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Exploring Rivalry Songs as Reflections of Power Struggles in Polygamous Households in Africa: The Yoruba Paradigm

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Abstract

This study examines the socio-cultural context of rivalry songs as a reflection of power struggles within Oyo-Yoruba polygamous households in Africa, aiming to identify their textual content, effects on polygamous households, and musical influences. The rivalry songs have some negative implications on polygamous families, and all forms of songs examined are performed in the Yoruba language of the Oyo dialect, and they are in vocal music in song form. All the songs are unaccompanied due to the context in which they are used and the spontaneous functions they perform in a polygamous household. All songs have satirical text themes that are directly or indirectly sung to abuse, criticize, or provoke a rival co-wife married to the same husband. The study has implied qualitative research by conducting oral interviews, library research, and content analysis based on primary and secondary research. This study hereby concludes that the practice of rivalry songs should be discouraged within the polygamous household due to its negative implications on the family and society as a whole. However, since physical fights should be discouraged between rival wives whenever there are misunderstandings or domestic clashes between them, rivalry songs become inevitable because they are the only alternative available to express their sentiments.

Keywords: Rivalry Songs, Polygamy, Oyo-Yoruba, Iyawo, Iyale.

Introduction

Among the Africans, music is the most common art because it covers all aspects of human existence in any society. Olusola (2005) observes that among Africans, music is ubiquitous and an indispensable art, because it forms part of the paraphernalia of daily activities of the people. Similarly, Vidal (1989) also stresses the importance and relevance of music to the life of the people of Africa, because it is the most common form in which they express their fears, feelings, emotions, love, as well as their beliefs and culture. Various scholars have written on the essentiality of music to life among the Africans. The nature of meaning in African music often serves as a means of communication that ordinary words cannot express effectively. Musical expressions in Nigeria, especially among the Yoruba people of the South-Western part of Nigeria, reflect the various characteristics of the people's culture and traditions within their societies (Babátúndé Yussuf & Oladipo Olúbòmęhìn, 2018).

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In Nigeria, a country with a musical and cultural heterogeneity in each ethnic region practicing its own musical language and stylish forms with different functionality, the various artistic and socio-cultural way of life of each society can be learnt through their music, be it traditional, popular, or art (Adegbite, 1993). Although each region's music can be used solely for entertainment, it cannot be separated from other arts and their various cultural needs, as it accompanies folklore, dancing, poetry, rituals, mask and masquerades (Okechukwu, 2025). Sequel to the above, Akinremi and Maram (2020) also observe that music is regarded as a major form of traditional and modern communication among the Nigerians and Africans in general. In different tribes, music is associated with happiness, creating pleasant feelings, meeting needs, and, in traditional times, was used for various occasions from birth to death; including socials, religious programmes, ceremonial activities, birth, death, christening, mourning, rituals, and moral lessons, among others (Akinremi & Maram, 2020; Blueprint, 2016).

Therefore, it is possible to communicate cultural beliefs, philosophies, and histories through music because "out of our musical communication came our cultures". The musicians thus function as custodians of moral law and cultural historians, educating and preserving the people's heritage and history through their music. This is evident in Yoruba indigenous/traditional and popular music genres, where the musicians creatively reflect other arts such as dance patterns, lyrics, religion, and traditions, which aid in preserving Yoruba culture (Oluwadamilare & Ayokunmi, 2024). So, it is possible to communicate cultural beliefs, philosophies, and histories through music because "out of our musical communication came our cultures". The musicians thus function as custodians of moral law and cultural historians, educating and preserving the people's heritage and history through their music (Milne, 2007). This is evident in Yoruba indigenous/traditional and popular music genres, where the musicians creatively reflect other arts, such as dance patterns, lyrics, religion, and traditions, which aid in preserving Yoruba culture (Denzer, 1994).

However, it is noticeable among Africans that one feature they possess is being polygamous in nature. Being a polygamist is perceived as a sign of being wealthy and responsible on the part of a man. In some Yoruba communities, men who are farmers marry several wives with children to have enough people to work with them on their farm (Aronson, 1980). It is therefore inevitable that husbands with more than one wife will make a night-sleeping timetable that will dictate whose turn it is to sleep with the husband in his room for each week or day. Rivalry songs in Yoruba polygamous households serve as a fascinating lens through which we can examine the intricate power dynamics that exist within these family structures. The Oyo region, with its rich cultural heritage, has a long history of polygamy, which has influenced social relationships, gender roles, and familial hierarchies. In these households, the relationships between co-wives often involve competition for the affection and

resources of the husband, leading to the emergence of rivalry songs as a form of expression (Titus et al., 2023). In any polygamous household among the Yoruba people, it is therefore inevitable that there will be occasional conflicts among the wives due to misunderstanding, envy, and jealousy. Because Africans like to express their feelings, sentiments, and fears through music, one of the wives can come up with a song using indirect words and proverbs to condemn the other wife or probably to talk about her deficiency by singing a song that indirectly talks about the other person (Bernard et al., 2023). The other wife, knowing that the song was sung to condemn her, will also come up with another song to reply to the first wife indirectly. They mostly sing these songs without facing each other; most times, they might pretend to be busy working while insulting each other indirectly (Alabi, 2023).

