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Musicolinguistic Analysis of some Selected Yorùbá and Igbo Folk Songs

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Abstract

Studies on musicolinguistics have received scholarly attention with a lot of them showing the interrelatedness of language and music. However, very limited studies have analysed the incorporation of musicolinguistics with Yoruba and Igbo folk songs combined to examine the interconnectivities existing between linguistics and music. This study, therefore, x-rays the musicolinguistic analysis of some selected Yorùbá and Igbo folk songs. The study adopts a qualitative research design to draw on the effect of language on music. Sleeper's (2018) integration of musical data into linguistics provides a framework for analyses in this study. Also, data for the study are drawn from the selected Yorùbá and Igbo folk songs: "L'abe Igi Orombo", "Olúrónbí" and "Uri Oma". Findings from the study reveal that folk songs are used to preserve Yorùbá and Igbo linguistic clarity while elevating their artistic and cultural expression. Through the careful balance of text and melody, these folk songs demonstrate how music functions as an extension of language, reinforcing meaning, identity, and cultural continuity.

The study contributes to the field of musicolinguistics and African folk songs.
Keywords: Musicolinguistics, music, linguistics, folk songs, interconnectivities

Introduction

Linguists have long applied the study of language to other fields of study, ranging from language and medicines, language and law, and language and advertisement, among others (Makinde, 2024a; Makinde, 2024b; Makinde, Chikezie & Onebunne, 2024; Makinde & Esimone, 2021; Besson and Schon, 2001; Sleeper, 2018; & Smith, 2014). There have also been scholarly studies analysing language in musical contexts. Research has further shown that an increasing number of scholars now combine musicological and linguistic approaches in their work. As Sleeper (2018) opines, this is still far from the norm in linguistics, where musical elements are often disregarded in the analysis of language in a musical context. A Google search shows that no study has looked at musicolinguistics from the point of view of Yorùbá and Igbo folksongs. In view of the foregoing, this study examines how language and music share a considerable number of general characteristics from the metrical structure point by looking at the interconnectivities that exist between linguistics and music through the lens of musicolinguistics.

Musicolinguistics, a field of study that integrates music and linguistics data, is a branch of cognitive science which attempts to describe music perception phenomena by means of linguistic methodology. Studies on musicolinguistics have received scholarly attention with a lot of them showing the interrelatedness of language and music. Research (Jackendoff, 2009; Antović, 2005; Sparling, 2003; Sleeper, 2018 & Patel *et al*., 1998) have shown that music and language share a considerable number of general characteristics from the metrical structure point. The two systems are physically manifested as sounds; they extensively utilize the

human vocal apparatus; and are expressible by means of written representations to evoke psychological (cognitive or emotional/affectual) reactions in listeners. In addition, both music and linguistics may be used for ritual purposes or as a source of aesthetic pleasure; they also need to conform to certain internal rules in order to be comprehensible by listeners. Just as sociolinguistics has identified the interconnectedness between language and culture, so also does the study of musicolinguistics draw its ideal on the interrelatedness of language and music. Since language serves as a tool through which music is represented, this study investigates the interconnectivities that exist between linguistics and music through the lens of musicolinguistics.

The fact that music uses language to arouse the audience's emotions is not in doubt. Thus, the choice of language employed in the lyrics of a music has been shown to affect the emotional response of an audience, and emotional appeal can effectively enhance an argument. In view of the foregoing, this study adopts Sleeper's (2018) framework of musicolinguistics to integrate musical data into linguistics. This approach highlights how tonal languages, such as Yorùbá and Igbo, shape and constrain melodic contours to preserve lexical meaning while allowing music to act as both a communicative and cultural medium.

Folk Songs in Yorùbá and Igbo Lands

Songs among the Yorùbá and Igbo are a reflection of people's feelings that centre around their worldview. Songs encompass their daily lives and inspire them while at work. Olagunju (1997:24-25) points to the fact that the Yorùbás enjoy expressing part of their worldview through music; this shows the appealing nature of music in their society. In the same vein, Okafor (2005) posits that music among Igbo is not merely for entertainment but serves functional, spiritual and didactic purposes. Yorùbá and Igbo indigenous folksongs are a veritable source for revitalising moral education among pre-school children. They are essential in

storytelling, moral instruction, and the preservation of historical narratives. In some instances, these songs depict various activities such as festivals, rites of passage and agricultural activities; thereby reinforcing communal solidarity and cultural continuity (Nzewi, 1991 & Olagunju, 1997).

