

AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF FIVE DIFFERENT YORUBA MUSICAL RHYTHMIC PATTERNS

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**Abstract**

While Yoruba rhythmic patterns are integral to the cultural identity of the Yoruba people, there is need for a comprehensive analysis that delves into the specific characteristics, origins, and cultural significance of various rhythmic traditions within the Yoruba musical landscape. A comparative study is necessary to deepen our understanding of these rhythmic patterns. This research digs into the intricate world of Yoruba rhythmic patterns, exploring some rhythms that have enriched the cultural heritage of the people. Through a detailed analysis, this study seeks to unravel the complexities inherent in these rhythmic structures, shedding more light on their significance in traditional Yoruba music and their influence on contemporary music genres. An analytical rhythmic pattern of *Bàtá, Ijala, Sakara, Agogo, and Dundun* rhythms will be examined. Yoruba music is characterized by its polyrhythmic nature, with multiple layers of rhythmic patterns interwoven to create a vibrant and dynamic musical tapestry. The roles of rhythm as a fundamental element in Yoruba music serve as a vehicle for cultural expression and communication. Through a comparative analysis of these five rhythmic patterns, this research aims to differentiate recurring motifs, underlying structures, and variations across different musical contexts. By contextualizing these rhythms within the socio-cultural framework of the Yoruba people, this study offers valuable insights into the rich musical heritage of the Yoruba tradition, fostering a deeper appreciation for its rhythmic intricacies.

**Keywords:** Yoruba rhythmic patterns, Musical analysis, Composition, Cultural significance, Polyrhythmic complexity

**Introduction**

The Yoruba people are one of the largest ethnic groups in West Africa, their musical heritage is deeply rooted in their music, dance, and oral traditions. Central to their artistic expression is the intricate and diverse rhythmic patterns that infuse their music, serving as a conduit for communication, storytelling, and communal celebration. These rhythmic patterns, often rooted in centuries-old traditions, reflect the complexities of Yoruba culture, history, and spirituality. In this analytical study, will be digging into the exploration of five distinct Yoruba rhythmic patterns, shedding more light on their significance, evolution, and cultural implications.

To understand the depth of Yoruba rhythmic patterns, it is imperative to contextualize them within the broader framework of Yoruba culture and its musical traditions. The music of the Yoruba people is characterized by its polyrhythmic nature, where multiple rhythmic layers interlock and intertwine to create a dynamic and lively sound. This polyrhythmic complexity is not merely a musical technique but is deeply rooted in the fabric of Yoruba society, reflecting their worldview, religious beliefs, and social structures.

Scholars such as Akin Euba, a prominent Nigerian composer and ethnomusicologist, have extensively studied Yoruba music; explored its complex rhythmic structures and cultural significance. Euba's

seminal work, "Yoruba Drumming: The Dundun Tradition," provides invaluable insights into the role of drums in Yoruba society and the complex rhythmic patterns associated with them. Through meticulous analysis and ethnographic research, Euba highlights the pattern between rhythm, language, and ritual in Yoruba drumming traditions.

Another influential scholar in the field of Yoruba music studies is John Chernoff, whose book "African Rhythm and African Sensibility" offers a comprehensive exploration of African rhythmic aesthetics, with a particular focus on Yoruba music. Chernoff's interdisciplinary approach combines musicology, anthropology, and cultural studies to unravel the intricacies of Yoruba rhythmic expression, emphasizing its communal and spiritual dimensions. Drawing on decades of fieldwork and immersion in Yoruba culture, Chernoff provides valuable insights into the performative aspects of Yoruba music, illuminating the interconnectedness between rhythm, movement, and social identity.

The five Yoruba rhythmic patterns selected for analysis in this study encompass a diverse range of musical genres, including traditional drumming ensembles, praise songs, and ceremonial music. Each rhythmic pattern embodies unique cultural traits, historical narratives, and symbolic meanings, reflecting the multifaceted nature of Yoruba musical expression.

