Continuities and Discontinuities: Social Signification in 'Tòkunbọ̀', a Yoruba Art Music Composition

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Abstract

'Tòkunbọ̀' can be described as an art musical composition that engages with ethical and cultural issues in a didactic way, specifically to fashion a critique on the purchasing of products or items used by white people from overseas, and the implication that even the second-hand products of white people are better than new local products or similar products that do not signal white cultural attachments. The story told in the composition extends beyond the signification of 'used wares', and develops to Yorùbá cultural values or expectations imposed by traditional beliefs and ideologies as regards morals and ethics. 'Tòkunbọ̀' deals with a very problematic subject that reveals the austere economic conditions in Nigeria, as well as the tension between modern living conventions and traditional expectations. In this paper, I observed and conducted a close reading of the narrative (video recording and musical score) from the choral composition vis-à-vis the concepts of continuity and discontinuity, extending this to its implications for art music scholarship in Nigeria. This study suggests that continuities and discontinuities are binaries based on perception, and perception of social change itself can be confusing as it has both the negative and positive aspects which take different connotations at different periods to people with varying ideologies in a society.

Keywords: Tòkunbọ̀, Continuities and Discontinuities, Social signification, Yorùbá Art music composition, Cultural values

Introduction

A brief overview of the Yorùbá art music composition and its narrative

The word 'Tòkunbọ̀', literally translated, means 'from overseas'. It is a Yorùbá coinage used to describe used products or second-hand items brought into Nigeria from overseas. In other words, second-hand goods and items imported into the country (mostly shipped) are called 'Tòkunbọ̀'.

In addition, Tòkunbọ̀ is also a name that denotes both male and female genders, usually applied to Nigerians (Yorùbá) who were given birth to overseas. Sometimes, parents of children birthed from what society regards as interracial marriage can also name their children Tòkunbọ̀. Yorùbá names usually possess either a prefix or suffix; meaning that people called 'Tòkunbọ̀' would often have some (meaningful) syllables added to the name, even if they are regularly called by the short form, Tòkunbọ̀ (Akinola, 2014). Also, 'Tòkunbọ̀', a Yoruba art music choral work composed by Dayo Oyèdúṅ in the year 2003 as the fifth number in his *Hospital Cantata*, denotes second-hand products from overseas.

'Tòkunbọ̀' is a musical composition in which the composer engages with ethical and cultural issues in a didactic way, specifically to fashion a critique on the purchase of products or items used by white people from overseas, and the implication that even the second-hand products of white people are better than new local products or similar products that do not signal white cultural attachments. The story told in the composition extends beyond the signification of 'used wares', and develops to Yorùbá cultural values or expectations imposed by traditional beliefs and ideologies as regards morals and ethics. Oyèdúṅ describes this by developing a number of scenarios directed to four kinds of audience: first, to the general public; second, to a lady figure; third, to a married man; and lastly, to a married woman.

The first scenario is about the austere economic conditions in Nigeria that have resulted in many Nigerians preferring or settling for second-hand products from white people. He regards this as demeaning and something that should not be happening.

The second scenario is a market scene (Alẹ́sinlóyé market),[1] that develops into a conversation between three persons: a clothes seller, a lady who wants to purchase clothes and the lady's neighbor. The clothes' seller advertises her wares (both new and second-hand wares) and the

[1] Alẹ́sinlóyé is a big marketplace in Ìbàdàn, the city where Oyèdúṅ lives.

lady opts to purchase a second-hand cloth, saying it is the same as the new and that there isn't a visible difference. The neighbor advises her to buy the new clothes.

The third scenario shifts to presenting examples of second-hand products, e.g., refrigerators that are defective and can lead to tragedies like the burning down of a house. Oyèdúṅ uses a man as the protagonist and a woman (his wife) as the antagonist. She sings of her husband, who spends his salary to purchase a second-hand television that displays a rainbow-like image. Annoyed, she lashes out at him, calling him foolish and wretched and accusing him of accumulating debt.