Folk song refers to a song in the traditional or contemporary folk music genre. According to Kennedy (1980), folksongs are songs of unknown origin that are passed down orally from one generation to another, sung without accompaniment are often found in variants (of words and tunes) in different parts of a nation. Studies like that of Samuel (2013) have shown that folksongs are predominantly found among peasants or country dwellers but have since spread to towns and urban cities, where they chronicle people's lives in terms of design, melody, and rhythm and have become traditional among them.

Musicolinguistics: A Conceptual Overview

Musicolinguistics is a branch of cognitive science that attempts to describe music perception phenomena using linguistic methodology (Besson and Schon, 2001). It is a field of study that integrates music and linguistic data. Studies on musicolinguistics have received scholarly attention, with many showing the interrelatedness of language and music. The term *musicolinguistics* was coined in the 1970s by Leonard Bernstein, an American composer. The discipline applies the epistemological framework and methodology of cognitive linguistics to study mental processes related to music cognition. By this, Bernstein has played a critical role in helping to define a particular linguistic paradigm (Bernstein, 1976; Smith, 2014). Among the numerous issues of musical theory that Bernstein investigates is the relationship between musicality and language, which, in his view, comes from what linguists today call affective prosody. Affective prosody, according to Bernstein, is the ability of speakers to produce their linguistic material with varying intonations, significantly altering

meaning. Bernstein was particularly interested in the musical interval known as the minor third sung downward, which exists in nursery rhymes from numerous cultures. By this, he claims that this was a substantive universal, more easily reached in music than in language. Bernstein is of the view that the system of tone scaling, i.e. the construction of keys, should be the subject matter of musical phonology (Bernstein, 1976; Stamenković, 2014).

Research on musicolinguistics was further enhanced by Antović (2005) to represent a comprehensive study of the interconnected fields of generative linguistics, cognitive semantics, conceptual semantics, and an emerging discipline called musicolinguistics. The emergence of musicolinguistics as a branch of cognitive science further strengthens the position of cognitive linguistics, as it demonstrates that musicality is yet another capacity that functions in ways similar to those described in cognitive linguistic theories. Within this framework, Antović provides a synopsis of the basic terms in musicolinguistics within the context of musical phonology, perception of tone quality and musical competence (Antović, 2005 and Stamenković, 2014) which also contributes to the analysis of this study.

In a more recent study, Waliya (2019) looks at musicolinguistics from another point of view. According to him, musicolinguistics is not a musical language, as emphasised by Ray, Douglas, Nancy, and Jeffrey (2014); rather, it is a study of the language application in music. It is not an interrelationship between music and language in cognitive linguistics, as Antović (2005) opined. In his investigation, he posits that musicolinguistics is an aspect of linguistics that questions the linguistic applications in music. In relation to Waliya's postulation, we shall also examine how linguistic applications in terms of tonal segment, phonological and rhythmic patterns serve as resources for making meaning in Yorùbá and Igbo folk songs.

Just as research (Jackendoff, 2009; Antović, 2005; Sparling, 2003; Sleeper, 2018 & Patel *et al*., 1998) have shown, it can be observed from the above postulations that language and music share a considerable number of general characteristics from the metrical structure point. The two systems are physically manifested as sounds; they extensively utilise the human vocal apparatus and are expressible by means of written representations to evoke psychological (cognitive or emotional/affectual) reactions in listeners. Drawing from Sleeper's (2018) integration of musical data into linguistic analysis *vis-a-vis* structural linguistics, sociocultural linguistics, and language revitalisation, our study applies these tenets in the representation of musicolinguistic analysis of selected Yorùbá and Igbo folk songs.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to draw on the effect of language on music. Data for the study were drawn from three Nigerian folk songs purposefully selected from Eastern and Western parts of Nigeria: two Yorùbá folk songs and one Igbo folk song. The Yorùbá folk songs include “L'abe Igi Orombo” and “Olúrónbí”, while the Igbo one includes “Uri Oma”. The folk songs were sourced through YouTube and transcribed musically and linguistically for data presentation. These folk songs were purposefully selected based on their relevance to the study under analysis.

