

## **YORUBA CULTURE AND ITS INFLUENCE ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF MODERN POPULAR MUSIC**

**BY**

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### **Abstract**

The Yoruba people, with their rich heritage and vibrant traditions, have contributed significantly to the musical landscape through their rhythms, percussion, religious themes, dance elements, and language. This paper examined Yoruba culture and its influence on the development of modern popular music. The findings revealed that Yoruba culture holds a significant place in both traditional and modern contexts. Its influence on the development of modern popular music is undeniable, as seen through the incorporation of Yoruba rhythmic patterns, percussion, religious themes, dance styles, and vocal techniques in various genres. Yoruba music, with its complex rhythms, call-and-response structures, and vibrant instruments, continues to captivate audiences and inspire musicians worldwide. Furthermore, Yoruba culture extends beyond music, encompassing a wide range of artistic expressions, religious practices, social structures, and culinary traditions. Its rich heritage, deeply rooted in mythology, spirituality, and community values, has shaped the identity and worldview of the Yoruba people and continues to thrive in their communities and diaspora. Therefore, people should explore Yoruba Music by taken the time to listen to traditional Yoruba music and familiarize yourself with its distinct rhythms, instruments, and vocal styles. This can deepen your understanding of Yoruba culture and its musical traditions. There should be creation of a proper distribution network that all labels/artists must go through and having accreditation of distributors through government policy.

**Keywords:** Yoruba culture, influence, development, modern popular music.

### **Introduction**

Yoruba culture, with its rich heritage and vibrant traditions, has had a profound influence on the development of modern popular music. The Yoruba people, an ethnic group primarily located in Nigeria, have a long history of artistic expression, including music, dance, and performance. This paper explores the significant impact of Yoruba cultural elements on the evolution of popular music, examining the historical context, traditional music practices, and the ways in which Yoruba influences have shaped contemporary musical genres. Yoruba culture encompasses a wide range of artistic and social practices that have deep historical roots. The Yoruba people have a complex language, a pantheon of deities known as Orishas, and a rich oral tradition that preserves their history and folklore. These cultural aspects have influenced various forms of artistic expression, including music. In the study of Yoruba music, researchers such as Simha Arom have highlighted the significance of polyphony and polyrhythms in traditional Yoruba music (Arom, 2011). The interplay of multiple rhythms and percussion instruments creates a complex and dynamic musical texture. Moreover, scholars like John Collins have examined the impact of Yoruba music on West African popular culture, emphasizing its role in shaping genres such as highlife and Afrobeat (Collins, 2010).

Yoruba music is deeply intertwined with religious and spiritual practices. The Yoruba pantheon of deities, such as Ogun, Oshun, and Sango, have provided inspiration for musicians and lyricists. Religious ceremonies, where music and dance play integral roles, have influenced the rhythmic patterns and lyrical themes of Yoruba music. As documented by Christopher Waterman, Yoruba musical traditions like juju have evolved into popular genres that blend traditional elements with modern instrumentation (Waterman, 2017). The impact of Yoruba culture on modern popular music extends beyond Nigeria's borders. Yoruba musical influences can be found in the works of renowned artists both within and outside of Africa. For instance, Fela Kuti, often referred to as the father of Afrobeat, is known for his fusion of Yoruba rhythms, political activism, and social commentary in his music. His Afrobeat style

incorporates elements of highlife, jazz, and funk, showcasing the distinct Yoruba rhythms and percussion (Olaniyan, 2014).

Also, Burna Boy, a contemporary Afrofusion artist, represents a newer generation of musicians influenced by Yoruba culture. His music incorporates Yoruba language, cultural references, and rhythmic patterns, demonstrating the continuing relevance of Yoruba influences in contemporary music (Olaniyan, 2014). Exploring these and delving into the broader cultural context, this paper highlights the significance of Yoruba culture in shaping the development of modern popular music. It demonstrates the enduring legacy of Yoruba musical traditions and emphasizes the need to recognize and appreciate the contributions of Yoruba culture to the global musical landscape.

