



YORÙBÁ TRADITIONAL MUSIC AS A NARRATIVE TOOL: CRAFTING YORÙBÁ SONGS FOR FEMI OSOFISAN'S "RED IS THE FREEDOM ROAD"

Victoria Ọbàsòótó

Department of Theatre Arts, Faculty of Arts, University of Ibadan.

Email: vobasooto537@stu.ui.edu.ng

Cite this article:

Victoria Ọbàsòótó (2026), Yorùbá Traditional Music as a Narrative Tool: Crafting Yorùbá Songs for Femi Osofisan's "Red is the Freedom Road". African Journal of Culture, History, Religion and Traditions 9(1), 69-92. DOI: 10.52589/AJCHRT-MPTV FH3H

Manuscript History

Received: 21 Jul 2025

Accepted: 25 Aug 2025

Published: 10 Mar 2026

Copyright © 2026 The Author(s). This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0), which permits anyone to share, use, reproduce and redistribute in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

ABSTRACT: *This study explores the dynamic role of Yorùbá traditional music in African theatre, with a focus on its narrative, emotional, and cultural significance. Examining the significance and lyrical composition of a collection of Yorùbá songs crafted by the Researcher for the FÀDÁKÀ production of Femi Osofisan's Red is the Freedom Road (directed by Adedapo Treasure and staged at Wole Soyinka Theatre, Ibadan, May 3–4, 2024), this research critiques the lack of proper documentation of songs in African play texts. Even established playwrights often omit musical documentation, leading to difficulties in preserving original melodies and intended meanings. This study advocates for the inclusion of tone marks, transcriptions, and musical scores within play texts to ensure accurate interpretations and future retrieval. Ultimately, this project reinforces the argument that music in African theatre is not merely ornamental but a vital narrative force. By demonstrating how Yorùbá traditional music deepens storytelling, evokes cultural identity, and elicits profound emotional responses, this study offers new perspectives on the integration of music in African drama and proposes sustainable methods for its preservation.*

KEYWORDS: Storytelling, Composition, Transcription, Tone marks, Yorùbá Traditional music.



INTRODUCTION

In the context of Yorùbá theatre, traditional music plays a very important role in narrative storytelling, influencing the emotional, cognitive, and aesthetic experiences of audiences; this rich musical heritage of the Yorùbá people, including genres like Àpàlà, Sákàrà, and Bàtá, etc, has been used to convey emotions, themes, and cultural contexts, making traditional Yorùbá music an essential tool for storytelling.

By investigating the intersection of music and drama, this study hopes to contribute to a deeper understanding of traditional Yorùbá music as a narrative tool and its continued relevance in contemporary Yorùbá theatre. The findings of this research will provide insights into the ways traditional Yorùbá music can be effectively employed to enhance storytelling and cultural expression in Yorùbá theatre and plays of Yorùbá origin in general.

Scope of Study

The study focuses on Yorùbá culture and theatre in Nigeria, specifically in the southwestern region where Yorùbá is predominantly spoken. It will explore Yorùbá traditional music and its role in Yorùbá theatre, including its significance, functions, and impact on culture and identity. The study will examine Yorùbá traditional music in the context of Yorùbá theatre productions/play productions of Yorùbá background.

Limitation of Study

This study employs the qualitative research methods, which may not provide generalisable results or statistical analysis, and as it will rely on data collected through interviews, observations, and content analysis, hence, it may be subject to biases. Examining Yorùbá traditional music in the context of Yorùbá theatre, may not be representative of other cultural contexts, performances, and other aspects of the Yorùbá theatre and culture such as: dance, costume, etc.

Furthermore, the study explores specific themes related to cultural heritage, identity, tradition, innovation, and preservation, which may not capture the full complexity of the Yorùbá culture and theatre. The study will also be limited by language barriers, as Yorùbá language and culture can be quite complex and nuanced, especially when translating the Yorùbá lyrics to English language.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditional Music

Music is a universal language that evokes emotions, sparks memories, and brings people together. It is a diverse and ever-evolving art form that has been an important part of human culture for centuries, and its power and significance cannot be overstated. Hallam (2019). Music has the ability to transcend borders, generations, and cultures, making it a universal language that unites us all. Music has many functions, some major functions of music as stated by Hallam are:



Emotional expression, aesthetic enjoyment, entertainment, communication, symbolic representation, physical response, enforcing conformity to social norms, validation of Social institutions and religious rituals, contributions to the continuity and stability of culture, and contributions to the integration of society.

Traditional music refers to the music of a particular region or culture that has been passed down through generations, often through oral tradition. Encompassing a wide range of genres, including folk, classical, and indigenous music, and is often characterized by its unique instrumentation, melodies, and lyrics. The texture of Nigerian and African traditional music is distinctly different when compared to music from other cultures. Many scholars have argued that African music is fundamentally percussive, and this percussive quality has significantly shaped the types of musical instruments found in African societies.

Some common characteristics of traditional music include storytelling, as traditional music often tells stories of love, loss, and everyday life. Traditional music is often performed in a community setting, such as at festivals, weddings, and other social gatherings; and it is also often passed down from generation to generation, continuously, through oral tradition.

Some Musical Instruments in Yorùbá Culture

Yorùbá music is enriched by a diverse collections of musical instruments that contribute to its distinct sound and rhythmic complexities. Some notable instruments are:

Dùndún (Talking Drums): The Dùndún, is a set of hourglass-shaped drums, that are well-known for their ability to imitate the tonal/speech patterns of the Yorùbá language; they produce a varying range of pitches/ sounds and are played with a curved stick, allowing for rhythmic conversations.

