

DECODING THE TIME LINE OF NIGERIAN FOLK MUSIC THROUGH THE VIRAL GWÒGWÒGWÒ NGWÒ DANCE CHALLENGE

By Olawole Aro

Abstract

Time line is an indispensable part that constitutes the Africanness of a piece of African music or music inspired by African cultural practices. It has been described several times among the music scholars' circle. Yet, the description of the time line of African music has not reached a satiable extent. For this reason, this study is set to join the inquiry by decoding the time line of Nigerian folk music through the viral *Gwògwògwò Ngwò* Dance Challenge. This research is supported by Kwabena Nketia's description of the African music time line. Considering this, the analytical method was adopted for this study. Consequently, special attention was paid to the snippet of Nigerian folk music entitled *Ka Esi Le Onye Isi Oche* as performed by Gentleman Mike Ejeagha and His Trio. Data were gathered by watching and listening to TikTok, Instagram, Spotify, and YouTube performances. Relevant previous studies are also instrumental to this research. It was discovered that the dance steps are more closely linked to the time line than the beat-class set of *Gwògwògwò Ngwò* chant. Also, inference from the high beat cluster at the 10th beat-class set shows the dance's climax and an exhibition of comic disposition from the dancers' gestures. It was proposed that Nigerian folk music should be explored similarly as a tool for relief and global entertainment through social media.

Keywords: Time line, Dance Challenge, Folk music, African music, Beat-class set

Introduction

Time line is an indispensable constituent part of most music in the world on which the musicality of a musical work hinges. This is even more so in African music and has been described several times by music experts. However, more explanation of the time line of African music is needed to create a glaring impression for all. That is why this study is apposite to decode the time line of Nigerian folk music through the viral *Gwògwògwò Ngwò* dance challenge.

Time line is a motivating factor for dance hence, this microstructural design in a piece of music helps the accompanying dance reach its full potential. The observable time line complements the movement of the dancers in Bakare's (1994) description of dance as the movement of the body in time and space usually to make a statement. In the African music parlance, dance and associated rhythm are inseparable. The dance steps from this viral dance sprout from the less than twenty-second snippet of the accompanying folk music. Subsequently, this paper will analyse the time line in the musical extract used for this dance through the lens of the observable time design.

This is in furtherance to the study of time lines in African music. Because of this, the analytical method that integrates both qualitative and quantitative approaches was adopted for this study. Again, this study mirrors the observable time design of Nigerian folk music entitled *Ka Esi Le Onye Isi Oche* as performed by Gentleman Mike Ejeagha and His Trio. Consequently, special attention is placed on the snippet of this song that was used for the online dance challenge. It is also important to add that "African" in this context refers to music from West Africa. Data for this research were gathered by watching and listening to performances from various sources like TikTok, Instagram, Spotify, and YouTube. Relevant previous studies are also instrumental to this research.

Theoretical Framework

This paper hinges on Nketia's (1963) model of the African music time line as thus;

A timeline is a constant point of reference by which the phrase structure of a song as well as the linear metrical organization of phrases are guided.

This term has been written differently by scholars even though they all point towards similar meanings. Thus, a review of the difference between these usages which include time line and timeline, is necessary. The Chambers 21st Century Dictionary describes time as the continuous passing and succession of minutes, days, years, etc. This expresses a specific calibrated point in the order of a passing moment. Meanwhile, line means shape (ibid). While both terms stemmed from the Greek meaning "chrónos" measurable time rather than "Kairós" imagined moment, time line is more lexicologically attuned with the usage by Professor Nketia. Timeline, on the other hand, sits well with such a concept as a sequence of historical events. Time line is a calibrated and recurring rhythmic shape that provides distinct guides to musicians or dancers in African music performance. In addition, the time line is not only a calibrated time but also perceptible in the discussion of rhythms in African music. Given this, "time line" will be adopted for this study.

Time line is one of the prevailing factors when describing any music composition or performance. It even holds more sway in the case of African music. Hence, a clearer understanding of the time line used in African folk songs is necessary to gain more understanding and better appreciation of the African musical culture. In the study of rhythm in African music, the time line is a popular concept that is believed to be the base of most African music (Nketia 1963; Agawu 2006; Ofuani 2014; Toussaint 2015; Adda Quay 2023). In addition, Nzewi (1974) describes the role of the time line in the Ohafia war dance as a one-tone reiterative rhythm that serves as a metronome played by non-meliorhythmic instruments.

