

Music and Storytelling in Africa: A Focus on the Yoruba Culture

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between music and storytelling within Yoruba culture, a rich and influential ethnic tradition in Nigeria and the broader African continent. In Yoruba society, music is an integral part of daily life and a means of conveying complex narratives that reinforce social norms and preserve cultural heritage. How is music a storytelling device? As well, what elements of indigenous storytelling practices have been musically abstracted to create, challenge, and sustain a postcolonial Yoruba identity? The article investigates key Yoruba musical art forms/genres, including *itan*, *ewi*, *apala*, *juju*, and *fuji* to illustrate how they reflect and reinforce communal values and provide a historical record. Through a comprehensive literature review and analyses of songs/song-texts, I reveal the interconnectedness of music and oral tradition in Yoruba culture and argue that music is a vital form of storytelling that maintains and communicates Yoruba identity across generations.

Keywords: *Music, Storytelling, Yoruba, Africa, Itan, Ewi, Fuji.*

INTRODUCTION

Music and storytelling are arguably the two most prevalent art forms in indigenous African societies. The emphasis on indigenous Africa is because the forces of urbanization, migration, and globalization have, over the years, nearly eroded the practice of storytelling in suburban African life and even in children's school curricula. This, as argued by Okafor and Ng'andu (2003), has led to poor memory skills and cultural deprivation. While storytelling offers alternative ways of thinking, living, and being, music serves as a powerful tool for achieving that sociocultural expression and cohesion, mindfulness, and historical preservation. As such, Africans broadly acknowledge that both music and storytelling are mutually exclusive. According to Okafor and Ng'andu (2003, 179),

African cultures hardly borrow another's language for telling a story. Even when they borrow a story from another group, only certain words and ideas from the group that originated the story could flow into the [new] story. The same happens in music; the elements of the musical language of the original owners of the music flow into performance systems of another culture or ethnic group.

This symbiotic relationship between music and storytelling is particularly evident in Yoruba culture, where music is intricately woven into the fabric of everyday life, spirituality, and communal events. The Yoruba people, who are predominantly found in southwest Nigeria, are not only one of Africa's largest and most culturally significant ethnic groups, but also one with a storied history of oral traditions that encapsulate their beliefs, values, cosmology, mythology, and historical experiences (see, for example, Akintoye 2010). As such, music and storytelling in Yoruba society are not merely forms of artistic expression, but also and more so vital narrative devices that convey communal knowledge, moral lessons, and spiritual beliefs.

The Yoruba tradition, for instance, emphasizes oral storytelling, where myths, legends, and histories are passed down through generations. These narratives are frequently embedded in music, with songs and chants conveying stories that educate, entertain, and connect listeners to their heritage. Just as there are Yoruba storytelling genres, including *itan* (plain speech tales), *ewi* (a form of poetry), and *alo* (musical story), so also are the music genres that may or may not accompany such stories. These include *apala*, *juju*, and *fuji* – all of which are characterized by their lyrical depth, strophic formal and tonal organization, and narrative strength. In these genres, musicians act as storytellers and quasi-philosophers, weaving tales that reflect both personal experiences and collective cultural memories. And so, in this article, I explore the role of music as a storytelling device in Yoruba culture by focusing on its function as a means of cultural preservation, identity formation, and social instruction. By examining the ways that Yoruba music is emblematic of the spirit of storytelling, this study illuminates the cultural significance of music in Yoruba society. Further, the analytical section will consider specific examples of musical stories, forms, lyrics, and storytelling techniques to underscore the essential role that music plays in communicating Yoruba values, myths and, ultimately, identity.

As an outline, I first present a review of the scholarship on oral traditions, music and storytelling both from a general and specific (African) perspective. This is followed by the more analytical sections on Yoruba music and storytelling, including such aspects as genres, song examples, performance techniques, intertextual meanings of excerpted lyrics, and so on. The article concludes with sections that broadly situate Yoruba musical storytelling performance as praxis of everyday social life and the negotiation of cultural identity.

Overview of the scholarship on African oral traditions and storytelling

Across the world are indigenous oral traditions and storytelling practices, which the respective societies draw from to validate lived and imagined experiences. Some of the folktale narratives have been transferred to literary forms and used as a “frame of reference to reconstruct the [people’s] experiences in a complex world with its postmodern tensions and anxiety” (Winduo 2010, 3). As such, the literature is replete with explorations on and around its complexities not least because “cultural narratives and use of indigenous folktales serve as the backbone of national narratives in a postcolonial society” (Winduo 2010, 10). It is this notion of a “national narrative” that Okafor and Ng’andu (2003) echo when they insist that “A story written by an African from a foreign cultural platform is not an African tale, no matter how good its content, style or structure. [Rather] it is the Africanity of the content that endows it with validity” (p. 180). African oral traditions are, therefore, foundational to storytelling and, by extension, the role of music as a storytelling tool.