The fourth scenario revolves around a female character. The composer paints a stereotypical picture of the expectations of a 'typical' Yorùbá man, who considers a woman virtuous in the light of how she accepts and dispenses her responsibilities regarding house chores. The text is something like a prayer to be spared a woman who is culturally worthless, mentioning some of the values lacking in such a woman: she can't cook, wash clothes, fetch water, split firewood, iron clothes, grind pepper, carry a baby on her back, or pound yam. But, she is talkative. The text ends with the message: 'products already used by whites are not ours'.

Analytical point of departure

The composition "Tòkunbọ̀" is a thought-provoking art piece that explores complex themes of cultural identity, economic conditions, and their social meaning. A close reading of the video recording and a few examples from the musical composition - Tòkunbọ̀ is done to examine its narrative and musical elements (Scott, 2016). The composition is then analysed within the context of Nigerian cultural values, traditional expectations, modern living conventions and its implication for the Nigerian Society.

This paper pitches from a standpoint that cultural beliefs regulate human principles as well as human patterns of living and being, and social change has over time influenced these beliefs (Babatunde, 2012; Mesoudi, 2007). I examined the narrative and a few musical elements from the choral piece 'Tòkunbọ̀' as a metaphoric example of how continuities and discontinuities are binaries based on perception .

Continuities and discontinuities are relative. What constitutes a change in a society is always in a state of flux (constantly changing). This is because the idea of change is often based on competing interpretations by people occupying different strata within a society and influenced by varying ideologies that has diverse emotive connection to the subject and

communities. Also, what constitutes change is shaped by how events of the past continue to resurface at major turning points. Continuities and discontinuities are not rigid binaries, but shades and iterations of change.

Consequently, the overlapping realities of continuities and discontinuities then offer more than an avenue to engage progress and regression, but also to reflect on the future, especially as it relates to African studies (Lagos Studies Association, 2025; Roux, 2013b). These binaries are examined through a close reading of the art music (choral) piece 'Tòkunbọ̀', which is explicitly discussed and musically analysed with the binaries of continuity and discontinuity in the significations implicitly engaged towards the end of this writing.

A close reading of Tòkunbọ̀ video recording, selected musical examples and their social significations

The video recording of 'Tòkunbọ̀' analysed here is of a performance that was staged at the 'Africa Sings 3' concert held in the University of Lagos, Nigeria. This recording is published on YouTube, performed by a choral group called 'The Pearls Choir', and conducted by Akinolá Samson *(Tòkunbọ̀ - Choral piece at Africa Sings 3 Unilag, 2012*). The author's choice of this particular recording stems from a live witness of the very performance as an audience member. Observing a close reading of this gives a reminiscence of the actual performance both in real time and after, which aids its discussion holistically. The recording is eight minutes and thirty-three seconds long (08:33), whereas the short dramatic sketch which opens this performance lasts for a minute and seventeen seconds (01:17). After the opening scene, the conductor walks on to the stage and the music begins few seconds later (01:27).

Oyèdúṅ devises a narrative that easily divides into different scenarios or acts. The dramatic sketch introduces a market scene where sellers put out their second-hand wares for sale at cheap prices. It is a rowdy market environment and becomes even noisier as the audience begins to react, some of them whispering among themselves and some speaking quite loudly. Clearly, the audience connects with the action on stage (the words uttered by the sellers to attract buyers are typical of the banter in major markets in Lagos). The choir is on stage, but does not seem to be a part of this scene, as they stand quietly with their hands crossed.

The downstage area where the action is happening is lit. Five actors are seen on stage – three of them (already on stage) are sellers competing for customers, while the other two (a woman

and a young man), who enter the stage at different intervals, are potential customers who seem to know each other. The young man compliments the woman on her appearance and inquires about the designer of her clothing. 'You're beautiful', he says, and she responds by saying 'I know!', mentioning the brand name of her clothing (a supposedly expensive brand that may or may not have been bought in the second-hand market). Excitedly, and without prompting, the young man too mentions the brand he is clothed in. The woman quickly takes her leave, pretending to be late for an appointment, while she is in actual fact in a hurry to go pick up second-hand wares in the market. As she moves from one seller to the other, the two bump into each other again in a very busy store where they had both come to pick up particular items of clothing. The woman sees her friend, their eyes meet and the young man shouts her name in astonishment. She is dazed and ashamed (the audience utters exclamations at this point), squirms uncomfortably, and then quickly exits the stage without saying a word. All the other actors also exit now in different directions and the scene ends. The audience reacts at this point with exclamations and applause.

