives a loaded meaning of what music is and does. That is, music is a medium of communication, so infectious that it arrests the attention of whatever filters into the ear and elicits feedback in varied forms, physical and metaphysical. Nzewi (1980), opined that traditional music is a perpetrator of the peoples' systems and beliefs in a repository of their folk philosophy, historical records, the gazette of their past, world and general knowledge; the recorder of their mores, the archive of folk instructions; an educational agent for moral, spiritual, artistic, matrimonial lessons for instructions on sex, propriety, self-control, self-discipline, and physical fitness.

It has never been found, in any society, tribe, or people without music. Music has always been an indispensable art in human history, existence and plays an important role in regulating and preserving the various institutions. Much like the role of sacrifice elsewhere in the world, the Yoruba of Western Nigeria still retained some practices of sacrifice. According to Awolalu (1979) kola-nut is the frequent offering used by most of the people of Nigeria. Other food items like yam, bitter-kola, porridge, rice, and fruits can also be offered. However, music constitutes a vital aspect of the offering. Therefore, among the Yoruba people of Western Nigeria, during the annual worships of deities, music accompanies ritual sacrifices. Nketia (1974) distinguishes four main occasions in which music may be used in African culture which are: rituals during which no music may be played; rituals during which music other than the divinity is played; rituals for which the music of the divinity or any other kind of music is played; and rituals during which the music of the divinity is exclusively played. African music is not meant for the ear alone, but for the senses and faculties of the body, it reflects Africans vision of the world on earth and the world beyond, a world in permanent search of betterment and perfection.

What has been gleaned from all of this is that the sacrificial role entails a great deal of social exception and a certain degree of acquiescence. In the Yoruba nation, sacrifices are made to both minor and major gods. Yoruba major gods are: *obatala* (Lord of the white cloth); *Oduduwa* (*Obatala's* wife) *Sango* (The god of thunder and lightning); *esu* (Divine messenger); *ifa* (god of divination); *elegbara* (deity); *ogun* (god of iron); *olokun* (lord of the sea); *olosa* (goddess of lagoon); *shopona* (smallpox god); and minor gods include *sigidi* (god of revenge); *oya* (goddess of Niger); *osun* (goddess of river); *aje* (god of wealth); *orisa oko* (god of agriculture), *osanin* (god of medicine); *aroni* (forest god); *aja* (god of the wild wind); *orisa ibeji* (tutelary deity of twins). More so, the Yoruba pay some attention to the heavenly bodies and sacrifice to the moon, star and planets. Invariably the need for this study is the near absence of

ritual sacrificial songs and its philosophical/musicological analysis. The aforementioned were x-rayed in this study.

The relevance of music in culture, invariably leading to the theoretical framework propounded by Hoods (1979) that music is culture-based and that ethno musicological study must be in tandem of the structural and musical attributes of that music, as well as the cultural context in which it is made. Nketia (1985) elaborates on this, according to Ejemobi (2005) that, “music in culture” deals with the ethnography of music in a particular culture thus: the roles and functions of a music as determined by its interrelationship with other aspect of culture; socio-cultural values that operate in music and music-making contexts; also music, culture and history. He concluded that the study and understanding of any music should be from its cultural perspective, and which must be based on views and conceptualizations of its makers. Therefore, the conceptualization of music in culture explains the functionality of traditional music in religion through sacrifice among the Yoruba people. The concerns of this study are; what is the place and role of traditional music in religious sacrifice? In this study therefore, the use of traditional music as a means of communication and transporting sacrifices to heaven in Yoruba cosmology was considered. The paper attempts a critical viewpoint of music (*orin ebo*) and brings to fore the musical typologies, symbolical uses and its relevance in the development of the society.

2. Methodology

This study relied on two different ethnographic methodologies of data gathering which are observation techniques and key informant methods. The direct observation of Yoruba musical performances during sacrifice exposes the researchers to various methods of performances and the key informants enables the researchers to have access to important places, performances and sacred information and objects. The sources of data are both primary and secondary. Primary data were collected through direct observation of music performances and secondary data were sourced through libraries and recorded music. The study adopted the qualitative method in the presentation and analysis of data.

