

**INTERCULTURAL EXPRESSIONS IN THE YORÙBÁ NATIVE AIR TRADITION OF  
REV. CANON J. J. RANSOME-KÚTÌ**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The evolution of indigenous Yorùbá Church music can be traced to the activism of some pioneer Church men who were passionate about generating appropriate idioms and medium for musical expression. Rev. Canon Josiah Jesse Ransome-Kútì can be regarded as a progenitor of the Yorùbá native air tradition in Christian liturgy. This paper employed the theory of interculturalism in identifying the elements of intercultural expressions in his musical output that formed the appendix of the Yorùbá Hymn book Iwe Orin Mimo fun Ijo Enia Olorun ni ile Yorùbá. His upbringing showcases simultaneous exposure to the worlds of Yorùbá traditional and European Church music. Intercultural expressions identified in the song collection of Canon Kútì includes documentation, set keys, instrumentation and rhythm, harmonic progression, structural form, as well as open air music performance.*

**Keyword:** Intercultural expression, Yorùbá Church Music, Hymn, J.J. Ransome-Kuti

**INTRODUCTION**

The earliest record of Yorùbá music in print was made by Henry Townsend in 1842. Townsend documented a brief vocabulary and list of personal names with their meanings, three proverbs, two texts of about six sentences each and a song with the words and tune supplied (Hair 1967). The mode by which the tune was supplied was not specified. In 1861, a pamphlet containing a collection of hymns composed in traditional Yorùbá style and sung to traditional tunes was printed in Abéòkúta. These hymns were composed and employed in services by a congregation in Òtá, which had Rev. James White a Sierra Leonean, as Priest (Hair, 1967). James White encouraged his congregation to compose songs according to Yorùbá indigenous music

sensibilities. Towards the end of the century, in a letter to Moloney, the then Governor of Lagos, James White attested to the success of his experiment in the following words:

The Òtàs (a sub-ethnic group among the Yorùbá) being reported to be famous native poets and musicians and finding a difficulty to teach the new converts to Christianity English tunes, I asked them to compose their own hymns and songs, which they did, subject to my corrections with regard to things unscriptural, and the collection contained in the book is the result. They are used to this day in divine worship. There is nothing like rhyming or metre. The hymns and songs being their own composition, they are intelligibly sung by old and young, and I have no doubt that the use of it has tended to deepen their devotion (Moloney, 1889, p. 290)

According to Lynn (1967), Abẹ̀òkúta served as a cradle for the development of native entertainment in which European and Yorùbá forms of entertainment were presented side by side in the same concert programme. This later influenced a similar development in Lagos. Lynn commented on a spectacular concert given in 1898 by the Abẹ̀òkúta choral society and conducted by Rev. Olúbí of the CMS, in which European and Yorùbá culture came together most spectacularly. The concert featured G. F. Handel's *'But thou didst not leave my soul in hell'* from the oratorio *Messiah* sung in Yorùbá, and an original composition "*Ó Yẹ K'á F'òpẹ F'Òlórún*", a piece played on the harmonium, a Yorùbá translation of Evangeline. Similar occasions of fascinating blend of European and Yorùbá culture in entertainment took place in the late 1880s into the early 1900s. An example of such took place in 1900 at the Wesleyan Itesi Church.

In Lagos, the Ebute Metta Choral Society, under the influence of Emmanuel Şówándé who played the harmonium at the 1898 concert of the Abẹ̀òkúta choral society, began to experiment with the blending of European and Yorùbá culture in entertainment. This gives strong indication of the role of Abẹ̀òkúta as the cradle of these intercultural activities which later culminated in the

