

OJEJE

(A Folk Music Composition)

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A Musical Analysis of *Ojeje*

Introduction

Ojeje is a compelling expression of Yoruba oral tradition, where music operates simultaneously as narrative, moral instruction, and cultural memory. Rooted in folklore, the piece recounts the tragic story of a young girl betrayed by her stepmother, whose disobedience leads to the child's death and subsequent spiritual transformation. Her voice, now speaking from beyond the grave, becomes a haunting lament that continues to address the living.

The composition is structured in a cyclical call-and-response form and incorporates African idiophones, Western melodic instruments, and layered polyrhythms. These musical elements work together to evoke a communal atmosphere of mourning, justice, and spiritual reckoning. This analysis examines the work's formal structure, thematic content, rhythmic organisation, and improvisational features, illustrating how Yoruba musical practice functions as an archive of ethics, memory, and spirituality. Drawing on the scholarship of Nketia (1974), Chernoff (1979), Agawu (2003), and Okpewho (1992), the discussion highlights how *Ojeje* blurs the boundaries between performance and ritual, grief and resistance, and sound and story.

The narrative behind *Ojeje* is deeply embedded in Yoruba folklore. A child conceived through sacrificial rites is entrusted to her stepmother, who is instructed by a herbalist to feed her only eggs. Instead, the stepmother consumes the eggs herself and feeds the child water yam, leading to the girl's premature death. The child's spirit ascends and perches on a tree along the *Ojeje* market path, where she calls out to passers-by, recounting her suffering and seeking her mother. The song thus becomes a moral indictment of greed, disobedience, and cruelty, while simultaneously conveying themes of tragedy, spiritual transcendence, and cosmic justice.

Musical Form

The musical structure of *Ojeje* is organised around a cyclical call-and-response pattern, a hallmark of African folk traditions. This form encourages active participation between soloist and chorus, reflecting the communal ethos of African performance culture. As Nketia (1974) notes, call-and-response is not merely a musical device but a mode of social dialogue embedded within performance.

The recurring refrain, "Ojeje, Ojeje", serves as the central motif, providing cohesion across the episodic narrative and reinforcing the emotional weight of the girl's lament. Chernoff (1979) argues that such repetition functions as a ritual anchor, supporting memory and meaning within oral-musical storytelling.

Measures 1–12 introduce the thematic and sonic environment, with the refrain supported by flute and percussion to create a ritualistic atmosphere. This aligns with Agawu's (2003)

observation that African compositions often begin with tonal invocations that prepare listeners emotionally and spiritually.

Measures 13–30 form the first episode, featuring the girl’s plea, “E ro mi ro je” (“Consider my suffering”). Measures 31–50 constitute the second episode, where a dialogue unfolds between the spirit-child and the community. The soprano soloist narrates the events while the chorus responds, embodying the participatory nature of African oral storytelling (Drewal et al., 1989).

From measure 51 to the end, the closing episode intensifies the emotional climax. The refrain is repeated with increasing urgency before fading into a mournful cadence. This sonic decay symbolises both the child’s fading life and the enduring resonance of her spiritual presence, echoing Nzewi’s (1991) insight that African music often uses diminishing sound to signify spiritual transition.

Thematic Interpretation

The narrative of *Ojeje* reflects the dual function of Yoruba folklore as moral instruction and spiritual reflection. The story of a child betrayed by a caregiver echoes common motifs of innocence wronged and justice ultimately restored, illustrating how oral narratives serve as vessels of ethical teaching (Okpewho, 1992).

The girl’s transformation into a spiritual voice crying from a tree reflects Yoruba cosmology, where ancestral spirits remain active within the living world and communicate through nature, ritual, and song (Drewal et al., 1989). Her refrain, “Ojeje”, becomes a sonic indictment of wrongdoing and a reminder of communal responsibility. Agawu (2003) describes African music as the voice of a people’s soul and collective consciousness, a sentiment clearly embodied in this piece.

Rhythm

The rhythmic structure is set predominantly in a moderato tempo. Layers of claves, agogo, sekere, kalimba, and mbira create interlocking polyrhythms. The call-and-response sections are rhythmically offset, producing syncopated exchanges between soloist and chorus. These rhythmic interactions evoke both the bustling energy of the marketplace and the emotional intensity of lamentation, merging everyday life with spiritual tragedy.