In more specific terms, scholars have examined and discussed African oral literature as a multifaceted tradition encompassing myths, proverbs, poetry, effect of literacy, and songs (e.g., Carter-Enyi 2018; Folaranmi and Oyeniyi 2021; Finnegan 2012; Okpewho 1992). But the most comprehensive text to date is arguably *The Palgrave Handbook on African Oral Traditions*, which is edited by Akintunde Akinfemi and Toyin Falola (see Akinfemi and Falola 2019). The text covers many dimensions and African contexts, ranging from language to locales, myths, orality, festivals and war songs, performance, as well as the legacies of colonialism. However, the book’s attempt at a fair representation of (sub-Saharan) Africa inadvertently robs it of a more specific focus on, say, music and storytelling among the Yoruba. This is the gap that the current article attempts to fill.

In African societies, oral literature is often accompanied by music to enhance the narrative experience. Music and storytelling coexist in a way that allows for the expression of complex ideas, cultural values, and historical knowledge. In Yoruba culture, storytelling goes beyond mere narration: it is an interactive, iterative communal event where the audience participates in the retelling of their collective history.

Oral storytelling traditions are sustained through *oriki* (praise poetry), chants, and music, each carrying cultural significance and reinforcing the shared values of the Yoruba people. With respect to *oriki*, scholars like Aaron Carter-Enyi have interrogated the dimensions of its performance, including how meaning is constructed and communicated by and through the eyes of the performer (see Carter-Enyi 2021). Elsewhere, Karin Barber (1991; 1994) has discussed *oriki* in relation to gender, its composition and performance; and Adeleke Adeeko (2017) has assessed *oriki* through its visual imaginary. Storytelling, therefore, becomes an act of cultural preservation, as it keeps the history and beliefs of the Yoruba people alive for future generations.

In terms of music, Yoruba music is a rich and diverse form that encompasses both secular and sacred genres, each with its unique functions and audience. According to Bode Omojola's *Yoruba Music in the Twentieth Century* (2012), Yoruba music serves multiple purposes: it is used in religious ceremonies, social gatherings, and as a medium for political and social commentary. Yoruba musical forms are deeply rooted in the tonal language of the Yoruba, allowing musicians to convey nuanced meanings through melody and rhythm.

Omojola notes that Yoruba musicians often employ musical instruments like the *dundun* (talking drum), which can mimic the tonal inflections of spoken Yoruba. This enables drummers to “speak” through their instruments, creating a form of storytelling that resonates with the community (discussed later). The versatility of Yoruba music allows it to be both a form of entertainment and a powerful narrative tool that expresses collective identity, social norms, and historical consciousness. This drumming and oral culture is given further focus by Mobolanle Sotunsa (2021) wherein she addresses the Yoruba “drum language” in relation to orality and literature. She notes that the integration of storytelling into Yoruba lyrics and drumming (performance) styles sets Yoruba music apart from other musical traditions.

Elsewhere, Karin Barber, while studying Yoruba oral poetry, emphasizes the performative nature of Yoruba storytelling. In Yoruba music, genres like *ewi* poetry are not only recited but also sung or chanted, creating a dynamic performance that involves both the storyteller and the audience. This performative element is crucial, as it transforms the audience from passive listeners into active participants in the storytelling process. This is so because of the temporality of performance, which, according to Margaret Drewal, “demands an approach that can accommodate human agents in the ongoing process of constructing social realities” (Drewal 1991, 2).

For instance, during a performance of *ewi*, the poet engages the audience through call-and-response, inviting them to affirm or react to the story being told. This interaction creates a shared experience, reinforcing communal identity and allowing cultural knowledge to be passed down orally in an engaging and memorable way. In these and other scholarly explorations, one thing is clear: the relationship between the spoken word, gaze, and musical performance is a complex one of mutual translation, interpretation, embellishment, and illustration – all of which are constantly vacillating between what is arbitrary and contextual.