The "Dundun" rhythm, popularly known as, "talking drums," holds a special place in Yoruba musical heritage, serving as a means of communication, storytelling, and cultural preservation. The Yoruba people believe that all their drums speak, but only those who have mastered it can understand. With the Dundun tonal variations and mimetic qualities, the drummers can convey complex messages, announcements, and narratives across vast distances. This oral tradition of drum communication not only facilitates practical communication but also reinforces communal cohesion and shared cultural memory. In addition to traditional drumming ensembles, Yoruba rhythmic patterns are also evident in vocal music genres such as "Juju" and "Apala," which blend indigenous Yoruba rhythms with modern musical influences. Musicians like King Sunny Ade and Ebenezer Obey brought juju music to limelight, features lively percussion grooves, infectious melodies, and call-and-response vocals, reflecting the vibrant blend of traditional and contemporary musical elements. Similarly, Apala music, branded by its rapid vocal delivery and syncopated rhythms, embodies the resilience and adaptability of Yoruba musical traditions in the face of cultural change.

In contrast, the "Agogo" rhythm, associated with the Yoruba deity Ogun, carries a more solemn and reverential tone, often performed during rituals and ceremonies honouring the warrior god. Marked by its steady pulsating beat and metallic resonance, the Agogo rhythm invokes a sense of spiritual power and ancestral reverence, serving as a conduit for divine communication and ritualistic invocation.

Another significant Yoruba rhythmic pattern is the "Sakara," a traditional drumming style, derived from the Arabic word "sakara," meaning "drum," this rhythmic pattern is characterized by its intricate polyrhythmic interplay between the lead drum (*iya-ilu sakara*) and accompanying drums *chordu sakara* and *omele sakara*. The Sakara rhythm is often performed during social gatherings, ceremonies, and joyful events, serving as a means of entertainment, cultural expression, and communal bonding.

Moreover, Yoruba rhythmic patterns extend beyond the realm of music, permeating various aspects of daily life, including language, dance, and religious rituals. The Yoruba language itself is renowned for its rhythmic cadence and tonal complexity, this tonal complexity are characterized by high, medium and low tone.

Tonal Sound	Tonal Symbol	Tonal Pitch
'Do'	\	Low tone
'Re'	No symbol	Middle tone
'Mi'	/	High tone

This tonal symbol is used to differentiate words with same spelling but pronounced differently. It is on this tonal center that *Bàtá* drums family was constructed. Scholars such as Rowland Abiodun and Kọ́lẹ́ Ọ́látúbọ̀sún as explore the musicality of Yoruba speech patterns and their poetic resonance. Through oral poetry, proverbs, and praise songs, the Yoruba people harness the rhythmic potential of language to transmit cultural knowledge, moral wisdom, and collective memory from one generation to the next. In the realm of dance, Yoruba rhythmic patterns play a central role in choreographic traditions such as "*Bàtá*" and "*Sango*," where intricate footwork, gestures, and body movements are synchronized with drum rhythms of the *Bàtá* to convey symbolic meanings and spiritual narratives. These ceremonial dances serve as embodiments of cultural identity, spiritual expression, and community solidarity, reinforcing the interconnectedness between rhythm, movement, and social cohesion.

Furthermore, Yoruba rhythmic patterns hold profound significance within the context of religious rituals and spiritual practices, where music serves as a conduit for divine communication and ritualistic invocation. In Yoruba cosmology, various deities (*Orishas*) are associated with specific rhythms, songs, and ceremonial protocols, each embodying distinct attributes and powers. Through rituals such as "*Ijala* chants" being performed mostly by hunters (*Ode*), it is used to invoke the presence of ancestral spirits and divine forces, seeking guidance, protection, and blessings for themselves and their communities.

The study of Yoruba rhythmic patterns offers a window into the rich needlepoint of Yoruba culture, history, and spirituality. From traditional drumming ensembles to modern musical genres, from linguistic cadences to choreographic traditions, Yoruba rhythmic expression floods every surface of life, reflecting the resilience, creativity, and vibrancy of the Yoruba people.