Most African musical performance has a basic and calibrated beat pattern that regulates other featured musical instruments, singers, and dancers in such performances. This pattern, which usually reoccurs as long as the performance lasts, has been described by various scholars in the past. For instance, Agawu (2007) recounts the prominence of the time line pattern, played on a double-pronged bell as a single layer in a Southern Ewe dance performance. In their study of the traditional music of Gbèdu Olu of Èpè, Oiekilome and Ogunyemi (2020) describe the time line as the basic rhythm pattern played on double stroke by Perente. Oludare (2016) reveals the various strokes in Konkolo rhythm patterns used in *Apala* music. Meanwhile, Stone (2015) notes that the Kumbadinda (time) pattern was played on the *kutiridingo* drum during *Lenjengo* recreational dancing in Gambia. From the foregoing, the time line can also be vocally conceived by the performers as Stone and Oludare noted.

Nevertheless, several terms have been used to describe this rhythmic component over the years. Hence, it was described as an ostinato (Oiekilome and Ogunyemi, 2020); circular (Anku, 2007); standard pattern (Agawu, 2006); persistently reiterated rhythmic motive (Nzewi, 1974), and orientational-rhythmic pattern (Ofuani, 2014) among numerous others. This paper examines the time line both in qualitative and quantitative perspectives. Agawu (2006) opines that the structure signifies material attributes mediated by a precise, mathematical nomenclature, and free of contingencies of expressivity. Although it is common to examine the structural attribute of folk music in the qualitative parlance, its quantitative representation is also apposite. In light of this, the time line is an effective musical component for the quantitative analysis of the rhythmic design of a piece of music. Therefore, this study is incomplete without a closer look into the rhythmic design of Igbo folk music through the lens of the obtainable time line.

A Re-examination of the Nigerian Folk Music

According to the Chambers 21st Century Dictionary, folk music is music that is played on traditional instruments or sung in the traditional style, handed down from generation to generation, and relates to the music of an area or group of people. Nigerian traditional society is characterised by folk music which enjoys patronage and continuous use from generation to generation. Folk music is traditional music that expresses the cultural paraphernalia of a people. Nzewi (1980) observes that the folk music of a Nigerian ethnic group is life: the identity, the fellowship, (and) the essence of its ethnic cosmos. Folk music can easily be identified with a given Nigerian culture due to some features they possess. Some examples of such features include pitch formation, time line, text, formal structure, performance style, or mood and function.

Folk music performances are often accompanied by dance. The dance could be as passive as making a metronome with the palm by beating oneself when trying to recall or sing a folk song to a person for the first time. It is also possible when singing a lullaby accompanied by a soft tap on a baby (Ibekwe & Umezina, 2017). Dance in a folk music performance can also be more active than in the aforementioned context in Nigerian ceremonies or festivals like the Egungun festival. Kwakwa (2008) notes that traditional African dances do not occur in isolation and often have a specific role within an event or a complex of events organized for a specific occasion. Yet, traditional or folk music of a people hardly exists in isolation. It has been observed to form a retinue of stories about past events, folk tales, fairy tales, fable, and other culturally significant occurrences. Omojola (1995) opines that music [in Nigeria] is an integral part of dance, of poetry, and of dramatic expression, all fused in the same performance context. For this reason, traditional society has folk music performances during moonlight story-telling arenas, rites of passage, wrestling contests, festivals, and more recently on social media.

The post-pandemic saw a skyrocketing use of the social media in Nigeria. This is why several innovative ideas sprung up for the sole purpose of entertainment, virality, and dominance. Warburton (2022) notes that young dancers use online platforms that can act as high-speed vehicles for communication and connection. An instance of such innovation is the introduction of “challenge” to social media spaces. A challenge is a social media trend where a social media user creates mostly a viral video in the form of acrobatics, craft, or dance, and encourages other social media users to recreate a creative version of it for entertainment or inclusion. Ng et al (2021) observe that challenges are video formats

that users endlessly iterate upon, usually involving an easy-to-replicate song and dance. Gwògwògwò Ngwò dance challenge is typical of this trend. It is crucial to know that a folk music recording by Michael Nwachukwu Ejeagha, who is popularly known as Gentleman Mike Ejeagha, was used for the viral video. Nwobu (2017) appraises the artistic and creative ingenuity of Mike Ejeagha as a (Nigerian) poet-musician, dancer and instrumentalist.