This dramatic sketch portrays a society where people are conscious of their social status or identity, and in an effort to meet with self-imposed or societal demands, they live in pretense and deceit. The class implications conferred on individuals by a certain kind of conspicuous consumption is not the problem per se, but rather the way in which this illusion is created and maintained. The individuals concerned pretend to be what they are not, and the purchase of second-hand clothes signifies this undignified choice. In a way, then, second-hand clothes signify unoriginality, low self-esteem and the lack of confidence to be true to one's self or personality (Talabi, 2020).

A typical example of this dramatic sketch is depicted in the music score with tone painting technique. The tone painting of the word 'ọ̀stérítì' (austerity) recurs in bars 27 and 28 for the soprano, bass, and left hand of the piano (see Figure 1 below, red marking). The left hand of the piano and bass voice play around the dominant note in bar 28, while the right hand of the piano plays in a florid style taken over by the left hand in the next bar in a descending scale that leads to an eighteenth-century cadenza-like closure of the principal theme on a cadential six four chord progression $I^6{}_4$-V^7-I (see Figure 1. black marking). In bars 27 and 28, the tenor sings detached quaver notes against the sustained notes of the alto voice (see Figure 1, blue marking) to articulate the word 'ọ̀stérítì' (or 'austerity'). In actual fact, Oyèdún amplifies the

word 'austerity' using both this truncated enunciation, as well as the contrasting glittering runs in the piano accompaniment (Figure 1, red and yellow marking) (Talabi, 2020).

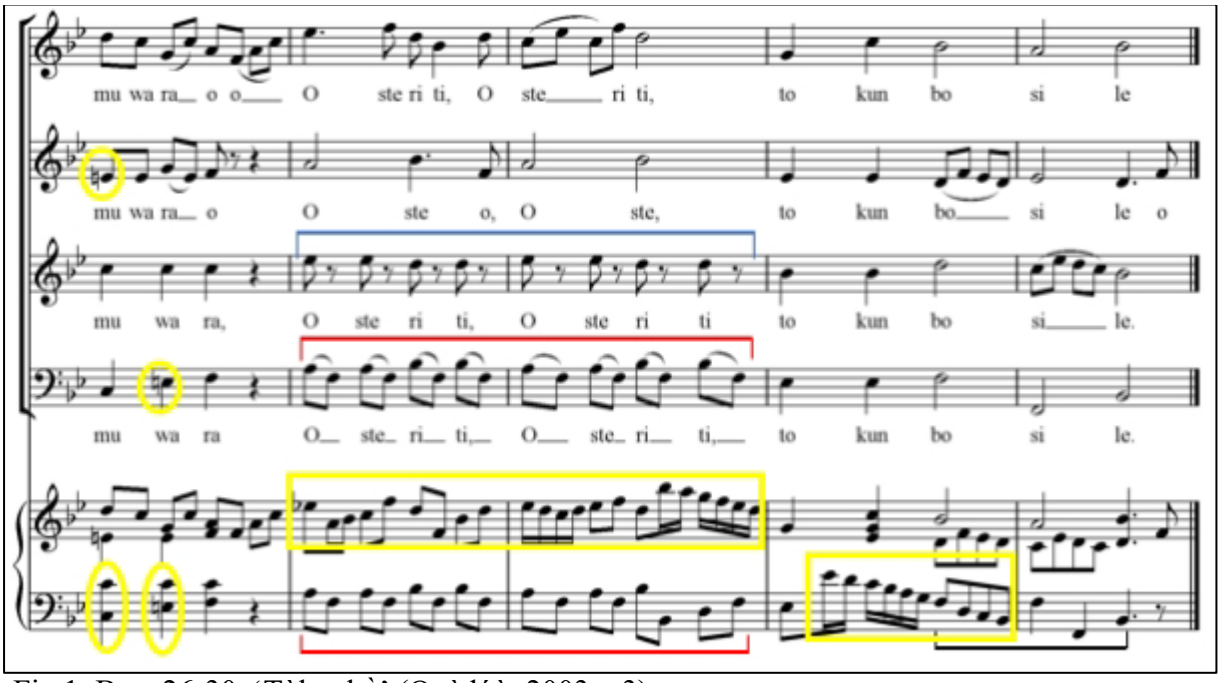

Fig 1. Bars 26-30, 'Tòkunbọ̀' (Oyèdúṅ, 2003, p3).

