Embodying Power: The Role of Performance Style in Yoruba Political Verbal Arts

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Abstract

Yorùbá verbal arts, particularly traditional songs and music, are performed in ways that are vital in communicating power dynamics, sociocultural messages, and the significance of political discourse among the Yorùbá people. This article analyzes the performance styles of selected traditional song performers to demonstrate how both verbal and nonverbal elements of Yorùbá performance contribute to the understanding of political messages within Yorùbá communities. It emphasizes that performance is not solely about the content of the words but also about their delivery and embodiment, which can amplify their impact and reinforce sociopolitical structures within the society. Drawing on performance theory, the study examines how Yorùbá traditional songs and music serve as powerful tools for political discourse and identity formation among the Yorùbá, focusing specifically on the Oǹdó, Ìbògùn, and Ọ̀yọ́ communities. Through a detailed analysis of the selected performers' styles, it reveals how songs and music not only reflect but actively shape understandings of power, solidarity, and sociopolitical interactions in Yorubaland. It argues that the performance styles of Yorùbá oral performers enhance the effectiveness of political narratives conveyed through performance. By highlighting the vital role of performance style in negotiating power and fostering cultural resilience, the study contributes to broader dialogues on the relationship between oral art and politics, offering new insights into the vitality of Yorùbá political aesthetics and the global relevance of indigenous expressive traditions.

Introduction

Yorùbá verbal arts play a vital role in shaping political stability and contributing to the overall well-being of community members. These expressions are commonplace in daily life, helping to lend meaning and significance to experiences (Bell, 2008: 129). Their performances often relate to political circumstances, containing inherent elements that make them powerful tools for political action (Askew, 2002: 22). This article examines the performances of Yorùbá oral performers, specifically focusing on their performance styles. It views Yorùbá verbal arts, particularly traditional songs and music, as a tool for 'both political thought and political engagement' (Shíocháín, 2021: 3). Yorùbá verbal arts are considered an 'authentic' voice of the past and the present, encompassing genres like Ifá verses, songs, festivals, legends, and myths (Adéjùmọ̀, 2009: 2), and have been in use since before the advent of the Yorùbá writing system. These genres address all issues concerning humans and their environment (Anya, 2018: 3; Míruka, 1994). The songs and music explored in this study are integral to how people in Yorùbá society and Africa generally comment on incidents and events experienced in their communities (Furniss and Gunner, 1995: 5), including socio-political issues. The study is a thorough examination of the performance styles used by Yorùbá traditional song performers, highlighting the diverse ways they structure their songs and the reasons behind their stylistic choices.

The discussion begins with the background of the traditional songs, noting their frequent employment within the Yorùbá indigenous political systems, as observed in the study areas. It then critically analyzes the performance styles of Yorùbá political songs. Focusing on the styles employed in song performances collected in the Oǹdó, Ìbògùn, and Ọ̀yọ́ communities brings out the communicative and aesthetic dynamics of the genres. This focus demonstrates the various ways performers structure their song performances and the purpose of their stylistic selections. It is argued that style is a poetic weapon that oral performers employ to convey socio-political messages to the audience during performances at festivals, installation rites, and coronation anniversaries.

Style is referred to as "the poetic function that conveys the orientation of the utterance, or the performer's attitude towards what she or he is speaking about" (Jakobson 1960: 356). The performance of verbal art is regarded as a way of speaking that allows a performer to use language freely (Aalders-Grool, 2013: 169). In essence, the performer's

language use is enhanced during a performance, distinguishing the verbal art performance from normal speech. Furthermore, performers frequently employ verbal and nonverbal elements to draw the audience's attention and enrich their performance. While manipulating language to create aesthetic and semantic values, they also maintain the unique structure of each genre.

Leach and Short (1981) cited in Òjó (2005: 51) define style as "the way in which language is used in a given context, by a given person, for a given purpose". They posit that four elements are key to 'style': the manipulation of language, by a specific person (the performer), for an occasion (like an Ifá festival), and for a particular purpose, all achieved through the performance of an art form. Crystal and Davy (1985) argue that style encompasses an individual's unique language habits and occasional linguistic quirks, involving both verbal and nonverbal aspects of oral performance. Therefore, within the Yorùbá context, style in poetic verbalization is regarded here as characterized by a rich blend of performative and linguistic elements that enhance the aesthetic and communicative power of the poetry. Considering this background, the article closely analyzes the performance styles of a few song performers in the three Yorùbá communities, exploring how they utilize verbal and non-verbal elements of Yorùbá songs to demonstrate the political power of performance.

Literature Review

Yorùbá verbal art is a representation of the past and the present that encompasses genres such as Ifá verses, songs, festivals, legends, and myths (Adéjùmò, 2009: 2). Having existed before the advent of the Yorùbá writing system, verbal art discusses all issues concerning humans and their environment (Anya, 2018: 3). Song, poetry, and various popular representations are integral to how people in Africa today comment upon what is happening in their societies (Furniss and Gunner, 1995: 5).

This study critically explores songs and music as key expressions of Yorùbá verbal art, revealing their significance and complexity within the sociopolitical context. Song and musical performances in Africa have attracted global scholarly attention, particularly from anthropologists, ethnomusicologists, musicologists, linguists, literary scholars, and cultural historians. Saboro (2021: 440) affirms that these scholars "have spent a considerable amount of time reflecting on the centrality of music in African cultures". He further explains that song performance among Africans has been a fascinating source of historical accounts. Falola and

Fleming (2012, cited in Saboro 2021: 440) argue that song and musical performance "facilitated interaction between neighbouring communities, elites and the masses, and those in power and those not". They also served as an arena where the populace could voice their support or disapproval for leaders, air grievances, enjoy the company of their peers, share collective successes, and join in communal activity. These scholars primarily focus on the expression of African identities and social relations.

