

A study on the role of African musical instruments on contemporary music composition

OTAMERE Osarodion Emmanuel

Department of Music
Edo State College of Education, Abudu, Nigeria

Abstract

This paper explores the role of African musical instruments in contemporary music composition, with specific focus on Nigerian art and popular music styles. The research employs a qualitative approach, combining literature review, interviews, and musical analyses. The paper discusses the historical significance of African musical instruments in Nigerian traditional music, while highlighting their cultural importance and sonic characteristics. It also analyses specific case studies of prominent Nigerian musicians and composers who have utilised African musical instruments in their compositions. The findings reveal the multifaceted role of African musical instruments in contemporary music composition, showing that the compositions serve not only as a means of cultural expression but also as a source of inspiration, innovation, and identity formation for Nigerian artistes. In addition, the research highlights the possibility for further exploration and experimentation in incorporating African instruments into global music contexts that would foster cultural exchange and create new artistic horizons. The paper constitutes an important contribution to the growing body of knowledge on African musical instruments and their relevance in contemporary music composition through provision of insights into the unique musical landscape of Nigeria, especially, thus becoming a foundation for future research in this field.

Keywords: African musical instruments; contemporary music; composition; traditional music.

Introduction

Music has always been an integral part of human culture - it serves as a powerful medium of expression, communication, and cultural identity. In the realm of contemporary music, artistes and composers constantly seek new sources of inspiration to create innovative and captivating compositions. This pursuit of artistic uniqueness often leads them to explore diverse musical traditions and instruments from around the world for ideas to be incorporated into their works. In this paper, we explore the realm of African musical instruments and their influence on contemporary music composition, with particular focus on the rich musical heritage of Nigeria. Nigeria,

known for its vibrant art and popular music scenes, provides a fascinating backdrop in the examination of the interplay between traditional African musical instruments and modern music styles as products of compositional adventurousness.

Generally speaking, African music is renowned for its captivating rhythms, intricate melodies, and vibrant percussive elements. These musical features have deep historical and cultural significance because they embody the narratives, beliefs, and rituals of various African societies. African music instruments, ranging from drums, xylophones, and stringed instruments, to wind instruments, possess unique tonal qualities and playing techniques that contribute to the distinctive African musical aesthetic. Nigeria, as one of the largest and most culturally diverse countries in Africa, boasts a myriad of indigenous musical traditions. From the mesmerizing beats of Afrobeat pioneered by Fela Kuti to the soul-stirring melodies of highlife, juju, and fuji music, Nigerian music has not only captivated audiences within the country but has also garnered global recognition.

The objective of this study is to explore the ways in which African musical instruments, particularly those used in Nigeria's traditional music, have influenced contemporary music composition. We will delve into the works of some Nigerian artists and composers who have seamlessly blended elements of traditional African music with modern genres such as hip-hop, R&B, jazz, and fusion. By analyzing specific examples, we aim to highlight the transformative power of African musical instruments in shaping the sonic landscapes of contemporary compositions.

Furthermore, this study aims to shed light on the cultural significance and symbolic meanings associated with African musical instruments. Understanding the historical and social contexts in which these instruments are used provides valuable insights into the deeper layers of contemporary compositions, as they become vehicles for cultural preservation, social commentary, and artistic innovation. Through this comprehensive exploration, we hope to emphasise the importance of African musical instruments in contemporary music composition and showcase the rich musical tapestry that emerges when traditional and modern musical worlds collide. By doing so, we seek to foster a greater appreciation and recognition of the invaluable contributions of African musical heritage to the global music landscape.

In the following sections, we will delve into specific case studies, highlighting the utilization of African musical instruments in contemporary Nigerian art and popular music styles. The study's findings contribute to the existing body of knowledge and inspire further research in this captivating field of study.

Theoretical concept

This paper explores hybridity as a theoretical concept. Hybridity refers to the blending, mixing, or intermingling of different elements, ideas, cultures, or identities to form something new and unique. According to Wikipedia ("Hybridity", n.d.), hybridity emerged as a concept primarily in postcolonial studies, cultural studies, and literary

theory but has since found application in various fields, including sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies.

