RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TRADITIONAL MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS AND SONG TEXTS

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ABSTRACT

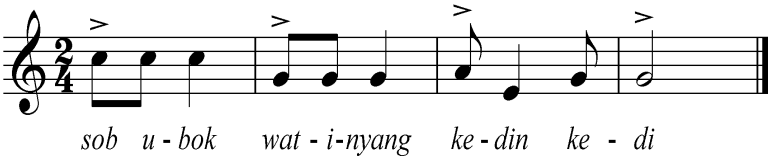
Man, no doubt, is a musical creature because he was found to derive great pleasure in using different parts of his body in producing artistic or musical sounds. As time went on in the history of his development, he began to explore his environment by fashioning some sound producing objects to substitute for his body parts. These objects, now referred to as musical instruments are used for producing a variety of musical sounds. In every culture, they differ in many dimensions which include concept, design and size, material of make, technology and function. In the African context, they have some remote or established connections with verbalized musical sounds commonly known as song texts. This paper identifies these significant connections and brings to limelight how musical instruments and song texts affect each other for the benefit of the African musicologists.

INTRODUCTION

From the large body of available literature concerning African music, studies on song texts of different cultures abound. There are also research reports on the origin, material resources, technology, classification, socio-cultural significance, functions and uses of African musical instruments. Observations, however, show that much has not been written about song texts and musical instruments more so, on their significant relationships. Having identified this as one of the less explored aspects of music making in Africa, it is considered the focus of this paper as it discusses their linguistic, musical, technological, contextual and cultural relationships.

Linguistic Relationship

Here, we are concerned with language in music relationship. Since it has earlier been established that in African music practice, every melody naturally grows out from the speech melody or contour of the text, it then means that language affects music as much as music also affects it. According to Bright (1963), both language and music are human behavioural means of expression which are characterized by overlapping mutual influences in social communication. In realization of this fact, Blacking (1970) describes music as "signals and symbols of human experience in culture which relate musical form to its social and cultural content" (p. 69). Similarly, Merriam (1959) explains that "almost all songs have words, whether or not those words are actually sung, so that when a song is played upon an instrument, words are automatically conceptualized, although they may not be verbalized" (p. 57). This implies that most African musical instruments are constructed for communication in performance situations. When melodic instruments, as extensions of vocal experiences, are involved in reproducing melodies of songs or melodic fragments, they equally trace the natural curve or contour of the relevant texts. In so doing, instrumental melodies so produced could be word-borne (*logogenic*), emotion-borne (*pathogenic*) or music-borne (*melogenic*). If we reason along the same line with Akpabot (1986), we can accept that the two main types of instrumental rhythms in African music derive from this overlapping relationship between language and music. He observed that percussive rhythms are produced by such percussive instruments as the gong, drum and rattle while melodic rhythms are produced on the melodic instruments. A closer examination of these rhythms reveals that they are strongly related to the stresses and movement of conceptualized words of the text which also produce inherent speech rhythms. If we use the first phrase of an Efik song text: *sob ubok wat inyang*, as an example, the regular rhythmic accents of duple timing fall on *sob*, *wat*, *ke* and *di* thus:



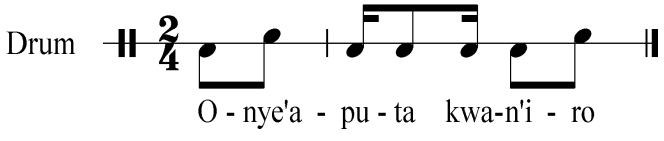
When the beats are properly distributed to their correct rhythmic divisions, the instrumentalist will be able to establish clear basis for drawing his accompanying patterns purely from built-in speech rhythms. In fact, we can conclude that each of the two rhythmic types as earlier mentioned is mostly determined by speech rhythms which Nketia (1974), refers to as "the durational values of the syllables of words" (p. 180). Given the fact that these instruments are provided with linguistic or communicative attributes, they are advantageously used for communication both in musical and extra-musical contexts. In this wise, they are designated as "talking instruments" or "speech surrogates". Exemplifying these are *ilu*, the hourglass drum of the Yoruba people; *ikon eto*, the four-note xylophone of the Ibibio and *ekwe* or *ikoro*, the wooden drum of the Igbo people just to mention but a few. As Akpabot (1986) puts it, "all African drums talk – some more eloquently than others depending on their size, shape and construction. The chief difference between African and European instruments lies in their functions and use" (p. 19). Since African musical instruments are also used for imitating and reproducing phrases and proverbs common to the area; they are, therefore, consciously tuned to the talking range of the people. When used