birth of the *Yorùbá Native Air (YNA)* tradition in Christian liturgy. The role of Abèòkúta in the development of *YNA* is demonstrated by a key pioneering figure in the person of Rev. Josiah J. Ransome-Kútì. He was among the clergymen, teachers, catechists, choirmasters and organists who reacted to the musical dissatisfaction of using European music in the Yorùbá Church. In 1923, a Yorùbá Hymn Book was published by the Church missionary society (C.M.S.) with a collection of fifty seven (57) Yorùbá songs contributed by Rev J.J. Ransome-Kútì as an appendix to the hymn book. The main six hundred (600) hymns in the book were translations of European hymns into Yorùbá sung to European hymn tunes. The songs in the appendix however, had both texts and melodies in Yorùbá indigenous poetic and musical idioms. Canon Kútì adapted these songs from Yorùbá traditional ritual melodies and gave them new Christian texts. The publication of his hymn book was a confirmation of the acceptance of the use of Yorùbá musical idioms in the liturgy of the Church by the C.M.S. and a landmark in the development of Yorùbá hymnody, paving the way for the eventual development of the *Yorùbá native air* as a bona-fide genre of Church music.

The theoretical orientation for this paper is anchored on Kimberlin and Euba's intercultural music model which addresses the phenomenon of musical works deriving from more than one culture. Euba broadly defined intercultural music as "that in which elements from two or more cultures are integrated. The composer of this music usually belongs to one of the cultures from which the elements are derived" (Euba, 1989, p. 116).

In order to facilitate a discussion of the intercultural expressions in the *Yorùbá native airs* of Rev. Canon J. J. Ransome-Kútì, his collection of Yorùbá hymns which forms the appendix of the

Yorùbá hymn book *Iwe orin Mimo* (I.O.M., 1923) has been selected for analytical discussion. This collection of indigenous hymns is the only existing published work of Rev. J. J. Ransome-Kuti. The discussion therefore explores his biographical sketch, documentation, set key, rhythm, instrumentation, harmonic progression, structural form and open air gospel music performance.

**A biographical sketch of Rev. Canon J. J. Ransome-Kúti (1855-1930)**



Rev. Canon Josiah, Jesse Ransome-Kúti was born in 1855. Kúti his father was the grandson of Likoye, a notable woman of Orile Igbein. Canon Kúti's father was Pa Kúti, who hailed from Orile the original homestead of the Egba. He was a cloth weaver and a professional drummer. His mother, Ekidan Efunpeyin was from the royal lineage of Igbein and Imo townships. The exact date of Canon Kúti's birth is unknown but as he puts it in his own words, " I was born between the years 1855 and 1857 but my mother told me I was about two years old when Aibo was destroyed in 1857, consequently I was born in 1855" (Delano, 1968). Rev. Canon J. J. Kúti was introduced to Christianity by his mother who became a Christian and adopted the name Anne. However, Pa Kúti would take young Josiah to the deity's shrine and all kinds of sacrificial feasts whenever his mother travelled to the farm. His father forbade him from going to school or

Church and made sure he participated in every festival. Whenever Kúti's mother came around, she ensured he went to school and Church. Canon Josiah's experience with his father whenever they went to the deity's shrine and sacrificial feasts accounted for his acquaintance with native tunes and music, the language of native drums and drumming which was going to set a pace for his Christian compositions.

According to Delano (1968), Canon Josiah Kúti and his mother became members of the Christian Missionary Society after the demise of his father in 1863. As a result of her conversion, she took young Kúti to serve as a houseboy with the Principal of the CMS Training Institute in 1864. As a result, Josiah attended school whilst he was staying with the Principal. He later returned to Igbein to continue his studies. He was very clever and excelled particularly in music. In Canon Kúti's words, "I had a glorious youth and I got a feel of both sides of life enjoying the good things of the Church and white men and also eating the foods sacrificed to idols. I had eaten the meats of the gods and the biscuits of the missionaries on the same day". Rev. Canon Kúti entered the C.M.S. Training Institute, Lagos In 1871 and was appointed a teacher at the Ake primary School. After the demise of his mother on the 15<sup>th</sup> of July, 1877, Canon Kúti was appointed music teacher at the C.M.S. Girls' school in Lagos (known as female institute), where he taught and performed music. During his days at the C.M.S. Girls' school, Canon Kúti had a blazing passion for music and singing. He was a spirited public speaker who always got across to his audience with a lively voice and energetic words. As a young man, he was an accomplished musician who played the piano and harmonium with ease and enviable confidence. His talent caused him to be in great demand to play before distinguished people in Lagos. His fine singing voice and self-accompaniment also guaranteed an appreciative audience whenever he performed.