Locating Music and Storytelling in Yoruba Culture

In Yoruba society, music is a vessel for mythological and historical narratives that convey the values, beliefs and identity of the people. Songs dedicated to deities like *Sango* (the god of thunder) and *Ogun* (the god of iron) serve as oral records of their deeds and attributes. These songs are performed during specific religious ceremonies, festivals, and community gatherings to remind the Yoruba of their ancestral heritage and the virtues embodied by these gods.

An example of this is seen in *Sango* worship songs, which recount stories of his bravery, temper, and supernatural powers. These narratives serve both a spiritual and educational function, as they instill respect for *Sango* and teach listeners about his significance in Yoruba cosmology. By integrating mythological themes into music, Yoruba culture ensures that the tales of its gods remain relevant and influential.

Beyond cosmology and mythology, Yoruba songs frequently incorporate moral lessons that serve as societal compass. Music thus becomes a way to communicate values such as honesty, resilience, and respect for elders. For example, a popular Yoruba proverb, “*Ti a ba fi owo otun ba omo wi, a fi tosi fa mora*” (If you chastise a child with the right hand, you pull him/her closer with the left), encapsulates the balance of discipline and love in parenting. Songs containing such proverbs reinforce cultural values that educate listeners about appropriate behavior within society. Such moral lessons are not only directed at individuals but also address broader social issues. For instance, Yoruba musicians may sing about the importance of communal harmony, warning against greed or betrayal. In this way, music becomes a tool for social cohesion, reminding individuals of their responsibilities to the community. Furthermore, genres such as *ewi*, *apala*, and *fuji* are instrumental in preserving Yoruba heritage.

Ewi itself often combines historical and allegorical narratives with moral insights, offering listeners a blend of entertainment and education. *Apala*, with its distinctive drumming patterns and lyrical focus on social themes, reflects the everyday experiences of the Yoruba, addressing issues such as economic hardship and resilience. *Fuji*, a more modern genre, also embodies Yoruba storytelling traditions by adapting folk narratives to contemporary themes. *Fuji* artists like Ayinde Barrister and Wasiu Ayinde Marshal have used their music to comment on socio-political issues and, therefore, created a form of storytelling that resonates with modern audiences while retaining traditional Yoruba values. To nuance these notions more clearly, I present and analyze some songs alongside their associated lyrics.

Yoruba Folklore, Music and Storytelling: Some Examples

Yoruba folklore is deeply embedded in and intertwined with music, particularly songs recounting the deeds of legendary figures and mythical beings. For instance, stories of *Orunmila*, the god of wisdom, are often told through songs that emphasize his role as a guide and protector of the Yoruba people. These songs are performed during festivals, rituals, and educational gatherings, thus allowing younger generations to learn about *Orunmila*'s virtues.

As well, Yoruba proverbs are integral to Yoruba storytelling praxis, which are often incorporated into song lyrics. Proverbs like *Iwa rere ni eso eniyan* (lit., “A good character is a person's adornment”) convey timeless wisdom that is reinforced through musical repetition. These proverbial songs highlight the Yoruba emphasis on character and integrity, and also serve as both pedagogical instruction and creative inspiration, which scholars like Olatunji Vidal have discussed extensively (see Vidal 2012). A good example of such an indigenous musical story is *Aja ran mi l'eru* (discussed below in Example 1).

Example 1: Aja Ran Mi L'Eru

Call: *Aja, Aja o ran mi l'eru* (Oh Dog, my friend, please help me)

Response: *janjala kope*

Call: *Boo ba ran mi l'eru, ma ke s'oloko* (If you do not help me, I will tell the farm owner)

Response: *janjala kope*

Call: *Bo loko ba de o, a gbe wa de* (On the arrival of the farm owner, we shall be apprehended)

Response: *Janjala ko pe*

Aja ran mi l'eru broadly depicts the power of words in African verbal arts (discussed in Peek 1981). The song specifically teaches children contentment and the need to avoid stealing. The story is about two proverbial friends namely *aja* (the dog) and *ijapa* (the tortoise). They both live in a community where farming is the main occupation. Unfortunately, both *ijapa* and *aja* are lazy and unable to farm and, thus, feed themselves. However, *ijapa* noticed that *aja* has been feeding well and, out of curiosity, asked to know the source of his food. As a good friend, *aja* told *ijapa* that he usually goes to and “picks” food items from people’s farms every day. So, the next day, they woke up early and went to do exactly as *aja* had described. Upon their arrival at the farm, *aja* took a negligible number of food crops as usual and left; but *ijapa* packed more than he could carry. As such, the weight of the stolen crops slowed down *ijapa*’s pace enough for the farm owners to catch him. It is at this point that he calls out in vain to *aja* for help (i.e., “Aja o ran mi l'eru”). Alas, *ijapa* is captured and killed.