singularly, a master player conveys verbal messages or matters of personal or social importance through melo-rhythmic cues or codes. While deriving clues from their melodic contour, these cues are not only understood by members of the community but also given literary meanings. Through such an artistic medium, a verbal statement, phrase, proverb or praise-name can be transmitted by any of these instruments.

In another development, some like the wooden drum (*ekwe*) and the big gong (*alo*) are also used for regulating times and seasons, signaling danger, summoning emergency meetings or by the town-criers for securing attention of the people when important public announcements are being made in the community. This communicative or socio-linguistic function of some musical instruments is, however, very important though secondary to the musical. It is equally symbolic of the communicative relationship between musical instruments and song texts. In the light of the foregoing, therefore, we can establish that song texts and musical instruments have either structural and tonal relationships or linguistic and communicative connections.

Musical Relationship

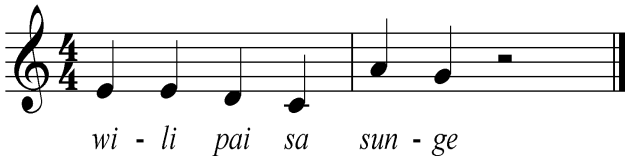
Bright (1963) acknowledges that "languages display regular patterns of high-pitched and low-pitched syllables, loud and soft syllables, long and short syllables; and different languages give different emphasis to these factors" (p. 27). In this music in language relationship, we can see that the musical elements of pitch, dynamics, duration and, of course, tone colour (timbre) are also basic parameters of speech and can equally be realized on some African musical instruments through coded cues. Akpabot (1986) maintains that "an instrumental melody many times, follows the vocal pattern which is inflectionary in conception: this means that a sentence as previously mentioned, can only have one curve if it is to maintain its meaning" (p. 11). Reasoning along the same line, Merriam (1964) states that "language clearly affects music in that speech melody sets up certain patterns which must be followed at least to an extent in music" (p. 188). If we accept that instrumental music is summarily, an extension of the vocal experience and that African melodic instruments are tuned in respect to the tonal inflections of speech, it then means that vocal music cannot be divorced from instrumental music. This is because the latter derives from the former. The illustrative figure below represents the coded cue for a security imperative which some Igbo vigilante groups play on the wooden drum to compel people to stay indoors at odd hours of the night:



While attending to the style of attack and release, an artistic execution of this cue, will produce the same desired effects and elements as in speech. In so doing, the two parameters of pitch and duration will be clearly exhibited as while the realization of the other two will depend on the medium and style of execution.

Furthermore, it is common knowledge that pitch in African music is not standardized. This is because it is closely related to the language behaviour of a given culture. To this end, African

scales are simply constructed by ear and consist of non-tempered pitches whose choice and arrangements are determined by some regional characteristics. Akpabot (1975) reports that in Central Africa, "the speech melody derived from the sentence, *wili pai sa sunge*, is used to tune the harp to the note of the pentatonic scale," (p. 5) thus:



In a similar development, the musicians of *Ekeremgba* music ensemble of Ngwa use the speech melody of what they call *ilu nkwa* in tuning their set of baton skin drums. Such phrases which are used either in the workshop or on the stage, serve the individual ensembles the same purpose the 'concert a=440 c.p.s.' serves the Western symphony orchestra. For example, when samples of the pentatonic scale mode are closely examined, noticeable differences in the choice and arrangement of their pitches may be found. Nevertheless, the striking thing about the examination is that the basic principle of the scale mode remains the same. Stressing this fact, Akpabot (1998) states that "in African music, any five notes, regardless of how they are arranged and their intervallic relationships, comprise a pentatonic scale" (p. 28). While tuning the tonal instruments, therefore, a lot of factors including linguistic, structural and regional characteristics come into play. They really help to emphasize the serious relationship between the musical instruments and song texts.