3. Results and Discussion

Table 1: Classification of Indigenous Yoruba Vocal Music

| SUNG VOCAL MUSIC KORIN OR ORIN ORIN; Sacred | CHANTED VOCAL MUSIC (SUN OR SISUN) SUN; | INCANTATION (PIPE OR PE) PE; |
|--|--|---|
| Efe (Humor song) | Iyere (Ifa liturgical chant) | Ogede |
| Iremo (Lullaby) | Ijala (Hunter’s chant) | Ofo |
| Oro (Diety) | Rara (Epic praise chant) | Ayajo |
| Iremoje (Hunters burial) | Esa (Masquerade chant) | Orisa (Evoking gods) |
| Orisa (Deity songs) | Ekun Iyawo (Marriage) | Oku (Dirge with wailing voice) |
| | | Ifa (Evoking Ifa spirit) |

Source: Vidal, T. (2012), Music in Yoruba Chants. In Olatunji, O.O. (ed). Reading in Yoruba Chants.

Table 2: Classification of Indigenous Yoruba Localized Vocal Music

| Secular | Localize Chants | KIKE OR 'KE; (spoken or shouted) |
|----------------|------------------------|---|
| | | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Owe (Proverbial Song) Aalo apagbe (Folksong) Itan (Storyline) Ise sise (Work song) | Alamo (Ekiti Eulogy Chant) Igbe Olori (Egbado Gelede chant) Ege (Wailing Egba chant) Ike (Egbado praise chants to witches) | Ewi (recited poetry) KIKI OR ‘KI (Eulogy) Oriki Oriki LOCALISE RECITATIVE Ayun (Egosi Ekiti), Osirigi (Igbara Oke), Olele (Ijesa) Osare (Ife), Ajagbo (Ekiti). |
| Ere Osupa (Moonlight story song) | Igbala (Egba kings’ funeral chant) Agbe (Egbado funeral chant) Ayuu (Egosi Ekiti chant) | |

Source: Vidal, T. (2012), Music in Yoruba Chants. In Olatunji, O.O. (ed). Reading in Yoruba Chants.

This study reveals seven steps in the joint community festivals, sacrifice methods and procedures among the Yoruba people; these include:

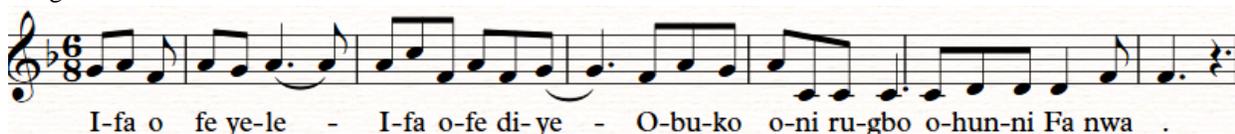
- Step 1: Visualization songs (to predicts the type of sacrifice)
- Step 2: Preparation of Sacrifice (to find out the objects of sacrifice)
- Step 3: Processional Song during Sacrifice
- Step 4: Offering of Prayers
- Step 5: Praise songs to the gods
- Step 6: Recessional song from the Shrine
- Step 7: Song of hope and general entertainment.

Step 1: Visualize songs predict the types of sacrifice: The need to know the type of sacrifice among the Yoruba people is always as a result of consultation to Ifa deity through Ifa priests. In the consultation of Ifa priest, as a spiritual being, he visualizes the types of sacrifice using the medium of sacred music. Sacrifice visualization song is divinely-inspired songs that detail the need and the appropriateness of sacrifice. The holistic Yoruba mythological system has been enshrined into the Ifa literary corpus. Therefore, in this analysis, references shall be cited in Yoruba Ifa literary corpus or philosophy. The two Ifa songs as follows contained the visualization of a type of sacrifice and the ingredients for the worship of community deity (*orisa ibile*).

Musical Example 1- Odu Oyeku (Ifa Recitation and song chorus)

| | |
|---|--|
| <i>Oyeku! Oyeku!Oyeku!</i> | Death is forbidden!!! |
| <i>Mo ti domo oyeku, nko ku boro,</i> | I ‘am an offspring of Oyeku |
| <i>A difa f’alaise,</i> | The diviner for the innocent |
| <i>Ti ‘nwon o f’iku lo, ti ko nii ku,</i> | Death is far away, no more death |
| <i>Ifa ni, ebo k’agbo, k’a to ni ka se,</i> | Ifa said, sacrifice of long life is appropriate; |
| <i>Ka le dagba, ka le f’opa rin.</i> | and to be aged with a long life. |

Song Chorus



I-fa o fe ye-le - I-fa o-fe di-ye - O-bu-ko o-ni ru-gbo o-hun-ni Fa nwa .

Translation - I-fa has forbidden pigeon and fowl, but a mature goat should be sacrifice, sacrifice to ifa deity. (The Ifa panegyric and the concluding song show the type of sacrifice, in line five; that long life is requested and the ingredient for the sacrifice is goat; *obuko*).