Canon Kútì had so many lovers of music who were proud to be associated with him and his musical success. While Canon Josiah Ransome-Kútì was enjoying the accolades his musical ability was earning him, his erstwhile training and rapport with the C.M.S and other missionaries shaped his compositions and musical prowess. He consecrated all his musical genius to the upliftment of Church music.

Canon Kútì got married to Bertha Amy Olubi on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of May, 1882, and they were blessed with two sons; Oluremi and Oludotun and a girl who sadly died in the course of Canon Kútì's ministry. Isreal Oludotun Ransome-Kútì later became the Principal of Abeokuta Grammar School and with his wife Olufunmilayo, gave birth to Olikoye, Beko (both frontline international health practitioner), and Fela Ransome-Kútì, the world renowned Afro beat musician popularly known as Fela Anikulapo Kútì. In 1887, Canon Kútì was asked to go and start a Church in Gbagura. Giving up many interests in Lagos, he moved to Gbagura alongside his wife. Shortly after, he built a Church in Gbagura which is still the site of the present Church and gathered a band of warm-hearted Christians through which he reached the hearts of the people with the help of his wife, going into the market place singing traditional tunes that the people knew and loved, which had been set into Christian texts. Canon Kútì's music played a great role in attracting people to the Church in Gbagura. Some members of his congregation also visited his home in order to enjoy his singing and music making. However, he faced challenges during the course of his ministerial duty. Despite attracting them with the use of music, he still had some degree of difficulty with the people in entrenching and extolling Christian virtues and discouraging people from idol worship and practices. He was once attacked and injured for pleading with the *Olu* of *Ilaro* to allow Christians to use umbrellas during their service to shield them from the scorching

sun and the drenching rain. The reason for his attack was based on the belief that Canon Kúti had come to destroy their royal tradition, as only the king used umbrellas. According to Delano (1968), Canon Kúti's life was that of service and discipline.

Being able to relate with people and their tradition was instrumental in the success of Canon Kúti. He wrote so many Church songs and pioneered the use of *native airs* in Church liturgy. His services were music-filled and his organist always had the hardest times playing to his standard and satisfaction. He would join the choir and occupy the organ seat if he didn't feel comfortable with his organist during worship services. He would start his Sunday with songs and prayers and abstain from the other luxuries just to serve the Almighty; he would sing the baritone voice of the closing hymn in Church. He was always seen singing at the top of his voice the words he knew so well moving and swaying to the melody. One of his most notable works was changing of some of the deity-worshipping lyrics to Christian lyrics, for instance; *Et'Olorun lawa o se o* (We will do God's will) whose original lyrics were *Awa o s'oro ile wa o* (we shall practice our native rites), or *epo n be, ewa n be o* (there is sufficiency of oil and beans). With his musical career spanning over a period of 60 years, he wrote a myriad of hymns and sacred songs in Yorùbá Language, thereby giving generations after him hymns and sacred songs in the native Yorùbá language.