Building on these pan-African perspectives, Ọláwálé's (2020) study in Ìlọrin offers a more localized exploration of indigenous songs to enact identities, history, and cultural memories. Ọláwálé (2020: 257) suggests that oral performers, including singers, "are part of the custodians of cultural heritage due to their rich knowledge about their communities, which they transform into songs". He stresses that songs are frequently embedded with historical accounts and current events and work to safeguard harmonious co-existence. The scholar argues that traditional songs of Ìlọrin, for instance, are a form of cultural expression reflecting the social, political, and religious dynamics of Ìlọrin, alongside the challenges of preserving the genres in the digital age. His analysis covers the linguistic, stylistic, and thematic features of the Ìlọrin songs, comparing them with other verbal art forms in the community. He argues that songs are a means of knowledge potent in fostering intercultural dialogue and harmony, particularly in Ìlọrin. While his work is limited to the Ìlọrin community, it provides insights into how Yorùbá people use song performance to promote harmonious co-existence and suggests that songs are highly significant in addressing sociopolitical issues for political stability. In connection with this, as subsequent sections will demonstrate, all the song and musical performances analyzed in this article were performed to promote social changes and transform the lives and communities of those who performed them.

Previous studies have often overlooked the performance styles of Yorùbá verbal arts, concentrating instead on the textual aspects and social identity within these genres. Consequently, the essential role of performance styles in Yorùbá political verbal arts has not received the scholarly attention it deserves. This study, therefore, seeks to fill that gap by examining the performance styles in political verbal arts within the communities of Oǹdó, Ọ̀yọ́, and Ìbògùn, offering valuable new insights.

In the following section, the methods of data collection and data analysis, as well as data management and ethical considerations, are clearly outlined.

Research Methodology

The performance style components of Yorùbá traditional songs and music reflect significant aspects of human behavior, making the study of these genres essential through qualitative analysis. This approach focuses on exploring the unquantifiable values that characterize these phenomena.

Data Collection and Participants

The article utilized various data collection methods, including in-depth interviews, participant observations, content analysis of existing literature, and recordings and analyses of live song and musical performances.

Participants included oral performers, royal poets, Ifá priests, and traditional rulers in Oǹdó, Ìbògùn (in Ifọ̀ Local Government Area), and Ọ̀yọ́ town in Southwestern Nigeria. These communities were selected for their rich cultural heritage and vibrant verbal art traditions, which play crucial roles in political discourse. Their shared cultural practices and historical experiences shape their responses, enabling a powerful analysis of how oral art forms communicate political messages. Their distinctive political landscapes allow for the exploration of diverse performance styles and their impact on political identity and engagement, revealing the adaptability of verbal arts across different settings.

A snowball sampling technique was adopted to identify suitable participants. This approach facilitated access to individuals through referrals within each community, specifically targeting those known for their engagement in traditional music, song, or religious performance. Participation was open to any persons who self-identified as traditional singers, musicians, or priests. Established facilitators—oral performers and traditional rulers—in these communities were instrumental in the recruitment process, introducing the researcher to participants beyond the initial three contacts (one in each study area).

Data collection took place from November 2021 to October 2022. In-depth interviews were conducted with thirteen participants: five in Oǹdó (three men, two women), five in Ìbògùn (three men, two women), and three in Ọ̀yọ́ (one man, two women). Sessions lasted between 40 and 60 minutes and were audio-visually recorded. The song and musical performances of the interviewees were collected during live performances captured during festival celebrations in the selected communities. This method allowed for the collection of data on various topics, particularly their diverse performance styles and settings.

All collected interviews and live performances were transcribed verbatim and translated into English from Yorùbá. Data analysis aligned with the selected theoretical framework, leading to the comprehensive reporting of the research findings. The existing scholarly works formed the theoretical and methodological foundations of this research.

The information collected for the study adhered to principles of informed consent, value neutrality, privacy, confidentiality, data protection, and non-invasive engagement. Participants were informed of their rights and the freedom to withdraw from the interview sessions at any time. The researcher meticulously managed the data, ensuring all audio-visual recordings of interviews and observations were digitally captured and protected.

Theoretical Framework

The full realization and potency of Yorùbá verbal arts, particularly traditional songs, are found in their performances. Song and musical performances have become a powerful tool through which the Yorùbá express and negotiate ideas about their society, culture, and political identity. This suggests that verbal art performance is crucial to how the people construct their narratives and political ideologies.

To fully explore the sociopolitical dynamics observed in Oǹdó and Ìbògùn through their song and musical performances, this study adopts Askew's (2002) Politics of Performance Approach. This framework situates verbal art performance, such as music, as a vehicle for negotiating politics and social relations across various levels of power. By applying Askew's approach, this article examines how the performance styles of Yorùbá song and musical performers are essential to understanding the dynamics of indigenous Yorùbá politics in these two communities.

While discussing the effectiveness of taarab musical performance in Tanzania, Askew (2002: 18) observes that

> .. musical performance provides people ... with a context for airing and engaging in disputes. Individuals interact through the music, utilising it as their communicative vehicle.

Just as taarab offers Tanzanians a platform for dispute and complex sociopolitical communication, Yorùbá songs and music serve a similar function. Yorùbá verbal arts allow for the exploration of community

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concerns, political identity, and social dynamics. Performers utilize these genres to articulate grievances, celebrate achievements, and foster dialogue. The interaction between performers and their audiences creates an environment where political messages are conveyed, disputes are discussed, and cultural identity is reinforced. Using song or musical performance is a convenient way for Yorùbá people to publicly negotiate politics and social relations in their communities, a fact clearly demonstrated by the significance of performance style in this negotiation.

Askew developed this approach because existing performance-oriented perspectives, such as Bauman's Performance-centered approach, often failed to account for the analysis of "nonverbal performance, or performance that communicates non-textual messages" (Askew 2002: 19). This limitation prompted scholars like Royce (1984), Cowan (1990), and Heath (1994) to address "logocentrism." Kelly Askew created the Politics of Performance to effectively explore the performances of both the politics of the personal and the politics of the national, using Tanzanian taarab, ngoma, and dansi as case studies. Expanding on Askew's thesis, this article delves into what makes Yorùbá songs and music politically efficacious from a performance analysis perspective.

Micu (2022: 1) notes that people engage in continuous performance, which shapes identities, roles in social hierarchies, and culturally shared values. In Yorùbá society, performance includes how performers and audience dress, speak, and move. It can serve to invoke, placate, mimic, or embody forces that may bless, curse, nurture, or destroy a community (Willis, 2018: 94).

In line with these theoretical backgrounds, this article employs the Politics of Performance approach to show how Yorùbá song and musical performances constitute an effective mode of negotiating social relations in Oǹdó and Ìbògùn by focusing on their performance styles. We argue that the effectiveness of Yorùbá verbal arts in negotiating social and political relations lies in their ability to reflect and shape the community's experiences, making them a vital component in understanding how crucial expressions impact and influence political discourse.