Apart from folk songs, Yoruba musical storytelling appears in contemporary popular music genres such as *fuji* and *juju*. Fuji music, for example, blends traditional Yoruba sounds with themes that reflect contemporary issues. Through a process of externalization, *fuji* musicians often address topics such as love, betrayal, and justice, which create relatable narratives for its urban audiences. By combining traditional rhythmic elements with modern lyrical content, *fuji* and *juju* music remain a vital storytelling medium that adapt to an evolving Yoruba lived experience. As examples, I briefly present and discuss two popular songs, namely “Joromi” and “Ise Oluwa.”

Example 2: “Joromi”

Joromi o, Joromi o, Joromi o

Gb'ori wole o (Bow down your head)

Emi ma ba e ja (I will not fight you)

Omo re wa gba mi lowo o (My child, come to save me)

Joromi o, Joromi o, Joromi o

Joromi is a song with a storytelling format that captures a dialogue between a character named “Joromi” and another unnamed character. Through its lyrics and call-and-response pattern, the song draws listeners into a narrative that speaks to themes of respect, humility, and social connection. Here, the Yoruba phrase “Gb’ori wole,” which literally translates as “bow down your head,” is a metaphor for humility and deference. These are highly regarded virtues and values in Yoruba society. The song’s structure includes repetition, which is a common

element in Yoruba musical storytelling. This makes it easy for the audience to participate and respond to the call of “Joromi o.” This repetitive technique engages listeners and evokes a communal spirit that brings them into the narrative. The phrase “Emi ma ba e ja” (I will not fight you) conveys a sense of peace and resolution, promoting conflict avoidance and harmony, which are important cultural values in Yoruba society. “Joromi” becomes a medium for teaching moral behavior, encouraging humility, respect, and reconciliation in interpersonal relationships. The song thus serves as a classic example of how Yoruba music is used to convey social norms and virtues.

Example 3: *Ise Oluwa*

Ise Oluwa, ko le baje o (The work of God cannot be destroyed)

Ko le baje o (It cannot be destroyed)

Ko le baje o (It cannot be destroyed)

Ise Oluwa, ko le baje o (The work of God cannot be destroyed)

“Ise Oluwa” is a traditional Yoruba hymn, popularized by the iconic Nigerian juju musician King Sunny Ade. His rendition has become one of the most recognized versions of this traditional piece. Musically, *Ise Oluwa* is a powerful Yoruba song that serves as both a spiritual hymn and a cultural proclamation of faith. The song’s lyrics emphasize the sovereignty and resilience of the Divine, expressing the belief that what is ordained by God is beyond the reach of human interference or destruction. This theme is central to Yoruba spirituality, where reverence for divine forces and the omnipotence of an Almighty God (Oluwa) are deeply respected.

The song’s structure is a prime example of the call-and-response technique in Yoruba music. The lead vocalist sings a line (“Ise Oluwa, ko le baje o”), and the audience or backup singers respond with the same phrase and, thus, reinforce the message of divine protection. This technique not only enhances audience engagement, but also allows the community to affirm their shared beliefs as they create a collective spiritual experience. The repetitive nature of the song also enables listeners to internalize its message, making it both a declaration of faith and a means of comfort and reassurance.

The song’s use of the talking drum adds an additional layer of storytelling by imitating the vocal inflections of the song-text in a non-verbal form. The drum’s tonal variations echo the lyrics, reinforcing the message and making it accessible even to those who may not fully understand Yoruba. King Sunny Ade’s version of “Ise Oluwa” uses this traditional hymn to connect audiences with their spiritual roots, promoting a sense of unity and resilience in the face of life’s challenges. Through this song, Ade exemplifies how Yoruba music can be a vessel for spiritual storytelling, passing down moral lessons and reinforcing cultural identity, which, beyond being a shared culture, also focuses on “what we really are, what history has done to us, what we have become, and the way we position ourselves within the narratives of the past (Hall 1990, 223).

All three song examples clearly illustrate how Yoruba music employs storytelling to convey moral values, social norms, and spiritual beliefs that reflect who the people really are and socio-historical influences that underpin their shared identity. The use of repetition, call-and-response, and instrumental accompaniment in particular allows these songs to resonate with listeners on multiple levels, ensuring that the messages within them are not only heard but

also felt and remembered. Yet a closer look reveals that this is achieved via specific musical and performance techniques in Yoruba storytelling, which I discuss below.

