

ETHNOMUSICOLOGICAL STUDY OF *NÀÌJÍRÌÀ DÌDE* AS A MEDIUM FOR NATIONAL UNITY AND IDENTITY

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Abstract

*This paper presents a multidisciplinary musicological analysis of *Nàìjírìà Dìde* (Nigeria Arise), a choral composition originally written in 1983 by the prominent Nigerian composer, Mr Sunday Akinfolarin Makinde. Drawing on ethnomusicology, cultural history and the study of political theology, the paper examines how this musical piece encodes Nigerian post-independence nationalism, the sonic and structural features of West African choral music, and a theology of collective moral accountability. Through sonic and lyrical analysis, the paper demonstrates how Makinde blends indigenous Yoruba harmonic practices and rhythmic vitalities with Western classical choral traditions. The lyrical analysis situates the composition within the turbulent socio-political climate of Nigeria's Second Republic in the early 1980s, which was a period marked by economic transition, democratic precarity, and intense debates over national identity. The study argues that *Naijiria Dide* functions not merely as a patriotic anthem but as a structured artistic argument for civic responsibility, spiritual humility and communal solidarity. The paper concludes by drawing attention to the enduring role of formal choral composition and collective singing as active agents in the ongoing project of postcolonial African nation-building, social critique, and cultural preservation.*

Keywords: Nigeria, choral music, ethnomusicology, Yorùbá oral tradition and genres, post-independence

Introduction

In postcolonial African societies, music has served functions far beyond entertainment. It has been deployed as a vehicle for political education, spiritual formation, community cohesion, and the negotiation of national identity. Nowhere is this more evident than in choral composition, which, by its very nature, demands collective participation and a unified voice. The choral tradition in West Africa is shaped simultaneously by indigenous musical aesthetics and the influence of Western missionary education (Collins, 1992; Omojola, 1995; Agawu, 2023). *Naijiria Dide*, composed by Sunday Akinfolarin Makinde in 1983 and harmonically revised in 1991, stands as a representative and instructive example of this tradition. Written for a four-part choir, Soprano, Alto, Tenor and Bass (SATB) and marked *Moderato* (Moderately), the song is a call to national awakening, a communal pledge of industriousness and a theological petition for divine guidance. Since 1983, the piece has been made accessible to scholarly and pedagogical audiences.

This paper analyses the composition (*Nàìjírìà Dìde*) across three interrelated dimensions. First, through its musical structure; second, through its Yorùbá-language lyrics and poetic devices and finally, through its historical and political contexts. This paper makes a central argument that *Nàìjírìà Dìde* functions as a site of convergence. That is, a place where choral technique, Yorùbá oral aesthetics, postcolonial nationalism and Christian-inflected theology meet to produce a coherent moral and civic knowledge. In doing so, it contributes to an understanding of how music contributes to society and how those contributions can endure across generations.

The Composer in Context

Mr Sunday Akinfolarin Makinde is a Veteran composer and Lecturer at the Department of Music, Federal College of Education (FCE), Abeokuta. His sojourn into music began formally with his enrollment into Federal College of Education, Abeokuta, to study Music/Yoruba at the National Certificate Examination (NCE) level. He composed *Nàìjíríà Dìdè* in 1983, a period of profound political instability in Nigeria. The country had returned to civilian rule in 1979 following years of military government, only to experience another military coup in December 1983 when Major General Muhammadu Buhari overthrew the government of Shehu Shagari. The composition, therefore, emerges from a moment of civic disillusionment in a society that had hoped for democratic renewal but found itself once again under authoritarian rule. That the composer chose this precise moment to write a choral work calling Nigerians to arise, to work and to love one another is not incidental; it is an act of cultural resistance. *Nàìjíríà Dìdè* is a composition that is serving as a living document, which continues to speak to the ongoing and unresolved question of what nationhood means in Nigeria.

While a full biography of Sunday Akinfolarin Makinde is beyond the scope of the present paper, his musical composition reveals a composer with significant training in Western choral writing and a deeply rooted knowledge of Yorùbá language sensibility. His ability to integrate both the conventional SATB voicing of the Western Choral Canon while employing rhythmic patterns and textual characteristics of Yorùbá oral tradition makes him a significant figure in the genealogy of Nigerian art music (Omojola, 1995; Obijiaku, 2023).