At its core, hybridity challenges notions of purity, authenticity, and fixed identities by emphasising the dynamic and transformative nature of cultural and social processes. It recognises that cultures and identities are not static or homogenous but are constantly influenced by encounters, exchanges, and interactions with other cultures, resulting in hybrid cultural formations.

Hybridity can manifest in multiple ways. It can refer to the mixing of cultural practices, symbols, languages, or traditions from different sources, often resulting from colonial encounters, globalisation, migration, or diaspora. It can also refer to the blending of different genres, styles, or forms in artistic expressions, literature, music, or architecture. The term "hybridization" dates back hundreds of years, to the time of Plato and Aristotle (Niel, 2023:1). One influential theorist who discussed hybridity is Homi K. Bhabha. In his book "The Location of Culture" (1994:7), Bhabha examines the concept of hybridity in relation to colonial and postcolonial contexts. He argues that hybridity disrupts binary oppositions and fixed identities, creating spaces of negotiation and ambivalence. Bhabha suggests that hybridity challenges dominant cultural narratives and opens up possibilities for subversion and resistance. Another notable scholar who has contributed to the understanding of hybridity is Stuart Hall. In his essay, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" (1990:56), Hall discusses the concept of hybridity within the context of diasporic experiences. He emphasises the complex and dynamic nature of identity formation, which is shaped by both cultural heritage and the social, political, and historical conditions of migration. Hall contends that hybridity allows for the creation of new and multiple identities that cannot be reduced to a single origin.

However, it is important to note that hybridity is not a uniformly positive or celebratory concept. It can also entail power dynamics, appropriation, or assimilation, wherein dominant cultures or identities may selectively adopt or commodify aspects of marginalised or subordinate cultures without acknowledging their origins or context. These power differentials and inequalities need to be critically examined when discussing hybridity.

Hybridity as a theoretical concept in this paper provides a framework to understand the complex and dynamic nature of culture, identity, and social interactions in music in a globalised world, where multiple influences and forces shape our lived experiences. The notion of musical hybridization, which highlights the idea that musical styles and traditions are always growing and merging, is explored. Hybridity in music challenges traditional categorisations and encourages a more inclusive and open-minded perspective. It allows for creative exploration, cultural exchange, and the formation of new musical languages. Moreover, it reflects the dynamic nature of music and its ability to evolve and adapt to different contexts and influences.

While the theoretical concepts of hybridity, fusion, and appropriation share some similarities - they are not the same and each carries its own distinct meaning. Here's a breakdown of each concept.

Hybridity

Hybridity refers to the blending or mixing of different musical styles, genres, or cultural traditions. It recognises the interaction and fusion of diverse elements to create something new and unique. Hybridity emphasises the fluidity and interconnectedness of musical forms and challenges notions of cultural purity and authenticity. It embraces the idea that cultural expressions are constantly evolving and influenced by various sources.

Fusion

Fusion, in the context of music, also involves the blending of different musical styles or genres. It typically refers to the intentional combination of two or more distinct styles to create a new sound or genre. Fusion often implies a conscious effort to merge elements from different traditions, resulting in a cohesive and integrated musical expression. Examples of fusion genres include jazz fusion, Latin fusion, and folk-rock fusion.

Appropriation

Appropriation refers to the borrowing or adoption of elements from one culture by another, often without adequate acknowledgment or understanding of the cultural context. In the realm of music, appropriation can occur when artists take musical styles, motifs, or samples from another culture and incorporate them into their own work without fully respecting the origins or significance of those elements. Appropriation raises ethical questions about cultural borrowing, power dynamics, and issues of cultural ownership and representation.

While hybridity and fusion are more focused on the creative blending of musical styles and traditions, appropriation highlights the potential problems associated with cultural borrowing and the need for sensitivity and ethical considerations when engaging with diverse cultural expressions. It's important to note that these concepts are not mutually exclusive and can often overlap. For example, musical fusion can involve elements of hybridity, as different musical styles are blended together, and appropriation can occur within hybrid or fusion genres when cultural elements are borrowed without proper understanding or respect.