### The Analytical Rhythm of *Bàtá* Drum

*Bàtá* drumming is a distinctive form of Yoruba percussion music, traditionally associated with religious ceremonies, rituals, and social events. A comprehensive musical analysis of *Bàtá* drumming reveals several key elements:

#### Drum Composition:

*Bàtá* ensembles typically consist of three drums: the largest-size *Iyá Bàtá* (lead drum) which also serves as the bass of the drum, the medium-size *Itótele* (middle drum) serves as the tenor, while the smallest-size *Omele* or *Okónkolo Bàtá* (baby drum) serves as the soprano. Each drum has a unique role within the ensemble, with the *Iyá* providing the lead rhythm, the *Itótele* playing a supportive role with embellishments and variations, and the *Okónkolo* maintaining a steady pulse. The wood is mostly gotten from *Oma* tree, the two playing head are gotten from goat skin.

### Rhythmic Patterns

*Bàtá* rhythms are characterized by intricate polyrhythms, with each drum playing intertwining patterns that create interconnected groove. The rhythms are based on a combination of binary and ternary subdivisions, resulting in complex syncopations and cross-rhythms. The *Iyá* drum often plays the primary rhythm, characterized by a series of alternating open and closed tones, while the *Itótele* and *Okónkolo* provide complementary patterns that connect with the *Iyá* rhythm. It incorporates call-and-response structures, where the lead drummer (the *Arowin*) initiates rhythmic phrases that are echoed by the other members of the ensemble. This call-and-response interaction creates a dynamic musical dialogue, allowing for improvisation and spontaneous variation within the rhythmic patterns.

#### Ex. 1 Representation of the call and response rhythm of the *Bàtá* family

**IKILO** SONGS, Osewa

The musical notation for 'IKILO' is presented in two systems. The first system features three staves: *Iyá*, *Itótele*, and *Okónkolo*. The *Iyá* staff has a call phrase 'so ti gbo' and a response phrase 'so ti gbo'. The *Okónkolo* staff has a call phrase 'mo ti gba' and a response phrase 'mo ti gba'. The *Itótele* staff provides complementary patterns. The second system features three staves: *Iyá*, *Itó*, and *Okó*. The *Iyá* staff has a call phrase 'so ti gbo' and a response phrase 'so ti gbo'. The *Okó* staff has a call phrase 'mo ti gba' and a response phrase 'mo ti gba'. The *Itó* staff provides complementary patterns, including a triplet 'so ro so' and a 'ke' response.

These representations shows the call and response between *Iyá* and the *Okonkolo*, while the *Itotele* providing complementary patterns that connect with the *Iyá* rhythm

### Melodic Elements

While *Bàtá* drumming is primarily rhythmic, melodic elements are occasionally introduced through vocal chants or sung praises, known as *Oriki*. These melodic elements provide a melodic counterpoint to the rhythmic patterns of the drums, enhancing the overall musical texture and expressiveness of the ensemble.

### Cultural Significance

*Bàtá* drumming holds deep cultural and spiritual significance within Yoruba culture, often being performed during religious ceremonies, festivals, and social gatherings. The rhythms and chants of *Bàtá* drumming are associated with specific deities, spirits, or *Orisha's* in Yoruba religion, serving as a means of communication with the spiritual realm and invoking blessings or protection.

### Performance Practices

*Bàtá* drumming is typically performed by skilled drummers who have undergone extensive training in traditional Yoruba rhythmic techniques. Performances are often accompanied by intricate dance movements, with the rhythms of the drums providing a rhythmic foundation for the dancers. *Bàtá* drumming is traditionally passed down through oral tradition, with knowledge and techniques being transmitted from master drummers to their apprentices.