Folk music is an inseparable aspect that helps to project the true features of the time line in African music. This is apparent by the fact that little or nothing has been done to water down its metrical integrity for it is a cultural entity that is as old as the culture itself. As a matter of identity, folk music is communal property (Nzewi, 1980) and initially requires a collaborative effort of the culture of origin to be effectively performed and enjoyed. Furthermore, the introduction of electronic recording in Nigeria has further face-lift this aspect of the nation's societal property. As a result, a new texture has been formed in a folk music performance through the inclusion of exotic musical instruments like the piano, saxophone, and guitar. In addition to this, the high rise in the use of social media in Nigeria has further helped to export folk music beyond its ancestral boundary.

Gwògwògwò Ngwò Viral Dance Challenge

African culture is rich in music traditions, to say the least, and has been examined umpteenth time among scholars. It is a global enterprise whose impact cannot be overemphasized. This is true because African musical practices are performed in most land and at most climes of the world. Social media has even made this much easier, so you can enjoy African music with a few clicks on your mobile device while lying on a couch in your living room. Some popular social media and streaming platforms include Spotify, Apple Music, YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram to mention but a few. It is on such instance that the Gwògwògwò Ngwò dance challenge was initiated with support from a snippet from a recording of an Igbo folk music entitled *Ka Esi Le Onye Isi Oche*.

Ka Esi Le Onye Isi Oche is a track from Gentleman Mike Ejeagha's *Akuko N'egwo* Original Volume 1 album that was first released in 1983. An excerpt of this song was suitably used to convey the short humorous dance step which snowballed into what is popularly known as the Gwògwògwò Ngwò dance challenge. However, this dance challenge was the brainchild of Emmanuel Chukwuebuba Amuzie who is popularly known as Brain Jotter. Brain Jotter, a household name in the Nigerian entertainment industry, is a Nigerian dancer, stand-up comedian, and social media influencer.



Figure 1: A dancer and Brain Jotter performing the Gwògwògwò Ngwò Dance Challenge (L-R)

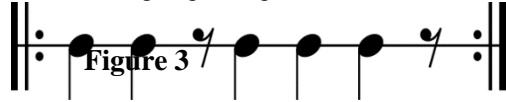
“Gwògwògwò Ngwò” is a refrain part of the song which was recurrent most times throughout the length of this almost 17-minute track. No wonder it is suitable for the short dance clip. Moreover, the rhythmic architecture of this theme is worth examining in this paper. This is relevant for a study not only for its dance-like disposition but also for its folkish tendency. The rhythmic design of this excerpt has birthed an instance of an African music time line that is pertinent to this study.

Analysis of the Time line

It is important to trace a problem to the root for it to be solved completely. However, there is a need to trace any African music to its source for a more appropriate meaning to it. Consequently, many scholars believe that a good consideration of the ancestral cultural background of a musical piece is important to making a profound judgment of it.

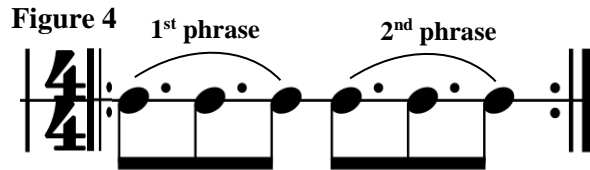


Although several time lines have been identified in African music, the analysis of this piece should not be based on the prevalent African music time line in twelve eighth time (found in figure 2 above) but contextually conceived. Therefore, the time line of the Gwògwògwò Ngwò dance is as thus;



From this shape, five quarter beats can be observed but the second and the fifth beats are followed by the eighth beat rest. In comparison, both time lines have the quarter beats and eighth beats in the ratio 5:2. Also, the eighth beats fall on a similar position in the beat progression of both time lines. The difference, however, is the eighth beat rests in the second time line. With Pressings’s cognitive isomorphism model, this shape can be viewed as <2212221> where 2 and 1 represent the frequency of the eighth notes or rest in the time lines. For instance, “2” means there are two eighth notes in a quarter note while “1” means an eighth beat rest. Hence, this can be viewed as two similar shapes each with beat class <221> and separated by a quarter note. Consequently, this time line is an uneven bi-phrasal idea with the first installment reading 221 and shortly followed by the second, 2221. Agawu (2006) describes this arrangement as a slight off-centeredness that conveys a fundamental duality found in the building blocks of many African expressive forms.

In the study of Christian Onyeji’s *Nka emume* songs composition, Ofuani (2014) notes that he adopted a shape in figure 4 below which was originally a time line in *Ohafia* war dance.



Aside from the fact that this shape is set in a simple quadruple time possessing eighth and dotted eighth notes, it is an evenly distributed bi-phrasal idea with the first phrase matching up the second one. This is another dynamism embedded in the African beat pattern especially ones from Igboland.