### **Meaning of Yoruba Culture**

Yoruba culture refers to the collective customs, beliefs, practices, arts, and social structures of the Yoruba people, an ethnic group primarily located in Nigeria but with a significant diaspora in other parts of the world (Lawal, 2012). Yoruba culture is rich in tradition, history, and artistic expression, reflecting the values, spirituality, and social dynamics of the Yoruba community. It encompasses various aspects such as language, religion, arts, music, dance, cuisine, and social organization.

### **Meaning of Modern Popular Music**

Modern popular music refers to the contemporary music that is widely consumed and appreciated by a large audience, typically associated with the popular culture of a given time period. It encompasses a broad range of genres and styles that have emerged and evolved in recent decades, reflecting the cultural, social, and technological advancements of the modern era (Adepegba, 2017). Modern popular music is often characterized by its commercial viability, widespread dissemination through various media platforms, and its ability to connect with diverse audiences on a global scale (Adepegba, 2017). It encompasses genres such as pop, rock, hip-hop, R&B, electronic, country, and more, reflecting the diverse musical preferences and tastes of listeners in the present day.

### **The Yorùbá Arts and Cultural Worldview**

Among the Yorùbá people artistic endeavours are closely rooted in religious belief, worldview or ritualistic expressions which are often mythical. Yorùbá religious belief is grounded in Olòdùmarè (the Supreme Being) and the many Orisas (deities) which form the link between Olòdùmarè and Man. This is manifested in the strong conviction of the Yorùbá about life after death and the belief that to die is just to engage in a journey. According to Drewal (2012). In Yorùbá thought the other worldly domain (Orun) coexists with the phenomenal world of people, animals, plants and things (Aye). Orun includes a pantheon of countable deities (Orisa), the ancestors (osi, egun) and spirits both helpful and harmful. The world and the other world are always in close proximity and both human and other spirits travel back and forth between the two. It is very important to understand the religious undertone of the Yorùbá in order to understand the arts. As is often encountered in African artistic discourse there might be two areas of division here: traditional art and contemporary art

Traditional art is synonymous with the early art form produced in the [Yorùbá] region [which] consists of religious icons and domestic objects such as jewellery, basketry, doors, and furniture (Adejumo 2015). In other words, the Yorùbá traditional art is not for aesthetic purposes alone but serves a religious function and is symbolic of the deities for which it is made. It is often sacred and serves as a link between the mortal and immortal, commissioned by the priests or king and involving sacrifices at different stages of work.

Contemporary art can be seen as one that is not devoted to any religious representation while accommodating various media outside of the Yorùbá form based on contact and exposure to Western ideas. Basically, when traditional art came under condemnation with the introduction of Christianity with the missionaries' target of

destroying the religious practices that sustained them, contemporary art became the alternative and was encouraged and supported. Contemporary Yorùbá art now includes various forms of painting, graphic arts, printmaking and various urban forms of sculpture that has received recognition worldwide.

### **Yoruba Culture: A Rich Heritage**

Yoruba culture represents a vibrant and diverse heritage that has deeply influenced the development of modern popular music. The Yoruba people, primarily located in Nigeria but with a diaspora in various parts of the world, have a long history of artistic expression, religious practices, and social customs. The Yoruba language serves as a vital element of cultural identity and communication within the Yoruba community. It is a tonal language characterized by its complexity and expressive qualities. Yoruba oral traditions, including proverbs, storytelling, and praise poetry, play a crucial role in preserving history, moral values, and cultural heritage (Falola & Heaton, 2008).

Yoruba religion, often referred to as Ifá or Orisa worship, is deeply intertwined with music, dance, and rituals. Central to Yoruba religious practices are the Orishas, deities that embody various aspects of nature and human experiences. Each Orisha has distinct rhythms, songs, and ceremonial practices associated with their worship. The syncretism of Yoruba religion with Christianity and Islam in the Yoruba diaspora has also influenced music in those contexts (Jones, 2016). Yoruba culture is renowned for its artistic traditions, including visual arts, sculpture, and textile designs. Yoruba art often reflects the religious and cultural beliefs of the community, featuring symbolic representations of Orishas, ancestral figures, and mythological narratives. The aesthetics of Yoruba art, characterized by intricate patterns, vibrant colors, and attention to detail, have influenced the visual presentation of music, album covers, and stage performances (Falola & Heaton, 2008).