The rivalry songs among the Yoruba people are not merely entertainment; they encapsulate the emotions, experiences, and struggles of women navigating their roles as wives within a polygamous setting. They often address themes of jealousy, love, status, and the quest for recognition, reflecting the broader societal expectations placed upon women. By analyzing these songs, we can gain insights into how women assert their identities, negotiate their positions within the family, and respond to the challenges posed by their polygamous arrangements (Ajibade, 2011). The study, therefore, explores rivalry songs as reflections of power struggles in polygamous households in Africa, focusing on the Yoruba people of Nigeria. This is with the intention to explicate the cultural significance of music as a medium for social commentaries and resistance. This study also intends to analyze and translate the textual content to reflect the real meaning of the songs. This will invariably highlight how women use songs to articulate their grievances, celebrate their victories, and foster solidarity among them. In essence, this exploration provides a deeper understanding of the roles of music in intra-gender conflicts and power struggles among Yoruba polygamous households.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is dual in nature. They are Social constructivism and feminist theories because they draw upon the two major key concepts that help to analyze the role of rivalry songs in Oyo-Yoruba polygamous households. While feminist theory provides the basis for examining the power dynamics and gender relations within polygamous families, with a focus on how women's voices and experiences are expressed through rivalry songs, social constructivism offers a perspective that will aid in understanding how cultural norms and societal expectations shape the creation and interpretation of rivalry songs as well as their impact on relationships among co-wives. In contrast, feminist theory offers the foundation for analyzing the power dynamics and gender relations within polygamous families, emphasizing how women's voices and experiences are expressed through rivalry songs.

According to Strassmann (1997) and Murdock (1967), polygamy is an agreement between a man and two or more women to live together at the same time as husband and wives. Murdock (1967) and Stresemann (1997) conceive polygyny as the marriage of one man to more than one woman at the same time. It was the prevalent form of marriage in pre-industrial societies. Also, Aryee (1978) observes the negative effects of polygamy on women in diverse ways, as it destroys women's self-esteem and pride. Polygamy is the preferred type of marriage for the men of the pre-colonial Yorùbá societies. The typical traditional Yorùbá compound has a large extended family that is patrilocal and patrilineal. The head of the family (Baálé) is usually the most senior male, with the most senior housewife as the female head (Ìyálé) within the compound (Àkòdì/Agboolé). The traditional Yorùbá men are usually polygamous. Nevertheless, modernization has not eradicated polygyny, as many still have the desire to go into it, but it is declining (Ogunyomi & Casper, 2021).

Timaeus and Reynar (1998) observe that among the Yorùbá, women do not solely depend on their husbands' resources, as many of them engage in economic activities with which they cater for their children. Men are permitted several wives, but women may have only one husband. With the incursion of Christianity, many men officially have monogamous homes but at times have "outside wives" or concubines that may or may not be known to the wives inside the house. This is contrary to the traditional form of polygyny in which more than one wives are married by a single man and all of them live under the same roof but in different rooms. Ezeh (1997) stresses that polygamy among the Yorùbá people is cultural due to patriarchy. Women in the traditional Yorùbá society are upholding patriarchy mainly because of securing inheritance rights for their children (especially males). This is because, traditionally, inheritance has been passed through male children. At the same time, Yorùbá women negotiate space for matriarchy, and this generates domestic violence.

Yorùbá women are peace-loving, and instead of always resorting to physical assault, they resort to verbal attacks through singing and chanting of verbal art in their negotiation for matriarchy. In other words, their expression of violence is mostly verbal. But this is not to deny the truth that women at times go into physical combat. This is because verbal assault affects more than flogging with whips. According to Wande (1968), domestic violence ensues or occurs when a dominating spouse or co-wife, through emotional or physical abuse, creates an environment of fear and intimidation that might prevent others from freely choosing how to live their lives (Ameh & Abdul, 2004). Among the Yorùbá people of southwest Nigeria, engaging in domestic violence is prevalent among women in polygamous marriages because polygyny is a broad way to jealousy, competition, and unhealthy rivalry (Bowman, 2003). This is even evident in the Ifá literary corpus, which is central to Yorùbá behavioral norms and matrices. The study intends to develop a multifaceted analysis of the cultural, emotional, and social importance of rivalry songs within Oyo-Yoruba

polygamous families by utilizing various theoretical perspectives. This will ultimately enhance our comprehension of women's roles and relationships in this environment.