Analysis of Musical Techniques in Yoruba Storytelling

In this section, and in no particular order, I discuss the common performance techniques found in Yoruba music and storytelling practice for their broad theoretical and practical implications to the current article's argument.

Use of the Talking Drum

The *dundun* (or talking drum) is a central musical instrument in Yoruba music, and is renowned for its ability to mimic spoken Yoruba. Drummers use the instrument to “speak” phrases and narratives, adding a layer of non-verbal storytelling that resonates with listeners. In this way, *dundun* serves as both a musical and linguistic tool, communicating messages that transcend language barriers. Dundun has a distinctive hourglass shape, with leather cords running along its sides. These cords are squeezed or relaxed by the drummer to vary the pitch, creating sounds that can imitate the rise and fall of spoken Yoruba. The drum can replicate the tonal inflections of words and effectively transform rhythmic beats into understandable messages and, in some cases, entire narratives that listeners can interpret.

In Yoruba culture, the talking drum is a powerful storytelling tool that conveys complex ideas, emotions, and historical knowledge. Skilled drummers use the drum to “speak” proverbs, names, praises, and even entire stories, allowing them to communicate in a way that resonates with the cultural identity of their audience. The ability of the *dundun* to “speak” Yoruba makes it a culturally significant instrument, as it enables drummers to participate in and contribute to the Yoruba tradition of oral storytelling. The talking drum thus becomes an extension of the drummer's voice by voicing the unvoiced, expressing emotions, wisdom, and communal values.

The communicative potential of the talking drum is often employed during festivals, rituals, and community gatherings, where the drum's beats and tones carry messages to the audience. For example, at a traditional Yoruba wedding, the talking drum might be used to convey messages of love, unity, and family pride. The drummer could tap out phrases that symbolize blessings for the couple, reciting a poetic sequence through the drum that wishes the newlyweds prosperity and harmony. In other settings, such as festivals celebrating the Yoruba deities or Orisha, the talking drum serves as a medium for narrating the histories and attributes of these spiritual figures. Through rhythmic storytelling, drummers bring these deities to life, connecting the community with their spiritual heritage and deepening their cultural understanding.

In many ways, the talking drum is an essential part of Yoruba historical record-keeping. Unlike written histories, which are static, the narratives conveyed through the talking drum are dynamic and adaptable. Drummers can modify their rhythms and messages to suit the occasion, adding layers of meaning to traditional stories or incorporating contemporary experiences. This adaptability makes the talking drum a living instrument of history, preserving the past while allowing it to evolve with the present. For example, in times of social or political upheaval, drummers might use the *dundun* to narrate recent events, offering commentary or critique in a way that is both poetic and resonant with the people. This makes the talking drum an essential tool for cultural continuity, bridging generations through sound.

The talking drum also plays a critical role in conveying respect and honoring individuals in Yoruba society. Through *oriki* (or praise poetry), drummers use the talking drum to sing the praises of prominent figures, ancestors, and deities (see Barber 1981; 1990). Each praise song is customized for the individual being honored, recounting their achievements, virtues, and lineage. This performance not only celebrates the person but also reinforces their role and status within the community. For instance, at a ceremony for a local chief or elder, the drummer may play a series of rhythmic patterns that “utter” the chief’s lineage, virtues, and deeds by drawing from an extensive oral repertoire of praises known to the community. This form of storytelling through the talking drum enhances the chief’s social identity/standing and connects the individual to their ancestral heritage.

Moreover, the talking drum has a unique role in Yoruba spiritual practices, where it is often seen as a conduit between the physical and spiritual worlds. In rituals dedicated to *Orisha*, the drum’s rhythms are believed to summon the presence of these deities by invoking their energy and wisdom. The talking drum’s ability to replicate spoken Yoruba is thought to make it intelligible not only to the people but also to the spirits by serving as a direct line of communication between worshippers and the divine. During rituals for *Orisha* like Sango, the drum communicates stories of his heroic feats and fiery nature, encouraging worshippers to embody his attributes of strength and justice. The rhythms of the drum tell the stories of Sango’s life, his virtues, and his wrath, making the storytelling experience an immersive, communal interaction that bridges the human and spiritual realms.