Fela Anikulapo Kuti did so much in bringing African instruments to the limelight with his popularised afro-beat or afro-Juju music genre. Afro-beat is indeed a fascinating and influential genre that can be considered a model for musical hybridity. Created by Nigerian musician Fela Kuti in the 1960s and 1970s, Afro-beat combines elements of traditional Nigerian music, highlife, jazz, funk, and West African rhythms, among others. It is characterised by its infectious grooves, politically charged lyrics, and extended improvisational sections. One of the key aspects of Afro-beat's hybridity is its ability to seamlessly blend various musical traditions and styles. Fela Kuti was

heavily influenced by James Brown and other American funk musicians, which is evident in the rhythmic and horn-driven sections of Afro-beat. At the same time, he drew from Yoruba and other Nigerian musical traditions, incorporating traditional percussion instruments, call-and-response vocals, and African polyrhythms. Furthermore, Afro-beat incorporates elements of jazz, particularly in its extended instrumental passages and improvisation. Fela Kuti was known for assembling large ensembles with skilled instrumentalists, allowing for intricate solos and collective improvisation. This fusion of African rhythms, funk, and jazz creates a unique and vibrant sound that captures the energy and spirit of multiple musical traditions.

Victor Uwaifo is another prominent Nigerian musician and songwriter who played a significant role in promoting musical hybridity and incorporating African musical instruments into his works. He was known for his innovative approach to music, blending traditional African sounds with contemporary Western styles. Uwaifo was a multi-instrumentalist and proficient in playing various musical instruments such as the guitar, and flute.

In his works, Uwaifo skillfully integrates these Western instruments alongside African instruments, creating a unique fusion of sounds. He combined elements of highlife, afrobeat, funk, and rock music, among others, to create a distinct style that showcased his musical hybridity. One of Uwaifo's most famous songs, "Joromi," exemplifies his approach to musical fusion. Released in 1969, "Joromi" blends traditional African rhythms and melodies with Western instrumentation, incorporating elements of highlife and rock music. The song features Uwaifo's energetic guitar playing, backed by a driving rhythm section, and the use of African instruments like the *ema* (double headed drum), conga, woodblock, *ukuse* (maracas) which adds a distinct cultural flavor to the track.

Uwaifo's innovative use of African musical instruments not only enriched his compositions but also served as a means of preserving and promoting Nigeria's cultural heritage. By incorporating these instruments into his works, he helped introduce and familiarise audiences with traditional African sounds, bridging the gap between traditional and contemporary popular music. Uwaifo's musical hybridity and incorporation of African instruments influenced subsequent generations of musicians, both within Nigeria and beyond. His pioneering efforts paved the way for the exploration of new musical possibilities, encouraging other artists to embrace their cultural roots while experimenting with diverse musical styles.

Another notable personality who exemplifies musical hybridity is King Sunny Ade, a Nigerian musician and pioneer of juju music. He indeed implements the concept of musical hybridity in his live performances. King Sunny Ade's performances showcase a fusion of traditional African music, contemporary Western elements, and various global influences.

One of the key ways King Sunny Ade incorporates musical hybridity in his live performances is through the integration of different musical styles. He skillfully

combines elements of juju music, highlife, Afro-beat, funk, jazz, and even reggae, creating a rich and vibrant musical tapestry. By fusing elements in these diverse genres, he produces sounds that are both rooted in African traditions and open to global influences, thus appealing to a wide range of audiences.

A significant aspect of King Sunny Ade's performances is the prominent role played by African musical instruments. Traditional African instruments like the talking drum, *shekere* (a gourd shaker with beads), and *agidigbo* (a thumb piano), feature prominently in his live shows. These instruments bring a distinct African flavour to his music, infusing it with a unique rhythmic and melodic quality.