Research Objectives

1. To analyze how rivalry songs impact polygamous African households socially and culturally.
2. To examine the textual themes of rivalry songs used among wives of polygamous families.
3. To find out how rivalry songs impact the relationships within polygamous families.
4. To examine the Oyo dialect of Yoruba, musical characteristics, and the style of rivalry songs
5. To assess and evaluate whether this practice should be discouraged within polygamous families.

Significance of the Study

This study is of key importance as it develops the socio-cultural understanding within the polygamous households of the African Oyo-Yoruba Community. The study emphasizes the expressions of jealousy, frustration, power, and negative emotions among polygamous families. It provides insight into the African polygamous domestic domain. It highlights the oral traditions accompanied by cultural practices reflecting the interpersonal relationships and conflicts among co-wives. The study is significant because it expands knowledge about how music impacts emotions and is used symbolically in everyday life. Though songs are basically of a non-violent nature, they can arouse negative emotions and conflicts, which may lead to physical confrontation. Therefore, this study is important as it draws attention to the policy makers and family counsellors to understand this family mechanism to manage the polygamous family system.

Review of the Literature

Cultural Context of Rivalry Songs in Polygamous Households

Among the Oyo people of the South-Western part of Nigeria, Polygamy is a common marital phenomenon among Africans because it was rooted in their culture and general worldview about marriage. The Oyo-Yoruba traditional people believe in their common saying that '*alaya kan ko kuro ni apon*', meaning that a man who has only one wife is still a bachelor. This is because it is believed among the Yoruba

people that only one wife cannot satisfy the sexual and other conjugal needs and care of a man. Another explanation for polygamy among the Oyo-Yoruba people is that since farming on a large scale is their major occupation, Oyo-Yoruba people prefer to marry four or five wives, with each wife having up to five or six children that will grow up to work in their father's farm. This, they believe, will increase the size of the farm and give them larger farm products that will, in turn, financially enrich the family. Apart from this, being a wealthy person among the Oyo-Yoruba people is adjudged by the number of wives and children one has (Egbeolowo & Onabanjo, 2020; Spreizer, 1995).

As a result of personality differences among the wives in polygamous households among the Oyo-Yoruba people, the husband of these wives is bound to have his secret favourite wife or wives among them. This will definitely give room for unconscious preferential treatment he will give to his favourite(s) among them (Adler & Denmark, 1995). When this is noticed, there will be jealousy, hatred, envy, and anger between these wives. This will eventually lead to domestic power struggles in the form of clashes or, at times, violence. Among the Oyo-Yoruba people, the housing system is in the form of *Agbo-ile* (large family compound), where the same extended family lives together in separate rooms with each of their nuclear families. In households where the co-wives respect or have fear for their husband and/or the members of the extended family, they try not to make domestic violence and clashes in the form of hatred, jealousy, and envy among them obvious. Therefore, instead of expressing their anger or dissatisfaction about their situation with physical fight or confrontation, they adopt the use of rivalry songs (Golan & Isopi, 2022).

Rivalry songs are songs that contain provocative, proverbial, protest, and other forms of abusive words that are used by the rival wives to condemn the bad actions or behaviours of each other during domestic clashes. These songs also contain lyrics that connotate power struggle, superiority, and subjugating other wives or wives in the polygamous households. Performances of rivalry songs are usually done indirectly without facing the person to whom the song is being directed. Therefore, domestic violence or clashes are not usually obvious to the children in the household. However, the adults in the compound know whenever there are misunderstandings or domestic clashes between the wives, and they quickly take action to settle the quarrels among them (Titus et al., 2023).

Implications of Rivalry Songs on Polygamous Households

Although music has been said to form part of the daily activities of the people of Africa, they best express their feelings and sentiments through songs. Therefore, songs among Oyo-Yoruba people have special functions they perform in the society because every song text communicates something to someone or people. It is worth

noting that rivalry songs in a polygamous household imply the family and the society. These implications are hereby discussed subsequently (Alabi, 2023).

Promoting Disunity among Children in the Family

When rivalry songs are performed in the family as a result of conflict between the wives, this usually promotes disunity among the older children in the family. The older children who know the reason for such songs being rendered are likely to directly or indirectly support their mothers. This therefore promotes disunity among these children, which could also lead to physical fights between them (Molagun, 2004).