The technical skill required to play the talking drum is considerable. Drummers must have a deep understanding of both Yoruba language and musical rhythm, as each tonal variation in the drum corresponds to a specific syllable or phrase in spoken Yoruba (discussed further in Euba 1990). A proficient drummer uses a combination of hand strikes and adjustments to the tension cords to produce the varying pitches needed to articulate words. This complexity makes the talking drum a highly respected instrument, as only those who have trained extensively can master its nuances and use it to its full storytelling potential. Skilled drummers are often revered as keepers of history and conveyors of cultural wisdom, holding an esteemed place within Yoruba society (for more, see Durojaye 2019).

Through its ability to communicate, commemorate, and connect, the talking drum transcends its role as a musical instrument to become a storytelling device that embodies Yoruba history, values, and beliefs. Whether narrating the deeds of ancestors, celebrating personal accomplishments, or invoking the presence of deities, the *dundun* drum enriches the Yoruba tradition of storytelling, making it an indispensable element of Yoruba cultural heritage. In essence, the talking drum serves as a voice of the Yoruba people, a rhythmic storyteller that articulates the soul of the community, resonating across generations as a living testament to the power of music and narrative in African culture.

Call-and-Response Technique

Although not exclusive to the Yoruba culture, the Call-and-response technique is a hallmark of Yoruba music that fosters a participatory storytelling experience. During performances, the lead singer or musician calls out lines, and the audience responds, creating a dialogue that strengthens communal bonds. This technique not only engages the audience but also ensures that the stories and messages within the songs are memorable. In such Yoruba songs, the call-and-response technique functions as more than just a musical interaction; it is a participatory method that draws the audience into the storytelling process. This communal

approach to music is particularly evident during events like weddings, festivals, and religious gatherings, where stories are not simply told to the audience but are instead shared experiences. This technique reflects the Yoruba cultural emphasis on community and illustrates that storytelling is a collective practice, and that narratives gain strength through shared and reified voices. For example, during a narrative about a Yoruba hero or deity, the lead performer might sing a line describing a key event, while the audience echoes or elaborates on the statement, reinforcing their connection to the story and their shared heritage. This process not only engages participants but also ensures that the tales being told resonate deeply with the cultural identity of the Yoruba people.

Elsewhere, and in certain rituals such as those dedicated to the Orisha (deities in Yoruba religion), the call-and-response format also serves a spiritual purpose. The chorused refrains represent the voices of the community as a whole, unified in worship or reflection on the deities' stories. This style blurs the line between music and worship and demonstrates how intertwined storytelling is with spiritual practice in Yoruba culture. The response from the audience signifies an agreement with, or endorsement of, the story, and thus elevates each storytelling event to an act of communal reaffirmation and solidarity. The call-and-response technique is one of the most distinctive and participatory features of Yoruba musical storytelling, serving as a fundamental structure in Yoruba music. This technique is not only a musical exchange between performer and audience but also a symbolic expression of communal unity and shared identity. In Yoruba culture, where community cohesion is valued, call-and-response represents the dynamic interaction between individual voices and collective affirmation. The lead vocalist or instrumentalist initiates the call, and the audience responds, creating a rhythmic and lyrical dialogue that reinforces a sense of belonging and cultural identity among all participants.

In traditional Yoruba ceremonies, call-and-response is utilized to involve the audience actively in storytelling, making the narrative a collective experience rather than a one-sided performance. This technique encourages audience participation, allowing listeners to engage directly with the story being told. For example, during a *juju* music performance, the lead musician might sing about a historical event or recount the tale of a legendary Yoruba figure. The audience, especially those who are familiar with the story and its significance, will respond in unison to affirm the narrative and express their shared cultural knowledge. This act of communal response not only deepens the emotional impact of the performance but also strengthens the listeners' connection to and sustenance of their heritage, even as they actively contribute to what is more or less the production of indigenous knowledge.

The call-and-response structure in Yoruba music also has a spiritual dimension, particularly in rituals dedicated to the Yoruba deities or Orisha. In these contexts, the response from the audience is seen as a form of spiritual agreement or invocation, where participants collectively affirm their devotion and call upon the presence of the deities (Omojola 2010). For instance, in ceremonies for Ogun (i.e., the god of iron), the lead singer might begin a chant or song praising Ogun's strength, bravery, and contributions to the Yoruba people. The audience responds with fervor, reinforcing the invocation and collectively inviting Ogun's spirit to join them. This form of spiritual storytelling allows the community to connect with the divine, with each call-and-response exchange representing a symbolic dialogue between humans and the sacred realm. The technique thus transcends mere musicality to become a spiritual practice and a way of merging the worlds of the living and the divine.