Although there are other beat characters from the performance of this folk music, prominent is the role of the time line stated above. Other musical instruments that supply beat characters to the music include the lead guitar, *ichaka* (rattle), and *udu* (pot drum). For instance, the guitar provides a “fill in” to the vocal lines at pauses while *ichaka* laced the entire performance with a background which exhibits the beats from the beat class integer. The beats from Udu occur sparingly in the music and constitute a deep buttressing sound that coincides with the last beat of the time line. However, more important in the beat characters of the music is the bi-tonal and chant-like phrase “Gwògwògwò Ngwò” whose beat pattern was variedly imitated in the dance step. The dance step in this short dance interlocks the beat character from the chant in a dovetail pattern. In addition to this, there are many cluster points in the performance where all the beat characters align. The notation in Figure 5 below is two of such cluster points showing the distribution of beats among the time line (woodblock), vocal, and dance steps.

Figure 5: Shows a four-measure snippet from the original version of this dance challenge by Brain Jotter and another dancer (L means left leg and R means right leg)

The musical score consists of six staves. The top staff is Woodblock, followed by Ichaka, Udu, Vocal (chan), Dancer 1, and Dancer 2. The vocal line has two instances of the chant 'Gwò-gwò-gwò - n-gwò'. Below the Dancer 1 and Dancer 2 staves, footwork patterns are indicated: 'LR L LR L' for Dancer 1 and 'LR L LR L' for Dancer 2.

Beat-Class Set and Beat Density

A beat-class set is a similar term to pitch class set when discussing rhythms in African music and the 20th Century music analysis respectively. Peck (2021) describes a beat-class set as a rhythmic analogue of a pitch-class set, where the modular pitch-class space of the latter is exchanged with a modular space of metric positions in the former. From the beat-class set of this folk music, the highest beat density is at the 10th beat onset while the lowest were at the 2nd, 11th, and 12th beat onsets. In this light, figure 6 (the table) below examines the beat distribution in the dance performance of the folk song. Since this music takes twelve beats to complete a cycle, this can be compared to the clock face in the pitch set theory. Thus, 0 is the first and the downbeat, 1 is the 2nd beat, 2 is the 3rd beat...9 is the 10th beat, ten (t) is the 11th beat and eleven (e) is the 12th beat. Also, in this table, dash (-) means silence while the empty boxes show elongation from the preceding beat. The table below shows the beat character of each instrument as well as the beat density when they are compared.

Although the punchline of the dance challenge occurs at the chant of Gwògwògwò Ngwò, the beat patterns of the time line (0 2 5 7 9) and the chant (3 4 6 8 9) look much different. A better closeness is rather between the time line (0 2 5 7 9) and the dance steps (3 5 7 9) as they both shared the last three characters. Meanwhile, less prominent are the 2nd, 11th, and 12th beats.

Conclusion

Beat-class integer	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	t	e
Woodblock (time line)	0		2		-	5		7		9		-
Ichaka	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	t	e
Udu	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	9		-
Vocal (chant)	-	-	-	3	4		6		8	9		-
Dance steps	-	-	-	3		5		7		9		-

In this two-dancer dance challenge, the time line is a motivating ingredient. Aside from the fact that it supplies steadiness to the dance, the time line also reflects the emblem of a people through its folkish inclination. The dance step aligns more with the time line rather than the vocal chant. Similarly, the implication of the high beat density at the 10th bc integer marks the climax of the dance and exhibits comic disposition from the dance gestures of the dancers. Therefore, the dance under this scope is humour-induced, encouraging participation and observation by all.

According to the researcher’s findings from TikTok and Instagram alone, this dance challenge has been viewed and recreated by over 60 million social media users globally within three weeks of its earliest known post online on July 5, 2024. Thus, this dance challenge is yet another use of indigenous music as a tool for “global synchrony”. On a

closer look, this dance challenge bridges cultural gaps as it supports participation from different cultural backgrounds and creeds.

This study has not observed the macro structure of GME's rondo-like folk music especially the roles of the Gwògwògwò Ngwò chant. Meanwhile, it is suggested that Nigerian folk music should be explored similarly as a tool for relief and global entertainment through social media. Although African music is largely conceived qualitatively, it is proposed that a quantitative approach should also be explored due to the rise in the use of quantised beats through digital recording. Therefore, in the study of African musical genres like contemporary Afrobeat music which relies on quantised beats, quantitative studies should not be contestable.

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