Şèkèrè: The Şèkèrè is a percussion that is made of a hollow gourd adorned with an interwoven net of beads or shells. It is shaken, slapped, or struck to produce rhythmic sounds and textures; the Şèkèrè is used to add a distinct musical quality to Yorùbá music.

Bàtá: These are a trio of double-headed drums, and they play an important role in Yorùbá religious ceremonies. Each piece of the drums has a specific sound and pitch, together they produce complex sounds and rhythms.

Àgídìgbo: According to Ogunmola (2024), the Àgídìgbo is a thumb piano, featuring metal keys attached to a wooden box that resonates. The thumbs are used to pluck the keys, which then makes it produce melodic patterns, and it contributes both melodic and harmonic qualities to Yorùbá music.

Omele: The Omele is a type of small drum in Yorùbá traditional music, often used in ensembles; a metal gong that is played with a mallet, it produces a deep resonant sound and it is used in royal or festive occasions.

The Yorùbá Language

Yorùbá culture encompasses the customs, beliefs, practices, arts, and social structures of the Yorùbá people, primarily found in Nigeria with a global diaspora; rich in tradition, history, and artistic expression, it reflects the community's values, spirituality, and social dynamics,



covering language, religion, arts, music, dance, cuisine, and social organisation (Ogunmola, 2024).

The Yorùbá language, a tonal language, closely interacts with music, linking sound and meaning; it emphasises vowel sounds, with all nouns starting and most words ending with vowels, except for the voiced consonant “n.” Musical instruments often serve as speech surrogates, viewed as music in their own right; tonal inflections (high, mid, and low) shape word meanings, marked with specific diacritics, highlighting the language’s complexity and its deep connection to music.

Yorùbá vowel sounds are a, e, ẹ, i, o, ọ, ú; the tonal inflections are classified into high, mid and low represented by a mark above the vowel (´), slanted slightly to the right for high tone [Mí], slanted slightly to the left for grave low tone [Dò], while mid-tones [Re] are not marked. The following examples using the word Ara will show how variation in sounds and tone marks can determine the meaning of a word in the Yorùbá language.

ARA

Àrà [low, low/ Dò, Dò] – Style

Ara [mid, mid/ Re, Re] – Skin

Àrá [low, high/ Dò, Mí] – Thunder

Ará [mid, high/ Re, Mí] – People

It can be ascertained that the Yorùbá music is word-born, which means the composition and even the very nature of Yorùbá music evolves from the language itself. One would have to be very mindful of the tone of the words (the rise and fall of each word) in the lyrics of a Yorùbá music when composing the melody or performing a Yorùbá song, as failure to do this can change the very meaning of the song entirely. Because, for the Yorùbá people, both sound and meaning hold equal significance, as there is a deep connection between the melody of speech and the melody of song, as well as between sound and meaning in their cultural practices.

Music and Theatre in Yorùbá Culture

Music in the Yorùbá culture is a major form of expression and communication; scholars widely acknowledge music’s significance in African life. According to Jayeola (2015), the music of any society serves as a reflection of its unique cultural identity and values, conveying messages and nuances that are deeply rooted in its social fabric, and as development is inextricably tied to culture, a people’s progress is shaped by their cultural experiences and ethos. Music, as an integral part of cultural exhibitions, plays a significant role in driving a nation’s economic and social advancement, showcasing its rich heritage and fostering growth.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach to explore how Yorùbá traditional music functioned as a narrative tool in crafting songs for Femi Osofisan’s Red is the Freedom Road. It combined several data collection techniques, including interviews, participant observation,



transcription, and content analysis, to ensure a thorough investigation of the utilisation of Yorùbá music in theatrical storytelling. The research is also grounded in a review of existing literature on Yorùbá traditional music, ethnomusicology, theatre studies, and linguistic studies on tone marks and transcription.

The study focused on documenting and analysing the creative process behind the composition and performance of Yorùbá songs in the play. This involved transcribing lyrics, observing rehearsals and performances, and engaging with key stakeholders, such as the Director and other cultural experts, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the cultural and artistic choices made in the production.

Transcriptions of the songs, interview transcripts, and observation notes were coded and categorized into key themes, such as storytelling through music, cultural representation, and the challenges of linguistic accuracy in transcription.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to standard ethical guidelines to protect the rights and privacy of all participants; informed consent was obtained from all interviewees and participants in the observation process, and the collected data was used solely for academic purposes.

MUSIC ANALYSIS

This chapter examines the thematic significance and lyrical composition of the collection of songs.

Femi Osofisan: A Short Biography

Babafemi Adeyemi Osofisan, born on June 16, 1946, is a Nigerian playwright and literary figure widely known as Femi Osofisan or F.O. His works are lauded for addressing societal challenges and integrating elements of African traditional performance alongside surrealism; a recurring and dominant element in his plays is the moral battle between good and evil.

Red is the Freedom Road

“*Red is the Freedom Road*” by Femi Osofisan is a politically charged play that critiques societal oppression and explores the fight for freedom in a postcolonial context; it is set against a backdrop of political unrest and social injustice, reflecting the struggles of the oppressed masses as they grapple with issues of exploitation, corruption, and inequality in society. The play highlights the collective resistance of ordinary people as they challenge authoritarian powers and strive for liberation.