Preservation and Promotion of the Culture of Rivalry Songs in the Family

The performance of rivalry songs in the polygamous households also leads to the preservation and promotion of such songs in the family. Singing rivalry songs in a polygamous household encourages the Children to imbibe the culture and further advance the creation of more and their usage in the family and the society at large. It is worth noting that these songs contain words of direct and indirect insults against another person (Obot et al., 2025).

Disclosure of Sensitive Secret

Performing rivalry songs discloses some sensitive secrets that are not supposed to be known by the husband, children, or other members of the family. Disclosing such secrets through rivalry songs may lead to divorce, the out casting of any of the wives, or further conflicts between the wives and their husbands. Disclosure of certain sensitive secrets through these rivalry songs could also inflict unforgettable injury within the family or the society (Weinger et al., 2006).

Discouragement of Polygamy

The practice of rivalry songs in a polygamous household among the Oyo-Yoruba people can discourage polygamy. Other members of the community, especially young ladies witnessing the conflicts and the use of rivalry songs in polygamous households, may not wish to encounter such an experience and therefore, may not want to get married to a man who already has a wife. On the other hand, some men may not want to marry more than one wife to avoid the practice of rivalry songs in their homes (Hamzat & Adeigbe, 2022).

Research Methodology

Due to the nature of this study, data shall be collected through both the primary and secondary methods. This is purely a qualitative study based on library research and content analysis to analyse the negative implications of rivalry songs on the whole society.

The Primary Method

The primary method of data collection involves field trips to rural communities in Oyo State, Nigeria, especially where there are large numbers of Muslim polygamists. Oral interviews were conducted with selected people through whose rivalry songs were collected through recordings.

The Secondary Method

The secondary method involves the review of related and relevant literature from books, journals, theses, magazines, and other library sources. Others include information and musical data collected from local home videos and other television plays.

Library Research

In most academic and research institutions, library research is considered a key aspect of research projects, and researchers must examine the research information to have meaningful results. Which contain high reliability and validity in relation to the research project the researchers are conducting (Allen, 2017).

Content Analysis
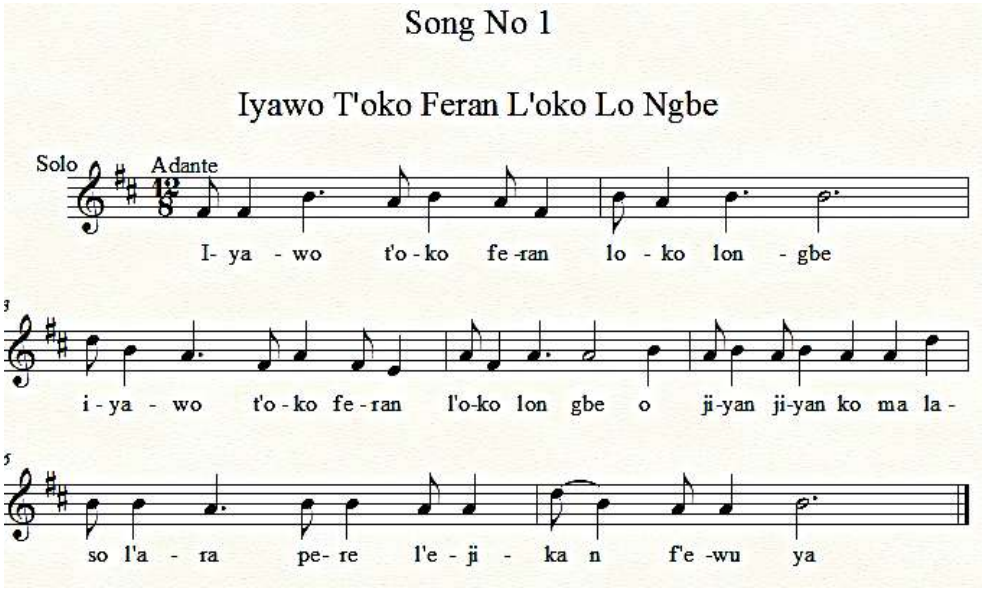
Content analysis is basically developed for primary research based on text-based information, and it can later be generalized by identifying dominant findings (Pope et al., 2007).