After the opening dramatic sketch, the conductor enters the stage majestically, takes a bow and cues the piano and choir at a moderate tempo. The flood light is switched on. The choir sings expressively, but in demeanour they remain demure, standing uniformly straight with one hand placed over the other. When the pianist performs a ritardando, starting the B section of the music (bar 49) with a slow movement on compound duple time and a change of key, a new stage scene is introduced.

This time, the actors are seen walking out from among the choir, seemingly cued by the piano ritardando. They enter from down stage left and right towards the down stage centre. This scene has four characters, the first two are the woman selling her wares and the woman she is selling to, then, another man and woman. The woman, who wants to purchase goods, calls a hawking clothes seller who advances towards her. The actors move and act in consonance with the text being sung by the choir, so much that the music speaks for the actors, while the latter act out the words of the choir. At this point, Oyèdúṅ assigns to the choir the role of the clothes seller who asks the purchaser if she wants second-hand or brand new goods. The woman responds by speaking the words on the score (see musical example below, Figure 2 bars 75-77). The other two actors (a woman and a man) are positioned down stage left and appear to be spying on the purchase. They are portrayed in the music as neighbors to the

woman who purchases the goods, advising her not to buy second hand wear, although this is not acted out. After the purchaser had said her lines, all the actors exit the stage, with the woman moving towards the choir and soliloquizing about why they advise her not to go for second-hand goods. Thereafter, she leaves the stage while the singing continues.

At this point in the music, Oyèdúṅ introduces a change of tempo to a simple quadruple time ($^4_4$) and a parlando, that is, an expressive speech for the soprano and altos with chordal accompaniment suggesting a tonal area in which the speech unfolds (see Figure 2 below). The parlando would have been more suitable for a solo voice, but unconventionally, Oyèdúṅ requires all the sopranos and altos to execute it. The harmonic colouration in the piano accompaniment starts off with a minor tonality, the first chord (bar 75, Figure 1, marked in blue) being a dominant chord in B minor resolving to a submediant chord in bar 76. This is followed by a Neapolitan 6th chord followed by a chromatic circling of the dominant pitch by the right and left hands of the piano in octaves (bars 78 to 79, Figure 3, passages in yellow), (G#-A, G#-A, G#-A, G-A, F#-A, E-A). The last chord in bar 79 finally presents the full dominant seventh chord; while the circling of the dominant pitch in bars 78 and 79 in fact provide an interlude to the choral entry in bar 80.

