

**ANALYSIS OF BÈMBÉ MUSIC OF OBÀFÈMI OWÓDÉ COMMUNITY, OGUN STATE
SOUTH WEST NIGERIA**

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ABSTRACT

This paper examined the structural forms of Bèmbé music in Obàfèmi Owódé local government area of Abeokuta in Ògùn State. It also investigated the content and context of Bèmbé musical performance among the people with specific reference to rituals. The study equally examined the musical instruments used in Bèmbé musical performance and categorised them under the Sachs and Honbostel system of classification. The performances of the Arífáyò family band were recorded and their songs randomly selected then subsequently analysed after the collection of relevant data from the field. Through detailed analysis, the study reveals salient elements of call and response with varied improvisations used in the music. It also established the multiple function of music performance in the context of social interaction and religious experience.

Keywords: Bembe, Ethnography, Ethnomusicology, Ensemble

INTRODUCTION

Music forms an integral and all-pervasive part of the Yoruba culture, South West Nigeria. One of such is Bèmbé music, a traditional genre found among the Egba-speaking Yorùbás in Obàfèmi Owódé local government area of Abéòkúta, Ògùn State in South Western Nigeria. Bèmbé is a musical celebration, which involves drumming, singing, dancing, and trance possession among the worshipers and the initiates. According to Nketia (1974) this music is performed for special events, either as the fulfilment of an obligation or as a celebration for òrìsàs such as Sàngo, Esu-Elegba, Osun, Egungun Ògún, Sòpòná, Oya, Obàtálá and Iyemoja. Schweitzer (2013) describes “Bèmbé” as a double-headed drum, played with a curved stick to accompany music and dance.

The study therefore examines the Bèmbé music of Obàfèmi Owódé local government area in Ogun State in Nigeria with the view to understand its structure, style, instrumentation and functions in ritual processes of the people.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF BÈMBÉ MUSIC IN OBÀFÈMI OWÓDÉ

Obàfèmi Owódé local government was created under the Edict No.9 of 1976 of Ogun State Nigeria (Ogun State Government). The local government comprises Adigbe, Oba Kobape, Obàfèmi, Ogunmàkin, Ajebo, Owódé, Ibafo, Iro and Mokoloko towns majorly of the Egba clan. The common language spoken in these settlements is the Yoruba with the Egba dialect. The aforementioned settlement is predominantly governed by high chiefs normally called the Baales. For administrative convenience, Obafemi Owode local government is politically divided into 12 wards: Mokoloki ward, Oba ward, Ofada ward, Egbeda ward, Owode ward, Kajola ward, Ajura ward, Obafemi ward, Moloko Asipa ward, Ajebo ward, Onidundu ward and Alapako-Oni ward.

The Arífáyò Family Band

The Arífáyò family band is the major exponent of Bembe music in the Obàfèmi Owódé local community. The band is led by Baba Arífáyò, a middle aged man in his 50s. He inherited a Bèmbé drum from his father who was an Ifá worshipper in the area. The Arífáyò family are the only lineage or clan who perform Bèmbé music in Obàfèmi Owódé community. The reason for such restrictions is due to



Plate 1: Arífáyò family band

the fact that specific skills, interests and availability need to be honed in the performance skills of the music genre. The band performs at occasions and events like coronations, festivals and marriage for a fee within and outside the community.

Performance Practice of the Band



There is a degree of flexibility in the performance practice of the Bèmbé musicians. Musicians are free to put on any dress during the performance of Bèmbé. The dance movement is determined by the style of music that is being played at that particular time. The beating of the timeline (*agogo*) serves as rhythmic ostinato to any song with strict and regular timing.

Plate 2 Bembe musicians in action

Singing in Bèmbé is done almost by the lead singer and the back-up singers with participation of members of the community. Once the lead singer establishes the song with an exclamation, it is usually followed by a response from the audience and the instrumentalists. Dancing is a very vital experience in the musical performance which represents the value of oneness and togetherness among the old and young people in the community as represented.

STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF BÈMBÉ MUSIC

For the purpose of this paper, some of the music performed by the musicians will be analysed. They include; Iba éré an introduction to Bèmbé ritual processes, Sango music, Ògùn music, Òsun music, Ègún music and orin Ìbejì. The descriptive analytical picture of Bèmbé music consists of three basic musical structures and they are: Worò (Arágbó), Sóngà and Wáriwò. The

music is rigidly controlled by a recurrent rhythm often associated with the role of the bell pattern called the agogo, typical of African music. This instrument plays a steady rhythmic pattern, including in its common or varied form.