Analysing the Songs

Unlike many of Osofisan’s plays, *Red is the Freedom Road* has no pre-written or composed songs; however, the playwright provides prescriptions for song placement in the stage directions, occasionally specifying the type of songs to be used. In many instances, though, the decision on song selection, placement and utilisation is left to the discretion of the Music



director/ Composer, and the Artistic director; given this flexibility, the integration of music into the play becomes an interpretative act that shapes the storytelling experience.

To ensure a structured and scholarly approach, the researcher employed the services of two final year Ethnomusicology and Composition majors from the Music Department, University of Ibadan—Mr. Precious Moronkeji Ilori and Mr. Samuel Lasisi Dada—who were responsible for scoring the songs. They were provided them the lyrics as well as a recorded performance, which served as a basis for their work. Each song has been carefully translated English by the researcher, to enhance accessibility, while preserving its cultural essence.

This analysis explores how these compositions contribute to the play's storytelling, character development, and overall dramatic effect; by deconstructing the melodies, rhythms, and lyrical choices, this chapter highlights the inherent link between Yorùbá traditional music and theatrical expression; demonstrating how music functions not merely as an accompaniment but as a vital narrative tool.

Àwá Fẹ: We want her

CALL: Àwá fẹ ò, àwá fẹ ò

RESP: Àwá fẹ

CALL: Ọdómọbinrin tó rẹwà

RESP: À wá fẹ

CALL: Ọmọ ọba òrékeléwà

RESP: Àwá fẹ

CALL: Ọrékeléwà tó tún n'iwà

RESP: Àwá fẹ

CALL: Arẹwà eyín m'ẹnu gún

RESP: Àwá fẹ

CALL: Eyín m'ẹnu gún o l'ọjú ẹgẹ

RESP: Àwá fẹ

CALL: Àwá fẹ ò, àwá fẹ ò

RESP: Àwá fẹ

CALL: Àwá fẹ ò, àwá fẹ ò

RESP: Àwá fẹ

(Translation)

We want her

We all want her, we all want her.

We want her.

The young and beautiful lady,

We want her.

The pretty young princess,

We want her.

Endowed with character and beauty,

We want her.

A damsel with perfect teeth,

We want her.

She, with those perfect teeth and captivating eyes.

We all want her, we all want her.



We want her.
 We all want her, we all want her.
 We want her.

Musical Notation 1. Àwá Fẹ

AWA FE

Musical notation for "AWA FE" in 4/4 time, featuring a call-and-response structure. The notation includes lyrics in Yoruba and English, such as "A wa fe o a wa fe o" and "O do mo bi rin to le wa o mo o ba o re ke le wa ke le wa o to tun ni".

The opening song, “*Àwá Fẹ (We All Want Her)*,” stands as a pivotal creative intervention that reshapes the narrative structure of *Red is the Freedom Road*. Although, it was not originally part of Osofisan’s script, this song was composed at the request of the director, to create a prelude that would foreground the play’s core themes by presenting a time of freedom and harmony before the onset of slavery and oppression; the result is a scene that offers a poignant



contrast to the play's primary narrative of captivity and struggle, enriching the emotional and thematic depth of the performance.

In the play text, the story begins with Àkànjí and Ìbídùn already in a state of enslavement, with Àkànjí poised to become the next Başòrun; however, this added song transports the audience to an earlier, idealised moment (a sub-textual past) where Princess Ìbídùn is free, adored, and cherished within her kingdom. This moment not only humanises Ìbídùn beyond her victimhood, but it also highlights the cultural and emotional loss that enslavement brings, framing the forthcoming narrative of oppression in stark relief.

The accompanying dance, led by Ìbídùn and Àkànjí, transforms the stage into a space of celebration, with flowing movements that reflect harmony and balance (qualities that will later be disrupted by the forces of oppression).

Thematically, "*Awa Fe (We Want Her)*" operates as more than a celebration of beauty; it is a lament for what is lost; the joyous scene becomes a haunting memory as the play shifts into its darker narrative, signifying the cultural and personal devastations of slavery. It frames Ìbídùn not just as an individual, but as a representation of a community's fractured identity.

Àtùpà Gb'èpo Nlè

"*Àtùpà gb'èpo nlè: Lamp, Yield Your Oil,*" serves as a profound tonal and emotional shift within the performance, immediately disrupting the celebratory atmosphere of the opening number. Although originally written by the playwright Femi Osofisan's, for *Women of Owu*, its selective use here was a deliberate creative decision by the music director, following the director's request for a song that would sharply contrast the initial glee. This insertion transforms the dirge into a powerful narrative device, heightening the play's emotional stakes and grounding the audience in the brutal reality of oppression.

(An excerpt)

Àtùpà gb'èpo nlè f'élépo

Refrain (to be sung repeatedly)