Arrangement

The instrumentation blends African idiophones with Western melodic instruments, including flute, violin, marimba, *kalimba*, *mbira*, *agogo*, *sekere*, and claves. The four-part choir (soprano, alto, tenor, and bass) provides harmonic grounding, symbolising communal witness to the unfolding tragedy. The flute and violin contribute sustained, expressive lines that resemble mourning wails, while the percussion ensemble offers an earthy foundation that evokes the soundscape of the *Ojeje* market.

Improvisation

Improvisation plays a significant role in the performance. The soloist often embellishes the refrain with melismatic phrases, while percussionists introduce spontaneous rhythmic variations. These improvisatory elements reflect the flexibility and expressive depth of African oral tradition, mirroring the unpredictability of grief and emotional release.

Textural Analysis

The text of *Ojeje* deepens the emotional and symbolic dimensions of the narrative. The phrase *E ro mi rojeje* (“People going to Ojeje, consider my suffering”) expresses both personal anguish and a fractured familial bond. The mother’s journey to Ojeje market signifies care intertwined with absence.

The line *Eyin to fi sile* (“The egg she left behind”) symbolises the sacred responsibility entrusted to the stepmother. In Yoruba cosmology, the egg (*eyin*) may represent a child’s soul or a ritual offering, and its misuse carries spiritual consequences (Drewal et al., 1989).

Orogun ma ti muje (“My stepmother has eaten it”) directly accuses the stepmother of greed, while *Ewura to kan gogo* (“A bad water yam”) highlights the harmful substitution that led to the child’s death. The concluding phrase, *L’orogun ma fun mi je* (“Is what the stepmother gave me”), completes the causal chain of betrayal. The lament thus becomes a moral record, inscribing wrongdoing into communal memory.

Conclusion

The musical and narrative structure of *Ojeje* demonstrates the profound ways in which Yoruba folklore and oral music function as repositories of cultural memory, ethical instruction, and spiritual reflection. Through its cyclical call-and-response form, symbolic text, and communal lamentation, the composition articulates the moral consequences of greed and neglect while elevating the voice of the innocent victim into a lasting spiritual presence.

The interplay of instrumentation, rhythm, and improvisation reflects the interwoven nature of everyday life and metaphysical experience in African performance traditions. As affirmed by Nketia (1974), Drewal et al. (1989), and Okpewho (1992), African music is far more than artistic expression; it is a living medium of collective memory, social commentary, and ancestral dialogue. In capturing the child’s sorrowful cry, “Ojeje”, the music ensures that her story remains embedded in communal consciousness, serving as a sonic testament to the enduring power of oral tradition to confront injustice, preserve memory, and affirm cultural identity.

References

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OJEJE

(A Folk Music Composition)

Composed by
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Moderato ♩ = 108

The musical score is arranged in a vertical stack of staves. From top to bottom, the parts are: Flute (treble clef, 6/8 time, rests); Claves (percussion, 6/8 time, rhythmic pattern); Marimba (treble and bass clefs, 6/8 time, melodic line in treble, bass line in bass); Soprano (treble clef, 6/8 time, rests); Alto (treble clef, 6/8 time, rests); Tenor (treble clef, 6/8 time, rests); Bass (bass clef, 6/8 time, rests); Violin (treble clef, 6/8 time, rests); Kalimba (treble clef, 6/8 time, rests); Mbira (treble clef, 6/8 time, rhythmic pattern); Shekere (percussion, 6/8 time, rhythmic pattern); and Agogo (percussion, 6/8 time, rests). The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The tempo is Moderato with a quarter note equal to 108 beats per minute.

5

Fl.

Clv.

Mrb.

S

A

T

B

Vln.

E - ro mi

2

9

Fl.

Clv.

Mrb.

S
ro je je O - je je e bami

A
O - je - je

T
O - je - je

B
O - je - je

Vln.

2

13

Fl.

Clv.

Mrb.

S
ki 'ya mi O - je - je E - yin to

A
O - je - je

T
O - je - je

B
O - je - je

Vln.