The study also explores how song performance constitutes and reinforces Yorùbá identity. As Bell (2008: 19) argues, social groups like communities are "constituted through the performances they create and re-create about themselves", such as family celebrations and political protests. The subsequent section analyzes specific instances of these performative actions. In applying Askew's approach, the article argues

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that song and musical performances are linked to political situations and are active tools for political action in the Yorùbá context.

Unveiling Political Narratives: Analysing Performance Styles in Yorùbá Traditional Songs

A performer formulates his performance "in words on a specific occasion and gives it life and existence by transmitting it through continued performance" (Ọlájubù, 1978: 677). The tone of voice is essential in producing Yorùbá verbal art forms, particularly songs and music. Ọlájubù (1981: 82) further observes that the

> … oral artist supplements his verbal efforts with dramatic actions, gestures, charming voice, facial expressions, dramatic use of pauses and rhythms and receptivity to the reactions of the audience.

The abovementioned elements are essential to the composition and performance process of Yorùbá songs and music. These non-verbal actions, along with the performers' costumes and the prevailing mood during the performance, contribute significantly to the meaning of the oral arts. Thus, performing Yorùbá songs and music studied in this work involves much more than just spoken words. Yorùbá song and musical performances typically feature elaborate language with symbolic word associations, dramatic gestures, expressive tones, strategic pauses and rhythms, and an active audience engagement (Akangbe, 2021: 70). Songs are designed to be performed through singing before an audience, whether at societal, religious, cultural, political, or informal events. Typically, these performances are enhanced with drums, music, and dance (Olajubu, 1981: 72; Akangbe, 2021: 70).

Song performance is one of the interesting features of festivals, installation rites, coronation anniversaries and other events observed in the study areas which consists of traditional bands who performed during the celebrations and popular musicians, notably *jùjú*, *fújì* and *bàtá* groups, which are stationed along Palace/Odòtù Road in Oǹdó (during *Ògún* festival) and other places like open fields, in the case of Ìbògùn in Ògùn State in Nigeria. The analysis reveals how songs performed during the above occasions are directly linked to the power structures displayed at the events. These include songs performed by *Ṣòrà* performers (in Oǹdó), songs performed in Ìbògùn of Òwu kingdom, and other performers whose song performances were collected during festivals and other events. Each

of these song performances represents "a specific realm of power and emanates from or is associated with specific institutions, agendas or historical developments" (Ọmọ́jọlà, 2011: 94).

Apart from the songs performed by bands such as *jùjú*[1], *fújì*[2] and *bàtá*[3] musicians, all songs performed by the devotees and other performers during the festivals and other events are "relatively short in length and feature the pentatonic scale and call and response format, in which the soloist and chorus repeat the same song or phrase alternately" (Ọmọ́jọlà, 2011: 94). Also, scholars like Nketia (1962: 28) and Olúdáre (2014: 9) regarded this pattern as a "call and response" form. In other words,

> The verbal content of these songs tends to be short (though the actual performance may be lengthy) and is often ephemeral. There is usually plenty of improvisation. Unlike the general pattern of Western European folksongs, the individual singer does not tend to stand out in a dominant position as against a passive audience, but instead interacts with a chorus. Yet these lyric songs still provide wide scope for individual expression (Finnegan, 2012: 235).

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[1] *Jùjú* is another Yorùbá popular music that originated among the Yorùbá in the 1920s. Jùjú was formed from traditional Yorùbá percussion, and it is regarded as a synthesis of Yorùbá aesthetics. It is believed that Túndé King was the one who created the genre, and the talking drum is its major instrument, but Western musical instruments are now incorporated into the music today.

[2] *Fújì* is a Yorùbá popular music that originated from the Muslim wake-up music, mostly performed during Ramadan to wake Muslims at dawn to eat their food. It was formed from *wéré* music in the 1960s, and late Sikiru Àyìndè Barrister is known as the founder of fújì music.

[3] *Bàtá* is used to refer to both *bàtá* music and *bàtá* drum ensemble, and it is a musical tradition of the Yorùbá people in Nigeria. *Bàtá* music and drums are regarded as sacred, and the rhythms of the drums possess spiritual powers capable of invoking and appeasing their deities, notably *Ṣàngó*. Previously, *bàtá* music and drums were mainly used during festival celebrations of some selected Yorùbá divinities, such as *Ṣàngó* and *Ọya*. Today, *bàtá* has transcended the traditional cycle and the people employ the ensemble to entertain themselves in their secular world.

Instances of these are seen during song performances, as shown in the following *Obitun* song sung by an Oǹdó traditional singer, Fọláshadé Ọláfẹ́miwá, popularly known as *Ìyá Dúdú* (Black woman) because of her complexion.

Lílé:	*Oyin má ṣọṣẹ́*	*Bees, do not attack*
	Oyin má ṣọṣẹ́	*Bees, do not attack*
	Má ṣọṣẹ́!	*Do not attack!*
Ègbè:	*Oyin má ṣọṣẹ́*	*Bees, do not attack*

The lead singer guided her members through the song by singing the first three lines, which contained both call and response, before the band members repeated the chorus alternately. But not all lines in the song were repeated; only the first line (a phrase) was repeated as the chorus. The song does not have more than four lines, though it was sung several times before they sang another one. The individual performers danced freely to the song with slow choreographed movements with an emphasis on leg movement. The intensity of their dance steps increased when the talking drummer engaged with the dancers individually. The excerpt depicts *oyin* (a bee) as a warrior who can bite and kill his enemies at will. It is a conflict-related song in a political context that the performers used to appeal to warriors and/or political officeholders not to deal with their critics because they are more powerful than they. According to the lead performer, the song is one that a group of people or individuals might sing when they have a conflict with others they believe are more powerful, particularly their traditional rulers and politicians. In line with Askew's (2002) argument, *obitun* performance discussed above is not just a form of entertainment, but also a powerful tool for negotiation, resistance and community cohesion during times of social and political unrest. *Ìyá Dúdú* employed her music to bring people together in Oǹdó community and foster a sense of unity and shared identity. The song allowed her to voice dissent and critique the powerful in Oǹdó community in such a way that might not be possible through direct speech. Her song and performance style subtly challenged the authority, strengthening communal bonds in Oǹdó kingdom.