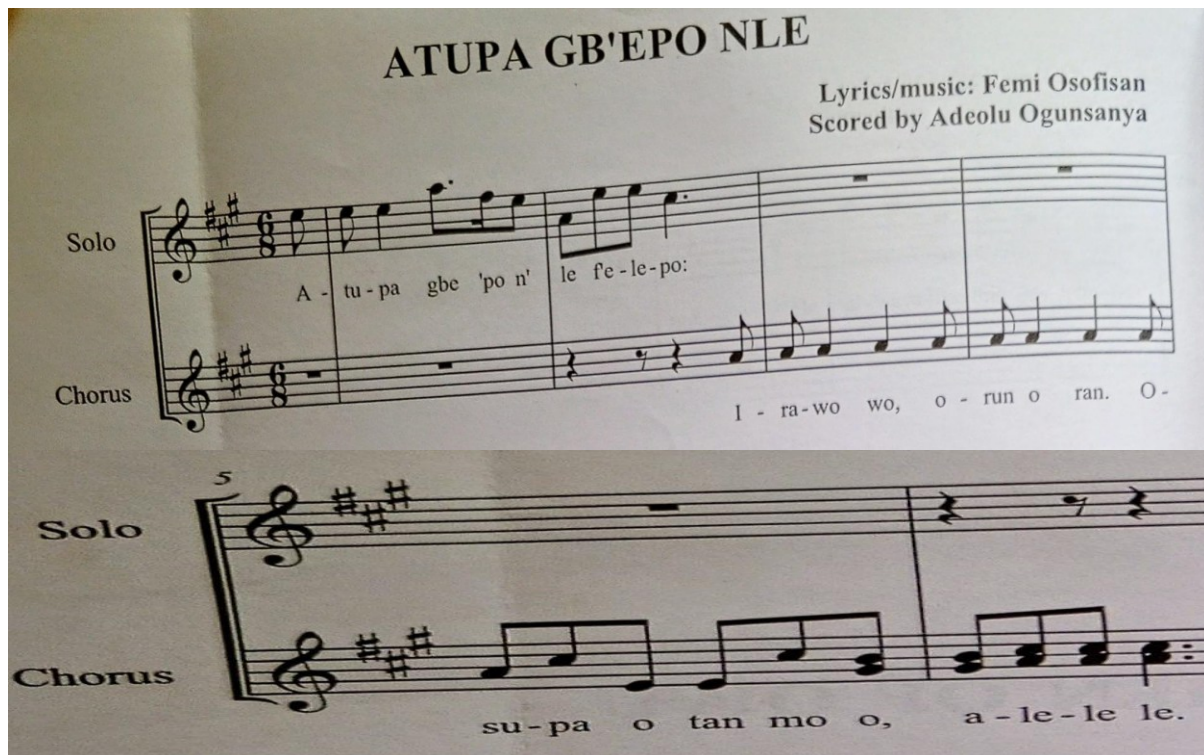
Ìràwọ wọ, òrùn ò ràn, òsúpá ò tàn mọ ò, alé lé lé...

Lamp, yield your oil

Lamp, yield your oil to the oil seller

The stars are down, the sun retired, the moon's refused to light up the night...

Musical Notation 2. Àtùpà gb'épo nlẹ̀.



ATUPA GB'EPO NLE

Lyrics/music: Femi Osofisan
Scored by Adeolu Ogunsanya

Solo
A - tu - pa gbe 'po n' le fe - le - po:

Chorus
I - ra - wo wo, o - run o ran. O -

Solo
5

Chorus
su - pa o tan mo o, a - le - le le.

The Imagery of celestial bodies abandoning their natural duties “*Ìràwọ̀ wọ̀, òrùn ò ràn, òsùpá ò tòn mó ò, alá lé lé*” intensifies the sense of cosmic disarray. It suggests that the universe itself has turned indifferent, leaving the characters in total darkness, both literal and existential; this cosmic silence mirrors the moral void in which the enslaved now exist, cut off from the natural rhythms of life and community.

Staging plays a crucial role in amplifying the dirge’s emotional weight; as the orchestra delivers the slow, harmonised, mournful melody, the stage transforms into a bleak, disoriented space. The vibrant colors and movement of the previous scene dissolve into shadows and stillness. At a corner in this bleakness sits Mama, Àkànjí’s mother, isolated. Her posture (disoriented and slumped) suggests a woman caught between dream and nightmare, embodying the psychological trauma of enslavement. And her silent presence anchors the dirge, offering the audience a visual representation of personal and communal grief.

Ibi Ayé Nlọ

The following song, “*Ibi Ayé Nlọ: Where the World is Headed*” serves as a deeply emotional lament, echoing the despair, confusion, and yearning for liberation that saturates this pivotal moment in the play. Written and composed specifically for this scene, the song functions not just as a backdrop but as a vital narrative device, heightening the tension surrounding Àkànjí’s moral dilemma and amplifying the collective suffering of the enslaved.



Ibi ayé nlo kò yé wa
Ibi àwá nrè kò yé wa
Èlèdà wa mà kó wa yò iyà yí tó
Şè b'òmọ erú náà ní baba
Èlèdà wa mà kó wa yò iyà yí pò
Áà ó le iyà yí pò
Èlèdà wa mà kó wa yò iyà yí tó
Şè b'òmọ erú náà ní baba

Where the world is headed
 Where the world is headed, we do not understand
 Where we are headed, we do not understand
 Oh our creator release us from this travail, we have had enough
 Ah it is hard, this travail is too much
 Oh our creator release us from this travail, we have had enough
 This slave child has a father

Musical Notation 3. Ibi Ayé Nlọ

IBI AYE NLO

CALL

I bi a ye nlo ko ye wa I bi a wa nre ko ye wa

RESPONSE

E le da wa ma ko

6

Se bo mo e ru na a ni ba ba A a o

wa yo i ya yi to E le da wa ma ko wa yo i ya yi po

12

le i ya yi po Se bo mo e ru na a ni ba ba

E le da wa ma ko wa yo i ya yi to

.The lyrics themselves are steeped in existential uncertainty and spiritual pleading; the repetition of “*kò yé wa: we do not understand*” reflects a collective disorientation (a community ripped from its roots, its future obscured by violence and subjugation). This sense of being lost is both literal, as the enslaved have been forcibly displaced, also metaphorical, as



their cultural and spiritual anchors are eroded. Hence, the plea to the creator (“*Elẹ̀dà wa mà kó wa yọ̀ iyà yí tó: oh creator, release us from this travail, we have had enough*”) is a raw invocation of divine mercy, capturing the breaking point of a people crushed under relentless suffering.