A careful observation of the melodies published by Canon Kuti reveals that his indigenous songs are built on the pentatonic scale. Pioneer Yorùbá music scholars like Dr. T.K.E. Phillips and Felá Sówándé who emerged after Canon Kúti saw his pentatonic melodies as a trailblazing element. This paved the way for Dr. Phillips' foregrounding his theory published in his book *Yorùbá*

*music* in 1953. Felá Şówándé was a protégée of Dr. Philips. He in turn imbibed this theory that Yorùbá melodies easily maintain the inflection of Yorùbá speech-tone pattern through the use of the pentatonic scale. Fela Şówándé, upon his contact with *YNA* crusaders like Rev. A. T. Ola Olude, took it upon himself to pass on the maintenance of the pentatonic scale in composing Yorùbá melodies in order to attain the Yorùbá speech tonal inflection in their compositions (Olude, 2008). Canon Kúti was a caring father, cheerful giver and a selfless man who avoided the urge to amass wealth to himself but rather, bless the lives of others. He lived up to his seventies, after which he took ill briefly and died on 4<sup>th</sup> of September, 1930. He was buried on the ground where the Church in Ake stands. Canon Kúti pioneered the move of evangelism in the Egba region and most importantly introduced the use of the Yorùbá Native Air in Christian liturgy.

## **INTERCULTURAL EXPRESSIONS**

### **Documentation**

The oral medium has been used in the transmission of Yorùbá traditional literature (music, prose, poetry, drama, eulogy, incantation, and so on) before and after introduction to literacy. Until the contact with Europeans through trade and religion, the traditional Yorùbá had limited formal reading and writing culture, and therefore passed traditional knowledge orally to younger generations who also do the same to their younger ones as they age. This is therefore responsible for the variation in details commonly experienced in the account of Yorùbá literary narratives and music. Another reason for such variation is the language of transmission. Although Yorùbá language of Oyo is central to various people groups in Yorùbá land, their various dialects always have significant effect on traditional music presentation as well as all other literary forms. An



example of such is found in the Yorùbá folksong ‘*Iya ni wura*’ which has slightly varying lyrics sung to the same tune as shown below.

I - ya ni wu-ra i-ye - bi-ye\_\_\_\_\_ Ti a ko le fo-wo ra.\_\_\_\_ I - ya niwura i-ye  
I - ya ni wu-ra i-ye - bi-ye\_\_\_\_\_ I - ya ko se'e fo-wo ra.\_\_\_\_ I - ya niwura i-ye

bi-ye\_\_\_\_\_ Ti a ko le fowo ra.\_\_\_\_ O l'o-yun mi fo-su me- san,\_\_\_\_  
bi-ye\_\_\_\_\_ I - ya kose'efowo ra.\_\_\_\_

O pon mi fo-dun me - ta.\_\_\_\_\_ I - ya ni wu - ra i - ye -  
I - ya ni wu - ra i - ye -

bi - ye\_\_\_\_\_ Ti a ko le fo - wo ra.\_\_\_\_\_  
bi - ye\_\_\_\_\_ I - ya ko se'e fo - wo ra.\_\_\_\_\_

**Music score showing lyrical variation in ‘*Iya ni wura*’**

<i>Ti a ko le f'owo ra.</i>	Mothers are inestimable treasure
<i>Iya ni wura iyebiye</i>	Unquantifiable treasures
<i>O pon mi f'odun meta</i>	She carried me in her womb for nine months
<i>O l'oyun mi f'osu mesan</i>	And backed me for three years
<i>Ti a ko le f'owo ra</i>	Mothers are inestimable treasure
<i>Iya ni wura iyebiye</i>	Unquantifiable treasure

A variant of the second line of the song is presented in the lyrics below.

<i>Iya ni wura iyebiye</i>	Mothers are inestimable treasure
<i>Iyako se ef'owora</i>	Mothers cannot be bought with money
<i>O l'oyun mi f'osu mesan</i>	She carried me in her womb for nine months
<i>O pon mi f'odun meta</i>	And backed me for three years
<i>Iya ni wura iyebiye</i>	Mothers are inestimable treasure
<i>Ti a ko le f'owora.</i>	Unquantifiable treasure

ORIN 51.

Fine. Chorus.

1 Enyin alaiye, enyin alaiye, E la t'aiye se, Jesu mi sehin bo. Chorus. Jesu mi sehin bo, Jesu mi sehin bo, Enyin alaiye, E la t'aiye se, Jesu mi sehin bo.