Ìyá Dúdú mainly follows the form and style of *Obitun*[4] music as many Oǹdó traditional female performers do today. Though these forms

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[4] In Oǹdó traditional society, *Obitun* evolved primarily as a puberty rite that was meant to ward off *Ogba* and functioned mainly as an initiation ceremony of the Oǹdó girls from girlhood to womanhood, which falls between the ages of 12 and

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and styles vary from one musician to another, there are "… established basic forms common to all, such as the arrival (beginning), homage, entertainment, mock ritual (middle); plate dancing (climax) and departure (end)" (Akinsipe, 2013: 96). In the case of Ìyá Dúdú's performance observed in Oǹdó on 13 January 2022, the mock ritual was absent, and plate dancing was replaced with individual dance. This may be due to the nature of this performance context, as her performance that day was arranged and not conducted within any ceremonial or ritual setting. After the performers arrived and converged two to three meters away from the performance arena, they lined up in a single line, ready to dance. The Indoor Sports Centre of Adeyemi University of Education, Ondo, was used as the performance arena. Many students and staff who heard their musical sound became their audience, making the performance spectacular because of the interactions between the performers and the audience.

The line-up of the performers featured the lead dancer at the front, followed by four other female dancers, and the only male dancer was positioned at the back. There were six dancers, including their leader, Ìyá Dúdú (stage name). Then the lead dancer opened the floor by paying homage to the Oǹdó king, Ọba Victor Ọlásimbọ́ Kíladéjọ, which she did

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17 years. In the contemporary Oǹdó society, the *Obitun* music style has become a general musical style that all Oǹdó traditional female musicians/performers adopted in their performances because of its uniqueness. Hence, Ìyá Dúdú adopts the style in her oral art. The advent of foreign religions, Christianity and Islam, in Oǹdó kingdom gave birth to the decline of *Obitun* as a girl puberty rite between 1920 and 1950. As Akinsipe (2015: 173) argues, Oǹdó people reinvented the style during their cultural dances, reminding themselves of their tradition. The new dance and music styles that emerged as a result of their frequent cultural dances during this period were named *Obitun* dance, which is now a common and unique music and dance style for both Oǹdó women at home and abroad today. In ancient times in Oǹdó, *Obitun* dance was not choreographed, rather it was a free dance. In other words, its form and style were not uniform, but flexible. The initiates (*Obitun* girls) danced freely as much as they could during the rites of puberty, but at the same time, "there is even very little dance the *Obitun* can do with her delicate ornaments, [and] weariness (because they are kept awake and busy through the nine days) with heavy attire" (Akinsipe, 2015: 172). However, choreography and other foreign musical elements have been added to the *Obitun* dance today, as confirmed by Ìyá Dúdú in an interview conducted with her shortly after her performance.

for two minutes performing the king's *oríkì*. After the homage, the dancers danced into the arena with an introductory song and uniform dance steps. After they had appeared on the stage, the dancers maintained a single line but horizontally, while the lead performer stood in the front, backing the other dancers. They all faced the audience, who left whatever they were doing to watch the performance. Entertainment (i.e., singing praises of individuals) came in after their introductory song and the mock ritual was omitted from their performance. Then the performance reached its climax with individual dances performed in turn before the performers departed from the stage with a song. The whole performance lasted for thirty to thirty-five minutes.

The Yorùbá people always incorporate a rich array of nonverbal elements in their performances. These aspects of verbal art performances, such as dance, gestures and facial expressions, music style, sound and sensory stimuli, significantly enhance the people's overall experience during performances. Cowan (1990), cited in Askew (2002: 19), argues that we can locate meaning in nonverbal elements of oral performance (such as songs and music) just as she located meaning in the nonverbal elements of the Greek dance performance. Cowan (1990), Heath (1994), and Askew (2002) argue in their studies that nonverbal elements of performance are essential in using performance as a mode of analysis in anthropological studies. Locating meaning in these nonverbal elements of a community dance, particularly African dances, will give new insights into the study of performance among the people. For instance, Yorùbá performance incorporates rich nonverbal elements that enhance communication and cultural expression.

Dance as a crucial non-verbal element of Yorùbá performance frequently has symbolic meanings through which the Yorùbá communicate their stories, emotions, and cultural values, as well as political messages in their communities. The dance movements of the performers are synchronised with the rhythm and tempo of the music, resulting in a visually stunning performance. Using Ìyá Dúdú's performances as an example, the dance steps of the performers symbolised unity, resisting oppression and reinforcing the political messages embedded in their songs. They used gestures and facial expressions to convey emotions and messages. The performers employed these nonverbal elements to express the theme of their songs. During the performance, the dancers frequently moved their hands to emphasise rhythm and emotion. For instance, sweeping hand motions used by

performers during this performance signified joy, celebration and excitement.

The stance and movement of the body were also vital in the musical performance of Ìyá Dúdú and her dancers. They often leaned forward to express the engagement and excitement they had during the performance. At some points, they swayed to convey a sense of calm. They used their foot movements to keep time with the music and add a visual element to their performance. During this period, the dancers subtly tapped to more elaborate dance steps. They smiled a lot to themselves and the audience, showing their happiness and confirming the approval of their audience. Through their mouth movements, they conveyed different emotions. The rhythm of their music and the pace of their movements evoked collective emotions and unity. Synchronisation in their dances and movements symbolised solidarity and collective action, which are crucial to the Oǹdó polity. They occasionally pursed their lips to show concentration and opened their mouths wide to express amazement at the comments of their audience during the performance. Performers' facial expressions expressed their emotions and intentions, such as solidarity for the oppressed and determination to ensure there was unity among the Oǹdó people, resonating deeply with the audience and amplifying the political impact of the performance.