Step 2: Preparation of sacrifice is a unique and special aspect of worship to find out the ingredient of sacrifice. This special instruction in the method and ingredient of sacrifice is naturally enshrined in *Ofo* (incantation) among the Yoruba people. The following is an example of incantation that spelt out some sacrifice dos and don'ts

Musical Example 2 - (Incantation)

Enikan kii fi ata sisun bo egungun

Eni kan kii fi obi bibo bo orisa

Ogun kii jori

Atewe atagba ni npe isewerii.

Translation

Dry pepper is forbidden in Masquerade ritual sacrifice

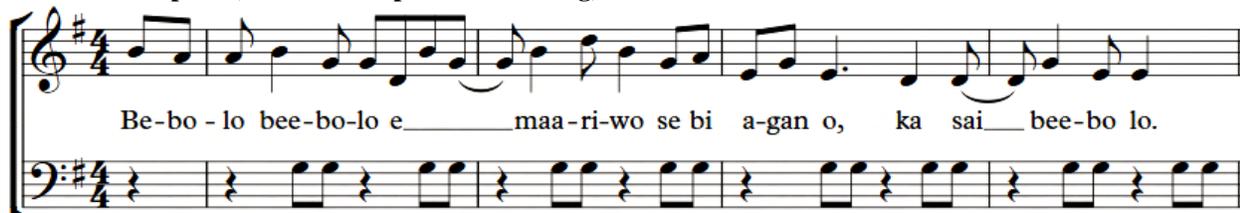
Deity is not appease with boiled kola nut

Ogun deity detested local cream

Both the old and young love *Iseweri*

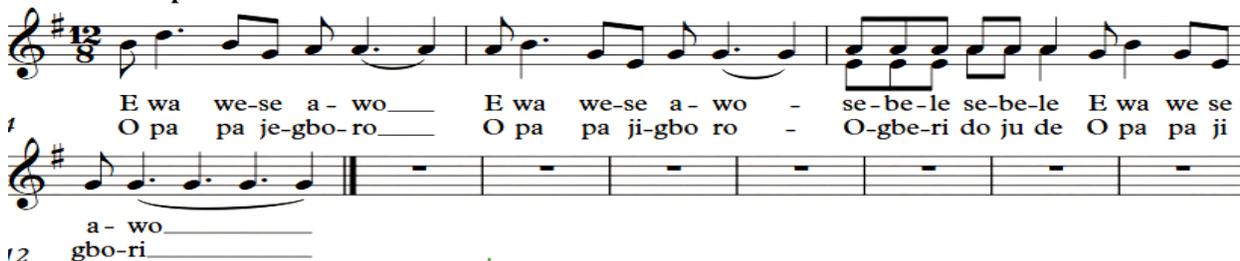
Step 3: Processional songs and sacrifices to gods are a unique experience among the Yoruba people. These sacrifices are made at designated places such as shrines (*ojubo*), forests (*agiju*), rivers (*eti odo*). However, traditional music usually accompanies the devotees with one or two people carrying the sacrifice ingredients on their heads. People on this occasion may also go in procession from the temple of their divinity to the town, and there will be much singing and dancing. The following is an example of *oro* deity processional song:

Musical Example 3 (Oro sacrifice processional song)



Translation - Evil, depart with the sacrifice, evil, depart with the sacrifice. (*Oro* is celebrated to ward off evil occurrences among the Yoruba people. It is also used to pray for bountiful harvest in the farm as well as to pray for rain and general peace of mind in the society).

Musical Example 4



Translation - Come and behold the cult's dance steps, see how wide and broad, the cult shall destroy all social pests. The cited song is a highly stylistic plan of expression of sorrow accompanied with the sacrificial ingredient. The burial

music procession is a lament or dirge in poetic form of the mourners for their departed soul. During the procession, the chief priest usually pronounces or recites special occult poetry to invoke the spirit of the dead ancestors. Such incantation is believed to have magical powers, especially to transport the sacrifice to heaven.

Step 4: Offering of Prayers: The songs which may be in the form of call and response chant may be accompanied with light instrumental accompaniments. Prayer is an indispensable aspect of sacrifice. Prayer is the act of communication and request before God or gods expressing praise, request, thanksgiving or forgiveness. For prayers to be effective, the Yoruba usually compose and weave such petitions into music, and especially traditional music is employed during worship to purge the land of filths. The following is an example of a prayer song during sacrifice:

Musical Example 5 - *Etutu a da, ebo afin*



E-tu-tu a daa, e - bo a-fin, e-bo a - do-de o- run__ gu-re gu-re.