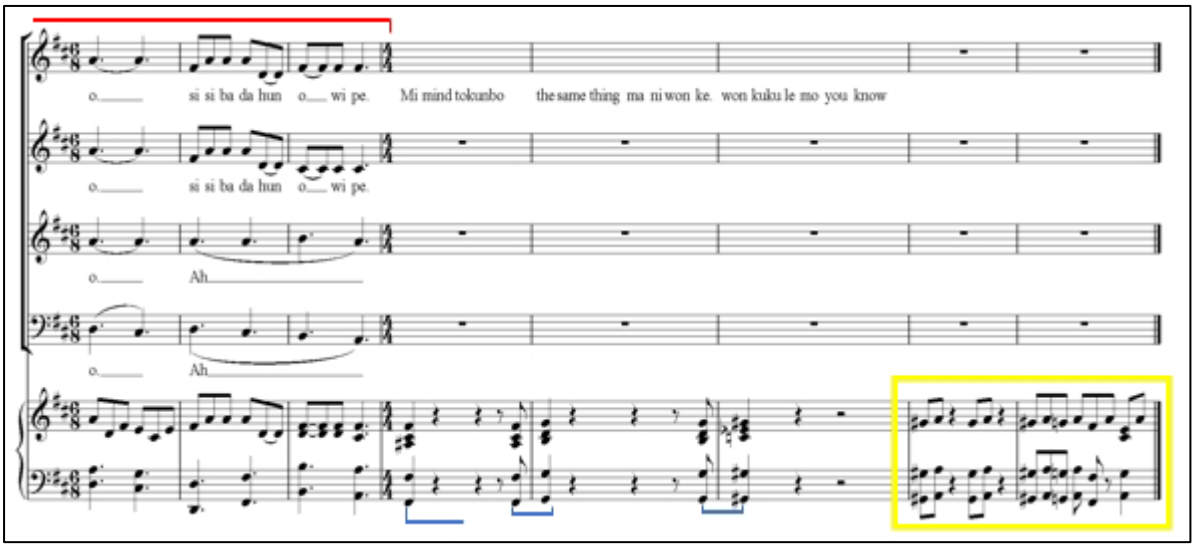

Figure 1 Bars 72-79, 'Tòkunbọ̀' (Oyèdúṅ, 2003, pp. 7, 8).

Next, the narrative in the music quickly moves to a third scene depicted by a change of key to B flat major (from bar 89). This scene is about a second-hand refrigerator capable of burning down a house. In the subsequent narrative (not staged but related by a 'wife' as narrating instance), a husband receives his salary at the end of the month and heads for a second-hand

shop to purchase a television, piling up debt. This scene, rather than being acted out, is expressed vigorously by the choir in their singing and facial expressions. The conductor varies the tempo considerably and oscillates between a fast and slow pace till the music reaches a cadenza with a fermata (bar 116), an arrival greeted with very loud applause and hooting from the audience. At this point, one cannot help but read the message as a thoroughly moralistic one, intended to critique materialist consumption generally, but specifically as it is directed towards the purchase of second-hand goods. Thus, the implication seems to be, or can be a thoroughly destructive practice (one can lose one's house) and the message seems to be that people should work to attain the best, and not be driven by materialist desire to settle for second best (Talabi, 2020).

The D section of the music starts with a change of time signature, continuing the narrative about the man, and building up momentum as the text becomes ever more stringent. At this point in the recorded performance, the galvanized audience can no longer hold their excitement. As the section starts with the first phrase (bars 117 to 120), the audience exclaims aloud with 'Haa!' The music moves on to another variation, with a new narrative about marrying a second-hand wife. The male choir excitedly acts this out as if to say: the storyline has dealt with the man; it is now time to turn the attention to women. They place their hands on their heads, some clapping, others tapping their fingers, while they all sing and pray that their heads save them from marrying second-hand wife material. The female voices make some movement to this – dancing to the rhythm of the song with no drumming but just piano accompaniment – and soon the male voices join in the dance. The rhythm of the movement and dance here is dictated by the call-and-response nature of the singing (bars 132 to 152). In bar 152, where the coda begins, the choir becomes immobile again and the music ends. As the choir sings the coda, which the audience seems to recognize as the climax of the music, the camera pans into the dark hall and the audience is seen to be super-excited. Many jump from their seats with loud applause and scream with excitement.

The costumes used in this performance portray the identity of the people and the geographical area of the performance and the music. It does not necessarily suggest a historical time, but in its own way, the sartorial decisions emphasize the song's theme, as only the new machine-made fabric tailored in Nigeria is used. The Ankara print worn by the choir is a very colourful fabric embedded in Nigerian culture and its re-invention is credited to the Yorùbá of

Southwestern Nigeria.[2] The entire choir is dressed up in African Ankara fabric: the females in knee-length dresses with their head ties and the males in trousers and embroidered shirts ('ṣòkòtò' and 'bùbá'). In this way, the choice of costume emphasizes the image of Nigerian cultural authenticity that Oyèdúṅ's music admonishes Nigerians to support. The actors who wear the English-made fabric (second-hand clothes) are clearly depicted in the acting and singing. In an interview I conducted with Èyítáyò Ọ̀gínní, one of the music directors who has conducted the piece, he says:

> Oyèdúṅ brings ills common around him into music, shows it to the face of the people, so it is now left to the people to take heed. For example, the song 'Tòkunbọ̀' speaks to me… except for new cars, which are beyond the reach of the average in Nigeria. I don't buy Tòkunbọ̀ [second-hand products], even my brother. The music impacts me and that's the whole idea. When you listen or perform a song like that, one way or another, it becomes a part of you. You would desist from such. (Ògínní, 2016b)

In a sense, then, the performance of 'Tòkunbọ̀' discussed here is an interesting example of how Oyèdúṅ's music embodies the total artwork concept (Kostelanetz, 1968; Oikelome, 2014; Stone, 2017). The music is imbued with a message, and the performance of the music – independently from the composer – enhances this message through performance expression and movement, while the dramatic staging and costuming are seen as part of how the music should be brought to life. In a separate interview with another music director who conducted 'Tòkunbọ̀', Joshua David, he says:

> … [A]s a director, going through the music alone gives a vivid interpretation of how it would be acted out. He's [Oyèdúṅ] got this style of changing moods, keys/modulations depicting different scenes… that modulation with the lyric 'Oń'jólé, oń'jólé, fríjì fríjì, tòkunbọ̀' [second-hand refrigerator burns down the house], it actually sounded like the house was going to burn. (David, 2016)

David's mention of the sudden key shifts and harmonic breaks moving the music into different scenes is an important addition to understanding this notion of the total artwork. These shifts suggest that the composer viewed the music as depictive of certain tableaus, where the realization of the 'pictures' depends on the dramatic staging of the work. The harmonic shifts are particularly marked precisely because the music is not characterized by

[2] Ankara prints are usually very colourful having African designs and themes. 'Ankara' was formerly called 'Dutch Wax', said to have originated in the Netherlands with its print and motifs made for the Indonesian market. However, it quickly became more popular in West Africa and Ankara was named after an African girl. An online source describes it as, '… [a] non-Nigerian invention which we have claimed as ours and made world famous… it's as Nigerian as the green white green flag [Nigerian flag]' (Nneka, 2016).

overt chromaticism, and the easily accessible tonal idiom of the vast majority of the music is intended to appeal to a non-musically literate audience. Together with the narrative, 'Tòkunbọ̀' therefore appeals to Yorùbá speakers and those who understand the language. But, the dramatic staging of the piece means that people who do not understand Yorùbá can access another level of communication of the same message.

Discussion and Conclusion

Valentine Roux & Marie-Agnes Courty 2013: *Introduction to Discontinuities and Continuities: Theories, Methods and Proxies for a Historical and Sociological Approach to Evolution of Past Societies* explain the concept or nature of (social) change, whether as continuous or discontinuous. Stating that, in the framework of 'evolutionary theory, a change is continuous when there is continuous social learning between generations and among peers; it is discontinuous when there is a complete cessation of transmission. The latter occurs only when a population is replaced' (2013, p.189). Drawing from the concept of continuity and discontinuity to explain social signification and to understand the engagements of 'Tòkunbọ̀' with ethical and cultural issues, Continuity from a general perspective refers to the view that development is a gradual, continuous process. While Discontinuity refers to the view that development occurs in a series of distinct stages.

A choral composition as 'Tòkunbọ̀' deals with a very problematic subject, and could cause offence to any group of people in an audience and will please another based on their socialities/class. These kinds of continuities and discontinuities within a community that shares cultural beliefs relay some binary opposition, which is dictated by their varying ideologies. The last scenario, for instance, portrays the patriarchal system of Yorùbá culture that sometimes relegates the role of a woman in the family to household chores. In a modern society where gender roles are more fluid and contested, some cherished Yorùbá cultural values can only be interpreted as misogynistic. It is not to say, however, that this is how the music is heard. Meanwhile, audience members who associate with such traditional values may consider Oyèdúṅ's music morally instructive and didactic. This, in itself, expresses the binaries and shades of iteration in the ideologies that supposedly sustain the value system of a class or culture.

