

METRICISM IN YORÙBÁ WÓRÒ RHYTHM

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Abstract

Wórò rhythm is a generic rhythmic configuration in the music of the Yorùbá of South-western Nigeria. Due to increased literacy and renewed interests in indigenous-inclined scholarship, African musicology, art music, and similar interests, there has been a remarkable increase in attempts at documenting African musical expressions (wóòròò inclusive). However, there have been several different formats deployed to this end, thereby leading to diverse (mis)representations of wórò's musicological structures. This article undertakes an analytical investigation of the structure of wóòròò rhythm using the theoretical foundations of Structuralism and Timeline. In-depth interviews, available literature and participant observation methods were deployed in carrying out this study. Empirical instruments of musicology were used to determine the actual metric configurations that existed in wórò rhythm. It was thereafter discovered that, instead of the compound duple, simple triple, simple quadruple and other metric formats that were erroneously and forcefully applied in representing wórò rhythm, the actual metrical format is the compound quadruple time. This fundamental theoretical basis will help establish proper documentation, and advance the course of further studies, analysis and scholarship in African musicology.

Keywords: Wórò rhythm, Metricism, Yorùbá, African musicology, Musical behaviour

Introduction

Rhythm is a fundamental element of music - in a way, it can be considered to be its regular (at times, irregular), essential and pulsating heartbeat. According to Ammer, "rhythm is the movement of musical notes with respect to time, that is, how fast they move (tempo) and the patterns of long and short notes as well as of accents" (363). As noted here by Ammer, one very important factor in the concept of rhythm is

that of time. In order to establish rhythm, the time factor plays the role of a backdrop of some sort, against which the musical sounds are organized. This idea is corroborated by the Oxford Dictionary of Music, 5th ed., where its definition of rhythm states that it, ". . . covers everything pertaining to the time aspect of music as distinct from the aspect of pitch . . ." (622). Akpabot also defines rhythm as, "...the organization of music in respect to time" (49).

In the exploration and studies of the music of Africa, one aspect that has received the keenest of interests has, undoubtedly, been its rhythm. Jones (1949) in *Agawu* declares that "if anyone were to ask, 'What is the outstanding character of African music?' The answer is, 'A highly developed rhythm.'" (57). Perhaps, this is because rhythm stands out as the most obvious aesthetic feature of African music, especially when viewed in comparison and contrast to the music of Western origin. This attention-grabbing tendency of rhythm in African music can be traced back to the initial contact of the earliest European explorers, ethnomusicologists, traders and missionaries, whose attempts at documenting their observations expressed different views, many of which were largely subjective (*Agawu* 55-56). Nevertheless, it is clear that rhythm in African music is too obvious to be ignored. Merriam posits that:

The importance of rhythm in the music of Africa has probably been more widely commented upon, by early as well as recent authors, than almost any other single aspect of African aesthetic expression. Early traveller's accounts emphasize the kinds, numbers, and varieties of drums and other percussion instruments, often to the exclusion of any further information. (57)

Johnson, while attempting to provide a detailed geographical description of the Yorùbá nation notes that it . . . lies to the immediate West of the River Niger (below the confluence) and south of the Quorra (i.e., the Western branch of the same River above the confluence), having Dahomeh on the West, and the Bight of Benin to the South. It is roughly speaking between latitude 6° North, and Longitude 2° 3' and 6° 3' East (23). A little probe into the ethnography of the Yorùbá reveals that, in terms of contemporary international frontiers, they can be found in some West African countries like Nigeria, Togo, Benin Republic and Sierra Leone. This nation also has some registered presence across the Atlantic Ocean, in some countries like Cuba and Brazil (*Vidal* 18; *Okunade* 65; *Samuel* 77). In Nigeria, home to the

largest body of the Yorùbá nation, they form the second largest ethnic group. There are also some major sub-groups in Yorùbáland, which include Èdgbá, Ìjèbú, Ìjèsà, Ifè and Èkìtì (Johnson 247: Euba 29; Okunade 65).