The line “*Şè b’ómọ ẹrú náà ní baba: The slave child too has a father*” stands out as a moment of both defiance and remembrance. In the face of dehumanisation, it reasserts identity and connection, rejecting the notion that enslavement erases lineage and belonging; it subtly challenges the oppressors’ attempt to strip away humanity by insisting on the existence of familial and ancestral ties, even within the chains of bondage.

Staging during this song is equally powerful; as the slaves, including Mámá and the pregnant Ìbídùn, are led in chains, the physical brutality of their condition is laid bare; the presence of whips and the dragging of shackles turn the stage into a visual manifestation of dehumanisation.

Abiyamọ, Sùn Re O

“*Abiyamọ, Sùn re o: Mother, Sleep Well*” stands as a poignant expression of grief and reconciliation, it anchors one of the most emotionally charged moments in the performance. Transcending its role as mere accompaniment, becoming a vessel for both the characters’ and audience’s mourning; its layered melodies and lyrical simplicity create an atmosphere of solemn reverence, underscoring the tragic weight of Mámá’s death and the fractured relationship between mother and son. These lyrics carry the gentle, aching cadence of a traditional Yorùbá funeral song:

*Abiyamọ
Sùn re o
Abiyamọ
Sùn re o
Íyá bí ẹ̀ kò sí fún wa mọ
Dákun sùn re o l’òrun o
Afi òrun kẹ ọ o
Dákun sùn re o l’òrun o
Oun tí wọn bá nje l’òrun o
Ni ko bá wọn je
Dákun sùn re o l’òrun o*

Mother

Mother, sleep well mother
We can have no other mother like you
Please sleep well in heaven
We bless you in the heavens
Please sleep well in heaven
Whatever food they eat in heaven, that you should also eat
Please sleep well in heaven



Musical Notation 4. Abiyamọ, Sùn re o.

ABIYAMO, SUN RE O

Adagio

A bi ya mo Sun re o oooo ooo oooo A - bi ya mo Sun n re oooo oo___

9 I ya bi i re___ ko si fun___ wa mo oo___ Da kun sun___ un re ooo___ lo run ooo___

16 ooo o A___ fi o run___ ke o oo___ o___ Da kun sun n re oo___ lo run

23 ooo oo oo ooo O un ti won ba nje___ lo run o ni ko ba won

28 je___ Da kun sun___ n re oo___ lo run ooo oo oo oo

“*Sùn re o, l’òrun o: sleep well in heaven*” serves as both a farewell and a blessing, reflecting a cultural understanding of death not as an end but as a transition to another realm. This reverence for ancestors within Yorùbá cosmology is deeply embedded in the song’s tone, framing Màmá’s passing not solely as a moment of loss but also of spiritual continuity; yet, the underlying tragedy remains palpable. Màmá dies in anguish, having cursed her own son, and the dirge becomes an attempt to mend the emotional rupture her death leaves behind.

Musically, the song is crafted to pull at the emotional core of both actors and audience; the slow, layered harmonies mimic the pacing of traditional funeral chants, where grief is not hurried but allowed to unfold gradually. The Music director’s decision to design melodies that would help actors internalise their characters’ pain pays off: the sorrow conveyed on stage feels raw and immediate; the notes swell and recede, much like waves of grief, enabling actors to organically tap into the emotions the moment demands.

The lines “*Ìyá bí rẹ̀ kò sí fún wa mọ̀: We can have no other mother like you*” take on a haunting resonance here, as Àkànjí stands alone, burdened by guilt and grief, seeking forgiveness from a mother who can no longer give it. This dual use of the song (first during the communal burial and then in Àkànjí’s solitary farewell) broadens its emotional range; it operates on two levels: collective mourning and personal reckoning. The repetition of the dirge also aligns with Yorùbá oral traditions, where songs and chants are often revisited in different contexts so as to highlight evolving emotional landscapes.



T'ani Ó R'ogun o?

“*T'ani Ó R'ogun o: Who Will Go to War?*”, marks a pivotal shift in the emotional and narrative arc of *Red is the Freedom Road*; this dynamic, fast-paced anthem acts as a rallying cry for rebellion, channeling both the collective rage of the oppressed and their urgent call to action. A creative remix of an excerpt from “*Awilele*” by Beautiful Nubia, this version has been carefully restructured to serve the context of the play, transforming a reflective piece into a war anthem that ignites the spirit of resistance; the lyrics are deliberately simple and repetitive, designed for collective chanting and heightened emotional engagement:

CALL: T'ani ó r'ogun o

RESP: Eee ta ló fẹ́ j'agun

CALL: T'ani ó r'ogun o

RESP: Eee ta ló fẹ́ j'agun

CALL: T'ani ó r'ogun o

RESP: Eee ta ló fẹ́ j'agun

CALL: T'ani ó r'ogun o

RESP: Eee ta ló fẹ́ j'agun

CALL: Ogun ogun mà ló kàn yí o

RESP: Ó dé jagun jagun dé

CALL: Ogun ogun ló mà kàn yí o

RESP': Ó dé jagun jagun dé

Who will go to war?