Analysis of Musical Data

The songs collected for analysis in this study are twenty in number. Since all the rivalry songs collected are unaccompanied by any melodic or percussion instruments, only a few selected songs will be used for analysis in this session. The analysis is in two categories, and they are:

i. Textual analysis
ii. Musical Analysis

Textual Analysis of Songs
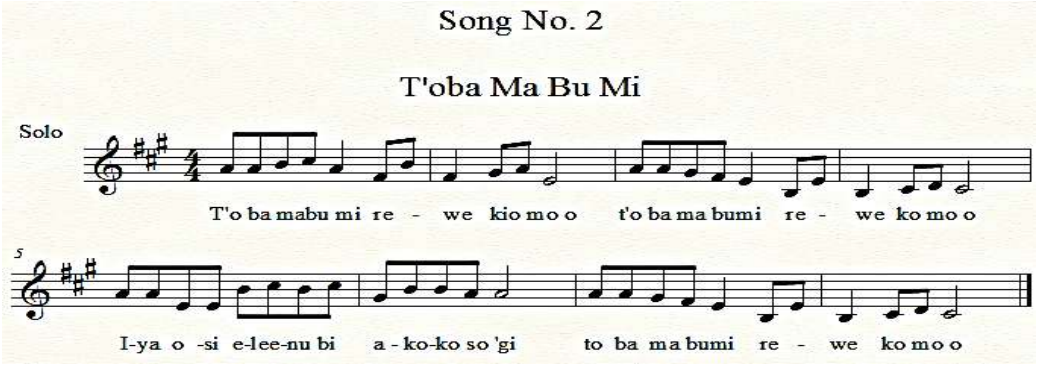


Song No. 1

Song Title:	***Iyawo T'oko Feran L'oko Lo Ngbe***
Yoruba Language	**Translation:**
Iyawo Toko feran L'oko lo ngbe	Our husband's favourite wife lives in the village
*Iyawo Toko feran L'oko lo ngbe*our	Husband's favourite wife lives in the village
O jiyan jiyan koma laso lara	She is worthless, but just to eat food
Pere lejika n fewu ya	All her clothes are more or less rags

As a result of the husband having priority for one wife over the other and his inability to hide his feelings, the song above is sung by the senior wife as a sign of jealousy to condemn the junior wife, who is their husband's favourite.

Language of Text:	Yoruba Language in the Oyo dialect
Musical Form:	Pure vocal in song form
Poetic Form:	Short form
Poetic Structure:	Solo
Theme of Text:	Condemning the rival wife satirically



Song No. 2

Song Title:	***To Ba Ma Bu Mi***
Yoruba Language	**Translation:**
To ba ma bu mi ree we k'o mo	If you want to abuse me, go and take your bath
To ba ma bu mi ree we k'o mo o	If you want to abuse me, go and take your bath
Iya osi elenu bii akopko so'gi	Useless woman with a mouth like that of a woodpecker
To ba ma bu mi ree we k'o mo o	If you want to abuse me, go and take your bath

The song above is a response to Song No. 1, sung by the jealous eldest wife. The junior wife responds with an insult that makes reference to the senior wife's ugly physical appearance.
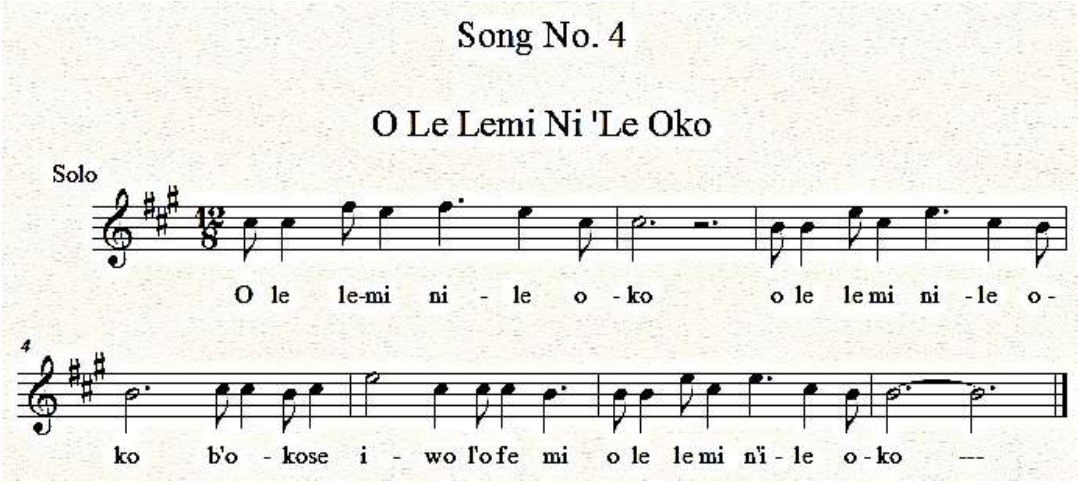
Language of Text:	Yoruba Language in the Oyo dialect
Musical Form:	Pure vocal in song form
Poetic Form:	Short form
Poetic Structure:	Solo
Theme of Text:	Satirical response to an insult with a counter-insult