Moreso, dance is an integral part of Yoruba culture, serving as a form of expression, storytelling, and community celebration. Yoruba dance is characterized by rhythmic footwork, expressive gestures, and intricate body movements. Traditional Yoruba dance forms, such as bata, gelede, and sukurat, have influenced contemporary dance styles, choreography, and performance aesthetics in popular music (Jones, 2016). Yoruba music represents a diverse range of styles, reflecting the cultural diversity within the Yoruba community. Traditional Yoruba music is characterized by complex rhythms, polyphony, call-and-response structures, and percussion-driven ensembles. Musical instruments such as the dùndún (talking drums), shekere (gourd rattle), bata drums, agidigbo (thumb piano), and omele (metal gong) are integral to Yoruba music, contributing to its distinctive sound (Arom, 2011). However, the richness and depth of Yoruba culture provide a fertile ground for the development of artistic expressions, including music. The interplay of language, religion, arts, dance, and musical traditions creates a multifaceted cultural tapestry that has had a profound impact on the evolution of popular music.

### **Yoruba Music: An Integral Part of Culture**

Yoruba music occupies a central and significant position within the rich cultural tapestry of the Yoruba people. It serves as a vital form of expression, communication, and cultural preservation. This aspect explores the characteristics, styles, and instruments of traditional Yoruba music, highlighting its role in rituals, ceremonies, and everyday life.

**Characteristics and Styles:** Traditional Yoruba music is characterized by its rhythmic complexity, polyphony, and intricate drumming patterns. The interplay of multiple rhythms and percussive elements creates a vibrant and dynamic musical texture. Yoruba music often incorporates call-and-response structures, allowing for communal participation and engagement. Different styles of Yoruba music include juju, apala, fuji, sakara, and highlife, each with its own distinct characteristics and influences (Waterman, 2010).

**Role of Music in Yoruba Rituals and Ceremonies:** Yoruba music plays a crucial role in religious rituals, ceremonies, and social events. It serves as a medium for connecting with the divine, invoking the presence of deities, and facilitating communication with ancestors. Yoruba religious ceremonies, such as those dedicated to Orisha worship, feature specific songs, chants, and drumming patterns associated with each deity. These musical

expressions evoke spiritual energy, create an atmosphere of reverence, and enhance the ritual experience (Jones, 2016).

**Musical Instruments in Yoruba Music:** Yoruba music is enriched by a diverse array of musical instruments that contribute to its distinct sound and rhythmic intricacy. Some notable instruments include:

- **Talking Drums (dùndún):** The dùndún, a set of hourglass-shaped drums, are renowned for their ability to imitate the tonal patterns of the Yoruba language. They produce a wide range of pitches and are played with a curved stick and a smaller beater, allowing for intricate rhythms and conversations (Arom, 2011).
- **Shekere:** The shekere is a percussion instrument consisting of a hollow gourd adorned with a net of beads or shells. It is shaken, struck, or slapped to produce rhythmic patterns and intricate textures. The shekere adds a distinct and melodic quality to Yoruba music (Jones, 2016).
- **Bata Drums:** Bata drums, a set of three double-headed drums, play a significant role in Yoruba religious ceremonies. Each drum has a specific role and pitch, collectively producing complex rhythms and interlocking patterns. Bata drums are considered sacred and are played by skilled drummers (Waterman, 2010).
- **Agidigbo:** The agidigbo is a thumb piano or lamellophone, consisting of metal keys mounted on a resonating wooden box. It is played by plucking the keys with the thumbs, creating melodic patterns. The agidigbo adds melodic and harmonic elements to Yoruba music (Arom, 2011).
- **Omele:** The omele is a metal gong that is struck with a mallet. It produces a deep resonant sound and is primarily used in royal or festive occasions. The omele contributes to the rhythmic foundation and adds a distinct timbre to Yoruba music (Arom, 2011).

The rich array of Yoruba musical instruments, combined with their distinctive playing techniques, contributes to the captivating and intricate nature of Yoruba music.

### **Yoruba culture Influence on Modern Popular Music**

The cultural richness and musical traditions of the Yoruba people have had a profound influence on the development of modern popular music. The impact of Yoruba culture can be observed in various elements and genres of contemporary music, ranging from rhythmic patterns and percussion to religious themes and vocal techniques. The following are the ways in which Yoruba influences have shaped and contributed to the evolution of popular music.