Who will go to war?

Eh who wants to fight a war

Who will go to war?

Eh who wants to fight a war

War, war is upon us

He is here, the warrior is here

War, war is upon us

He is here, the warrior is here



Musical Notation 5. T'aní Ó R'ogun o.

TA NI O R' OGUN

Ta ni o r'o gun ee Ta ni o r'o gun aa
 Ta lo fe ja gun Ta lo fe ja gun
 Ta ni o r'o gun ee Ta ni o r'o gun aa
 Ta lo fe ja gun Ta lo fe ja gun
 O gun o gun ma lo kan yi o
 O de ja gun ja gun de
 O gun o gun ma lo kan yi o
 O de ja gun ja gun de

The repeated question: “*T’aní Ó R’ogun o: Who will go to war?*”, acts as both a literal call to arms and a philosophical challenge to the audience and characters alike. It tests loyalty, courage, and the willingness to sacrifice for liberation; and the answer comes not from words but through action, as Àkànjí leads the chant, solidifying his role as both a warrior and a leader.

The song’s energy is driven by its rhythmic intensity, with rapid and insistent beats, pushing the tempo forward with a sense of urgency. This drumming not only sets a warlike tone, it also roots the scene in Yorùbá cultural traditions, where drums often serve as both musical instruments and communicative tools in moments of communal decision-making and action.

Thematically, it speaks to the inevitability of an uprising in the face of prolonged oppression; it frames rebellion not as a choice but as a necessity. The simplicity of the question “Who will go to war?”, is deceptive; beneath it lies a deeper inquiry about duty, identity, and sacrifice;



the song forces both the characters and the audience to confront these questions, even as the adrenaline of the scene drives forward.

Ogun Dé O

“*Ogun dé o: A War Is Here*”, serves as the explosive continuation of the revolutionary energy ignited by “*T’ani Ó R’ogun o: Who will go to war?*”. Where the preceding song acts as a call to arms, “*Ogun dé o: A War Is Here*” embodies the march into battle (a thunderous charge that carries Àkànjí and his fellow warriors into the heart of conflict). The abrupt transition between the two songs is intentional, leaving no room for reflection or hesitation; the rebellion has begun.

Ogun dé o
Ogun òmìnira
Ogun mà dé èrò ilú ẹ p’ara mọ
Ẹni bá l’áyà
Ẹ mí a ká lọ
Ẹni bá l’òmọ
Ẹ p’ara mọ
Ogun òmìnira
Ló mà dé o

A war is here
 A war for freedom
 War is here, people of this town better hide
 Whoever is brave
 Let us go to war
 Whoever has children
 Better hide
 The war for freedom is upon us

Musical Notation 6. Ogun dé o.

OGUN DE O

SOPRANO 1

O gun de o O gun o mi ni ra O gun ma de e ro i lu e pa ra mo

E ni ba la ya e ma a ka lo E ni ba lo mo e pa ra mo O gun o mi ni ra lo ma de o

What is particularly striking is the song’s balance between communal energy and individual stakes; while the warriors chant as one, the lyrics still speak to personal choices: “*Ẹni bá l’áyà*,



E mi a ká lọ: Whoever is brave, let us go to war”, and personal fears: “*Ení bá l’òmọ, E p’ara mọ: Whoever has children, better hide.*”; this reflects the reality that while wars are fought collectively, the costs are borne individually. This is not a glorified vision of war but one that acknowledges its brutal consequences; the song pushes the audience to feel the rush of rebellion while also recognising its human cost.

Iná

The following song serves as a powerful symbol of transformation, victory, and resilience; the repeated invocation of “*Iná: fire*” not only marks the literal illumination of the stage through the torches, but also metaphorically represents renewal and the burning away of oppression. Fire here becomes both a destructive and purifying force, emphasising the warriors’ triumph over darkness, which can be read as both a physical night and a symbolic tyranny.

Iná ni wá
Iná wọ lé
Ódéeé Ódéeé ooo
Iná dé o òkùnkùn paradà
Ódéeé Ódéeé ooo
Iná dé o òkùnkùn paradà
Ódéeé Ódéeé ooo
Iná wọ ’lé òkùnkùn paradà
Ódéeé Ódéeé ooo

We are fire!
 It is here! It is here!
 Fire is here!
 Fire is here, darkness transforms
 When fire enters, the darkness transforms
 When fire enters, the darkness transforms

Musical Notation 7. Iná ni wá

INA NI WA

SOPRANO I

I na ni wa I na wo le I na wo le o kun kun pa ra da I na de o

6
 I na wo le o kun kun pa ra da I na wo le o

9
 kun kun pa ra da I na ni wa I na wo le I na de o



Ọsán Já

The following song functions as a profound meditation on mortality, broken lineage, and the futility of certain struggles; the imagery of the snapped bowstring and the bow reduced to a straight stick symbolises the end of purpose and agency. Àkànjí, once the driving force of rebellion, is now lifeless, stripped of his role as a liberator; the metaphor extends to the *Ẹmó* (Guinea pig), and the severed *Etí* (ear), both representing disconnection from life and community.

Ọsán já ọsán já o
Ọrún d'òpá o
Ẹmó kú ẹmó kú
Ọjú òpó ti dí
Etí òmà sí l'óri mó
Ód'ápólà igi
Ọsán já ọsán já o
Ọrún d'òpá o

The bowstring snaps, the bowstring snaps,
The bow has become a straight stick.
The Guinea pig is dead, the Guinea pig is dead,
Its hole is blocked,
The ear is no longer attached to the head,
The head has become a mere piece of wood.
The bowstring snaps, the bowstring snaps,
The bow has become a straight stick.