**The Analytical Pattern of *Ijala* Chants Rhythm**

*Ijala* chants represent a distinctive form of oral poetry and musical expression deeply rooted in Yoruba culture and tradition.

**Rhythmic Complexity and Poetic Versatility**

*Ijala* chants are renowned for their rhythmic complexity and poetic versatility, showcasing the mastery of Yoruba oral poets known as "*Akorodu*" or "*Ewi*" singers. Karin Barber (1981) have explored the poetic dimensions of Yoruba oral literature, highlighting its rhythmic patterns, linguistic intricacies, and performative qualities. *Ijala* chants rhythmic patterns are intricately woven with poetic verses with several gun short used to conform the power of "*Ogun*" (god of iron), employing techniques such as repetition, alliteration, and parallelism to convey intricate narratives, historical events, and moral lessons, thus serving as a form of cultural expression and communal storytelling.

**Ex. 2a Excerpt from Olufemi Akanji Olaleye**

<b>Poetic Chant</b>	<b>Chorus</b>
<p>O bin rin to ba ro jo a bo si fo ko re, o gun a da jo</p>	

**Ex. 2a Excerpt from Olufemi Akanji Olaleye**

Ijala song	
	<p>O bin rin to ba ro jo a bo si fo ko re o gun a da jo</p>
Gunshot	
Body movement	

These representations explain how the *Ijala* song is used during ceremonies. While the singing is going on, the hunters move from one spot to another, shooting their guns to the air to indicate a call for celebration.

**Cultural Significance and Performance Tradition**

*Ijala* chants foster community engagement, participation, and cultural continuity within Yoruba communities, serving as a platform for intergenerational transmission of knowledge and values. Ayo (1971) have studied the role of oral literature in Yoruba cultural identity, emphasizing its function as a repository of historical memory and communal values. *Ijala* chants are often performed during occasions such as weddings, funerals, naming ceremony and festivals, serving as a means of entertainment, social commentary, and cultural affirmation, hence fostering a sense of shared

heritage and collective identity among participants. Wande (1975) discusses the role of oral literature in Yoruba social life, emphasizing its ability to foster communication, foster social cohesion, and preserve cultural heritage. *Ijala* performances often involve not only skilled performers but also audience members, who actively engage with the rhythmic call-and-response patterns, consequently creating a dynamic atmosphere of communal celebration and cultural exchange, ensuring the preservation and perpetuation of Yoruba oral traditions for future generations.

### Spiritual Invocation and Ancestral Invocation

Central to *Ijala* chants is the invocation of spiritual energies and the communication with ancestral beings, reflecting the animistic worldview and religious beliefs of the Yoruba people. Ulli (1955) have explored the ritualistic dimensions of Yoruba oral poetry, highlighting its role in invoking divine blessings, ancestral guidance, and communal solidarity. Through rhythmic recitation and melodic intonation, *Ijala* singers invoke the presence of deities, honour ancestral spirits, and evoke the power of divine forces, therefore establishing a sacred connection with the supernatural realms and reaffirming their cultural heritage and spiritual lineage.

### The Analytical Rhythmic Pattern of Sakara Drum

*Sakara* rhythms are an integral part of Yoruba musical tradition, characterized by their distinct patterns, instrumentation, and cultural significance. A thorough musical analysis of *Sakara* rhythms reveals several key elements:

#### Rhythmic Structure

*Sakara* rhythms typically feature a repetitive yet dynamic structure characterized by alternating strong and weak beats. The rhythmic pattern often consists of a combination of duple and triple subdivisions, creating complex polyrhythms. Syncopation is a prominent feature, with offbeat accents adding to the rhythmic complexity and energy of the music. *Sakara* drum is a cylindrical drum with a goatskin head stretched over round mode clay. The *Sakara* drum is played with both hands, allowing for intricate rhythmic patterns and variations. Accompanying instruments may include the *Sekere* (a gourd rattle), *Agogô* (iron bells), and occasionally, the *Gángan* (talking drum), adding layers of texture and timbre to the ensemble.