In solo singing, poem recitations and song narratives, some musical instruments like the hourglass drum, wooden drum, *sanza* and the chordophones are craftily employed for providing suitable rhythmic accompaniments or background melodic fragments over which the *griots* sing or recite. Moreover, the instruments do not only support, embellish and supply musical interludes but also stress the main themes in the performance through communicative dialogue. In so doing, they serve to add some dramatic dimensions that heighten the performances while providing the performers an unassuming atmosphere and time to organize the succeeding sections of their creative works.

Technological Relationship

According to Echezona (1963) "life has a melodic or rhythmic orientation, and again, no event happens that is not associated with music" (p. 12). Stressing this same fact, Nketia (1963), said that "for the African, music and life are inseparable, for there is music for many of the activities of everyday life as well as music whose verbal texts express the African's attitude to life, his hopes and fears, his thoughts and beliefs" (p. 4). In the spirit of the foregoing postulations, we are given to understand that in Africa, all aspects of music making, including the conception, design and technology of traditional musical instruments, are to a large extent, influenced by a lot of human behaviours and thought processes. In fact, Okafor (2005) thinks that "makers of African musical instruments rely on their eyes, sense of pitch, ears and on tradition for the construction" (p. 160). It should then be noted that some African musical instruments are primarily conceived either as speech surrogates or as extensions of those body parts that are used for interpreting vocal melodies or for stressing the rhythmic patterns of life.

In the *Ufie* music ensemble of the esoteric Igbo for example, the pair of wooden drums is regarded as a symbolic representation of an initiate and his wife who always engage in a romantic dialogue in performance situations. What readily comes to mind here is that the pair is not only musical but also communicative. With this understanding, each of the drums is, therefore, designed and constructed to assume a hollowed cylindrical wooden body fitted with two sounding lips (one high, one low); and two rectangular sound holes through which the hollow was chipped out to make for improved resonance. In addition to the high, medium, low tones that could be obtained from the sounding lips; the body of each drum when rasped, also produces muted sound that could represent the drop tone, heave or aspiration in Igbo speech. Provided with these special features which characterize the typology of African language, therefore, the drums are then melo-rhythmically used by the people to imitate their speech patterns and rhythmic movements on one hand and to convey through coded cues, some important literary information on the other. It then implies that the technological processes of the said drums and most of the other percussive instruments are greatly influenced by the linguistic framework of a given culture.

This technological relationship is also evident in the construction of some melodic instruments like *ọja* (notched flute) and *opi* (horn). Since they are primarily designed for reproducing melodic fragments which trace the contour of some texts, they are tuned to the talking range of the people. This, perhaps, could be why they are equipped with narrow compasses. Since it is now common knowledge that African melodies normally grow out of the speech rhythm and speech melody of relevant texts, they are by nature short and repetitive. So, if any such tune is to be extra-verbally reproduced on an instrument, it must be on one that is equipped with melodic, rhythmic and linguistic properties. This explains why these melodic instruments are so built and employed for the same purpose. We can then conveniently say that in African traditions, the conception, design and construction of musical instruments are by and large related to song texts.

Among some ethnic groups, people claim and also believe that it is only trees which grow along roadsides or near homesteads that can provide better resource materials for constructing 'talking/musical instruments'. Although this could be one of the popular myths surrounding African music practice, suffice it to say that it was informed by the assumption that such trees overhear human conversations and by association, have the ability to reproduce their language patterns with discernible tonal figurations. It is in the spirit of this thought process that the wood from *ọma* and *ọpa* trees are to the Yoruba people, best for constructing drums as wood from *ụkọ* and *okwe* are to the Igbo, best for making xylophone slabs.