Musical Notation 8. Osán já

OSAN JA

♩ = 80

SOPRANO



o san ja o san ja a o o run d'o pa o


ALTO



TENOR




3



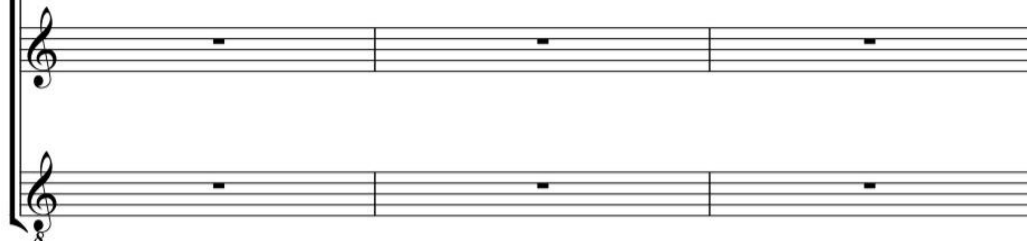
e mo ku e mo ku u o ju o po ti i di e ti o ma si lo ri



6



mo o da po la i gi o san ja o san ja a o o run d'o pa o





2
9

o san ja o san ja a o o run d'o pa o e mo ku e mo ku u

o san ja o san ja a o o run d'o pa o e mo ku e mo ku u

o san ja o san ja a o o run d'o pa o e mo ku e mo ku u

12

o ju o po ti i di e ti o ma si lo ri mo o d'a po la i gi

o ju o po ti i di e ti o ma si lo ri mo o d'a po la i gi

o ju o po ti i di e ti o ma si lo ri mo o d'a po la i gi

15

o san ja o san ja a o o run d' o pa o

o san ja o san ja a o o run d' o pa o

o san ja o san ja a o o run d' o pa o



The dirge's structure, beginning with a solitary voice and swelling into a collective lament, mirrors Àkànjí's isolation in death and the community's shared grief; the initial lone voice underlines his personal sacrifice, while the full orchestra's entry transforms his death into a communal tragedy, suggesting that while leaders may fall, their loss reverberates through the collective.

Staging Àkànjí's final act (dragging himself to the riverbank to speak to his dead mother) emphasises a cyclical return to origin.

The dirge, persistent in the background, bridges these moments of loss, reinforcing the inevitability of death while honoring the sacrifices made; its solemn, rhythmic repetition acts almost like a ritual, guiding both the characters and the audience through the act of mourning.

Dúró Dè Mí

The final song acts as both an emotional climax and a thematic closure, tying together the play's exploration of love, loss, and shared suffering; its gentle, almost pleading tone, anchored by the repeated "*Dúró Dè Mí: Wait for me*", creates a haunting echo of longing and inevitability. Ìbídùn's suicide becomes more than a personal act of despair, it transforms into a final gesture of unity with Àkànjí, underlining the play's recurring motif of collective fate over individual survival.

Dúró dè mí
Dúró dè mí oo
Dúró dè mí oo
Dúró dè mí
Ọ̀nà yí le
Odò yí jìn
Ọ̀nà yí le
Ó le jù f'ẹ̀nikan
Ọ̀nà yí àjorin
Odò yí àjowè
Àrùn wa àjọ̀ṣe
Ikú wa àjokú
Ìfẹ̀ mí
L'adùlẹ̀ Ọ̀run
Dúró dè mí
Dúró dè mí ooo

Wait for me
 Wait for me
 This path is rough
 This river is deep
 This path is rough, too rough for one person
 This path we must tread together
 This river we must swim through together
 This illness we must endure together



This death must take us together
My love, in the heavenly abode
Wait for me

Musical Notation 9. Dúró Dè Mí.

DURO DE MI

Largo

Du - ro de mi Du - ro de mi o. Du - ro de mi Du - ro de mi

8
o. O na yi le - O do yi jin - O na yi le O le ju fe ni kan.

15
O na yi a jo rin, O do yi a jo we, A run wa a jo se, I ku - wa a jo ku.

21
I fe mi L'a du le o run Du - ro de mi

25
Du - ro de mi o.

By using this song for the curtain call, the production ensures that the play's final emotional note is not one of simple defeat, but of enduring love and solidarity, even in death; it compels the audience to reflect on the entwined fates of the oppressed and the emotional cost of resistance, leaving a lingering sense of collective grief and remembrance.

Ultimately, the use of Yorùbá traditional music in this production does more than enhance the aesthetic quality of the play, it becomes an active force in the storytelling. It bridges the historical with the contemporary, the personal with the communal, and the seen with the felt; in doing so, it reinforces the enduring power of indigenous music as a vehicle for resistance, remembrance, and cultural continuity within modern African theatre.



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research set out to explore the use of Yorùbá traditional music as a narrative tool in African theatre, using the 2024 FÁDÁKÀ's production of Femi Osofisan's *Red is the Freedom Road* as a case study; it examined the composition, application, and impact of Yorùbá traditional music within the production, assessing its influence on both the cast and audience.

Recommendations

Playwrights and dramatists need to treat music with the same level of importance as dialogues and stage directions; songs included in play texts must be transcribed with accurate tone marks and, where possible, accompanied by musical scores. As this approach can ensure that future productions retain the intended meaning, mood, and cultural depth of the original compositions.

