

Compositional Process of Yoruba Dùndún Music from Nigeria

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Introduction

Before discussing the compositional processes of Yoruba *dùndún* music, it might be necessary to define the word 'process', the Collins English Dictionary defines it as 'a series of actions directed to achieving a result or condition'. It also sees it as 'a method of doing or producing something'. These definitions are however relevant to our discussion as certain actions or methods are employed by a *Dùndún* musician in composing his music. Such actions or methods are those to be discussed next as compositional processes of Yoruba *dùndún* Music.

A Yoruba *dùndún* music composer-performer creates his music by working through various compositional processes. Such processes are musical awareness, retention of musical ideas, utility of remembered musical ideas, use of intuition, creative imagination and musical realizations. Each of the processes demonstrates a manifestation of the musical ability of a Yoruba *dùndún* music composer-performer.

Musical Awareness

Musical creativity in Yoruba depends on the conscious action of the creative artist, based on a thorough acquisition of performance skills. *Dùndún* music compositions for religious ceremonies are in certain order which follows a musical sequence of ideas based on the procedure of the event. A *dùndún* music composer-performer must be aware of such order so that his music can reflect on the nature of the event.

DÙNDÚN SET



ÌyáàlùIyaalu

Gúdúgúdú

Ìsaájú

Ìkehin

Keríke-ri

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Musical creativity and musicality embrace other elements such as the capacity for becoming absorbed emotionally in music and the ability to enter into an intimate relation with it, so that the whole organization of the soul is affected. The talent for composition is based on musicality, together with certain influences that have been of importance in the development of the necessary motivation and mental attitudes such as the inspiration of composer-performers with whom a child has come into intimate contact during his apprenticeship. Uzoigwe (1998) had observed that:

the compositional process in Igbo society is an orally transmitted activity which, although an ongoing process always retain the spiritual essence of the historical culture (Uzoigwe: 1998).

This observation by Uzoigwe is based on Ukom music of the Igbo. The same observation is made on the process of creativity of Yoruba *Dùndún* music.

While Situ Ayanlola attributed much of the knowledge he gained as a drummer to Muraina Asamuayan, Muraina credited much of his musical upbringing to Salawu Ayankunle who praised his father for much musical knowledge that was passed on to him. These are our principal informants.

Even though musical creation involves the participation of more than one person, every Yoruba composer is regarded as an individual artist. The distinction between composers are made on the basis of differences between their precision and general treatment of techniques. The ease in overcoming difficulties or in short, cleverness, and dexterity on the one hand, and genuine musical inspired, and creative interpretations on the other hand. The combination of all these qualities gives a composer the musical awareness which differentiates him from others.

Retention of Musical Ideas

The art of composing requires a reliable musical memory. The study carried out on Erwin by Revesz (1925) revealed that the various qualities that are embodied in the gift for memorizing, such as, for instance, the diversity of types of memory, the strength of the impression received, the degree of accuracy in remembering the illusions of memory, the power of recognizing something already familiar, the role played by this quality of “familiarity” etc. must undoubtedly influence creative activity which, after all, is to a certain extent, based upon the reproduction of actual experience. At this point, I remember my late maternal uncle, Lawani Ayandokun, a famous master-drummer who, outside the context of performance, was in the habit of humming drum texts and rhythms similar to the way these would be reproduced on the *iyáàlù dùndún*. Such a practice enhances memory, and the experience is in turn appropriately utilized during performance.

In the Yoruba *dùndún* – sàṣṣèkèrè tradition, musical knowledge is handed down orally from generation to generation. For instance, the principles of tuning the instruments, the playing techniques, the framework of each musical composition must all be memorized and assimilated. Salawu Ayankunle explained to me that one of the attributes of a master-drummer is the ability to retain musical ideas and the appropriate use of them when needed. Children born into *dùndún* music tradition carry the drums of the ensemble to the venues of performance. It is customary in Yorubaland that the ancestor of every clan serves as the basis of the *oríkì* (praise name/poetry) to be used for the members of the clan. In a social gathering that requires music making, children demonstrate their ability to retain musical ideas by performing as solo, duet, or even trio artists, while the adult members of the group watch them as they observe a short break. In this context, the child that acts as the master-drummer tries to imitate the adult master-drummer by using the *oríkì* (praise name/poetry) of the guests in the gathering as basis for music composition. The member of the *crowd* who identifies that he is being praised acknowledges the gesture by giving the young composer a gift. The child's power of remembering the *oríkì* of the member of any clan in the audience, and his efforts to use the appropriate praise to compose, are rewarded by the complementary remarks from the adult members of the *dùndún* ensemble.