Additionally, traditional costumes play a vital role in Yorùbá performance. These elements are often elaborate and colourful, adding meaning to the whole performance and highlighting the identities of the performers. The dancers' costumes were traditional Oǹdó ones, often employed in *Obitun* dance performances. The use of Oǹdó traditional attire and accessories signified respect for Oǹdó cultural heritage and its political history. The costumes of the performers were colourful and uniform. As a professional band, the performers used *aṣọ òkè*[5] as their costumes. Female performers, including their leader, tied wrappers made with *aṣọ-òkè* around their chests, flowing down to their knees, and they were without top wear. While the only male among the dancers wore *ṣòkòtò* (loosely fitted trousers) and *bùbá* (loosely fitted tunic) of the same *aṣọ-òkè* fabric as the others. Female performers adorned their hair and necks with beads, and they also wore beads on their ankles and wrists. The male dancer also wore beads. The female dancers tied beads around their

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[5] *Aṣọ-òkè* is a Yorùbá traditional fabric or garment reserved for major and special events. It is traditionally worn by royalty, chiefs, and affluent individuals during important ceremonies among the Yorùbá.

heads and secured their wrappers *ìpèlé* to keep them tight during the performance. Individual performers hung two *Yata* (decorative bags) around their necks. These bags hung from left to right and from right to left sides of the performers, resting on their waists on both sides. The performers held *ìrùkẹ̀rẹ̀* (white horse whisks) in their right hands and waved them as they danced. The dance was performed barefoot. Typically, the drummers put on the same type of traditional male attire as the dancers. However, in this performance, the drummers' attire was casual and did not match the dancers' costumes. I sensed that this happened because it was an arranged performance.

O*bitun* dancers often display their oral art using the *Esi* ensemble, a traditional Oǹdó drum ensemble. This ensemble features four distinct types of drums: *Ìyá-ìlù, ọpon, konkolo,* and *dabua*. The last three drums are the backers for the *Ìyá-ìlù* (Akinsipe, 2013), and all are membranophones. Due to the ease of playing, many *Obitun* musicians prefer the *dùndún* ensemble drummers, as was the case with Ìyá Dúdú. During her performance, the talking drummer used his drum to communicate with other drums, drummers, and dancers. Occasionally, the talking drum set the tempo for the ensemble, and at other times, it signalled the dancers to change their dance steps. As the primary drum, it led the ensemble and was typically played by the lead drummer (the talking drummer). *Gúdúgúdú* (the father drum) produced a constant background rhythm, which varied in speed as directed by the talking drum. The *omole akọ* and *omole abo* drums were the accompanying rhythmic instruments, giving rhythmic support to the talking drum and creating complex patterns during the performance.

Increasingly, the *Dùndún* ensemble is producing music that is similar to the *Esi* ensemble among the *Obitun* performers in Oǹdó. Consequently, many Obitun dancers now comfortably use the *Dùnduú* ensemble instead of the original *Esi* ensemble. These instruments were used to add verbal and nonverbal layers to their performance. The musical instruments mimicked the tonal language of Yorùbá, effectively used to speak to both the performers and the audience through rhythm and sound by the drummers. Through their choreography and call-and-response patterns, performers engaged the audience and created a dynamic performance environment. However, this was not a ceremonial context; it was an arranged session of performance. This performer-audience engagement created a sense of community and shared purpose, strengthening the political message expressed in the song. These non-

verbal elements were integral to the performance of Ìyá Dúdú's band, enriching Oǹdó's cultural expression and ensuring the preservation of their traditions. The non-verbal elements worked together to craft a compelling, immersive experience that efficiently conveyed and strengthened political messages among the Oǹdó audience.

To further the discussion on performance style in Yorùbá traditional songs, I will move from analysing Ìyá Dúdú's performance in Oǹdó to demonstrating how Yorùbá songs are frequently performed in antiphonal form, using the song performance of Òṣun devotees in Ọ̀yọ́ as a case study. Yorùbá traditional songs are often performed in antiphonal form. In other words, Yorùbá traditional songs feature a "response of some kind between soloist and chorus, and the song depends on the alternation between the two parts" (Finnegan, 2012: 252). In this context, the soloist plays a crucial role during the performance, for he/she takes other singers through the performance by deciding when and how songs should be sung. An instance of this is seen in the following song sung by the Òṣun devotees during the *Ṣàngó* festival celebrated in Ọ̀yọ́ in 2022. The soloist, the priestess of the deity, led other devotees in song performance while taking a procession from the Òṣun temple to the palace of *Aláàfin* of Ọ̀yọ́. The excerpt reads thus:

Lead:	*Láyíwọlá, wẹ̀yìn rẹ;*	*Láyíwọlá, behold the people left behind,*
	Báyé dùn bí ò dùn o	*And see how joyous they are.*
Resp:	*Wẹ̀yin rẹ,*	*Behold the people left behind,*
	Báyé dùn bí ò dùn o	*And see how joyous they are.*
Lead:	*Wẹ̀yin rẹ,*	*Behold the people left behind,*
	Báyé dùn bí ò dùn o	*And see how joyous they are.*
Resp:	*Wẹ̀yin rẹ,*	*Behold the people left behind,*
	Báyé dùn bí ò dùn o	*And see how joyous they are.*

The song was sung many times before singing another song. As mentioned above, the soloist who led other devotees in singing the song included the name of the Late Aláàfin, Ọba Làmídì Ọláyíwọlá Adéyẹmí III, but the chorus does not include this. The lead singer did so to inform the audience to whom the praises should go. This is a praise song that the devotees employed to connect to the late king and to reassure him that all things he left behind are intact, none of them is ruined, even in his absence. As displayed above, the devotees reflect every musical phrase as sung by the priestess and soloist in their responding chorus. These performance

elements were witnessed in August 2022 in Ọ̀yọ́ during Ọ̀ṣun Day observed at the World Ṣàngó festival.