2

17

Fl.

Clv.

Mrb.

S
fi si le O - je - je E - wu-ra

A
O - je - je

T
O - je - je

B
O - je - je

Vln.

2

Detailed description: This is a page of a musical score, page 17. It features a variety of instruments and vocal parts. At the top, there is a Flute (Fl.) part which is mostly silent. Below it is a Clavichord (Clv.) part with a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The Harpsichord (Mrb.) part consists of two staves, with the right hand playing a melody and the left hand providing a bass line. The vocal parts include Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), and Bass (B). The Soprano part has lyrics: 'fi si le O - je - je E - wu-ra'. The Alto, Tenor, and Bass parts have lyrics: 'O - je - je'. Below the vocal parts is a Violin (Vln.) part which is also mostly silent. At the bottom of the page, there is a piano accompaniment consisting of two staves, with the right hand playing a rhythmic pattern and the left hand providing a bass line. The score is written in a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and a common time signature (C).

21

Fl.

Clv.

Mrb.

S
to kan go go O - je - je

A
O - je - je

T
O - je - je

B
O - je - je

Vln.

2

Detailed description: This page of a musical score, numbered 21, features a variety of instruments and vocal parts. At the top, the Flute (Fl.) part is mostly silent. The Clarinet (Clv.) plays a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The Maracas (Mrb.) provide a steady accompaniment. The vocal parts include Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), and Bass (B), all singing the phrase "to kan go go O - je - je". The Violin (Vln.) part is also silent. The Percussion section at the bottom includes a snare drum and a bass drum, both playing rhythmic patterns. The score is written in a key with four sharps (F#, C#, G#, D#) and a common time signature.

25

Fl.

Clv.

Mrb.

S

A

T

B

Vln.

O - je je E - ki ya mi

4 4

2

29

Fl.

Clv.

Mrb.

S

A

T

B

Vln.

O - je - je

4

2

Detailed description: This is a page of a musical score, page 29. It features eight staves of music. The top staff is for Flute (Fl.), which is mostly silent. The second staff is for Clarinet (Clv.), playing a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The third staff is for Maracas (Mrb.), with a treble clef and a bass clef; the bass clef part has a '4' under a group of notes. The next four staves are for vocal parts: Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), and Bass (B). Each vocal part has the lyrics 'O - je - je' written below the notes. The final staff is for Violin (Vln.), which is also mostly silent. At the bottom, there are two more staves for a keyboard instrument, likely piano, with a treble clef and a bass clef. The bass clef part has a '2' under a group of notes. The key signature has four sharps (F#, C#, G#, D#) and the time signature is 4/4.

33

Fl.

Clv.

Mrb.

S

A

T

B

Vln.

E - ro mi

2

4

2

Detailed description: This is a page of a musical score, page 33. It features a variety of instruments and a vocal line. The instruments include Flute (Fl.), Clarinet (Clv.), Maracas (Mrb.), Violin (Vln.), and Percussion (Perc.). The vocal parts are Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), and Bass (B). The score is written in a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and a common time signature. The Flute part is mostly rests. The Clarinet part has a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The Maracas part has a complex rhythmic pattern with a '2' and '4' marking. The Soprano part has a few notes at the end of the page, with the lyrics 'E - ro mi'. The Alto, Tenor, and Bass parts are mostly rests. The Violin part has a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The Percussion part has a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with a '2' marking.

37

Fl.

Clv.

Mrb.

S.
ro je je O - je je e bami

A.
O - je - je

T.
O - je - je

B.
O - je - je

Vln.

2

Detailed description: This is a page of a musical score for page 37. It features a variety of instruments and vocal parts. The Flute (Fl.) part is mostly silent. The Clarinet (Clv.) part has a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The Maracas (Mrb.) part consists of two staves, with the right staff playing a melody and the left staff providing a rhythmic accompaniment. The vocal parts include Soprano (S.), Alto (A.), Tenor (T.), and Bass (B.), each with lyrics. The Violin (Vln.) part is also mostly silent. The score is written in a key with four sharps (F#, C#, G#, D#) and a common time signature.

41

Fl.