**Rhythmic Patterns and Percussion:** Yoruba music's intricate rhythmic patterns and polyrhythms have significantly influenced modern popular music. Artists and producers have drawn inspiration from Yoruba drumming styles and incorporated them into diverse genres. The syncopated rhythms and interlocking patterns, often associated with Yoruba drumming ensembles like the bata drums, have found their way into genres such as Afrobeat, jazz, funk, and Latin music.

**Religious and Spiritual Themes:** The rich religious and spiritual traditions of the Yoruba, with their pantheon of deities and mythologies, have influenced lyrical themes in modern popular music. Artists have drawn upon Yoruba religious concepts, incorporating references to Orishas, spirituality, and mythology in their songs. The incorporation of Yoruba religious themes has been particularly notable in genres such as Afrobeat, reggae, and hip-hop, giving rise to songs that explore social and political issues while maintaining a spiritual foundation (Olaniyan, 2014).

**Dance and Performance Styles:** Yoruba dance and performance traditions have also influenced the visual and choreographic aspects of modern popular music. The energetic and expressive movements found in Yoruba dance forms have been integrated into performances by artists across various genres. Yoruba dance elements, such as footwork, gestures, and body movements, can be seen in contemporary dance styles, stage performances, and music videos (Jones, 2016).

**Yoruba Language and Vocal Techniques:** Yoruba language and vocal techniques have played a significant role in shaping the sound and identity of modern popular music. Artists have incorporated Yoruba lyrics, phrases, and chants into their songs, showcasing the linguistic and melodic beauty of the Yoruba language. Yoruba vocal techniques, including melisma and ornamentation, have also been adopted by singers across genres, adding a distinct flavor to their performances

## **Conclusion**

Yoruba culture holds a significant place in both traditional and modern contexts. Its influence on the development of modern popular music is undeniable, as seen through the incorporation of Yoruba rhythmic patterns, percussion, religious themes, dance styles, and vocal techniques in various genres. Yoruba music, with its complex rhythms, call-and-response structures, and vibrant instruments, continues to captivate audiences and inspire musicians worldwide. Furthermore, Yoruba culture extends beyond music, encompassing a wide range of artistic expressions, religious practices, social structures, and culinary traditions. Its rich heritage, deeply rooted in mythology, spirituality, and community values, has shaped the identity and worldview of the Yoruba people and continues to thrive in their communities and diaspora. Through understanding and appreciating Yoruba culture, we gain a deeper appreciation for the diverse tapestry of human expression and the global impact of African cultural contributions. It serves as a reminder of the interconnectedness of cultures and the ways in which traditions can evolve and resonate in contemporary contexts.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended that;

1. People should explore Yoruba Music by taken the time to listen to traditional Yoruba music and familiarize yourself with its distinct rhythms, instruments, and vocal styles. This can deepen your understanding of Yoruba culture and its musical traditions.
2. There should be creation of a proper distribution network that all labels/artists must go through and having accreditation of distributors through government policy.
3. People should attend Yoruba Cultural Events.They should look for Yoruba cultural events, festivals, or performances in your local community or online platforms. These events often showcase traditional Yoruba music, dance, art, and cuisine, providing an immersive experience into the culture.
4. Government should support for Yoruba artists and musicians by attending their concerts, purchasing their music, or following them on social media. This helps to sustain and promote their creative contributions while fostering cultural appreciation and exchange.
5. There should be engagement in conversations with individuals from the Yoruba community or those knowledgeable about Yoruba culture. Ask questions, share insights, and foster a respectful exchange of ideas and experiences to deepen your understanding of Yoruba culture and its influence on modern popular music.
6. Delve into the rich mythology and religious practices of the Yoruba people. Read books or academic articles that explore Yoruba mythology, deities (Orishas), and religious rituals to gain a deeper appreciation for the spiritual aspects that influence Yoruba music.
7. Discover Yoruba-Influenced Artists: Research contemporary artists who incorporate Yoruba influences in their music. Listen to their songs, read interviews or articles about their artistic process, and explore how they blend traditional Yoruba elements with modern genres.

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