In addition to religious contexts, call-and-response is frequently used in Yoruba work songs and communal gatherings, where it serves as both a rhythm for coordination and a means of alleviating the strain of labor. For example, in agricultural settings, workers might sing call-and-response songs to maintain synchronization during tasks such as planting or harvesting. These songs often contain moral lessons, encouragements, or humorous observations about life, which not only make the work more enjoyable, but also foster a sense of camaraderie among the participants. Here, the leader sings a line, often improvising and extemporizing based on the mood of the group or the challenges of the work at hand, while the others respond, creating a musical rhythm that matches the physical rhythm of the labor. This use of call-and-response underscores the Yoruba belief that music is integral to daily life and that storytelling can serve both practical and aesthetic purposes.

The improvisational nature of call-and-response in Yoruba music also allows for flexibility and creativity, as performers and audience members adapt their responses to suit the occasion. Unlike scripted storytelling, which remains fixed, call-and-response is fluid and responsive, with each performance potentially differing from the last. This adaptability makes it an ideal technique for capturing the ever-evolving nature of Yoruba cultural narratives. For example, during celebrations such as weddings or naming ceremonies, the lead musician might spontaneously compose praise songs for the family being honored, singing of their lineage, virtues, and achievements. The audience responds with enthusiasm, each response varying slightly, yet echoing the sentiments of respect and honor being conveyed. This spontaneous interaction allows the performance to reflect the unique dynamics of each gathering, emphasizing the importance of both individual and collective expression in Yoruba culture.

In modern Yoruba music genres like fuji, apala, and juju, the call-and-response technique has evolved to address contemporary issues and connect with urban audiences. Musicians use this technique to engage listeners on topics such as social justice, political activism, and cultural pride, encouraging the audience to respond not only with words but also with a sense of solidarity and shared purpose. For example, in juju performances, artists like King Sunny Ade use call-and-response to critique societal problems subtly, calling on the audience to reflect on themes of unity, progress, and resilience. By inviting the audience to respond, the musician transforms the performance into a communal discussion, giving listeners a sense of agency and voice in the narrative. This evolution of call-and-response demonstrates its versatility as a storytelling tool, as it adapts to reflect the changing realities and concerns of Yoruba society.

Moreover, call-and-response serves as a pedagogical tool in Yoruba storytelling, enabling younger generations to learn the songs, stories, and proverbs of their culture. Through repeated participation in call-and-response performances, children and adolescents internalize the rhythms, words, and meanings of traditional narratives, becoming fluent in the cultural language of their heritage. This form of communal learning ensures the continuity of Yoruba knowledge and values, as the youth become both the inheritors and future transmitters of these cultural stories. The inclusive nature of call-and-response means that even those who are new to the culture can participate and gradually learn the intricacies of Yoruba storytelling through active engagement, fostering cultural pride and continuity.

In sum, the call-and-response technique in Yoruba music is more than a musical format; it is a communal ritual, a form of spiritual invocation, a method of work coordination, a platform for creative improvisation, and a means of cultural education. This technique encapsulates the Yoruba understanding of music and storytelling as interactive and participatory practices that bring people together, allowing them to express individual identities

while reaffirming collective values. Through call-and-response, Yoruba music captures the voices of both the performer and the audience, making each storytelling event a collaborative creation that reflects the shared experience and resilience of the Yoruba people. This approach highlights the enduring power of music to unite, educate, and inspire, making call-and-response an essential element of Yoruba cultural expression and an invaluable tool in the preservation of oral traditions. I shall now turn to one other art form that is nearly always present during musical storytelling in Yoruba culture: dance. Indeed, dance is a medium of storytelling in traditional Yoruba societies, and music plays a vital role in such dances. Within the context of storytelling, such dances are termed danced dramas. Thus, this article will not be complete without an overview of the role of dance in music and storytelling.

Dance in Musical Storytelling among the Yoruba

As an essential element of Yoruba musical storytelling, dance transforms songs and rhythms into a multisensory experience. Dance adds physical expression to the narrative, as performers use body language, gestures, and symbolic movements to represent characters, emotions, and plot elements from the stories. In Yoruba culture, different dances are associated with different deities, events, and tales in order to create a visual language that complements the music. For instance, dances honoring Sango (the god of thunder) are energetic and intense, with sharp, bold movements that symbolize his strength and fiery nature. These movements tell the story of Sango's legendary prowess and volatile character, providing an additional layer of storytelling beyond words and music. Similarly, dances associated with *Osun* (the goddess of love and fertility) are graceful and fluid, embodying her gentle and nurturing qualities. These performances allow the audience to experience the attributes of the deities on a more visceral level that reinforces their understanding of each deity's role and personality.