2 Enyin onifa, enyin onifa, E la ye 'ro pa, Ekuro ki soro. Chorus. Ekuro ki soro, ekuro ki soro, Ekuro ki soro, Enyin onifa E la ye 'ro pa. Ekuro ki soro.

3 Enyin elangun, enyin elangun, E la ye 'ro pa Eniku ki dehin. Chorus. Eniku ki dehin, eniku ki dehin, Eniku ki dehin, Enyin elangun, E la ye 'ro pa, Eniku ki dehin.

***Song 51: Example of documentation with the use of staff notation***

Having mastered a wide array of traditional ritual and secular songs through exposure to rituals and deity worship by his father, Canon Kúti adopted the tune of many of those songs, to which he added new Christian lyrics. In order to avoid variation or alteration which was most likely to occur with the set of *Yorùbá native airs* being composed by Canon Kúti, he adopted the European method of musical documentation, whereby he made use of the staff notation method with added lyrics. This he did in order to avoid the songs being sung wrongly, as he wanted his composed *native airs* to be sung with precision. As stated earlier in his profile, he always joined the choir whenever he didn't feel comfortable with his organist or choristers during services, which reveals how perfect he wanted musical presentations to be. Unlike many other *Yorùbá native air* composers whose songs were not properly documented (many of them documented their compositions with the use of tonic solfa), Canon Kúti's songs – a collection of fifty-seven *Yorùbá sacred songs* which were published in 1923 as an appendix to the *Yorùbá Hymn Book* of the Church of Nigeria, Anglican Communion were documented in staff notation.

## **Set Keys**

Prior to exposure to European musical tradition, the concept of ‘key’ was not totally strange to the Yorùbá singing culture. The recognition associated with *ohun orin* could be likened to the European concept of ‘key’, but not in its entirety. The lead singer takes the song utilizing his most convenient vocal register without necessarily putting the vocal range of the participants into consideration. The traditional idea of *ohun orin* in Yorùbá singing culture requires backup singers to align with the tonal pattern of the lead singer in such a way that they all sound together within same tonal range, whereas the European concept of ‘key’ entails a song being performed with precision within a given tonal territory which has been pre-determined based on individual singers’ vocal range.

Canon Kútì was one of the earliest *Yorùbá native air* composers who bridged the gap between the Yorùbá idea of *ohun orin* and the European concept of ‘key’, thereby setting his *Yorùbá native airs* into keys which would ensure the most convenient performance whenever they are sung. By so doing, Canon Kútì was able to prove beyond doubt that *Yorùbá native airs* could be performed without the congregation straining their voices in order to sing along. The musical example below shows the setting of key in one of Canon Kútì’s *native airs* showing consideration of the four main categories of the singing voice.

ORIN 38.

<p>1 A parun, a parun                  A parun, a parun                  Dede oriṣa o, nẹ re deḷeyà                  A parun l' aiye o.</p>	<p>2 A parun, a parun                  A parun, a parun                  Dede imalẹ o, nẹ re deḷeyà;                  A parun l' aiye o.</p>
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The vocal range of the singing voices as illustrated below shows that the set key in the above *Yorùbá native air* by Canon Kútì was carefully selected to enable voices sing without stress.

Soprano                      Alto

Tenor                              Bass

### **Instrumentation and rhythm**

Drums form the primary instruments used to accompany music in traditional and modern Yorùbá musical practice. Sachs and Hornbostel (1914) classified them as membranophone instruments, for they make use of animal skin in order to produce sound. Oládàpò (1995) demonstrates the vastness of Yorùbá drum melodies that emanate from texts of proverbs, historical accounts and wise sayings in his compilation titled *Àyàn Akéwì Afilùsòrò*.