Music sheet 1: Agogo

Plate 3: The agogo (bell)

Arágbó Movement

This musical form in Bèmbé music is always slow and steady because it is always played at the beginning like the Ijúbà song (to show respect). Vidal (2012) observed that the Ijúbà song sang at the beginning of an Efe ceremony is a verbal acknowledgement of the existence of superior forces and a call to them to remove all obstacles or impediments that might stand in the way of the supplication. The process is also applicable in all Bèmbé musical performance where the ritual is performed because the Bèmbé musicians believe that there are some unseen forces that must be acknowledged. This is seen in the excerpts below where the song is performed in a slow and steady tempo from bars 1 to 8:

Music Sheet 2: Iba

Translation

Respect to ere, ere I give you honour
Respect to atotele, I give you honour
B’omo korin
If a child wants to sing successfully, you must be acknowledged
I respect ere aragbo

Arágbó serves as an introduction to Bèmbé performance in which the deities are revered and acknowledged by the performers. The tempo of this movement is basically slow which opens the door for drummers to explore their creativity. The Bèmbé instrumental performance consists of steady ostinati frameworks of multi-concentric rhythms on which various manipulations of the set are realised by the lead drummer. A look at the interlocking rhythmic pattern reveals the simple and complex nuances in the configuration of the music ensembles. While we find the Bèmbé drum leading the way at the beginning with complex interlocking rhythms, the other instruments (Atele, Agogo and Isaju) provide some balance to the rhythmic setting. The example below shows the graphic demonstration of interlocking sequence of Bèmbé instrumental performance.

The image shows a musical score for six instruments: Iya Ilu Bembé, Eji, Omole Isaju, Akuba, Agogo, and Sekere. Each instrument has a staff with a 12/8 time signature. The Iya Ilu Bembé staff shows a complex, continuous rhythmic pattern. The other instruments have simpler, more spaced-out rhythmic patterns that interlock with the Bembé drum.

Music sheet 3: The interlocking rhythm in Bèmbé music

Sóngà Movement

This form in Bèmbé music is mainly meant for entertainment purposes. The rhythmic movement of Sóngà is lively because of the function this style performs. The rhythm is free with a regular beat. However, this can be only at the discretion of the master drummer and the lead singer. The basic pattern of Sóngà movement is transcribed below:



Music sheet 4: Sóngà

The uniqueness of this movement is the collective social participation of both members and audience during performance. That is why Sóngà is associated with occasions of serious social and festive nature, such as coronation, naming ceremonies, marriage, funeral rites and recreational purposes. The excerpt presented in Sheet music 5 is used to eulogise twins in performance:

Lively **Orin Ibeji**



5 O se bo lo ko o wa e dunya a gba do

Music sheet 5: Orin Ibeji

Yorùbá

Ose boloko, ose boloko wa
Edun ya gba do fe

Translation

He thought the farmer wouldn't come
Edun devour the corn

Wàriwò Movement

This form of Bèmbé music is highly rhythmic and percussive in nature. This movement is associated with rituals, worship, prowess and related contexts. Wàriwò is characterised by a fast tempo from the beginning to the end. There may be two master drummers playing together at one time and swapping roles at other times when one gets tired. The master drummer plays a vital role in Bèmbé music performance. He dictates the tempo of the music and provides varying rhythms to the prescribed movements. There is a synergy of uniformity and order that must exist among the drummers. It is the role of the master drummer to communicate with the other drummers to provide such synergies. Furthermore, he creates a strong motivation to the musicians and the masquerades during performance. Examples of such masquerades are Panla, Pabíalájá, Ologbòjò, Paramólè, Owòlewà, lagbòndòkò and Agbomolà. His task is to lead them from the physical to the spiritual realm with his drumming. Hence, the place of the master drummer is vital in implementing the procedure with respect to the corresponding dance sequences of the masquerades and the crowd. The excerpt below is the song used by the singers. As the lyrics portends, it is a song heralding the gods (Sango, Panla, Pabíalájá, and Égún) and beckoning them to the floor of the dance as if they are going to war. Hence, the movement of the singers and the drummers will be boisterous, fast and highly rhythmic in nature:

Yorùbá

Sango de o

Òrìsà majé o tẹ́nu mi jádè

Panla npa le ogun mó

Pabialaja npa le ogun bò

Égún npa le o gun mó

Translation

Sango is here

Orisha don't let it come out of my mouth

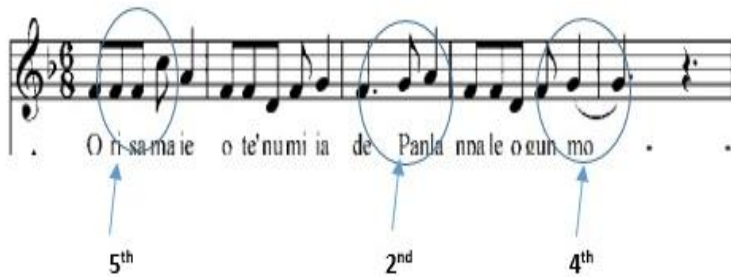
Panla is ready for war

Pabialaja is preparing for war

Egun is ready for war

MELODIC RANGE IN BÈMBÉ MUSIC

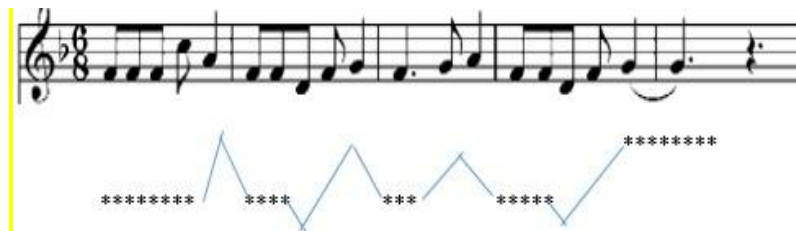
The range of a melody is the interval between the lowest and the highest notes McDermott et al. (2010). The melodic intervals explored in most songs used in Bèmbé music are often in stepwise (2nd), skip-wise (3rd) and leap-wise (1st -5th) movements either below or above preceding notes. Melodies of songs used in Bèmbé music are not often built around the range of an octave. However, most songs are restricted to short intervals ranging from seconds to fifths as seen in Music sheet 6.



Music Sheet 6: Melodic range

MELODIC MOVEMENT AND CONTOUR

This describes the shape of the melody used in Bèmbé music. It is observed that most of the songs used in Bèmbé performances tend to have descending melodic contour generally (Manuel & Orlando, 2010). The melodic movement of Iba ere is pendulum in nature as it fluctuates in each line.



Music sheet 7: Melodic contours

CALL AND RESPONSE

The call and response is the main vocal form employed in Bèmbé music. The lead singer (Idowu Arifayo) sings the song from the beginning to the end followed by the backup singers excerpted below:

O se bo' lo ko o wa e dunya a gba do

O se bo lo ko o wa e dunya a gbado

Call **Response**

Music Sheet 8a: Melodic contours

Sometimes, the lead singer takes a part of the song while the other singers join midway between the renditions. This is as shown in the following excerpt.

Call (lead singer)----- Response (Chorus).....

A go go npee el re o - o fe re de - seke re npee le re o o fe re de

Music Sheet 8b: Melodic contours (call and response in between renditions)

There are times the lead singer's line is slightly different from that of the chorus, as seen in the excerpt in Music sheet 8c:

Orin Ibeji

Lively

5

fe - - e dun ya a gba do fe

O se bo' lo ko wa

O se bo' lo ko wa

Call 2

Response 2

Music sheet 8c: Call and response pattern

CLASSIFICATION OF BEMBE MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS WITH THE SACHS-HONBOSTEL SYSTEM

The Sachs-Honbostel system (or H-S System) is a comprehensive, global method of classifying acoustic musical instruments. It was developed in 1914 by two European musicologists, Curt Sachs (1881–1959) and Erich Moritz von Honbostel (1877–1935) do Germany and Austria respectively. The purpose of this system was to create a room for many musical instruments, from ethnic groups across the world that have no place in the western orchestral system of classification (brass, percussion, strings, and woodwinds). The H-S system divides all musical instruments into five categories: idiophones, membranophones, chordophones, aerophones, and electrophones. The major groups of instruments represented in this geographical region are the Membranophones and the idiophone. The number of instruments used in such ensembles ranges from five to eight, with the aim of creating tonal quality and thus reinforcing specific pitches. Bèmbé songs involve a lot of dancing and are characterised by some complicated rhythms of

percussion instruments always calling for audience involvement. Using Sachs and Honbostel system of instrumental classification, the traditional musical instruments used in Bèmbé music can be grouped into membranophones and idiophones. These classifications are discussed in the following sub sections.

Membranophones

A membranophone is any musical instrument which produces sound primarily by way of a vibrating stretched membrane or animal skins over hollowed –out log of woods, earthenware, gourds, and tins. The membranophones are the dominant instruments in Bèmbé music. The instruments in the membranophone family of Bèmbé music are Iya ilu Bèmbé (the master drum), Eji, Omele kénkélé, Omele Àtèlé and Àkúba.

Ìyá Ìlù Bèmbé. This is a cylindrical double-headed membrane drum. It has several shakers around the head area which are used to create sub-rhythm while it is being played. As the drum



is being beaten the serattles (saworo) shake and create rhythmic effect which also contributes to the rhythmic configuration of the musical performance. These pegs are used to increase or decrease the tension on the drum. This

Plate 4: Ìyá-ìlùBèmbé

Bèmbé drum is the principal drum of the ensemble and the music. It also serves as the mother drum (as suggested by its name- Ìyá Ìlù meaning mother drum) upon which the player improvises during the performance, while other drums in the ensemble play a steady rhythmic pattern thus making it both a melodic and rhythmic instrument. This is achieved by squeezing the

leathers with the hands to achieve the desired melodic fragments needed. Below is an example of Ìyá Ìlù Bèmbé rhythmic pattern.