The talking drum, in particular, holds a special place in King Sunny Ade's performances. It is a traditional West African instrument that is played by squeezing the drum's strings under the arm to vary the pitch while striking the drum with a stick. The talking drum's ability to imitate human speech patterns and intonations add a distinctive and dynamic element to King Sunny Ade's music. It allows him to communicate and interact with his band and audience in a call-and-response manner, creating an immersive and participatory experience. In addition, King Sunny Ade's band is known for its skilled musicians who play a wide range of instruments (both African and Western) such as guitars, keyboards, brass instruments, and drums, to form a musical ensemble that seamlessly produces blends traditional and contemporary sounds.

King Sunny Ade's live performances exemplify musical hybridity by combining various musical genres and cultural influences. African musical instruments, particularly the talking drum, play a vital role in shaping the rhythmic and melodic aspects of his music, infusing it with an authentic African identity. These elements contribute to the unique and captivating experience that King Sunny Ade and his band offer during their performances.

The role of African musical instruments in African societies

Musical instruments play a significant role in cultural communication and community engagements across various societies. They are powerful tools that facilitate the expression of cultural identities, preserve traditions, foster social cohesion, and communicate various aspects of a community's values, beliefs, and history. This is particularly true in African societies, where music and musical instruments hold deep cultural significance.

African instruments are essential for expressing cultural identities and celebrating the diversity within African communities. They serve as symbols of heritage, helping to preserve and transmit cultural knowledge from one generation to another. Nzewi (2007:60)

African instruments are integral to ceremonial and ritual practices, which hold great significance in African societies. They are used in various rites of passage, initiation ceremonies, harvest festivals, and spiritual rituals. For example, the talking drum,

found in Yoruba culture, is employed to communicate messages and accompany ceremonial events such as weddings, funerals, and traditional festivals. Hogan (2010)

Music and instruments provide a platform for social interaction, unity, and collective participation within African communities. They create opportunities for individuals to come together, participate, and engage in shared cultural experiences. African instruments are often used as a means of communication, conveying messages, and transmitting information. (Diamond, 2001) The role of these musical instruments has transcended the boundaries of their indigenous usages into applications in contemporary music compositions and performances.

What is contemporary music?

The term "contemporary" in this context is relative and can vary depending on the time frame being considered. According to Victor Mandoza, it is music composed and performed with what is rhythmically, harmonically, and textually current. It typically refers to music composed and produced within the past few decades, reflecting the current trends and artistic sensibilities of the time. However, what is considered contemporary music remains in a state of flux as new musical styles and movements emerge.

Contemporary music encompasses various genres, including pop, rock, hip-hop, electronic, jazz, classical, experimental, and many others. It embraces a wide range of artistic approaches, from commercially successful mainstream music to avant-garde and experimental compositions. It often reflects the cultural, social, and political influences of its time and serves as reflection and commentary on contemporary society. Contemporary music meets the musical demands of the contemporary era; in order to satisfy their need for fresh musical concepts, present-day musicians are seeking diverse means to generate and incorporate new sounds and rhythms in their works. For example, the violin can be played very percussively to mimic the sound of the drum. New technical developments are always emerging to support the composition of new music.

The role of African musical instruments in contemporary Nigerian art music composition

African musical instruments have played a significant role in Nigerian art music compositions by enriching the sonic palette of individual composers, and contributing to the cultural identity of musical works. These instruments have been utilised by Nigerian composers to infuse their compositions with elements of

African musical traditions, creating a unique fusion of styles.

Nigerian art music composition is a diverse field, and the incorporation of African musical instruments may vary depending on the individual composers and their creative vision. Therefore, specific examples and citations would be required to explore the contributions of particular Nigerian composers and their use of African music instruments in art music compositions. The role of African musical instruments in Nigerian art music composition has been significant because the instruments imbue the compositions with distinct cultural identity and unique sound. In Nigerian art music

composition, traditional musical instruments serve as the foundation for creating rhythmic patterns, melodic motifs, and harmonic textures that reflect Nigeria's rich musical heritage.