Yorùbá folk songs often feature themes of daily life, storytelling, social values, or communal activities. This song, “L'abe Igi Orombo” translates to "Under the orange tree", reflects a narrative or setting familiar to the Yorùbá people, with the orange tree symbolising a place of shade, rest, or communal gathering. Folk songs like this one are often sung during communal events and passed down orally from generation to generation. The second Yorùbá folk song, “Oluronbi”, is an essential piece of traditional Yorùbá music and storytelling. It narrates the moral tale of a

woman, Oluronbi, who promises her child to a spirit in exchange for prosperity but faces dire consequences. This song is rich in cultural, musical, and linguistic elements, reflecting the values, aesthetics, and oral traditions of the Yorùbá people in Nigeria. The third folk song, "Uri Oma", is a product of the interdependence between language, rhythm, melody, and cultural communication.

Discussion of Findings and Analysis

Sleeper's (2018) integration of musical data into linguistics provides a framework for analysing music as a communicative form that blends linguistic and musical systems. In this light, the Yorùbá folk song "L'abe Igi Orombo" can be examined by considering how tonal language and musical features interact and reinforce meaning. The framework also enables the analysis of the Yorùbá folk song "Oluronbi" as a prime example of the inseparable relationship between music and tonal language. For the Igbo folk song, "Uri Oma Leeee, Leleh, Urioma", Sleeper's (2018) framework enables us to analyse the song as a product of the interdependence between language, rhythm, melody, and cultural communication. This approach views music as a communicative system in which tonal languages like Igbo and Yorùbá are deeply embedded in musical structure.

Sleeper emphasises the inseparability of tonal language and melodic contour when he views "musical grammar" as parallel to linguistic grammar. This approach highlights how tonal languages, such as Yorùbá and Igbo, shape and constrain melodic contours to preserve lexical meaning while allowing music to act as both a communicative and cultural medium. For the purpose of analysis, the researchers investigate how the linguistic tone, rhythm, and melody of selected songs work together to maintain meaning and convey cultural aesthetics. The analysis is done under six subheadings.

Language-Tone Relationship

The Yorùbá and Igbo languages are tonal languages, where pitch variations (high, mid, low, and high, low and downstep, respectively) determine the meaning of words. In “L'abe Igi Orombo”, the melody aligns with the lexical tones of the text to avoid distorting the meaning. L'abe igi → lá-bé igi "under the tree": The pitch sequence matches Yorùbá tones: High-high-mid-mid. Orombo → "orange tree" (ò-ró-m̀-bó): This word typically carries low-high-mid-high tones. The melodic contour of the song thus mirrors these tonal patterns to preserve intelligibility, a key point in Sleeper's framework. Disrupting the tone-melody alignment would compromise both linguistic clarity and the cultural aesthetics of the piece.

The Yorùbá language relies heavily on lexical tones (high, mid, low) to differentiate meaning. Any musical setting of a Yorùbá text must adhere to these tones to maintain intelligibility. The story of Oluronbi centers around a woman who, in desperation, promises her child to a spirit in exchange for wealth. The song narrates this folktale, reflecting themes of morality, sacrifice, and consequences. The word *Olúrónbí* itself is tonal, showing Olúrónbí with → mid-high-high tones. In the melody, these tones are mirrored in the contour to maintain the semantic meaning. A deviation would compromise the narrative clarity of the song. The melody in Olúrónbí closely follows the tonal contours of the text, exemplifying what Sleeper (2018) calls “linguo-musical mapping.”

As is the case with the Yorùbá language, any melody set to Igbo lyrics must align with the tonal contours of the words to ensure linguistic intelligibility. Therefore, in the selected Igbo folk song, Uri oma → "Good dance" or "beautiful song" in Igbo, the tones of the word "Uri oma" typically follow a low-high-mid tone pattern. The melodic contour of the song mirrors these tones so that the meaning of Uri oma is preserved and not distorted. Following Sleeper's (2018) emphasis on tonal languages, melody functions as

an extension of speech, requiring careful mapping between language tones and music. In “Uri Oma”, the melody follows the text's natural tonal flow, ensuring that the beauty of the language is preserved through musical performance.

Melodic Structure as Tonal Mapping

Yorùbá folk melodies often function as an extension of speech rather than purely abstract musical patterns. In Yorùbá folk music, melodic patterns are constrained by the tonal structure of the language. The melody of “L'abe Igi Orombo” follows a speech-melody convergence. Simple melodic phrases mirror the syllabic rhythm and tonal qualities of Yorùbá speech. Also, pitch inflections are mapped onto a pentatonic framework, allowing melodic fluidity without altering the linguistic meaning. This convergence demonstrates a "linguo-musical system", where the linguistic tone informs the melodic contour (Sleeper, (2018).