The works of individual composers and groups of musicians, who are their predecessors serve as models to be improved upon, or re-interpreted according to their feelings in each new situation and these must be remembered too. In support of this, Salawu Ayankunle referred to some of the popular tunes sung by the sàṣṣèkèrè musicians accompanied by *dùndún* and sàṣṣèkèrè ensembles, the time the two were newly merged. The text of one of the songs is *Adébimpé, Àtándá baba àgbà, baba Wúlèmótù*; meaning

Adebimpe, Atanda the elderly one, the father of Wulemotu. The above, according to Salawu Ayankunle, was specially performed to praise Àrèṣṣòmò (Prince) Ariamosa. He continued by repeating the song and verbalizing the drum rhythms that accompanied it, as follows:

Song: Adébimpé, Àtándá baba àgbà, baba Wúlèmótù

Drum: Nde de din de de de de de de

Text: Òdólúgbekún tiriri enu gógó

Forí kan 'lè un o f'orí kan'lè

F'orí kan 'lè f'orí kan 'lè, f'orí kan 'lè.

Meaning: Nde de de din de de de de de de (rhythmic motif)

Òdólúgbekún (an irresponsible person) pushes his mouth forward (abusive for an irresponsible person Touch the ground with your head (instruction by the drummer to the dancer). I shall not touch the ground with my head Touch the ground with your head.

It is essential to note that verbalized rhythmic motif was not used in abusing any particular person, it was an onomatopoeia mainly employed to enhance learning and remembering of the rhythmic patterns of the music.

The experience related to me by Salawu Ayankunle and other informants were easy because of the effectiveness of the power of retention. It could confidently be said therefore, that Yoruba composers are firstly active members of their society, and this experience is the source of the ideas that inspire them.

The Use of Remembered Ideas

Ideas are assimilated through practice. These ideas are the foundation of a person's subsequent creative behaviour. Robert Thomson, commenting on learning operations, wrote:

Any mature living creature brings to a situation in which it is active a whole repertoire of previously acquired habits and dispositions. In the case of intelligent human behaviour part of what we mean by calling it intelligent; is to refer to the fact that such activity depends upon prior learning. Learning is therefore one of the necessary conditions for thinking to take place. (Thomas 1959: 10. He continued by defining learning as any changes in the general activity of an organism the effects of which persists and recur over a period of time and which are strengthened by repetition or practice) Ibid.

In traditional African societies, music is initially learnt through initiation in initiation schools as well as by the apprenticeship system, with less formalized systems of instruction. The learning processes continue throughout the life of each individual and the more a composer learns, the richer is the repertoire from which he can derive his musical ideas. Merriam asserted that:

The questions which surround the learning of music are very important ones, for they provide us with a knowledge of how music is produced as well as an understanding of techniques, agents, and content of music education in a given society. It is through the learning processes that the relationship between product and concept is established via response of the musician to the criticism of his performance by his listeners. Musician is maintained through practicing, and this too is a form of continuing learning, which allows the musician to follow the perfection of his craft as well as to change his concepts of music performance through time (Merriam 1964:161).

It is not correct to say that musicians in oral traditions exercise only their intuitive experience in their choice of musical ideas. If this is what they do all the time, as some writers have suggested, they might be very productive, but their works would often be resented or rejected by members of their society.

Traditional musicians, in Africa, who do not compose their music on manuscript paper, do so through frequent performances, which are open to criticism from their listening participants. Salawu Ayankunle is of the opinion that a piece of music composed for any *idilé* (clan) in Yorubaland is identified with it. A clan can ask for additions to or deletions from the musical or textual ideas of the music specially composed for it. He explained further that members of Modeke and Mogba clans in Oyo for example, have become so familiar with the music specially played for the members of the clan by *dùndún* musicians, that they often resent or reject unsatisfactory performance. Consequently, composers continue to pursue perfection in their craft as they eliminate and substitute musical ideas as necessary.