Ọjọ́ Ọ̀ṣun, a day dedicated to Ọ̀ṣun deity during World Ṣàngó festival celebrations in Ọyọ́, was replete with activities performed by the Ọ̀ṣun devotees. There were devotees, chiefs, royal house members, and other spectators who waited at the Palace of the *Aláàfin* of Ọ̀yọ́, who kept watch at the palace as they awaited the arrival of the votary maid, the chief Ọ̀ṣun priestess and other worshippers who took a procession to the palace to deliver *Ọ̀ṣun's* message to the regent, the Baṣọ̀run of Ọ̀yọ́, High Chief Yusuf Akinade Ayọ̀ọlá (the second in command to Aláàfin and the head of the Ọ̀yọ́-Mèsì). The procession was the final major performance that closed the Ọ̀ṣun day for the celebration in 2022. There was a feet-washing ritual performed for the Votary maid (known as *arugbá*) at Ọ̀ṣun shrine by the Yèyé Ọ̀ṣun of Ọ̀yọ́ before they embarked on a procession to the palace. The chief priestess, Yèyé Ọ̀ṣun, led the Votary maid out of the temple to wash her legs at the shrine outside, next to the temple where rituals were performed before their procession. This ritual symbolised purification and preparation for the sacred duties she was about to perform. The washing of her legs before the procession ensured that she was spiritually clean, pure, and ready to lead the procession to the palace, where the message of the deity would be delivered to the regent (who would receive them there) in the absence of the Aláàfin on the throne. This action highlights the significance of purity and holiness in the Ọ̀ṣun cult, showcasing the community's respect for the goddess Ọ̀ṣun and their dedication to preserving sacred traditions. During the procession, the Votary maid carried a calabash containing sacrificial elements used for ritual performance and her face was covered with a green-yellow cloth to prevent her from being distracted during the sacred journey to the palace. Additionally, they believed that covering her face would help her to maintain her purity and sanctity, and it would shield her from any negative influences or distractions that could disrupt their sacred journey. On the part of the devotees, the covering ensured their full concentration on the ritual and offerings, rather than on the individual who carried the ritual calabash.

The Votary maid tied a white wrapper around her waist and covered her body up to her chest. When she got to the entrance to step out, she turned her back to the entrance and came with her back facing inside. Immediately she came out of the house, the worshippers sounded *Oore Yèèyé ò!* (Blessings of the mother - referring to Ọ̀ṣun), "the most popular

signature chant for *Ọ̀ṣun*" (Ọmọ́jọlà, 2011: 93). The Votary maid "represents the link between humans and Ọ̀ṣun and constitutes the medium through which corporate healing is delivered to the land" (Ọmọ́jọlà, 2011: 88). During the feet-washing ritual, the Chief priestess sprinkled the remaining water inside the calabash on the shrine three times. While doing so, the Priestess chanted words that were not audible enough for the audience to hear, let alone understand. This practice is common among the Yorùbá during rituals at their community shrines, as they aim to communicate solely with their deities, not the audience. In such situations, they seek the support of the deity and pray for successful rituals. The Chief priestess followed this tradition, asking *Ọ̀ṣun* for support to help the Votary maid carry the calabash during the processions and rituals. She also invoked the deity's spirit for protection and participation in the celebration. A few priestesses witnessed the feet-washing ritual performed for the Votary maid, while other devotees and passers-by watched from a distance. This was so because not all participants had the right to stay at the shrines in Yorùbá society, as their deities do not condone any uncleanliness. For instance, if a woman on her menstrual cycle visits a shrine during her period, her menstruation may dry up, and she may never experience it again in her life, as one of the *Ṣàngó* priests I interviewed in Ọ̀yọ́ told me. Hence, women who are no longer in the state of childbearing and young virgin girls are preferred to perform rituals to their deities, as they are considered cleaner than those who are still experiencing their monthly blood flow.

The procession of the Ọ̀ṣun devotees involved drumming and singing from the Ọ̀ṣun shrine which was led by the Yèyé Ọ̀ṣun Ọ̀yọ́. Their song performances were accompanied by the *dùndún* ensemble and dances, praising *Ọ̀ṣun* and their late Ọba Ọláyíwọlá Làmídì Adéyẹmí III and showing their excitement and joy as shown in the above song. Their singing, drumming and dancing were performed with greater frenzy. On getting to the palace and retiring to where the Regent was sitting, the Regent addressed the devotees, praying for a good year, peace and prosperity of the Ọ̀yọ́, and wishing them a happy celebration.

Drumming is one of the major channels of communication with divinities and other supernatural beings among the Yorùbá. The drum talks to the devotees, and they understand its message. Through drums, the worshippers communicate with their deities. This suggests that drumming during a festival performance, such as *Ọ̀ṣun,* transcends mere entertainment; rather, it connects the devotees to the spirits of their deities and makes things happen in the spiritual realms and with manifestations

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in the physical domain. The procession of the votary maid and other *Òṣun* priestesses and priests was led exclusively by a professional *dùndún* ensemble from the *Òṣun* temple to the palace of Aláàfin of Ọ̀yọ́. The members of this *dùndún* ensemble were drawn from particular families of drummers in Ọ̀yọ́ town. The ensemble consists of "the talking drum (*ìyá ìlù*), and a group of secondary drums, known collectively as *omele,* comprising of *ìsáájú, àtẹ̀lé, gúdúgúdú* and *àgùdà*" (Ọmọ́jọlà, 2011: 94). These drums, apart from the *gúdúgúdú,* have an hourglass shape and two drumheads with tension. The *gúdúgúdú* has only one drumhead and is shaped like a small pot (Ọmọ́jọlà, 2011). This ensemble symbolises and amplifies the king's spiritual and political power during the festival. During communal ceremonies among the Yorùbá, particularly during festival celebrations, drummers often see themselves serving their king's and his subjects' interests.

During their performance, the *Òṣun* devotees, except for their Votary maid, danced freely with slow, choreographed movements, focusing on leg movements that grew in interactions between the lead drummer and the dancers. The Votary maid walked gently and focused on her journey to the palace while the Chief priestess kept chanting incantations and evoking *Òṣun's* spirit to energise the maid. Their performance featured songs and chants, drumming, as well as improvised and choreographed dances. Their dances and song performances were accompanied by shouts of *Oore Yèèyé ò!* This occurred immediately after the rendering of the extended chant by the Chief priestess. According to Ọmọ́jọlà (2011: 101), "this climax evokes the appearance of the votary maid at the festival, the point at which participants would raise their voices in support". Many of the songs they performed during the procession praised both the deity and the late *Aláàfin,* describing *Òṣun* in their songs as *Yèyé* "mother" "who possesses a great capacity for kindness and acts as a symbol of their collective identity" (Omojola, 2011: 101). Their song performances incorporated *oríkì* through which the performers celebrated the deeds and qualities of both *Òṣun* and *Aláàfin.* These *oríkì* were sung and chanted rhythmically and melodically. As Victor Turner (1969) suggests, the procession and song performances of Òṣun devotees serve as a tool for evoking and shaping collective meaning, facilitating transformative experiences, reinforcing communal life and beliefs, and invoking a mythical past. Turner labels the sense of togetherness occurring during rituals as *communitas,* asserting that regardless of its fleeting nature or connection to specific rituals, this experience briefly erases status

differences among community members. *Communitas* temporarily unites people as equals who partake in a shared experience, as observed in Ọ̀yọ́ during the ritual performance of Ọ̀ṣun devotees.