Percussion instruments play a crucial role in Nigerian art music composition, providing intricate rhythmic patterns and enhancing the overall groove of the music. Instruments such as talking drum, *djembe*, and *agogo* contribute to the rhythmic complexity and add a vibrant African flavour to compositions. (Omojola, 2009) These instruments are often used to create polyrhythms, syncopations, and cross-rhythms, which are integral components of Nigerian music. (Nzewi, 2007)

The utilisation of African musical instruments in Nigerian art music composition is exemplified by the works of various composers. For instance, Fela Sowande, a renowned Nigerian composer, incorporated indigenous African instruments and musical idioms into his compositions, blending them with Western classical traditions. (Euba, 1990) Another notable composer, Akin Euba, has extensively explored the integration of African instruments in his compositions. Euba's works often feature the use of African percussion instruments, such as talking drum and *agogo*, alongside Western instruments, resulting in a distinctive fusion of sounds. (Euba, 2001).

Okubor Goziem is a contemporary composer who has constantly blended African musical idioms with those of the West by way of using both Western and African musical instruments in the same composition. *Uya-bia* (meaning "sorrow") is the third song in his Christmas oratorio entitled "Glad tidings". It blends both Western and African musical instruments and musical elements. This is visible in the usage of African instruments like *oja* (wooden flute) and *opi* (long metal horn represented as African horn on the score below), both from eastern Nigeria. The pentatonic scale serves as the foundation for *oja's* melody. The *oja* plays a lead role in this work as a solo instrument, thereby giving it prominence. The *opi* is performed in a hocket style,

using the chord of G minor.

The musical score is arranged in two systems. The first system (measures 61-62) features a tempo marking of ♩ = 50. The second system (measures 63-65) also features a tempo marking of ♩ = 50. The vocal parts (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) have lyrics 'do do kwo.' written below them. The instrumental parts include Oja, African Horns 1-4, Piano, Violin 1, Violin 2, Viola, and Double Bass. The score is written in 3/4 time and includes various musical notations such as rests, notes, and dynamics.

Similarly, Igbi (2017) has also utilised eclectic approach to oratorio writing. He employed the use of African musical instruments throughout the work, and advanced the idea that African choral music accompaniment can be written solely without the use of the piano. In his work, he replaced the piano with the xylophone and this made the composition unique while still blending musical ideas of the West and different parts of Nigeria. “Beautiful Erhumu” is one of the pieces in his oratorio. Instruments like xylophone, *agogo*, *sekere*, *agba*, *ekwe*, *Izu Igede*, *iya-elu*, *alo* and *udu* are used. These instruments, together with the voices, help to convey the message of musical hybridity through its blending of instruments from different parts of Nigeria.

Beautiful Erhumu

Mudia Igbi

Allegro

Soprano
E - rhu - mu is so beau - ti - ful, E - rhu - mu is so beau - ti - ful;

Alto
E - rhu - mu is so beau - ti - ful, E - rhu - mu is so beau - ti - ful;

Tenor
E - rhu - mu is so beau - ti - ful, E - rhu - mu is so beau - ti - ful;

Bass
E - rhu - mu is so beau - ti - ful, E - rhu - mu is so beau - ti - ful;

Oja

Xylophone

Agogo

Sekere

Agba

Ekwe

Izu Igede

Iya Ilu

Alo

Udu

“Ojo” by Ademola Adeosun, is another masterpiece in this category of composition that blends Western and African musical instruments and ideas. In the Yoruba language, “Ojo” means rain. The work utilises piano, *agogo*, woodblock, *sekere*, melodrums, and *gbedu* drums as accompaniment for choral voices.