It might be argued that intuitive experience cannot be separated from knowledge gained through experience. For example, *dùndún* musicians in Yorubaland get the practical experience transmitted to them from parents to sons, or from older relations to the younger ones. A child of about eight years old should be able to play the *gúdúgúdú* or any of the other secondary drums of the *dùndún* ensemble. It is true that motor skills are required here; but without the support of a critical mental faculty, the acquisition of usable motor skills might be very difficult if not impossible.

Let us now consider the position of the composer within the two worlds. Does he choose his musical idea only to satisfy his instinctive power as a musician? Or does he view the selected materials of the work critically and logically and the effect that this would have on the audience or the society as a whole? In Yoruba society, these two kinds of experience must be combined. Yoruba music is expected to serve particular social or religious purposes, and there are appropriate musical ideas for each and every occasion. Composers are expected to use musical ideas that are appropriate for each musical event and its participants. For instance, a *dùndún* ensemble should not perform the music of *Oṣṣbátálá* when *Sṣàngó* is being worshiped or vice versa. Thus, musicians must have a sound knowledge, not only of musical forms, but also of all the rules and procedures of the events that they accompany.

Use of Intuition

While discussing the use of remembered musical ideas, the importance of intuition in composition was mentioned. Actions carried out intuitively should not be regarded as involuntary or unconscious. Intuitive responses cannot be made without previous hard and intensive learning, or training, and a constantly alert mind. Even an action that emanates from motor dexterity does so with the assistance of the active function of the brain.

A composer of any order or culture must exercise those capacities of intelligent behaviour to the full. These kinds of intelligent, intuitive behaviour

depend upon various subsidiary functions, such as the ability to discriminate or differentiate aspects of the environment. In support of this notion, Munn, in his book “Evolution and Growth of Human Behaviour”, declares that:

The evolution of sensitivity, motor dexterity, and learning ability is dependent upon nerves and brains as well as receptor and effector mechanisms. In any discussion of basic processes in evolution of intelligent behaviour one must therefore take cognizance of neural evolution.(Munn 1995:83)

He continues,

For the highest types of learning, which involve the development and utilization of symbolic processes, the evolution of cerebral cortex is especially significant (Ibid).

It can then be said that intuition is a natural endowment, but one which cannot be fully exploited without using other learning processes to improve the general human ability.

Psychologists have shown that thinking is a dynamic, intense, and highly personal activity which cannot be tied down to any formal pattern which fits all individual cases. Some creative thinkers believed to be systematic, orderly and thorough, and to apply their techniques with deliberate purpose; others follow impulse from start to finish and gave what appear to be inspired performance. Thomson explains this issue by using Stephen Spender’s example of the contrast between Mozart and Beethoven: the former apparently intuitive, writing his music as it came to him and the latter struggling from a pitifully weak idea to a great masterpiece after days and months of toil and anxiety. The former, says Spender, is like a man who dives suddenly into the depths of an experience: the latter is one who digs deeper and deeper, layer by layer, towards the heart of his experience. For many artists, there is a middle way involving both styles of thinking (Thomson 1959:190).

It had clearly been seen that creative activity could not be productive without the collection, selection and analysis of materials which go hand in hand with some preliminary trial and error. Whatever people might regard as unconscious effort must have been preceded by a period of preliminary conscious work. In favour of this Thomas says:

‘No intuitions will come without prior hard work’ (Ibid. P. 190) To reconcile all that has been said with the position of traditional Yoruba creative artists, one can see that there is both a period of preparatory, hard and intensive training from early childhood; and then the fullest use of intuitive experience as well as all the other processes required for producing works of art.

Creative Imagination

Imagination is one of the motivating factors in creativity. It is a power without which a composer cannot excel. Thomson quotes Mace's distinction of these senses in which the term 'imagination' is used:

1. Practical Imagination: In this case there is an observable or tangible product which demands ability, skill and intelligence. For example, many objects manufactured by human industry (hats, dresses, piece of furniture, and pottery) and also the products of artists (paintings, sculptures, musical compositions) are often eulogized for the 'imagination' on the part of their creator. Similarly, actors, singers, dancers and other performers are credited with imagination. Yoruba musicians compose new music from materials selected from old repertoire. By observing the political and economic situation in the society, musicians skillfully and intelligently select ideas to compose music not only to comment on the current state of affairs, but also compose music that is performed to forecast and warn about the future.