Translation - Sacrifice shall be efficacious, rituals would be accepted, and sacrifice shall reach heavens.

Step 5: Praise and homage songs are especially composed to eulogize the virtues of a god or subject. The Yoruba usually praise their gods, a king, animal, plant, a chief or an important personality. The most pronounced feature of a praise poem is the invocation of the heroic qualities of gods through the use of appropriate metaphors, symbols and allusion. The following is an example of homage in praise of Esu deity.

Musical Example 6 -ESU THEME SONG (With the permission of Adeolu O, Ogunsanya)



1 E-su oo E-su o - Laa - ro ye se o n gbo 'gbe ba-ba?
 7 A-ra-ye de 'ri wa mo kan ga a o ti se ka yoo? A wa ti de gboin
 10 gboin de d'e-ni kan gun ba-ba o. E-ran-ko oo, i-nu i-bo - ji won ra ma ko s'o mi loo?
 13 A-ke-re, e - e ma i ko sa, kop' oun t'o-ri b'o ko? Gba wa o - we de m'e-
 -do ko - gbo t'e - nio

Translation

Esu Oo, Esu Oo, Esu Oo, Laaroye, Esu Ooo, Laaroye; Father, please hear our prayers; We are pushed down the well of despair; We long to surface again; We have our backs pinned to the wall; Completely lost and undone! The mighty beasts who rule the jungle, how can they drown at sea? Will the crab leave his home in the rivers? And then take to the bush? We call you, and crave your pity Please do not shun our prayers!

Step 6: Recessional Song from the Forest/shrine; the recession is a process by which the devotees return from the shrine, forest or river side. The type of song, dance and drumming is dependent on the god who has just been worshipped. It is noted that the returnees increased the volume and display of happiness with their music and dance. The following music examples may be sung while returning from the forest:

Musical Example 7



7 E-bo ru e - bo da na oo, a-ja nte-re - du gbe du-gbe, e-bo-ru e-bo-da na o, a-ja
 nte re du gbe du gbe.

Translation - Sacrifice has been accepted, 'Ajantere dugbedugbe' (nonsense sellable) / 2ce

Step 7 Song of Praise: The importance of song of praise among the Yoruba of Western Nigeria is to eulogize the quality of god and it is efficacious in any religious worship, this cannot be over-emphasized. Hence, there is no known religion; orthodox and otherwise that does not have or make use of music that is peculiar to its traditions, norms, myths or

conventions. Music plays vital roles particularly in the propagation of any religion through songs of praise. In fact, music is not just a catalyst but the kernel that infiltrates adherents of any religion to its tenets.

Musical Example 7



Translation: We have a journey to and from; enemies (who wish us evil) shall be destroyed.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study interprets the Yoruba cultural practices as factors that shape the musical forms. The oral transmission methods of Yoruba cultural practices from generation to generation helped to preserve the music. These oral forms of Yoruba music are woven around the events of daily life and reflect or mirror social realities. This invariably helped to preserve Yoruba cultural music from generation to generation. Therefore, the forms and techniques of Yoruba traditional music are by and large, uncontaminated. This fact was confirmed by Ekwueme (1973) that traditional music in its unadulterated form thrived most lusciously in the Nigerian society and it thrives in continuity as age-old traditions and practices handed down from generations to generations are maintained and sustained in similar if not exact form and style as they have been from time immemorial.

Most importantly, the authentic traditional religion of Yoruba people still exists until the present time, which includes the worship of deities, with their undiluted music. The Yoruba musical sound performs musical and extra-musical functions in traditional worship of deities. One of the extra-musical functions is the spirit invocation and possession through craftily weaving musical tunes. Traditional music has been known to ginger the devotees to a level of spirit possession or trance. Isola (1977) observed that during formal acts of worship, the highly trained artiste inspires *Sango* at the annual festival; the *ELEGU* is inspired by vigorously chanted special chants that hasten the process of his being possessed by the spirit of *Sango*.

Music has been one of the most common forms by which man expresses his emotions, feelings and sentiments. Musical sounds among the Yoruba are the media through which cosmological forces may be summoned, directed and manipulated. Traditional music is a medium through which celebrants render praises to the gods for a good harvest or their request. Mbiti (1975:12) observed that some festivals involve paying homage to the dead. In the rituals associated with this festival, the spirit of the dead is invited and praised to them to protect and provisions. Music is a medium through which the devotees render praises to the god for a good harvest.

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