Also, “Oluronbi” follows a relatively stepwise melodic contour, avoiding wide leaps that might distort the speech tones. The melody primarily uses the pentatonic scale, a common feature in Yorùbá folk music, which provides a smooth, flowing structure while accommodating tonal alignment. For example, lines like “Olúrónbí ò, Jọ’in jọ’in, Ìrókò, Jọ’in jọ’in” as in the chorus are sung with a melody that rises and falls in line with the natural tonal inflection of the words. This relationship aligns with Sleeper’s assertion that music in tonal languages functions as an extension of speech, where melody becomes a carrier for both linguistic meaning and artistic expression.

The song, “Uri oma”, utilises a tritonic scale, which is common in Igbo folk music. The simplicity of the tritonic scale allows for smooth melodic motion without conflicting with the tonal demands of the Igbo language. The melody avoids wide leaps or chromatic alterations that might interfere with the speech tones of the lyrics. Observable in the song is its stepwise movement. Here, the melody progresses in a stepwise motion with slight rises and falls to align

with the speech tones of Uri oma and related phrases. For example, the repetition of "Uri Oma" (beautiful song) likely features a melody that matches the low-high-mid tonal pattern of the text.
There is also the use of repetition and ornamentation in "Uri oma le". By featuring a repetition of key phrases as in "Uri oma le; le le", the song reinforces the words' meaning and emotional weight. Ornamentations like extended vowels (le; le leh) serve both musical and expressive purposes, emphasizing the text's meaning and emotional resonance while providing melodic fluidity. This alignment between tonal language and melody exemplifies Sleeper's concept of linguo-musical mapping, where linguistic tones shape the melodic contour.

Rhythm as Syllabic Structure

Yorùbá music often reflects the rhythmic qualities of the spoken language, particularly its syllable-timed structure. In this way, a syllable-timed occurs where each syllable receives relatively equal rhythmic weight.

In "L'abe Igi Orombo", the rhythm closely follows the lyrics' syllables. L'a-be i-gi o-rom-bo → each syllable receives roughly equal rhythmic weight. This syllabic regularity ensures that the song remains linguistically intelligible while maintaining a natural flow. Also, syncopation and polyrhythms, often found in Yorùbá folk music, may be introduced through percussive instruments, but the vocal line remains rhythmically tied to the language.
The rhythm of "Oluronbi" mirrors the speech rhythm, ensuring the alignment of text and music. For example, in *O-lu-ron-bi o* →, each syllable receives a distinct pulse, often in simple duple time (2/4) or compound time (6/8), maintaining clarity. The song also contains an element of repetition and cyclical rhythms. It often repeats key phrases (e.g., "Oluronbi o, Oluronbi"), creating a rhythmic and melodic cycle. This reinforces the oral tradition of storytelling while enhancing memorability, thereby highlighting how rhythmic structures in music mirror the prosody (stress and

timing) of spoken language, strengthening the connection between the two systems.

Like Yorùbá, Igbo is a syllable-timed language, where each syllable receives equal rhythmic emphasis. The rhythm of "Uri Oma Le; le leh!!!" closely follows the syllabic structure of the text: “U-ri-o-ma-le, le-leh, U-ri-o-ma”. Each syllable receives roughly equal duration, creating a steady, rhythmic flow. As part of its syllabic timing, simple and compound time are also used in the song. The song, "Uri Oma Le", alternates between a simple triple meter (3/4) or compound meter (6/8), reflecting both the natural rhythm of the Igbo language and the lively, danceable quality of the music. This rhythmic structure mirrors spoken Igbo's prosody (stress and timing), reinforcing the natural relationship between language and music.

The song also features repetitive rhythms and call-and-response patterns. The soloist sings a phrase (call), and the group or chorus responds, repeating or elaborating on the phrase. This structure mirrors conversational interaction in Igbo discourse and emphasises communal participation in the performance.

Text-Music Integration and Call-and-Response as Linguistic Interaction

According to Sleeper's analysis framework, text and melody are interdependent. The text provides meaning through tonal grammar, while the melody enhances emotional and cultural expression. Thus, the interplay of linguistic and musical structures creates a "communicative duality" in tonal cultures.