Advancing the discussion on the performance style of Yorùbá songs, it was evident in the song performances of many Yorùbá oral performers witnessed during my fieldwork in Ọ̀yọ́ kingdom and other study areas that the soloists can introduce variations on:

> the basic theme of the song in contrast to the part of the chorus, which is more or less fixed. In other cases, the soloist has complete scope to improvise his part of the verse as he chooses (apart perhaps from the very first line). This type of composition results in many impromptu and often ephemeral lyrics. Within the general antiphonal form, which has often been mentioned as one of the main characteristics of African song, there are several possible variations (Finnegan, 2012: 252).

Máyọ̀wá Ayolo's song performance during the *Ṣàngó* festival celebrated in Ọ̀yọ́ in August 2022 affirms Finnegan's argument. Though he did not perform with his band members that day, the audience sang the chorus while he performed a solo role. Also, he sang some songs with slight variation while mentioning the names of some prominent people (who participated in the ritual session) in the songs. One of these excerpts goes thus:

Lead:	*Ẹní súmọ́ba,*	*S/he who associates with the King,*
	Yóó jẹ̀gbádùn ọba.	*Would certainly enjoy her/his friendship with the King.*
	Ẹní súmọ́ba,	*S/he who associates with the King,*
	Yóó jẹ̀gbádùn ọba.	*Would certainly enjoy her/his friendship with the King.*
	Dìgbòlugi tí wọn yà,	*It is your wickedness,*
	Tán fi ń rọ́báa fín.	*That makes you disrespect the King.*
	Ẹní súmọ́ba,	*He who associates with the King,*
	Yóó jẹ̀gbádùn ọba.	*Would enjoy his friendship with the King.*

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Resp:	*Ẹní súmọ́ba,*	*S/he who associates with the King,*
	Yóó jẹ̀gbádùn ọba.	*Would certainly enjoy her/his friendship with the King.*
	Ẹní súmọ́ba,	*S/he who associates with the King,*
	Yóó jẹ̀gbádùn ọba.	*Would certainly enjoy her/his friendship with the King.*
	Dìgbòlugi tí wọn yà,	*It is your wickedness,*
	Tán fi ń róbáa fín.	*That makes you disrespect the King.*
	Ẹní súmọ́ba,	*He who associates with the King,*
	Yóó jẹ̀gbádùn ọba.	*Would enjoy his friendship with the King.*

The repetition in both the solo and chorus in the above song underscores its central theme and reflects the call-and-response structure typical of Yorùbá musical performance. The song is the most basic type of lead and chorus, which is common in Yorùbá traditional song performance. There is a solo and a chorus, but the devotees who sang the chorus were not members of the performer's band. His band members did not perform the song with him because the event was not meant for general participation. The song performance took place during appeasement to *Èṣù Akẹ̀sán* at *Èṣù* shrine in Òyọ́ during *Ṣàngó* festival. Names of the prominent devotees who participated in the event are mentioned in the song by the soloist, while the audience sang the chorus. The song was elaborated to accommodate the names of these devotees. The call of the second version (as seen in the song below) is longer than the call of the original version because names of some foreign devotees (like Dr Paula Gomes, a Portuguese woman who was a cultural ambassador to the Late Ọba Làmídì Ọláyíwọlá of Òyọ́) are mentioned while the chorus retains its eight lines.

Lead:	*Doctor súmọ́ba,*	*Doctor associates with the King,*
	Ọ́ jẹ̀gbádùn ọba.	*And she enjoys her friendship with the King.*
	Doctor Aponla súmọ́ba,	*Doctor Paula associates with the King,*
	Ọ́ jẹ̀gbádùn ọba.	*And she enjoys her friendship with the King.*
	Ṣàngódélé súmọ́ba,	*Ṣàngódélé associates with the*

		King,
	Ó jẹ̀gbádùn ọba.	*He enjoys his friendship with the King.*
	Èṣùṣùpọ̀ súmọ́ba,	*Èṣùṣùpọ̀ associates with the King,*
	Ó jẹ̀gbádùn ọba.	*And he enjoys his friendship with the King.*
	Dìgbòlugi tí wọn yà,	*It is your wickedness,*
	Tán fi ń rọ́báa fín.	*That makes them disrespect the King.*
	Ẹní súmọ́ba,	*He who associates with the King,*
	Yóó jẹ̀gbádùn ọba	*He would enjoy his friendship with the King.*
Resp:	*Ẹní súmọ́ba,*	*S/he who associates with the King,*
	Yóó jẹ̀gbádùn ọba.	*Would certainly enjoy her/his friendship with the King.*
	Ẹní súmọ́ba,	*S/he who associates with the King,*
	Yóó jẹ̀gbádùn ọba.	*Would certainly enjoy her/his friendship with the King.*
	Dìgbòlugi tí wọn yà,	*It is your wickedness,*
	Tán fi ń rọ́báa fín.	*That makes them disrespect the King.*
	Ẹní súmọ́ba,	*He who associates with the King,*
	Yóó jẹ̀gbádùn ọba.	*Would enjoy his friendship with the King.*

Emphasis is placed on *Ẹní súmọ́ba, Yóó jẹ̀gbádùn ọba* (S/he who associates with the king, would benefit from the king's generosity and kindness), and it is repeated several times, through two phrases.

It is ascertained that songs found in this category of repetition are relatively short, though the actual repetitions may be drawn out almost indefinitely, as Finnegan (2012) notes. The beauty of this pattern is that the soloist is at liberty to introduce slight variations, melodic or textual, as seen in the above excerpt, where the performer elaborated the second solo to accommodate names of devotees for emphasis on the fruitful relationships that they had with the Aláàfin of Ọ̀yọ́. The soloist includes their names in the song to reinforce the importance of the theme of his song while the words of the chorus remain unchanged.