Music sheet 9: Ìyá Ìlù Bèmbé rhythmic pattern

Ejì. This is next to Ìyà-ìlù Bèmbé both in size and order of hierarchy in Bèmbé music. It is a double-headed drum, cylindrical in shape and made of goat skin and straps to change the pitch of the drum. It is played with a curved stick and made of òmò tree. *Ejì* plays, a supportive role



predominantly to Ìyà-ìlù Bèmbé in the Bèmbé music performance. Its rhythm is much simpler and straight-forward. It plays the first two beats of the quadruple note and rests for the third of each of the beats.

Plate 5: *Ejì* drum

Music sheet 10: *Ejì* rhythmic pattern

Omele Ìsájú. This is a medium sized drum, which is obviously not as big as the Ìyá Ìlù Bèmbé. It is a semi cylindrical double-headed drum with several pegs around the head area which are used to manipulate the tension of the sound and tune of the drum. The *Omele Ìsájú* plays a steady

rhythmic pattern in the ensemble, thus, making it solely an ostinato rhythmic instrument. However, due to the size of this drum, its acoustic makes it a mid-pitch instrument. It is usually played with a stick, which come in different sizes.



Plate 6: Omele isájú



Music sheet 11: Omele isájú rhythmic pattern

Omele Àtélé. This is the next in shape to Omele isájú. This is a high pitched, semi cylindrical and double-headed membrane drum with several pegs for tuning of the instrument. It plays the sub-rhythm or supportive role in Bèmbé ensemble. The pitch of this instrument can be varied by the pressure exerted by the hands of the player.



Plate 7: Omele Àtélé



Music sheet 12: Omele Àtélé rhythmic pattern

ÀKÚBÀ: This is the only adopted drum into Bèmbé music. It is cylindrical single-headed membrane drum with several pegs around the head. Àkúbà plays an accentuated rhythm in Bèmbé music just like the pot drum in traditional Igbo music. Its body is made of hollowed wood and it is covered with a stretched membrane with metal pegs around the drum.



Plate 8: Àkúbà drum



Music sheet 13: Àkúbà rhythmic pattern

Idiophones

Idiophones are self-sounding instruments. They may be shaken, struck, stamped, or scraped. Examples of instruments in this category found in Bèmbé music are the agogo (bells) and the sèkèrè (gourd rattle).

Agogo (gong). This is a metal bell instrument used majorly in African music to keep the tempo and the timeline of the music. The iron bell is one of the most common and widely distributed

musical instruments in Nigeria and they come in two varieties: single and double. Akpabot (1986) noted that one of the bells is a large conical-shaped one producing just one tone and the



twin-gong producing two tones which is smaller in size. It is played with sticks while they are held by the left hand either downward or sideways. The right hand beats to bring out the sound. It is primarily a rhythmic instrument which plays the

Plate 9: Agogo

roughout Africa with some variations.



Music sheet 14: Agogo rhythmic pattern

Sèkèrè (Rattle). This is made from a dried out gourd covered with netting to which small beads have been attached. This instrument plays an important role in Bèmbé music as it supports the agogo in playing the rhythm and keeping the tempo of the music.



Plate 10: Sèkèrè

It maintains one particular rhythm throughout the performance, but at times there may be an interjection from the player. Sèkèrè (Rattle) is usually played by shaking and striking it against the leg and the hand of the player.



Music sheet 15: Sèkèrè rhythmic pattern

CONCLUSION

The paper examined the Bembe Music of Obàfèmi Owódé local government area of Abeokuta in Ògùn State. It also undertook a historical analysis of the genre by drawing attention to how the religious activities came to play in its evolution and development. Using the Sachs and Honbostel system of classification, the study examined the musical instruments from two major systems within the group. From the study, it was discovered that the rhythmic configuration of Bèmbé music is laden with complex interlocking rhythm. There are three musical forms in Bèmbé music which include, Sóngà Wáriwò and Arágbó. Furthermore, the dominant musical style in Bèmbé music is antiphony: the call and response style. Furthermore, the timeline concept of the bell rhythm (agogo) translates as a time cycle because African music is perceived essentially a circular concept rather than linear. We also discovered that Bèmbé music is mainly performed in unison though there may be an interjection in vocal movement. The continuity of this music genre is assured as young men are now gravitating towards the music. This will in the long run preserve the genre for the coming generation of Obàfèmi Owódé Community.

RECOMMENDATION

The author recommends a further musicological research to be undertaken on other music typologies within and outside the community in order to identify and document the richness in African music for posterity.

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