Song No. 3

Song Title:	***Iyawo Oniranu Re O***
Yoruba Language	**Translation:**
Iyawo oniranu re o	Come and see a stupid wife
Iyawo oniranu re o	Come and see a stupid wife
Mo nboko mi sor o nmomi loju	She is eyeing me badly while I'm with my husband
Iyawo oniranu re o	Come and see a stupid wife

The song above is usually sung by a wife against her jealous co-wife in a polygamous household. This usually happens when their husband is discussing or playing with one of his wives, and the wife notices that the other wife is jealous.

Language of Text: Yoruba Language in the Oyo dialect
Musical Form: Pure vocal in song form
Poetic Form: Short form
Poetic Structure: Solo
Theme of Text: Condemning her rival wife for jealousy
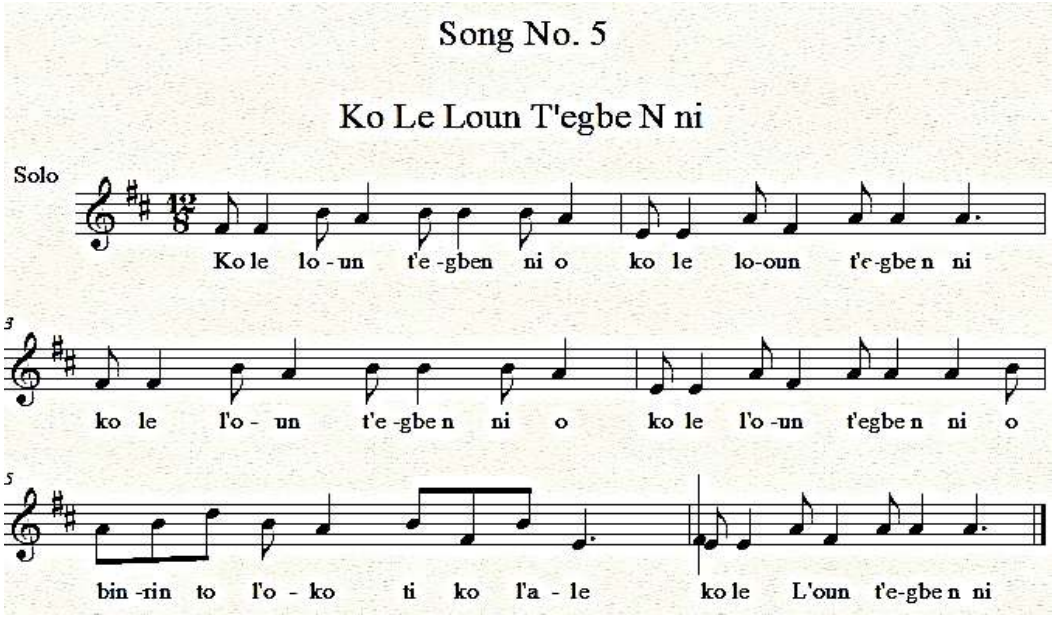


Song No. 4

Song Title:	***O Le Lemi Nile Oko***
Yoruba Language	**Translation:**
O le lemi nile oko	You can't frustrate me in my husband's house
O le lemi nile oko	You can't frustrate me in my husband's house
Iyawo ojowu o	You jealous wife
O le lemi nile oko	You can't frustrate me in my husband's house

The song is sung by a wife to assure a jealous co-wife that she can't frustrate her out of her husband's house.