*A set of Akuba drums*

Drums and gongs had been the main set of instruments that provided accompaniment to Yorùbá songs, until the exposure of the Yorùbá people to European musical culture which brought about the use of organ, harmonium, piano and other Western musical instruments into accompanying Yorùbá songs. Canon Kútì was one of the pioneers of this new musical practice. He played the organ and harmonium so well that he accompanied himself while singing. He used the keyboard instruments both as harmonic and rhythmic accompaniment, in a way that consequently attracted a lot of people to the Church. The amalgamation of these instrumental traditions was novel, because early Yorùbá Christian converts were hitherto used to mainly drum and gong accompaniment during singing. The style eventually paved way to introduction of more cross cultural musical instruments into the music of the Yorùbá Church.



*Agogo (gong)*

### **Harmonic progression**

Playing the piano or any of the keyboard instruments to accompany singing entails the use of chords which therefore form a harmonic structure upon which the song sits. Prior to the time Canon Kútì explored the use of the keyboard instruments to accompany his singing, Agidigbo had been the only Yorùbá instrument that could produce sounds which could be likened to that of the piano.



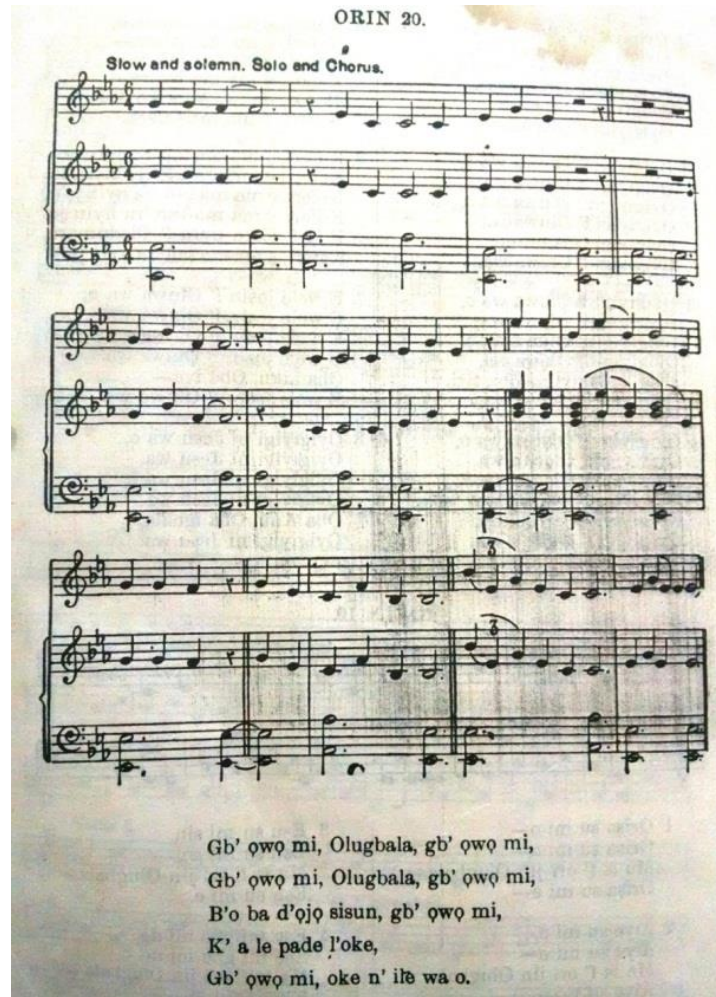
*Agidigbo*

However, agidigbo does not require a precise universal tuning, as the sound produced by the short pieces of metal attached to its body are only meant to give a sense of sound variety.



ORIN 20.

Slow and solemn. Solo and Chorus.



Gb' ọwọ mi, Olugbala, gb' ọwọ mi,  
Gb' ọwọ mi, Olugbala, gb' ọwọ mi,  
B'o ba d'ọjọ sisun, gb' ọwọ mi,  
K' a le pade l'oke,  
Gb' ọwọ mi, oke n' ilẹ wa o.