During the course of investigation it was discovered that Muraina Asamuayan, one of my informants composed music in praise of members of the audience he had never known or seen before. These he did convincingly by using what he described as *ojú inú* (inner eyes). It can therefore be said that the Yoruba composer-performer uses his sense of practical imagination to create music that would suit different categories of people, different grades, and different events and situation.

2. Linguistic Imagination: Imagination is also employed when praising the work of poets, novelists, preachers, or creators who use words in speech or writing to stimulate a large audience. In Yorubaland for example, musicians are often judged on their ability to stimulate through texts. The audience response is demonstrated either by dancing to the music or by acknowledging the creative ability of the musicians by giving them gifts. A piece of music that lacks the correct selection of texts and other appropriate musical ideas would meet with an undesirable audience response. I observed that one of the reasons why Muraina Asamuayan and members of his group are highly respected as accomplished composer-performers is their ability to select the right texts for their composition.
3. Representational Imagination: The power for this is exercised when things are visualized, in the mind's eye, what is not present to the senses. What have never been perceived in the past could be imagined.

In this third type, the example of the *dùndún* music for *Obàtálá* is very appropriate. *Obàtálá* is one of the Yoruba divinities who has never been seen physically by anybody, yet he is credited with the wonderful acts of creation. As a result, he is regarded as 'great'. One of the *dùndún*

compositions played in his honour has as its main theme 'Gbongbon bi meaning The great one'.

Èṣù, is yet another Yoruba divinity who, like Oṅbátálá has never been seen by anybody. He is regarded as a trickster divinity who is always going about with an elongated staff which he uses on his victims. This imagined concept reflects on the *dùndún* music in his honour; 'Látòṣpa, Èṣù gongo (He who wields the elongated staff).

There is therefore no doubt that creative imagination plays a very important role in composition in many oral traditions as well as in traditions where writing has been used. The concepts and feelings of imagination are believed to have been suggested by socio-cultural background or activities. Such feelings are worked out with the aid of all the human processes to build up a concrete image referred to as musical composition.

Musical Realisation

All the previous discussions on creative processes have been based on two related aspects of musical expression. The first represents what we refer to as mental musical realization or the musical intellect of the creative artist. This could be described as the composer's overall musical experience which has been evolved through his contact with the external world. The second is the one regarded as the personality (ego) originated, not only by external stimuli but also by stimuli from within the composer. In recent studies, it has been suggested that virtually all the distinguishable features of personality are correlated with features of the cultural or of social environment of the individual's remote past. The second aspect centers around the composer's personal experience in which something of his individuality is expressed. His personality is uniquely his, in this respect, and in being assessed as a composer, he is also being judged as a man. At the time of my field research, it was observed that my informants could identify the hand (compositional style) of any of their colleagues on the drum even when they were playing music out of sight. They did this several times and they were always right. For example, we were going to perform for a ceremony one day, from a distance, Muraina Asamuayan told us that the drumming we were hearing was a particular colleague's hand. When we arrived there, it was true. He was asked how he knew, he laughed and said that they could all identify one another's 'hand'.

Salawu Ayankunle elaborated further on the issue of compositional style by saying that every one of them had got his own 'hand'. He said that even though they all worked within the same musical structures, every one of them showed his true self in the way he created his music. The way a drummer or a singer uses his imagination to reflect on his variation of melodic and rhythmic motifs, use of proverbs and other Yoruba wise sayings, change of texts to suit the event-situation, change from one piece to another as required by the event going on, use of jokes as

needed, use of improvisation, use of ideas and so on, depends on his individuality as a composer-performer. Because of Muraina Asamuayan's sense of humour, he always introduced humour into his music to blend with the musical ideas. Salawu Ayankunle concluded on this issue by saying that it was these distinguishing features in the 'hands' of various Yoruba composer-performers that made some clans prefer one musician or a group of musicians to another. Muraina Asamuayan was therefore proclaimed one of the best drummers in Oyo because of what people referred to as 'his sweet hand'. The references made here have confirmed that every composer is a unique individual in the society. His opinions, thoughts and emotions are all reflected in his music.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it could be affirmed, based on the investigation carried out that in Yoruba dùndún music, many compositional processes are utilized by the dùndún music artistes in their performance. The level of the handling of the processes already highlighted in addition to other devices distinguish one dùndún music composer-performer from another.

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