Leverage technologies available for writing and Transcription. Modern tools can simplify the accurate transcription of Yorùbá songs; writers, composers, dramatists and publishers are encouraged to utilise these available technologies.

Incorporate music and language studies into theatre arts curricula. Theatre Arts and Performing Arts departments across Nigeria should include basic music theory and indigenous language studies in their academic programs; this equips future dramatists and composers with the skills necessary to compose, transcribe, and preserve traditional music accurately.

In conclusion, Yorùbá traditional music is not just an accompaniment to African theatre, it is a vessel of cultural memory, a storyteller in its own right, and a vital force that bridges the past with the present; this research contributes to the ongoing discourse on the role of music in theatre and serves as a call to action for practitioners to preserve, respect, and celebrate the invaluable role of music in African storytelling.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the memory of my beloved mother and best friend, Christiana Bolaji Obásòótó (Ìyá Àdùrà Àsepé), whose love, strength, and unwavering support continue to inspire my journey in life and in the arts.

“Iye oma, olúkùn oma è”

REFERENCES

- Adedeji, F., & Olusola, K. (2024). *An ethnomusicological analysis of five Yoruba folktale songs* (pp. 121–133). Department of Performing Arts, Olabisi Onabanjo University.
- Adeleke, E. B. (2019). *Music, aesthetics and culture in Femi Osofisan's selected plays*.
- Adeyemi, A. O. (2009). *The dramaturgy of Femi Osofisan* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Leeds).
- Bakare, A. B. (2020). *The Yoruba theatre from religious and ritualistic perspectives* (pp. 121–133). American University of Nigeria.
- Carter-Ényì, A. (2018). *Hooked on Sol-Fa: The Do-Re-Mi heuristic for Yorùbá speech tones*.



- Hallam, S. (2019). *The psychology of music*. Routledge.
- Jayeola, F. (2015). Indigenous music in Nigeria: Its role towards national development. *FUNAI Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 1(2), 102–109.
- Mokwunyei, J. N. (2024). *Music as a means of communication in Nigerian drama* (Ph.D. thesis, University of Benin). Department of Theatre Arts.
- Ogunsanya, A. O. (2014). *Femi Osofisan: Songs from the plays, Volume I*. Kraft Books Limited.
- Ogunmola, I. F. (2024). *Yoruba culture and its influence on the development of modern popular music* (pp. 234–239). Department of Music, Federal College of Education.
- Olaleye, O. A. (2012). *The social contexts of selected Yoruba traditional musical forms*.
- Olaleye, O. A., & Adeyeye, A. O. (2020). *Yoruba indigenous music as a medium of communication in Yoruba traditional religious sacrifices* (pp. 128–136).
- Olaniyan, T. (1997). *Ancient songs set ablaze: the theatre of Femi Osofisan*. *Theatre Journal*, 49(1), 87-88.
- Olatunji, S. S. (2020). *Music in selected play productions of Wole Soyinka and Femi Osofisan* (Master's thesis, Goldsmiths, University of London). Graduate School.
- OWOLABI, A. M. (2019). *Ideology and aesthetics of songs and chants in femi osofisan's drama* (Doctoral dissertation).
- Osofisan, F. (1982). *Red is the freedom road*. In *Morountodun and other plays*. Longman Nigeria Limited.
- Uwawah, A., & Odogbor, P. O. (2014). *Reflections on three musico-theatrical academics of the Department of Theatre Arts and Mass Communication, University of Benin*. *West African Journal of Musical Arts Education*, 2, 39–53.
- Study.com. (2024). *The role of music in theatre*. Retrieved November 2024, from <https://study.com/academy/lesson/the-role-of-music-in-theatre.html>
- UCL Atlas. (2024). *Yoruba pronunciation*. Retrieved September 2024, from <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/atlas/yoruba/pronunciation.html>
- Fadaka.org. (2024). *Red is the freedom road*. Retrieved November 2024, from <https://fadaka.org/red-is-the-freedom-road/>
- Beautiful Nubia. *Awilele*. https://youtu.be/F_ei4_yAqss?si=JiNnCAPfoFV1xxAm

Song Credits

In order of usage:

- *Àwá Fẹ*. Written and composed by Victoria Ọbásòótó
- *Àtùpà gb'èpo nlè*. Written and composed by Femi Osofisan
- *Ibi aiyé nlo*. Written and composed by Victoria Ọbásòótó
- *Abiyamọ*. Written and composed by Victoria Ọbásòótó
- *T'ani o r'ogun*. Written and composed by Victoria Ọbásòótó. A remix of *Awilele* by Beautiful Nubia. *Awilele* <https://g.co/kgs/eE9r573>
- *Ogun dé o*. Written and composed by Waheed Sodiq Olamilekan, Victoria Ọbásòótó
- *Iná Ni wá*: Written and composed by Victoria Ọbásòótó
- *Ọsán já*. Written and composed by Victoria Ọbásòótó
- *Dúró dè mí*. Written and composed by Victoria Ọbásòótó



Interviews

- Ṣbásòótó, Victoria. “Interview with Dr O. A. S Babalola” at the Department of Theatre Arts, Faculty of Arts, University of Ibadan, Ibadan on 2nd September, 2024.
- Ṣbásòótó, Victoria “Interview with Director Treasure Adedapo” via Telegram, on 18th September, 2024
- Ṣbásòótó, Victoria “Interview with Miss Erioluwa Pópólá “via WhatsApp, on 4th September, 2024.