Language of Text: Yoruba Language in the Oyo dialect
Musical Form: Pure vocal in song form
Poetic Form: Short form
Poetic Structure: Solo
Theme of Text: Instructing the co-wife to be ready for rival competition
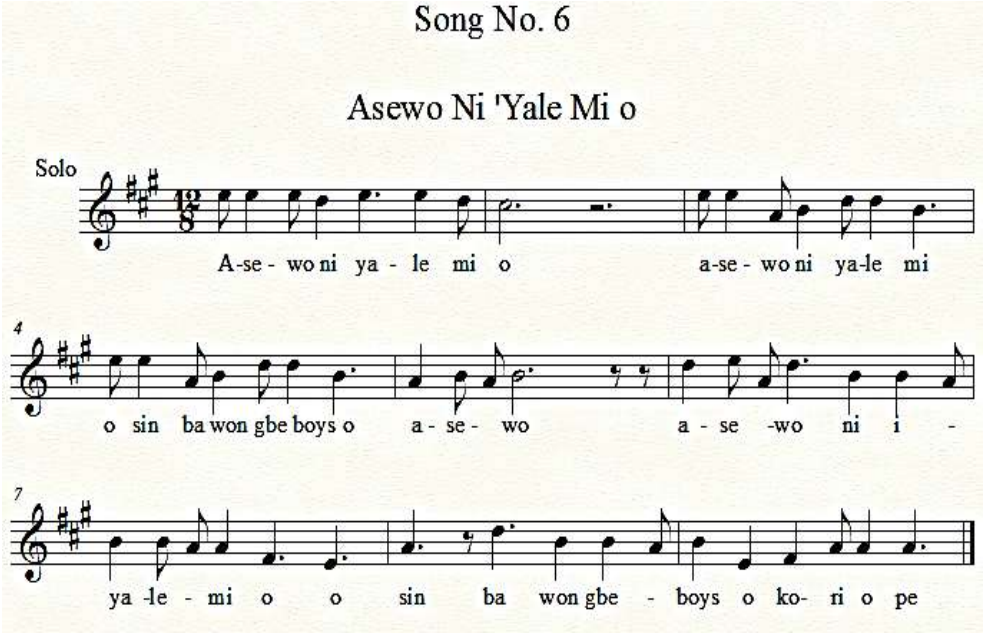


Song No. 5

Song Title:	***Kole Lohun Tegbe n Ni***
Yoruba Language	**Translation:**
Ko le ni n tegbe n ni o	She cannot be financially stable
Ko le ni n tegbe n ni	She cannot be financially stable
Obinrin to loko ti o lale	A wife who does not have a concubine
Ko le ni n tegbe n ni	She cannot be financially stable

The song is sung by a wife to assure a jealous co-wife that she can't frustrate her out of her husband's house.

Language of Text:	Yoruba Language in the Oyo dialect
Musical Form:	Pure vocal in song form
Poetic Form:	Short form
Poetic Structure:	Solo
Theme of Text:	Condemning her rival wife for her financial incapacity
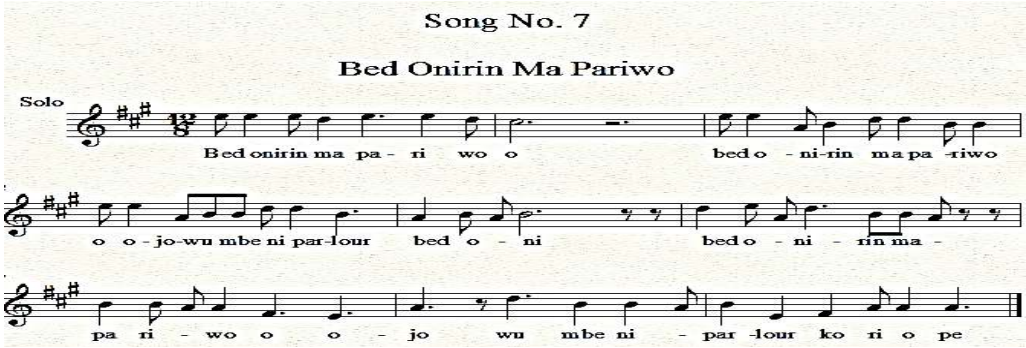


Song No. 6

Song Title:	***Asewo Ni Iyale Mi O***
Yoruba Language	**Translation:**
Asewo ni iyale mi o	My senior wife is a harlot
Asewo ni iyale mi	My senior wife is a harlot
Osi nba won gbe boys o	She is still having boyfriends
Asewo asewo ni iyale mi o	My senior wife is a harlot
Osi mba won gbe boys o kori o pe	Imagine, she is still having boyfriends

The song above is a response to the wife who condemns the other wife's financial incapacity. The other wife accuses the senior wife of her infidelity to their husband, which can lead to the divorce of the senior wife.