ADEMOLA ADEOŞUN

Moderato ♩ = 90

f

SOPRANO
O - jo, o - jo, o - - - - - jo;

ALTO
O - jo, o - jo, o - - - - - jo;

TENOR
O - jo, o - jo, o - - - - - jo;

BASS
O - jo, o - jo, o - - - - - jo;

Moderato ♩ = 90

Piano
f

Agogo
|| 4/4

Wood block
|| 4/4
pp **f**

Şekere
|| 4/4
pp **f**

Moló Drum
|| 4/4
pp **f**

Gbèdu Drum
|| 4/4
pp **f**

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The irresistible inclusion of African instruments in contemporary music has gone a long way to shade the spaces that distinguish African music from the musics of other peoples.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the roles of African musical instruments in contemporary music composition are undeniably significant and have contributed to the rich musical landscape we witness today. Nigerian music, in particular, has experienced a resurgence and global recognition due to the integration and adaptation of traditional African musical instruments into contemporary compositions. These instruments not

only provide unique tonal qualities but also serve as a melting pot of cross-cultural musical experiences towards preserving and promoting Nigeria's rich musical heritage.

We have explored some African musical instruments that have played a crucial role in shaping Nigerian art and popular music styles. Instruments such as talking drum, *djembe*, *shekere*, *ogene*, and conga, among others, have not only provided rhythmic and melodic foundations in traditional music making but have also brought a distinct African flavour to modern compositions. The fusion of traditional and contemporary sounds has allowed Nigerian artistes to create a vibrant and diverse musical palette, captivating audiences both locally and internationally. The integration of African musical instruments into contemporary Nigerian music has fostered cultural identity and pride. By incorporating these instruments into their compositions, Nigerian artistes have not only promoted their heritage but also conveyed powerful messages of unity, resilience, and societal peace. This blending of traditional and modern elements has created a unique sonic experience that resonates with listeners across geographical and cultural boundaries.

In the light of the foregoing, the paper recommends that efforts should be made by musicologists, researchers and practitioners towards optimising the role of African musical instruments in contemporary music composition, particularly within the Nigerian context. These could be attained through: promoting education and research; collaboration and cross-cultural exchange; preservation of traditional instruments; technological integration; and support and recognition.

Promoting education and research

It is crucial to provide opportunities for aspiring musicians and composers to learn about African musical instruments, their historical significance, and their contemporary applications. Educational institutions and cultural organisations should incorporate comprehensive music programs that highlight the importance of these instruments, allowing students to develop a deeper understanding and appreciation for their potential in composition.

Collaboration and cross-cultural exchange

Encouraging collaborations between Nigerian musicians and artists from different cultural backgrounds can lead to the exploration of new musical landscapes. This cross-pollination of ideas and sounds can result in innovative compositions that blend African musical instruments with various global styles, fostering a broader appreciation for the richness of Nigerian art and popular music.

Preservation of traditional instruments

Efforts should be made to preserve and document traditional African music instruments, ensuring their longevity and availability for future generations. This includes initiatives such as instrument-making workshops, archives, and museums dedicated to showcasing and safeguarding these valuable cultural artifacts.

Technological integration

Embracing advancements in music production technology can provide new avenues for incorporating African music instruments into contemporary compositions. The use of digital interfaces, virtual instruments, and software synthesizers can expand the possibilities of sound manipulation and experimentation, creating unique and immersive musical experiences.

Support and recognition

Governments, cultural institutions, and the music industry should provide support and recognition to artists and musicians who actively incorporate African musical instruments into their work. This can be done through funding opportunities, awards, and platforms for showcasing their talent, ultimately encouraging further exploration and innovation within this realm.

By implementing these recommendations, we can ensure that the roles of African musical instruments in contemporary music composition, with a focus on Nigerian art and popular music styles, continue to flourish. This will not only contribute to the evolution of Nigerian music but also promote cultural diversity and appreciation on a global scale. The fusion of traditional and modern sounds will remain a powerful tool for artistic expression and a testament to the enduring influence of African musical heritage.

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Video links

- A performance by Fela Anikulapo Kuti, incorporating Western and African instruments in the same performance. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z7OB9W0cAzs>
- Victor Uwaifo’s *Joromi* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8EDrH-HS7tA>
- King Sunny Ade <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=osNAy1DNkOQ>