Metricism is a musicological feature of rhythm which serves as a 'measuring scale' of some sort for it. Kostka and Payne describe this feature as the consistent patterns resulting from the grouping of beats in a musical passage (29). However, in spite of the fact that the concept of meter, as conceived by Western musicologists, continues to generate questions and controversies on its application and suitability for African rhythm, many of the key features of this concept have nevertheless been identified, accepted and applied by a wide range of African musicologists. Some of these key features include beats accents, metric cycles, timing, time signatures, metric accent patterns, and so on. Corroboratively speaking, Labi asserts that "musical behaviour of most African societies involves foot stamping, hand clapping or the beating of idiophones. The concept of meter, therefore, is a direct result of this externalized timing principle manifesting in the form of beats" (6).

Recently, there has been a wave of intellectual African renaissance, of some sort, among scholars of African descent and even beyond (Ekwueme 2). This, and perhaps, increased connectivity through globalisation, has led to a kind of 'reawakening' that has given birth to the arousal of fresh scholarly interests in issues pertaining to African history and heritage, music inclusive. Vidal, in providing an historical antecedent to the above, and using the Nigerian experience as an illustration, states that:

Between 1705 and 1975, the study of the science of music (musicology) was yet to be firmly entrenched in Nigeria as a scholarly discipline . . . The period between 1964 and 1974 was marked with an increase in the number of contributions by Nigerian musicologists . . . the reawakening of interests in African humanities did not emerge until the independence years that the cultural identity became one of the focus of nationalists all over the country, after a century of colonization. (148)

Although, it has been half a century since independence, it is pertinent to note that the reawakening of interests in African humanities still remains a gradually unfolding phenomenon. Having gone past

the age of oral traditions in the preservation and trans-generational transmission of African musical heritage, in-depth musicological studies and analyses of these musics have become inevitable. The lack of which is evident in the inadequacy, inconsistency and confusion of language being employed in attempts at documenting African music. One of the important rhythmic styles of the Yorùbá is what is commonly referred to as wòòròò, which is the focus of this study. This style features frequently in the music of the South-western Nigeria. It has been used actively in a wide range of genres which includes, but is not limited to, traditional, popular music, gospel, folklore and art music. However, it has been noticed that there are no generally accepted standards in the representation of this rhythmic pattern. For example, there have been several accounts of duple, triple, quadruple and other time formats being used in its documentation by notation. This study intends to engage this style in a theoretical analysis, in order to gain a better understanding of its structures. This kind of effort can help to correct the widespread misrepresentation and the plurality of standards used in its documentation. In doing this, the study aims to contribute to the ever-growing quest to document different aspects of traditional African values (music, in this instance). This is based on the axiom that, in order to guarantee preservation and integrity of these values in trans-generational transmission, the hitherto reliance on oral tradition does not suffice. Also, by providing a lucid depiction of the structural formation of the wòòròò rhythmic pattern through an objective engagement and interrogation of its inherent musicological elements, the article would have opened new vistas of research in African musicology scholarship.

With the renewed interest in the musicological study of African music and its attributes, it has become imperative to probe further, using appropriate language that is based on theoretically sound foundations. It is common belief among some scholars that there is still a dearth of language in traditional African music. In this regard, Ekwueme asserts that:

. . . among all investigators, black and white, there has been a preponderance of anthropological approach to the study of African music, where the emphasis is on the social function of music with a thorough description of the exotic rituals with which music is associated and a (sometimes) ultra-scientific description of African indigenous musical instruments. (23)

As a solution to the aforementioned and in a bid to make a recommendation, he further states that "more should be done, however, to find out also the original theories behind African traditional musical organisation, before those theories are completely swept away from contemporary practice by forces of change" (23). Mereni corroboratively claims that a major part of existing literature of African music "reveals that only little is said about the music and that little, only in descriptive terms" (ii). He argues further that the 'little' places emphasis on cultural anthropology (ii).

Furthermore, it is obvious that the international language of music is so developed that it hardly needs any spirited effort at advancing its frontiers. However, it has been demonstrated repeatedly that the use of this Western musical language in representing African music has proved deficient (Nketia 25; Agu 32; Vidal 18; Ekwueme 50). There is, therefore, the need for a better understanding of the underlying principles and theories that are present in African musical styles. It is in this quest that this work finds its justification.