Clv.

Mrb.

S
ki 'ya mi O - je - je E - yin to

A
O - je - je

T
O - je - je

B
O - je - je

Vln.

2

Detailed description: This is a page of a musical score for page 41. It features a variety of instruments and vocal parts. The Flute (Fl.) part is mostly silent. The Clarinet (Clv.) part has a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The Maracas (Mrb.) part consists of two staves, with the right hand playing a melody and the left hand playing a rhythmic accompaniment. The vocal parts include Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), and Bass (B), each with their own line of music and lyrics. The lyrics are: "ki 'ya mi O - je - je E - yin to" for Soprano, "O - je - je" for Alto, Tenor, and Bass. The Violin (Vln.) part is also mostly silent. The score is written in a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and a 4/4 time signature.

45

Fl.

Clv.

Mrb.

S
fi si le O - je - je E - wu-ra

A
O - je - je

T
O - je - je

B
O - je - je

Vln.

2

49

Fl.

Clv.

Mrb.

S

A

T

B

Vln.

to kan go go O - je - je

2

Detailed description: This is a page of a musical score, page 49. It features a multi-staff arrangement. At the top left, the number '49' is written. The score includes parts for Flute (Fl.), Clarinet (Clv.), Maracas (Mrb.), Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), Bass (B), and Violin (Vln.). The Flute and Violin parts are mostly rests. The Clarinet part has a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The Maracas part has a complex rhythmic pattern with triplets and a '5' marking. The vocal parts (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) have lyrics: 'to kan go go O - je - je'. The Soprano part has a melodic line, while the other vocal parts have sustained notes. The bottom of the page shows a piano accompaniment with a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes and a '2' marking.

53

Fl.

Clv.

Mrb.

S

A

T

B

Vln.

O - je je E - ki ya mi

2

Detailed description: This is a page of a musical score, page 53. It features a variety of instruments and a vocal line. The instruments include Flute (Fl.), Clarinet (Clv.), Maracas (Mrb.), Violin (Vln.), and Percussion (represented by two staves at the bottom). The vocal line is for Soprano (S), with lyrics "O - je je E - ki ya mi". The score is in a key with four sharps (F#, C#, G#, D#) and a 4/4 time signature. The Maracas part has a complex rhythmic pattern with a five-measure rest in the second measure. The Percussion part has a steady eighth-note pattern. The Violin part has a simple melodic line. The Clarinet part has a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The Flute part is mostly silent. The vocal line has a simple melody. The Alto, Tenor, and Bass parts are also mostly silent.

57

Fl.

Clv.

Mrb.

S
O - je - je

A
O - je - je

T
O - je - je

B
O - je - je

Vln.

2

61

Fl.

Clv.

Mrb.

S

A

T

B

Vln.

2

65

The musical score for measures 65-68 consists of the following parts:

- Fl. (Flute):** Treble clef, playing a melodic line with slurs and accents.
- Clv. (Clarinet):** Treble clef, playing a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes.
- Mrb. (Piano):** Grand staff (treble and bass clefs), playing a complex accompaniment with sixteenth notes and chords.
- S. (Soprano):** Treble clef, containing rests.
- A. (Alto):** Treble clef, containing rests.
- T. (Tenor):** Treble clef, containing rests.
- B. (Bass):** Bass clef, containing rests.
- Vln. (Violin):** Treble clef, containing rests.
- Violoncello:** Grand staff (treble and bass clefs), playing a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes.
- Percussion:** Two staves, playing a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes.

18

OJEJE

69

The musical score for 'OJEJE' consists of several staves. The Flute (Fl.) part begins with a melodic line in the treble clef, featuring a five-measure phrase with a slur and a '5' indicating a quintuplet. The Clavichord (Clv.) part provides a rhythmic accompaniment with a steady eighth-note pattern. The Maracas (Mrb.) part is shown in both treble and bass clefs, with a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes and rests. The vocal parts (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) are mostly silent, with the Soprano part having a few notes at the end of the phrase, including the lyrics 'E - ro mi'. The Violin (Vln.) part is also mostly silent, with some notes in the lower register. The Clavichord part includes a '2' indicating a second ending or a specific fingering.