In *A Critical Study of Bini and Yorùbá Value Systems of Nigeria in Change: Culture, Religion, and the Self*', Emmanuel Babátúndé collates five essays that reveal the tension between modern living conventions and traditional expectations for the 'ideal husband' and

the 'ideal wife' in both the Yorùbá and Bini cultures (Babátúndé, 1992, pp.13-20). Three of the essays are pertinent to Oyèdún's concerns in this music, specifically, his metaphoric development of Tòkunbọ̀ (second-hand) husbands and wives. Cultural beliefs regulate human principles, as well as human patterns of living and being, and social change has, over time, influenced these beliefs. Babátúndé notes: '… The perception of social change itself can be confusing as it has both negative and positive aspects and as it takes different connotations at different periods (p.20) to people with varying ideologies in a society.

Adéyemí Ògínní, who was at one time a music director of Oyèdún's choir (UCH Sinfonia), describes his experience of the choir's performance of this particular piece to three audiences in three different settings.

> …'Tòkunbọ̀', which I conducted at three different scenarios, was received by the audience in three different ways. Yes! [He pauses]. In UCH where you'll find middle-class people (lecturers, students), it was easier to laugh at it. There is this part in the song, 'oko mí gbowó osù, ólosí isò tòkunbọ̀, óra telifísoǹ t'oń yo rénbò' [my husband received his salary, headed for the second-hand market, to buy a rainbow-like television], or Alẹ́sinlóyé clothes. So now, for a song like that, UCH audience would just laugh; it doesn't matter if you patronise the market. We did this same song in Ládojà Mapo Hall (a public hall in Ìbàdàn), the concert was sponsored by the governor ... think about the audience, different political parties at the grass roots with market women and all that... when we got to that part in the song where we sing gleefully 'gòngò sú' (meaning fricking idiot), the whole hall went quiet. And remember the reason for that 'gòngò sú' is because the husband bought a television showing rainbow [a second-hand product]. You see a lot of people there who could identify with that, because it is normal for them. So it is easier for you as middle class who can get by, you have a little bit of money and the rest, and have choices. But some can't afford nothing and then they find such music abusive to their personality. They went quiet because they knew what it meant. For us (the choir), Tòkunbọ̀ was a very beautiful song; we sang it everywhere, but for that particular audience, it wasn't it. (Ògínní, 2016a)

Although Ògínní does not mention the third scenario, the anecdote above illustrates how 'Tòkunbọ̀' could be heard differently by different class audiences sharing broad cultural parameters like language and listening culture.

The analysis of 'Tòkunbọ̀' reveals a complex engagement with cultural and ethical issues, critiquing the preference for second-hand products from overseas and highlighting the tension between modern living conventions and traditional expectations. The composition suggests that cultural beliefs play a significant role in regulating human principles and patterns of living, and that social change can influence these beliefs in complex ways. The study

highlights the importance of considering the continuities and discontinuities of cultural values and practices in understanding the impact of social change on Nigerian society.

'Tòkunbọ̀' offers a nuanced commentary on the complexities of cultural identity, consumerism and social change in Nigeria.

Turning to (Yoruba) art music scholarship, my reading of Oyèdúṅ's music poses the question as to whether the composer's own use of a Western musical idiom can be described as an investment in a second-hand product, a 'white cultural attachment', with ethical and cultural implications directly contrary to the message the work wishes to convey. It is in this regard that the reading of the music can assist in a conclusion.

Whereas much of Oyèdúṅ's writing is conventional, it is also original and inventive (the word painting of 'austerity' and its amplification by glittering runs is a case in point). The work itself, on a meta-level, thus goes beyond a mere critique of what seems like a simple ethical equation. It encourages us to ask what, in fact, 'second-hand' is, and what cultural contributions from the colonial encounter – extended through the vastly unequal economic conditions governing power relations between the West and Nigeria – can be claimed as their 'own'. Oyèdúṅ seems to suggest in 'Tòkunbọ̀' that musically the answer is far from clear (Irele, 1993; Agawu, 2003, 2011, 2016; Talabi, 2020).

However, overall, Tòkunbọ̀'s themes and messages are highly relevant to the Nigerian context, making it a significant work of art. It is a powerful composition that challenges listeners to think critically about cultural identity, economic conditions, and social change, but also for art music scholarship to consider the binaries and implications of Western media in African music studies.

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