Owing to the fact that there is a fair amount of ideological unity in African music, there are, therefore, many references to 'African Music' in this study. The researcher is also aware of the 'Saharan divide,' therefore, 'African music' as used in this research refers only to the music of sub-Saharan Africa, as opposed to that of Northern Africa or other Arabized communities (Nketia 3). As seen earlier, the geographical spread of the Yorùbá nation not only transcends national borders, it also trans-continental. The scope of this study is however limited to the analytical study of wòdròò rhythmic pattern as it exists and is performed by the Yorùbá people of South-western Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

Two theories serve as conceptual guides for this study. The first is the Timeline theory. This theory, which is also known as the bell rhythm, bell pattern, phrasing referent, etc. was first propounded by Jones, who claimed that it was a universal feature in African music (210-212). Thereafter, the theory has gone ahead to gain popularity among other scholars of African musicology (Jones 210-212; Vidal 131; Nketia 131-132; Akpabot 54-55; Ekwueme 4; Olusoji, Agawu 73-75). It was used by Nketia in his treatise on *The Music of Africa* and also by Ekwueme (27-35) where he employed it in his paper entitled, *Structural Levels of Rhythm and Form in African Music* (Nketia 131-132; Ekwueme 27-35). This theory is well suited for this study because, against the background that the Timeline as an embedded feature of the wòdròò pattern, it can provide a highly useful tool in its analysis.

One remarkable reality about the timeline theory is that of its universality in African music. Its ubiquitous occurrence has contributed to the creation of an aesthetic uniformity in African music. Akpabot, speaking of Jones, explained that "Jones has made us aware of the presence of a standard bell pattern throughout Africa (emphasis mine) (84). In explaining the concept of timeline from a functional point of view, Nketia posits that,

Because of the difficulty of keeping subjective metronomic time in this manner, African traditions facilitate this process by externalising the basic pulse. . . .this may be shown through hand clapping or through the beats of a simple idiophone. The guideline which is related to the time span in this manner has come to be described as a time line. (131-132)

Vidal, in his treatise on Rhythmic Modes, brought this theory closer home (at least, as far as the focus of this study is concerned) when he related it directly to the Yorùbá (131-135). First, he identified the time line as a form of rhythmic ostinato where the phenomenon of hemiola is evident. Second, he was able to establish and analyse its occurrence in Yorùbá music. Another point worthy of note here is that he was able to define a verbal connotation that is used as a colloquial identification of the Yorùbá time line, which he referred to as the 'konkolo' pattern. Also, Agawu's explanation on time lines is illuminating and germane here. He offers that,

A *topos* (his own name for time lines) is a short, distinct, and often memorable rhythmic figure of modest duration (about a metric length or single cycle), usually played by the bell or high-pitched instrument in the ensemble, and serves as a point of temporal reference. It is held as an ostinato throughout the dance-composition. (73)

The second theory used in this study is the theory of Structuralism. It evolved because of the works of Claude Levi-Strauss, a French anthropologist and ethnologist. The theory, as quoted by Blackburn posits that "...elements of human culture must be understood in terms of their relationship to a larger, overarching system or structure" (15). Another definition for this theory was provided by a Blackburn, when he explained that it is "the belief that phenomena of human life are not

intelligible except through their interrelations. These relations constitute a structure, and behind local variations in the surface phenomena there are constant laws of abstract culture" (28). The meaning (intelligibility) of wòdròd rhythm (the phenomenon in this case) can therefore only be understood through its structural frame and the relationship between its components. Blackburn's explanation therefore highlights an important concept; that of 'inter-relativity'. This is what this study is all about.

This concept of the inter-relativity structural elements in this theory is further corroborated and articulated by Adeleke who posits that the theory, ". . . explores the relationships between fundamental elements upon which some higher mental, linguistic, social and cultural values are situated" (2). It is in the light of this that this study investigates the relationship that exists between the different elements of rhythm in the style of music under focus, and how these elements, in turn, relate with its overall structure. Adeleke also used this theory in his research on Ìyèré Ifá in Yorùbá culture. Likewise, in the musicological analysis and identification of structural devices in Ibibio music, the theory of structuralism was used by Akpabot (22). Blacking also employed this same theory in his analysis of the structural layout of Venda melodies (7).