Dance also serves as a form of non-verbal storytelling, particularly useful in festivals where large crowds gather, as it conveys complex stories and emotions even to those who may not hear/understand every word of the song. Through synchronized movement and traditional attire, dancers represent the collective memory and cultural heritage of the Yoruba, using physical expression to keep the narratives of their history and beliefs alive. The integration of dance into storytelling events underscores the Yoruba belief that music, movement, and narrative are interconnected aspects of cultural expression, each enhancing the other to create a unified form of storytelling. Each dance movement is deliberate and emblematic of the story, emotions, or characters involved. As well, certain music instruments have specific functions and symbolism among the Yoruba. This is because there is a "direct structural relationship and coordination between the dancer and the instrumentalist" (Bakare and Mans 2003, 229).

For example, the steps, gestures, and body language used in *alagbede* traditional Yoruba blacksmith dance are often laden with the symbolic meaning of *agogo* (the metal bell) to reinforce the worship and legend of Ogun (the god of iron). Unsurprisingly, the entire *alagbede* ensemble consists of only various sizes of the metal bells. Elsewhere, there exists dances like the *agere*, which is named after the long drum ("agere"). The instrument is roundly linked to royalty; and so, only royal personalities dance to *agere* because the story of the music is in and of itself about royals. By implication, these and other Yoruba dances allow the audience to visually experience the narrative, adding a kinetic dimension that complements the auditory experience of music and lyrics. The gestures of a dancer may symbolize bravery, sorrow, joy, or even ambivalence (depending on the story). Nevertheless, this offers the audience an opportunity to interpret the narrative on multiple sensory levels. This multisensory approach

creates an immersive experience that helps listeners to connect with the story on a deeper and more personalized level (Bakare 2000).

In all, the role of dance in Yoruba musical storytelling exemplifies the belief that all forms of art—music, dance, poetry—are interconnected and serve as expressions of cultural identity and communal values. Dance, in particular, provides a means of storytelling that transcends language and, thus, allows for the preservation and transmission of Yoruba heritage even in contexts where language barriers may exist. The physicality of dance enables storytelling to reach broader audiences, including those who may not fully understand Yoruba language or idioms. Whereas its interpretation remains firmly context and culture related, this universality ensures that Yoruba stories and values can be appreciated by diverse audiences in a globalized world where enhancing cultural exchange and the spread of Yoruba identity transcends geographical borders.

CONCLUSION

The interplay between music and storytelling within Yoruba culture is a profound testament to the richness of African oral traditions and the significance of music as a cultural repository. In Yoruba society, music is not simply an art form but a vital tool for conveying stories and moral pedagogy, preserving historical knowledge, and celebrating communal/cultural identity. Through genres like ewi, apala, juju, and fuji, Yoruba musicians have created a narrative legacy that captures and disseminates the values, struggles, and beliefs of the Yoruba people. This article has explored the multifaceted roles of music in Yoruba storytelling, examining how mythological and historical narratives, moral lessons, and social values are woven into musical forms. Yoruba music embodies the stories of gods and heroes, teaching listeners about their heritage and encouraging them to embody the virtues and resilience that these figures represent. Through proverbial songs and poetic expressions, Yoruba music also reinforces community values, reminding listeners of their responsibilities to one another and their cultural legacy. Furthermore, the analysis of musical techniques such as the use of the talking drum, call-and-response interactions, and dance highlights the ways that Yoruba musicians engage their audience and foster a communal storytelling experience. These techniques are more than artistic choices; they are essential elements of the Yoruba oral tradition that ensure stories are not only heard but also internalized, remembered, and passed down through generations.

Finally, the Yoruba approach to music and storytelling exemplifies a broader African tradition that approaches music as a living, dynamic form of cultural transmission. In a society where oral literature remains a primary means of historical documentation and cultural continuity, Yoruba music plays a crucial role in sustaining its identity and heritage. As African societies continue to evolve and adapt to modern influences, the enduring legacy of Yoruba music and storytelling serves as a reminder of the importance of preserving cultural narratives and the power of music as a timeless form of storytelling.

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