*Musical score showing the use of harmonic progression by Canon Kùtì*

In addition, Canon Kùtì's documentation of the harmonic progression of the keyboard instrument must have been done to avoid any form of unwanted or unnecessary improvisation, since it is not uncommon that musicians who play the keyboard instruments sometimes express personal idea when accompanying songs or hymns. He was a great lover of music whose experience surpassed any form of un-artistic expression. Having documented the harmonic progressions of his *Yorùbá native airs*, he therefore made the organ accompaniment in a definitive form.

**Structural forms**

According to Nketia (1974), form and structure in African music involve solo, chorus, call and response and canonic arrangements. Although many of the *Yorùbá native airs* of Canon Kùtì were adaptation of traditional folk and ritual songs to which he substituted with Christian lyrics, they all could be categorized based on traditional African forms as stated above, as well as European forms which include strophic, binary, ternary and thorough composed. His *Yorùbá Native air* compositions reflect two identities; they are African based on their textual and melodic pattern, while taking the European identity through notation and harmonization. Consequently, one could view the forms of the *Yorùbá native airs* of Canon Kùtì from both African and European perspectives. The *Yorùbá native air* of Canon Kùtì shown below is structurally analyzed using both African and European identities.

ORIN 2.

<p>1 E, t' Olurun l' awa o se o ;          E, t' Olurun l' awa o se o ;          Eṣu nṣe ṣa,—Oluwa.          Eṣu nṣe ṣa, kò ri 'pa kan sà ;          E, t' Olurun l' awa o se o.</p>	<p>2 Awa o juba Olurun o,          Awa o juba Olurun o,          Ènit' o niwa, l' Oluwa ;          Ènit' o niwa l' o ye k'a wa sin,          Awa o juba Olurun o.</p>
<p>3 O ye k'a fi 'yin f' Olurun o,          O ye k'a fi 'yin f' Olurun o ;          Oba t'o ni wa l' Oluwa,          Oba t'o ni wa on ni Jesu ;          O ye k'a fi 'yin f' Olurun o.          Aṣṣ. Amino.</p>	

*Canon Kùtì's Yorùbá native air; Et'Olorun l'awa o se*



The form of the above song by Canon Kúti could be approached inter-culturally. Having been written using European music notation principle, it could be referred to as an extended binary. The first four bars of the score forms A, while the next four forms B on the eight bar. Bar nine and ten then extends the B section of the music, thereby making it an extended binary. The following two bars form a coda which is sung to *Ase, amin o* (amen). The song could also be said to be a chorus, considering its origin.

### **OPEN AIR EVANGELISTIC OUTREACH**

Music making among the Yorùbá that predated the incursion of European missionaries had been a collective effort by groups of musicians who take up various roles such as lead singer, backup singers, lead drummer, backup drummers, and so on (Euba, 1977). Being one of the pioneers of intercultural musical practice, Canon Kúti successfully experimented the one-man music making concept, whereby he would sing at the top of his voice, while accompanying himself with either the drums or other traditional instruments. In the words of Delano;

it was during that period when he went to fetish groves with his father, who was a professional drummer, that he learnt native music and tunes. Later, when he became a preacher, he set Christian songs to this music, and sang them at his open air services. He also learnt the language of native drum (Delano, 1968)

He was an energetic singer who had mastered the art of singing and drumming from his father who was a professional drummer. Being a fantastic singer, drummer and keyboard player made him an excellent musician, thereby leaving a landmark achievement in his Yorùbá evangelistic outreaches.

## **CONCLUSION**

The childhood experiences of Canon Kúti gave him an opportunity to see the two worlds of traditional culture, as well as European religious life. He was brought up as a drummer boy within the environment of Yorùbá traditional religious worship, and eventually trained as a priest in the Church, whereby he made use of traditional music as a strong support for his priestly career. His biography reveals his family upbringing as being very influential over his career as a prodigious Music Minister who utilized music as a veritable tool for evangelism and Christian religious worship. His foray into music documentation, set keys, instrumentation and rhythms, harmonic progression, structural forms, as well as open air evangelistic outreach reveals intercultural expressions in his works.

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