The analytical examination of wòdròd rhythms in this study therefore sits well within the context of these theories. First, the timeline theory establishes the fact the timeline is an internally embedded and essential structural element of wòdròd rhythms. Consequently, it will be used in the analysis of the internal structures of wòdròd rhythm. Second, the structuralist approach will be used as a theoretical framework of this research, as it relates to the study of the musicological elements of wòdròd rhythm. The study hopes to do this by investigating the relationship of these elements to one another and how these elements in turn connect to the overall structure.

Metric Formats used in Wòdròd Notation

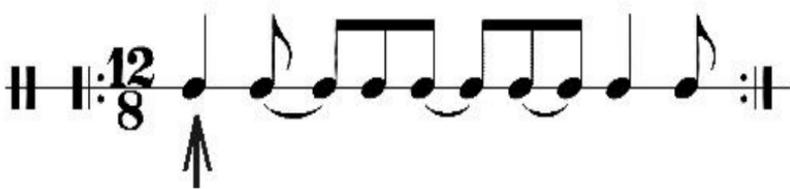
In different individual (and largely isolated) attempts at metricising wòdròd rhythm, various metric formats have been used. Some of these include triple time (simple and compound), duple time (compound) and quadruple (simple and compound) time. One of the contemporary drummers interviewed in the course of this study (Mr Daniel Onogbai) claimed that there were both '6/8 and 12/8' types of wòdròd. These all point to the fact that there are several individual notions about what metric format best suits wòdròd.

However, this multiplicity of metric formats has raised some questions. These questions are: Is wórò rhythm definitive in nature? Does it self-mutate (i.e., does it undergo changes on its own accord)? Can more than one metric format address the same musical structure? Direct answers to these questions will help in determining, in realistic terms, the correct metric format to be used in notating wórò music.

The Timeline and Wórò Metricism

In 1956, Jones established a universal concept in African music, known as the timeline (210-212). Afterwards, several scholars in African musicology (notably Nketia, Agu, Ekwueme, Agawu, etc.) have gone ahead to validate and extensively use this theory. In Yorùbá music, Vidal went ahead to identify this as the konkolo bell pattern (133). Based on the premise discussed above, it is therefore safe to assert that wórò's timeline forms a vital part of the internal structure of wórò patterns. In fact, it forms a foundational structure, upon which other building blocks are laid. Due to this structural integration, it can be deduced that the timeline is a possible measurement tool for the metric structure of wórò.

Therefore, an understanding of the structural framework of the timeline can help in providing an understanding of wórò's musicology character – its metric format, in this case. The basic wórò (konkolo) timeline is provided in musical example 1 below. This illustration, in addition, highlights the point of accentuation.



Musical Example 1: Wórò Timeline, Showing Point of Accentuation

In determining the metric format of a piece of music, two important factors act as the determinants: cyclicism and accentuation. First, there must be a cyclic motion of the main pulse, i.e., 1, 2 ... N, and back to 1, 2...etc. If these cycles cannot be established, then determining the meter is impossible. For example, we will need to know the number of beats of a particular type of note in each bar. The bar represents the measure of a cycle. The stress pattern of the pulse becomes a pointer to the position in the cycle. Normally, a 'first count accent' reveals where each cycle commences. The first pulse of each cycle is either

the strongest, or it is strategically positioned to 'mark' the outset of the first (also called the main) pulse.

Against the background of the forgoing, another look at musical example 1 clearly reveals rhythmic attributes of the wódròò timeline. The arrowed point reveals a clearly accented point, which also marks the first pulse of each measure. The stress point is also usually reflected in the other instruments of the ensemble. Although, there are usually multiple horizontal lines of rhythm (realized by percussion instruments playing in a multi-rhythmic combination, also called polyrhythm), there is usually a slight 'convergence' at this point, thereby effectively causing a reinforcement of the first pulse. This clearly demonstrates the position of the commencement of a new measure. It is therefore safe to conclude that wódròò can be correctly notated using this format, which is in compound quadruple time.

Furthermore, musical example 2 below represents the timeline above, with the metric pulses (beats) highlighted. In addition, the pattern of metric accent is also included in this illustration. This pattern (Strong - weak - Not-so-strong - weak) is consistent with the universally recognized pattern of metric accents in a quadruple time meter.