#### Ex. 3 Excerpt from 'Olorun mbe leyin mi' by Saka Olayigbade

The image displays musical notation for an excerpt from 'Olorun mbe leyin mi' by Saka Olayigbade. It consists of four staves. The first two staves are for 'Iya Sakara' and 'Omele Sakara', both in 4/4 time. The last two staves are for 'Iya' and 'Oml', also in 4/4 time. The notation shows complex rhythmic patterns with syncopation, indicated by the placement of notes on offbeats and the use of beams and accents. A second ending bracket labeled '2' is shown above the 'Iya' staff in the second measure of the bottom two staves.

These representations shown is an indication of syncopation features in *Sakara* drumming pattern

#### Melodic Elements

While *Sakara* drumming is primarily rhythmic, melodic elements are occasionally present, often carried by vocal lines or subtle melodic motifs played on the *Sakara* drum. Melodic improvisation may occur within the context of vocal performances, adding a dynamic element to the music.

#### Cultural Significance

*Sakara* rhythms hold deep cultural and religious significance within the Yoruba community, often associated with traditional ceremonies, celebrations, and social gatherings. *Sakara* drum is divided into three, *Iya sakara*, *chordu sakara* and *omele sakara*. The rhythmic patterns of *Sakara* drum are closely tied to Yoruba folklore, mythology, and spiritual beliefs, serving as a means of cultural expression and communication.

### Performance Practices

Skilled drummers who have undergone extensive training in traditional Yoruba rhythmic techniques typically perform *Sakara* drumming. Performances often involve call-and-response interactions between the lead drummer and other members of the ensemble, creating a dynamic and engaging musical dialogue. Improvisation plays a significant role in *Sakara* performances, allowing musicians to express themselves creatively within the framework of the rhythmic patterns.

### The Analytical Rhythmic Pattern of *Agogo*

*Agogo* patterns are a fundamental component of Yoruba music, contributing to its rhythmic complexity and cultural richness. A musical analysis of *agogo* patterns reveals several key elements:

#### Rhythmic Structure

*Agogo* patterns typically consist of a series of interlocking rhythms produced by two or more *agogo* bells. The rhythms are often based on a combination of binary and ternary subdivisions, resulting in syncopated and polyrhythmic patterns. Each bell in the *agogo* ensemble may play complementary rhythmic phrases, creating a cohesive rhythmic texture.

#### Ex. 4 Rhythmic representation for announcements of ritual

SONGS, Osewa

Agogo agba

Agogo Kekere

ko le gbe le ko le gbe le ko le gbe le o o o o

These representation shown, tells how the *Agogo* rhythm is used to make announcement and what it means whenever the sound is made.

#### Timbral Variation

*Agogo* bells produce distinct pitches, with one bell typically higher or lower in pitch than the other. The contrasting timbres of the *agogo* bells contribute to the richness of the ensemble sound, allowing for melodic and harmonic interplay between the bells. *Agogo* patterns frequently incorporate call-and-response structures, with one bell initiating a rhythmic phrase that is echoed or answered by another bell. This call-and-response interaction adds a dynamic element to the music, allowing for improvisation and variation within the rhythmic patterns.

#### Cultural Significance

*Agogo* patterns hold deep cultural significance within Yoruba music and are often associated with religious ceremonies, rituals, and social gatherings. The rhythmic patterns of the *agogo* bells are integral to traditional Yoruba music and dance forms, serving as a foundation for rhythmic expression and communication.

### Performance Practices

*Agogo* patterns are typically performed by skilled musicians who have undergone training in traditional Yoruba rhythmic techniques. Performances may involve solo or ensemble playing, with musicians coordinating their rhythms to create a unified musical performance. *Agogo* patterns are often accompanied by other percussion instruments, such as drums and rattles, further enriching the rhythmic texture of the music. *Agogo* patterns play a vital role in Yoruba music, contributing to its rhythmic complexity, cultural identity, and expressive potential. A musical analysis of *agogo* patterns provides valuable insights into the intricate rhythmic structures and cultural significance of this important musical tradition.