In “L'abe Igi Orombo”, the melody does not obscure the text but reinforces its semantic clarity. This duality reflects what Sleeper describes as a "mutual reinforcement of communicative codes", where music serves as both linguistic carrier and artistic expression. Also, in “L'abe Igi Orombo”, a lead singer (call)

introduces the melodic phrase while the chorus (response) repeats or elaborates on the phrase. This mirrors the Yorùbá oral tradition, where linguistic interaction is central to storytelling, communal communication, and shared cultural values. The call-and-response format reflects Sleeper's concept of dialogic structures in music, where music mimics the back-and-forth dynamics of speech.

In “Oluronbi”, the text delivers the moral of the story, while the music enhances its emotional resonance. The use of call-and-response structures adds a conversational dynamic; the call-response structure as in lines 1 and 2 “Oníkálukú jèjé ewúré” and response “Ewúré, ewúré” as well as in lines 3 and 4 “Oníkálukú jèjé àgùtàn” and “Agùtàn bòlòjò” respectively where a soloist introduces a phrase, and the chorus responds, mirrors the speech patterns in Yorùbá discourse. This antiphonal exchange reinforces communal participation and reflects the dialogic nature of Yorùbá oral traditions. In this way, the music is shown to support the narrative without distorting the text, exemplifying a balance between linguistic fidelity and artistic creativity.

In “Uri Oma Le; le le”, the text ("Uri oma") is central to the song's meaning, celebrating music, likely in a communal or festive context. The music amplifies the emotional and aesthetic aspects of the text through extended vowels, as in "le; le leh", which add expressiveness and melodic beauty. There is also the use of rhythmic repetition, which reinforces the celebratory and collective nature of the message. The close integration of text and melody allows the song to function as both linguistic communication and artistic expression.

Cultural Semiotics and Functionality

Sleeper's approach also recognises music as a form of cultural and linguistic identity. Here, music serves as a cultural and linguistic artifact. In “L'abe Igi Orombo”, the integration of tonal language and melodic contour encodes Yorùbá cultural values. Such cultural

values include respect for nature (symbolised by the tree), communal unity (reflected in collective singing), and oral tradition to preserve linguistic and musical knowledge. The song, therefore, operates as a form of cultural semiotics, where musical and linguistic data combine to convey deeper meanings. Evident in the folk song, “L'abe Igi Orombo”, is the use of musical and linguistic functionalities. Linguistic function reflects how the song communicates a straightforward narrative or setting ("under the orange tree") in a way that preserves Yorùbá tonal semantics. Likewise, musical function is depicted via such elements as melody and rhythm to enhance the expressive qualities of the text, turning speech into a performative art form. This dual function highlights the broader communicative role of Yorùbá folk music in that it serves as both a speech act and an artistic practice.

Also, the Yorùbá folk song, “Oluronbi” exemplifies cultural semiotics and functionality by encoding Yorùbá values and traditions. Such exemplifications include moral instruction, which showcases how the story warns against making reckless promises, teaching ethical lessons to the community; cultural identity, reflecting on how the song preserves linguistic, musical, and cultural heritage through oral transmission, as well as performance context, which in this case reflect on how Oluronbi is performed in storytelling sessions, communal gatherings, or as part of didactic rituals, reinforcing its functional role in Yorùbá society. The song’s dual role as a linguistic and artistic medium aligns with the assertion that tonal music encodes speech and cultural meaning (Sleeper, 2018).

In Uri Oma Le le leh, such cultural semiotic functionalities are exemplified in the form of celebratory, communal participation, and emotional and symbolic meaning. In terms of celebratory function, “Uri Oma Le; le leh” is often performed in social, festive contexts such as weddings, naming ceremonies, or other communal gatherings. It serves to praise the traditional music of

the community, express joy, and strengthen communal bonds. For communal participation, the call-and-response format fosters audience involvement, turning the performance into a shared cultural experience, and for the emotional and symbolic meaning, the word "Uri oma" (the beautiful song) reflects positive aesthetics, admiration, and communal values of songs and harmony. The song thus functions as both a celebration of communal songs and a means of reinforcing cultural identity and values.

Instrumentation and Harmony as Resources for Meaning-Making

While the song can be performed as a cappella, "L'abe Igi Orombo" is often accompanied by traditional Yorùbá instruments such as *gangan*, *agogo*, *shekere*, and *agidigbo*. *Gangan* (talking drum) provides rhythmic patterns that complement the song's pulse. Also, *agogo* (bell) adds a steady, syncopated beat, while *shekere* (beaded gourd shaker) provides a percussive, textured sound. *Agidigbo* (thumb piano), on the other hand, is sometimes used to add melodic and harmonic accompaniment. The instrumental accompaniment enhances the repetitive and rhythmic nature of the piece.