Metric Pulses: 1.....2.....3.....4

Pattern of Metric Accents: Strong weak Not-so-strong weak

Musical Example 2: Wódròò Timeline, Showing Metric Pulses and Metric Accents

Musical Example 3: Attempted Wódròò Notation Using 6/8 Time

The musical example above shows the most commonly used metric time for wódròò. Some scholars who have claimed that wódròò

is in 'compound duple' time are directly referring to this timing formation. Therefore, a number of wòdròò notations encountered in the course of the research were done in 6/8 time signatures. In musical example 3 above, the 'arrowed points' reveal where accentuation occurs, thereby showing the stress patterns. This pattern shows a 'bi-measurely' occurrence of these accentuations. The implication of this is that the bar lines must have been in the wrong places. If we take into account the concept of 'first beat accents', then it will be more appropriate to take these accented points as the beginning of new measures. This will take us back to the 12/8 timing as the most appropriate metric format for wòrò patterns.

↓ ↓ ↓

Ì pà dé d'ò la Ì pà dé d'ò la A dú pé dú pé l'ò wò Q lò run A dú pé dú pé l'ò

Etc.

wò o lù kò

Score A

Ì pà dé d'ò la Ì pà dé d'ò la A dú pé dú pé l'ò wò Q lò run

Etc.

A dú pé dú pé l'ò wò o lù kò

Score B

Musical Example 4: Ìpàdé D'òla by Ayòò Dédeké from Má Gbàgbé Ilé Songbook

Rhapsodia Nigeriana

Nigerian Rhapsody For Strings

Lau Esuwere

Violin I

f

Timbane

5

10

Etc.

The musical score is written for Violin I. It begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 2/4 time signature. The tempo and mood are indicated as 'Allegretto' and 'Moderato'. The score is divided into three systems. The first system shows the beginning of the piece, with a 'Timbane' section above the staff and a 'Violin I' section below. The second system starts at measure 5 and continues the piece. The third system starts at measure 10 and ends with 'Etc.'. The score is marked with a forte dynamic (*f*) at the beginning of the Violin I section. The 'Timbane' section is marked with a 'T' and a 'B' above the staff, indicating a specific rhythmic pattern. The 'Violin I' section is marked with a 'V' and a 'I' above the staff, indicating the instrument. The score is written in a single staff for the Violin I part, with the 'Timbane' section written above it. The score is divided into three systems, with measures 5 and 10 marked. The piece concludes with 'Etc.'.

The image displays three systems of musical notation. The top system is a single staff labeled 'Timeline' with a series of notes and arrows. The middle system is labeled 'Violin I' and shows a single staff with notes and arrows. The bottom system shows a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) with notes and arrows, and the word 'Etc.' at the end.

In the musical example above, 'Score A' shows the original notation as done by the author. However, arrows have been added to highlight the points where cyclic accentuations occur. 'Score B' is therefore a recommended re-metricised format, having put the aforementioned musical characteristics into consideration.

Score A

Score B

Musical Example 5: Rhapsodia Nigeriana - Original (Score A) and Re-metricised (Score B) Versions

In musical example 5, Score A shows the original score notated as 6/8. Arrows have been added to indicate the points where the main cyclic accentuations occur. These points therefore suggest where the measures commence. In addition, another staff was added to the score to highlight the timeline. The timeline also helped, as a structural element, in determining the metric format of the music. Score B shows a re-metricised format of the original score, where the compound quadruple timing was used.

Conclusion

This paper has taken a critical look at the metric formats that have been used in representing the Yorùbá wóóròdò rhythmic pattern, it has thereafter observed that many of these formats fall short of correctly representing the musicological form of this traditional rhythmic pattern. The damaging impact of this misrepresentation (as it currently adorns several pages of academic theses, other scholarly publications and documents) on the propagation, documentation and research can only be imagined. It is therefore important that this commonly featured literary error and its accompanying pitfalls be avoided all together by all stakeholders in African music scholarship. Based on the empirical evidence of the cycle of musicological metric accents as observed in the Yorùbá wóóròdò rhythmic patterns, with the aid of the timeline theory, this paper was able to conclude that the only suitable and acceptable metric format is simply the compound quadruple time.

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