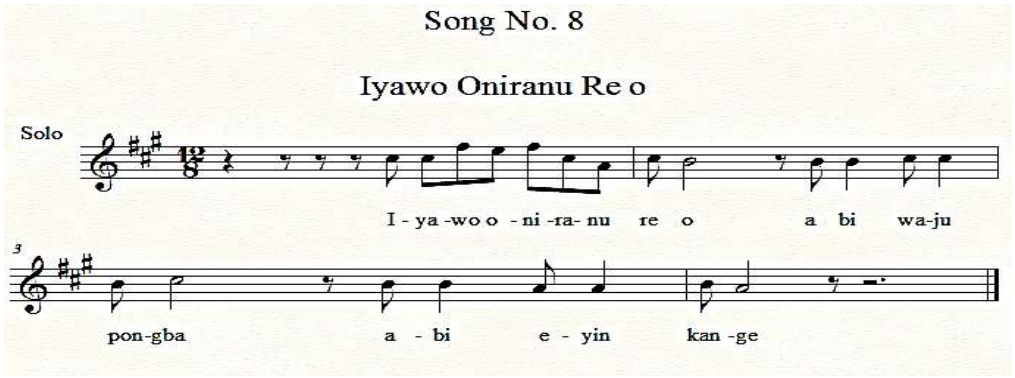
Language of Text:	Yoruba Language in the Oyo dialect
Musical Form:	Pure vocal in song form
Poetic Form:	Short form
Poetic Structure:	Solo
Theme of Text:	Recalling God’s destruction of Jericho in the Bible



Song No. 7

Song Title:	***Bed Onirin Ma Pariwo***
Yoruba Language	**Translation:**
Bed onirin ma pariwo o	Iron bed should stop making noise
Bed onirin ma pariwo	Iron bed should stop making noise
Ojowu mbe ni parlour o	My jealous co-wife is in the parlor
Bed onirin ma pariwo o	Iron bed should stop making noise
Ojowu mbe ni parlour kori o pe	My jealous co-wife is in the parlor, lamenting

Because sleeping with the husband is shared between the wives either daily or weekly in a polygamous household, the song above is a satirical song against a perceived jealous co-wife, who is not her turn to sleep with their husband for that night.



Song No. 8

Song Title:	**Iyawo Oniranu Re O**
Yoruba Language	**Translation:**
Iyawo oniranu re o	Here is my useless co-wife
Abi waju pongba	She is ugly at her front
Abi eyin kange	She is also horrible at her back

Musical Analysis

The analysis has revealed that all forms of songs examined are performed in the Yoruba language of the Oyo dialect, and they are in vocal music in song form. All the songs are unaccompanied due to the context in which they are used and the spontaneous functions they perform in a polygamous household. All songs have satirical text themes that are directly or indirectly sung to abuse, criticize, or provoke a rival co-wife married to the same husband. All songs' texture is in monophony due to the functions they performed, and are in both long and short poetic forms. Also, most songs' musical structures are in through-composed musical form. All song texts are structured on the Yoruba pentatonic scale, and they are arranged in syllabic form with conjunct and terraced melodic movement, and most of them end with perfect and plagal cadences (Saror, 1993).

Research Findings and Conclusion

This research study has examined the practice of rivalry songs among two or more Oyo-Yoruba who are married to one husband in order to highlight the cultural significance of music as a medium for social commentary and resistance. It highlights how women use artistic expression to articulate their grievances, celebrate their victories, and foster solidarity among themselves. The research findings have revealed that rivalry songs in a polygamous household have implications for the family and society. These implications include promoting disunity among children in the family, preservation, and promotion of the culture of rivalry songs in the family. Others include disclosure of Sensitive Secret, and it discourages the culture of polygamy among the Yoruba people.

The research findings also revealed that all forms of songs examined are performed in the Yoruba language of the Oyo dialect, and they are in vocal music in song form. All the songs are unaccompanied due to the context in which they are used and the spontaneous functions they perform in a polygamous household. All songs have satirical text themes that are directly or indirectly sung to abuse, criticize, or provoke a rival co-wife married to the same husband. All songs' textures are in monophony due to the functions they performed, and are in both long and short poetic forms. Also, most songs' musical structures are in through-composed musical form. All song texts are structured on the Yoruba pentatonic scale, and they are arranged in syllabic form with conjunct and terraced melodic movement, and most of them end with perfect and plagal cadences.

This study hereby concludes that although music has been said to form part of the daily activities of the people of Africa, it best expresses their feelings and sentiments through songs. However, rivalry songs as a reflection of power struggles among the rival wives should be discouraged within the polygamy household due to their negative implications on the family and society as a whole. However, since physical fights should be

discouraged between rival wives whenever there are misunderstandings or domestic clashes between them, rivalry songs become inevitable because they are the only alternative available to express their sentiments. This study hereby recommends that African musicologists should express interest in collecting and documenting rivalry songs as part of the musical culture of the Oyo-Yoruba people of Nigeria. This will invariably prevent rivalry songs from going into extinction as a result of modernization.

Recommendations

This study hereby recommends that African musicologists should express interest in collecting and documenting rivalry songs as part of the musical culture of the Oyo-Yoruba people of Nigeria. This will invariably prevent rivalry songs as an African verbal art from going into extinction as a result of modernization.

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