Contextual Relationship

In most parts of Africa as Euba (1977) observes, "much of the traditional music is realized within the context of social ceremonies" (p. 11). Agu (2000) acknowledged that in such contexts, "music not only serves specific purposes and functions but also enriches and glorifies events of life." Okafor (2005), therefore, says that:

> In African culture, music is an entity rather than a mere mental creation or conception. It reflects and interprets the man in a specific environment and is often

> the key, which opens the gates to spiritual, mental, emotional, psychological, social and mystic realms. (p. 88)

Stressing this same fact, Nketia (1975) admits that:

> Every musical type played has a tradition behind it, a tradition which governs its mode of performance, its repertoire, its choice and use of musical instruments as well as traditions that govern the context in which it should be played. (p. 48)

We are thus given to understand that the meaning and content of African traditional music are to a large extent, determined by the context in which it is performed. This could be ritual or non-ritual. Apart from the issue of tone colour which bears upon the instrumentalist, selection of instruments is primarily linked with the nature of his musical creation. Nketia (1975) further emphasizes that "the conception of a musical piece and details of its form and context, are influenced not only by its linguistic and literary intention, but also by the activities with which it is associated" (p. 206). In ritual contexts for example, the texts of the songs usually connote very serious and solemn subjects. In such circumstances, it could be seen that, like the theme, the instrumentation, is extremely restricted. Akpabot (1986) tells us that in the ritual worship of *Sango*, the god of thunder, the culture constituted only four drums namely: *iya ilu bata*, *emele ako*, *emele abo* and *kudi*, which the Yoruba worshippers symbolically use in accompanying their praise songs, incantations, supplications and intercessions. Here in context, it is apparent that the subject of the song text, as well as its instrumentation, is exact and definite. The story is, however, different in non-ritual situations. Such circumstances are characterized by secularization, relaxed atmosphere and flexibility in the instrumentation as revealed in the preponderance of percussive instruments other than the drums. So far, what really emerges from the foregoing is that context of musical activity is seen as a major determinant of its subject and song text. This, in turn, influences the melody which characterizes the song type and the song type finally determines the instrumentation.

Cultural Relationship

It is worthy to note that both song texts and musical instruments are closely linked to culture. This is because examples of song texts and particular musical instruments clearly point to the culture which they are part of. Given the fact that African song texts are usually in the local language of particular cultures, they constitute effective media through which histories of genealogies, past rulers and patriarchs, legends and mythologies can be taught or recounted. This explains why they are seen as embodiments of oral traditions through which people learn of their glorious past, mythical origins, beliefs and thought processes. Merriam (1964) observed that "mythology, legend and history are found in song texts, and song is frequently used as enculturative device" (p. 208). Akpabot (1986) also said that "myths and legends are integral parts of the people's way of life," (p. 96) and are used in a given society to regulate and reinforce the cultural traits and daily life of the people. Just as proverbs, maxims, mythical references of valour and legendary powers of past heroes and ancestral gods are borne through song texts, so are they encapsulated in the evolution, technology and organizational practices of African musical instruments.

Against this background, one can conveniently say that some musical instruments and their symbolic sounds have grown to be associated with particular cultures. In Nigeria for example, it is no secret that the hourglass drum (*ilu*) is admittedly synonymous with the Yoruba culture, where it is dominantly used not only as a musical instrument but also a communicator in social and ceremonial situations. The story seems to be the same with the giant wooden drum (*ikoro*) as well as the wooden flute (*ọja*) in Igbo culture while the double reed flute (*algaita*) and the elongated trumpet (*kakaki*) tend to indicate connections with the Hausa/Fulani culture. As one cannot divorce musical instruments from music making, it is equally impossible to separate song text from musical instruments because they are not only closely related but also significantly linked to the people's way of life.

Conclusion

In this discourse, an attempt was made to identify and outline some of the significant connections between musical instruments and song texts in the African cultural context. As a modest attempt, therefore, it cannot claim to have exhausted all the possible links owing to obvious reasons. Nonetheless, it can be seen from the foregoing, that musical instruments and song texts are incompatible aspects of African music that constitute the most diversified source of information on the beliefs and thought processes of the people, their social and artistic values, musical practices and structures, cultural and historical traditions, as well as language and communication. These and more, led Africans to believe that music is an essential part of the living process. As one of those aspects of African music that has not been fully explored, there is no reason why it should not be properly investigated, sustained and improved upon by the present day researchers and ethnomusicologists. They should, therefore, collaborate with the traditional music practitioners to provide ways of creating greater awareness about the modus operandi of these significant links between musical instruments and song texts. When this is done, it is hoped that it will not only offer the people a better comprehension of the subject matter but also increase their appreciative capacity of the same.

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