While traditionally monophonic (a single melodic line), modern renditions of "Oluronbi" often introduce simple harmonies, typically in thirds or sixths, that support the tonal integrity of the text. Percussive instruments like the *gangan* (talking drum), *shekere*, and *agogo* often accompany the vocal line, providing a rhythmic foundation that complements the syllabic rhythm of the language. The talking drum, in particular, mimics Yorùbá tonal inflections, serving as both a musical and linguistic tool, further illustrating Sleeper's concept of "linguo-musical grammar" (2018). Traditional Igbo instruments likely accompany the vocal melody. Such musical instruments include *udu*, *ekwe*, *ogene*, and *ịchaka*. *Udu* is a clay pot drum that provides a deep, resonant rhythmic

pulse. *Ekwe* is a slit drum that adds rhythmic complexity and accents. *Ogene* is a metal gong that delivers sharp, high-pitched rhythmic patterns, while *shekere* is a beaded gourd shaker that provides a steady, percussive backdrop. These instruments contribute to the song's overall rhythmic and dynamic energy, enhancing its festive and participatory character.

Conclusion

Using Sleeper's (2018) integration of musical data into linguistics, "L'abe Igi Orombo", "Oluronbi" and "Uri Oma" exemplify how Yorùbá and Igbo folk music embodies a linguo-musical system. The tonal alignment of the language with melodic contours, rhythmic mapping of syllables, and dialogic call-and-response structures reflect a sophisticated integration of speech and music. The selected folk songs are shown to preserve Yorùbá and Igbo linguistic clarity while elevating their artistic and cultural expression. This analysis affirms that Yorùbá and Igbo folksongs are not merely musical but are deeply embedded in the language and identity of the Yorùbá and Igbo people. Through the careful balance of text and melody, these folk songs demonstrate how music functions as an extension of language, reinforcing meaning, identity, and cultural continuity. This study contributes to the field of musicolinguistics and African folk songs and showcases the need for interdisciplinary studies in arts and humanities.

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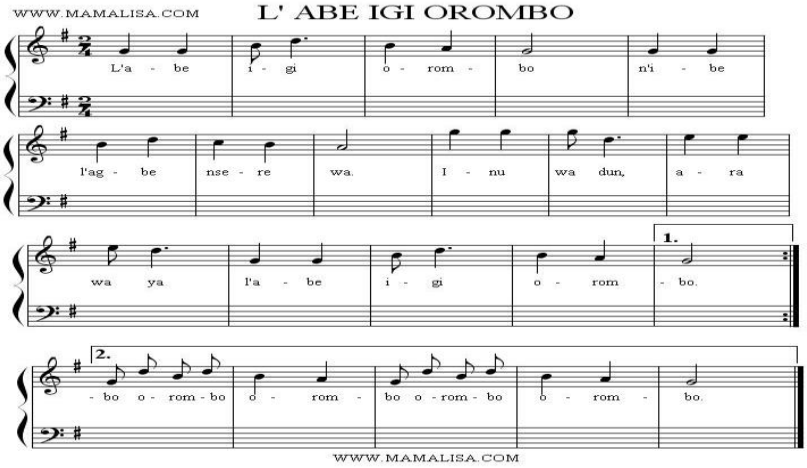
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Appendices

(L'abe Igi Orombo)

L'abe Igi Orombo (Yorùbá)	Under the Orange Tree (English)
L'abe igi orombo	Under the orange tree
N'ibe l'agbe nsere wa	Where we play our games
Inu wa dun, ara wa ya	We are happy, we are excited
L'abe igi orombo	Under the orange tree...
Orombo, orombo	Orange, orange
Orombo, orombo.	Orange, orange.



Olúrónbí

Olúrónbí (Yorùbá)	*Olúrónbí (English)*
Oníkálukú jèjé ewúré	Some offered a goat,
Ewúré, ewúré	Goat, goat.
Oníkálukú jèjé àgùtàn,	Some offered a sheep,
Agùtàn bòlòjò	A healthy sheep.
Olúrónbí jèjé ọmọ re	Oluronbi offered her child
Ọmọ rẹ a pón bíi epo	Her beautiful fair child
Olúrónbí ò	Oluronbi O!
Jọ'in jọ'in	Joun joun*
Ìrókò	Iroko tree,
Jọ'in jọ'in	Joun joun.

Uri Oma