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As Finnegan (2012: 253) asserts, the call and response patterns of traditional songs "basically involve the balance of sections sung by leader and chorus against each other and depend essentially on repetition". She further explains that the song's conclusion varies-"sometimes the end is abrupt, at other times the leader joins in the chorus response, often with a prolonged final note" (p.254). In the example above, the soloist did join the chorus before continuing with the king's *oríkì,* which formed the central part of the appeasement to the deity *Èṣù.*

This pattern is a common technique of composition for Yorùbá traditional songs which is done through "creative expressions of oral poetry, by means of musical and lexical repetition, parallelism/juxtaposition, and tonal (phonemic) counterpoint/contrasting intonation" (Oludare, 2014: 9). These techniques are evident in the above songs and other songs collected in the study areas where musical expressions are woven into melodic and rhythmic patterns, extended through compositional variations, repeated instances, and clever linguistic twists, drawing upon allusions and metaphors (Olatunji, 1984; Oludare, 2014).

Another aspect of call and response is where the textual phrases of the responding chorus of a song are a bit different from the solo voiced by the leader of the group. An instance of this is shown in a song performed by a group of *Ifá* performers led by Abíọ́dún Ifábìyí (an Ifá priest from Ifọ̀ Local government of Ògún State, Nigeria) during the *Ifá* festival celebrated at Ajígbọ́tifá Temple, Ọ̀tà Ògùn State of Nigeria on 4th December 2021. The excerpt states thus:

Lílé:	*Ẹni ráwo tó pòṣé o*	*Anyone who sees Ifá priests and hisses*
	Ẹni ráwo tó pòṣé o	*Anyone who sees Ifá priests and hisses*
Ègbè:	*Wọn a ṣì ma wọ òdì èwù*	*Would be behaving abnormally.*
	Wọn a ṣì ma wọ òdì èwù o	*Would be behaving abnormally.*
	Ẹni ráwo tó pòṣé o	*Anyone who sees Ifá and hisses.*

The song is short, and the first two lines of the chorus are entirely different from the voiced solo. Members of the group included the first line of the solo (repeated in the second line) in their response, which ends the chorus. This pattern is what Olúdáre (2014: 9) terms "call and response with different Textual, Melodic and/or Rhythmic phrases". The pattern allows other performers to sing a chorus differently from the soloist. The song

warns against ridiculing *Ifá* priests whenever they are seen performing rituals or sacrifices. The performers have many experiences of how some members of their communities ridicule *Ifá* priests by hissing. It then stated in the song that whoever murmurs against any priests would continue to behave abnormally. It is evident in the songs above that "the antiphonal form provides scope for far more flexibility, rich elaboration, and varied interpretation than is immediately apparent from the bald statement" (Finnegan, 2012: 255) of Yorùbá songs, which is their characteristic structure. The pattern allows the performer to be creative and increases the audience's participation in singing along with the performer. The frequent occurrence of "repetition and lack of demand on the chorus also makes it particularly appropriate for dancing… the balanced antiphony both gives the poem a clear structure and adds to its musical attractiveness" (Finnegan, 2012: 255).

The performance style of this band was unique and different from the performances of the two groups discussed above, as all songs performed by the *Ifálọba* string band were rendered solely on both *agogo* (a metal gong) and *ṣẹ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀* (a rattle made from a gourd and beads) to produce sound. Each of these instruments added a unique texture to the overall sound of their music. The members of the band beat *agogo* to make melodious sounds, and another member drummed *ṣẹ̀kẹ̀rẹ̀* to produce harmonious sounds, while Abíọ́dún Ifábìyí (their leader) led the song performance. All members of the group sang the songs and danced along with their leader. The performers used these two traditional musical instruments to create layers in their music during the festival. Their dance steps added a visual element to the auditory experience of their performance. The combination of these nonverbal elements created a powerful and immersive musical experience that is both celebratory and spiritually significant. The performers also incorporated *oríkì* in their songs to praise the virtues of *Ifá* and the king, which was performed melodically and rhythmically. Unlike the drum ensembles used by the previous groups of performers discussed above, the *Ifálọba* band's performance did not involve the use of *dùndún* or *bàtá* ensembles. Hence, their musical instruments could not mimic the tonal patterns of the Yorùbá language through which drummers often use their instruments to speak during musical performances. Their instruments were meant for producing rhythms and melodies only, a practice which is more common to *Ifá* performers. According to the lead performer, their performance during the festival was not just for entertainment; it also served as a means of communicating with *Ifá,* strengthening the bond between them and their

deity. Yorùbá verbal art performance typically features elaborate language with symbolic word associations, dramatic gestures, expressive tones, strategic pauses and rhythms, and an active audience engagement (Akangbe, 2021: 70), as demonstrated in our discussion. Typically, these performances are enhanced with drums, music, and dance, reinforcing the arguments of Olajubu (1981) and Akangbe (2021).

Conclusion

This article has established that the performance of verbal art holds a distinctive role in Yorùbá society, and performers effectively conveyed their political messages through their performance styles. The study confirmed that verbal art constitutes a field where the dynamics of political processes and the daily representation of social life are centrally intertwined, as song and musical performances played significant and transformative roles in Yorùbá communities by commenting upon pressing socio-political issues. The argument was that verbal art is an area where politics and social life are closely connected because Yorùbá people used these art forms to express their views on the problems they faced, with the intention to bring about positive social change.

The article demonstrated how the performance styles of Yorùbá singers and musicians served as a vibrant testament to the rich cultural tapestry of the Yorùbá people. Through the intricate rhythms and melodies of the analysed songs and music, performers conveyed profound narratives that celebrated cultural values, identities, and deities, and reinforced communal bonds during significant festivals, such as Ṣàngó in Ọ̀yọ́ and Ifá in Ìbògùn. The study also highlighted the incorporation of nonverbal elements, such as eye movements and dance gestures, which enhanced the performers' delivery and added layers of meaning that transcended the spoken word, as observed in the song performances of Ìyá Dúdú in Oǹdó and the Ifáḷọba string band in Ìbògùn. By embracing both verbal and nonverbal expressions, their performances created a holistic experience that was not only artistically captivating but also deeply rooted in their communities' spirituality, politics, and cultural identities.

Ultimately, the article showed that Yorùbá performances are more than entertainment; they are a dynamic and multifaceted form of cultural and political communication that honours tradition while allowing for personal and collective expression. This intricate interplay of song, music, movement, and meaning sustained the Yorùbá way of life, ensuring the rich traditions endure for future generations, making verbal arts an integral

component of Yorùbá existence. Overall, the article argued that performances of verbal arts, such as songs and music, were strategically used in negotiating power and social relations to promote social change in Yorùbá society.

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