### The Analytical Rhythm of Dundun Drum

The *Dundun* ensemble, a fundamental component of Yoruba musical culture, is characterized by its distinct rhythmic patterns and musical characteristics. These characteristics contribute to the ensemble's captivating and dynamic sound, which plays a significant role in both religious and secular contexts within Yoruba society.

### Rhythmic Complexity

The rhythmic patterns of the *Dundun* ensemble are intricately woven, featuring layers of polyrhythms created by the ensemble's cylindrical drums. These drums, typically played with curved sticks, produce deep, resonant tones that contribute to the ensemble's rich sonic palette. The lead drum, known as the *Iya ilu* or *Dundun* (mother drum), serves as the primary rhythm keeper, establishing the foundational pulse of the ensemble. It produces the bass line for the accompanying drums, such as the *Gudugudu* (middle drum) and *omele Gangan* (smallest drum), provide additional rhythmic complexity and embellishments, enhancing the overall texture of the music.

### Ex. 5 excerpt from Olupemi E. Oludare

Gbedu Oba

The musical score consists of five staves. The top three staves are for the drums: Gudugudu, Omele Gangan, and Iya ilu. The bottom two staves are for the vocalists: Gudu and Oml. The Iya ilu staff includes the lyrics: "E rin fo la mi s'o ba je je je je" and "O lo gun le e ko O di o, A gba la gba i fe". The score shows rhythmic patterns for each drum part in 3/4 time.

These is the representation of the *Dundun* ensemble. The *Iya* making a the call when the *Omele* and *Gudududu* is responding.

### Cultural Significance and Ritual Context

Within Yoruba society, *Dundun* drumming holds significant cultural and ritualistic importance, being an integral part of ceremonies, festivals, and social gatherings. Scholars such as John (2010) emphasize the role of drumming in Yoruba religious practices, where *Dundun* drums are used to invoke



deities, communicate with ancestors, and celebrate communal rites of passage. *Dundun* drumming serves as a conduit for spiritual energy, facilitating trance induction, healing rituals, and communal bonding among participants.

### **Community Engagement and Social Cohesion**

*Dundun* drumming fosters community engagement, participation, and social cohesion within Yoruba communities. Omojola (2008) discusses the communal aspects of Yoruba music making, emphasizing its role in fostering collective identity and solidarity. *Dundun* performances often involve not only skilled drummers but also dancers, singers, and audience members, creating a dynamic interactive experience that strengthens bonds of kinship and cultural pride among participants.

### **Conclusion**

The study of Yoruba rhythmic patterns has provided a comprehensive exploration of the diverse and intricate rhythmic traditions within Yoruba music. Through meticulous analysis and examination, we have gained valuable insights into the rhythmic complexities, cultural significance, and ritualistic contexts of these rhythmic patterns.

By delving into each rhythmic pattern individually, we have uncovered the unique characteristics, rhythmic structures, and symbolic meanings embedded within Yoruba musical traditions. From the polyrhythmic intricacies of *Bàtá* rhythms to the poetic versatility of *Ijala* chants, each pattern offers a window into the rich cultural heritage and spiritual worldview of the Yoruba people.

Furthermore, our study has highlighted the interconnectedness of Yoruba rhythmic patterns with various aspects of Yoruba society, including religious practices, social gatherings, and communal celebrations. These rhythms serve not only as musical expressions but also as mediums for cultural preservation, community engagement, and spiritual invocation, reinforcing the bonds of kinship and identity among the Yoruba people.

As we conclude, it is evident that the analytical study of Yoruba rhythmic patterns offers a deeper appreciation and understanding of Yoruba music and culture. Moving forward continued research and exploration of these rhythmic traditions will undoubtedly contribute to the preservation, promotion, and dissemination of Yoruba musical heritage for generations to come.

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