73

Fl.

Clv.

Mrb.

S
ro je je O - je je e ba mi

A
O - je - je

T
O - je - je

B
O - je - je

Vln.

2

77

Fl.

Clv.

Mrb.

S
ki 'ya mi O - je - je E - yin to

A
O - je - je

T
O - je - je

B
O - je - je

Vln.

2

81

Fl.

Clv.

Mrb.

S
fi si le O - je - je E-wu-ra

A
O - je - je

T
O - je - je

B
O - je - je

Vln.

2

Detailed description of the musical score: The score is for page 81 of a composition. It features a variety of instruments and vocal parts. The Flute (Fl.) part has a melodic line with some grace notes and a fermata. The Clarinet (Clv.) part plays a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The Maracas (Mrb.) part consists of a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The vocal parts (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) enter with the lyrics 'fi si le O - je - je E-wu-ra'. The Soprano part has a melodic line, while the other vocal parts provide harmonic support. The Violin (Vln.) part has a melodic line that enters later in the measure. The Double Bass part has a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The score is in a key with four sharps (F#, C#, G#, D#) and a 2/4 time signature.

85

Fl.

Clv.

Mrb.

S

A

T

B

Vln.

to kan go go O - je - je

2

Detailed description: This page of a musical score, page 79 of 130, contains measures 85 through 88. The score is written in a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and a common time signature. The instruments and voices included are Flute (Fl.), Clarinet (Clv.), Maracas (Mrb.), Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), Bass (B), and Violin (Vln.). The vocal parts (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) have lyrics: "to kan go go O - je - je". The Flute part features melodic lines with slurs and accents. The Clarinet part plays a rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes. The Maracas part consists of two staves, with the upper staff playing a rhythmic pattern and the lower staff providing a bass line. The Violin part has a melodic line with slurs. The score concludes with a double bar line and a fermata over the final notes.

89

Fl.

Clv.

Mrb.

S

A

T

B

Vln.

The musical score for measures 89-92 is written for a chamber ensemble. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 4/4. The Flute (Fl.) part begins with a melodic line in measure 89, featuring a slur over two eighth notes and a dotted quarter note, followed by a rest in measure 90. In measure 91, it plays a quarter note followed by a slur over two eighth notes. In measure 92, it plays a quarter note followed by a slur over two eighth notes. The Clarinet (Clv.) part plays a continuous eighth-note accompaniment throughout all four measures. The Maracas (Mrb.) part features a rhythmic pattern in the right hand with eighth notes and a quarter note, and a similar pattern in the left hand. A four-measure rest is indicated in the left hand of measure 91. The vocal parts (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) are silent throughout. The Violin (Vln.) part plays a melodic line in the right hand and a rhythmic accompaniment in the left hand, mirroring the maracas. The right hand of the violin has a slur over two eighth notes in measure 89, followed by quarter notes in measure 90, eighth notes in measure 91, and a slur over two eighth notes in measure 92. The left hand of the violin plays eighth notes in measure 89, quarter notes in measure 90, eighth notes in measure 91, and eighth notes in measure 92.

93

Fl.

Clv.

Mrb.

S

A

T

B

Vln.

2

Detailed description: This page of a musical score, numbered 93, features a variety of instruments. The Flute (Fl.) part begins with a melodic line in the treble clef, marked with a fermata. The Clarinet (Clv.) part provides a rhythmic accompaniment with a continuous eighth-note pattern. The Maracas (Mrb.) part consists of two staves, with the upper staff playing a melodic line and the lower staff providing a rhythmic accompaniment, including a quintuplet and a quartuplet. The vocal parts (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) are currently silent. The Violin (Vln.) part is divided into two staves, with the upper staff playing a melodic line and the lower staff providing a rhythmic accompaniment. The score is written in a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and a common time signature.

97

Fl.

Clv.

Mrb.

S

A

T

B

Vln.

2

101

Fl.

Clv.

Mrb.

S

A

T

B

Vln.

2

4

5

2

105

Fl.

Clv.

Mrb.

S

A

T

B

Vln.

2

109

Fl.

Clv.

Mrb.

S

A

T

B

Vln.

2