Nigeria in the 1980s: Political Landscape and Cultural Response

To understand *Nàìjíríà Dìdè*, one must reckon with Nigeria's history, especially her independence, gained in 1960. Also significant are the decades that followed, which were marked by civil war (1967-1970), cycles of military rule and the complex social consequences of the oil boom and subsequent economic mismanagement (Falola, 2021). By 1983, there was widespread disenchantment with the promise of independence. Corruption had become entrenched in public life; civic institutions were fragile; regional and ethnic tensions persisted. The nationalism that had fuelled the independence movement had, for many Nigerians, curdled into cynicism.

It is within this context that the lyrics of *Nàìjíríà Dìdè* must be contextualized. The song begins with an opening appeal, *Nàìjíríà, iṣẹ́ pọ̀ fún wa a, Nàìjíríà iṣẹ́ yá o* (Nigeria, there is a lot of work for us to do, Nigeria, it is time to work). This is not simply motivational rhetoric; it is a diagnosis of national failure framed as a call to remedy. The song does not celebrate achievement; it confronts complacency. The line *A kì í gbé òmìnira* (We cry for freedom) is particularly charged. The lyric is framed as a cry, a longing not yet fully realized. The composer begins the songs with the ache of unfreedom, so that when liberation is named, it carries the full emotional weight of everything that preceded it.

This framing relates to a broader discourse in postcolonial African thought that is associated with figures such as Frantz Fanon, Julius Nyerere, and Obafemi Awolowo (Fanon, 1963; Awolowo, 1960; Falola, 2021). It refers to the difference between political independence and genuine liberation. For the composer, formal independence without civic virtue, collective labour and moral transformation is an incomplete and fragile thing. *Nàìjíríà Dìdè* articulates this not in the language of political philosophy but in the language of choral music through rhythm, repetition, harmony and communal voice.

Musical Structure of *Nàìjíríà Dìdè* Composed by Sunday Akinfolarin Makinde (1983)

NAIJIRIA DIDE

MAKINDE S. A. 1983, '91

Transcribed by Dr. A. A. Ikum
July 2024

Moderato

na - i - jí - rí à l - é pò fun wá na - i - jí - rí - a l - é pò.
Te lo lo lo lo lo lo lo lo lo lo lo lo lo lo lo lo.
A - mu - sin ko ye wa ni - lo Na - i - jí - rí - a, A lo lo ko o - ra,
A kigbe o - mi ni ra a ni gbo - mi - ti ra o - mi - ni - ra o - mi - ni - ra o -
mi - ni ra o - mi - ni ra. Nai - jí - ra - a o di - de di - de
gi - ri.
na o mu to so mu - so fi wa di - lo o - lu - wa
da - kan ye ran wa lo - wo.
Da - kan ye gbo gbo wa Da - lo ko - mi ri ra
Da - lo ran wa lo - wo.
na ti wa lo - ra l - wa bu ju ko du - ra
l - wa bu - ju ko ju wa.
l - wa bu ju ko mu - wa. E ju - wa o o - ra. E ju - wa a lo ju - wa.

4

359

(Bass)

E ja-ru a, E ja-ru a, u - ra, i - lu - lu - ki-ki, Na - ji ti

360

1-36

wa-ra a lu - lu

a, pa lu - lu, a, ki-ki pa-ru a, i - lu - lu

361

ki-ki, Na - ji - ti, a, pa lu - lu, a, Na - lu - lu

362

ff

a - lu - lu, a, pa lu - lu, a, ki-ki, a, Na - lu - lu

363

E

ma lu

a lu - lu, a, a lu - lu, a, a lu - lu, a, a lu - lu, a, a lu - lu

364

ji ji ji a-ra, ji a-ra, ji ji ji a-ra, ji a-ra, ji a-ra, ji a-ra, ji a-ra

365

E

ma lu

a lu - lu, a, a lu - lu, a, a lu - lu, a, a lu - lu, a, a lu - lu

366

a lu - lu, a, a lu - lu, a, a lu - lu, a, a lu - lu, a, a lu - lu

367

ji a-ra, ji a-ra, ji a-ra, ji a-ra, ji a-ra, ji a-ra, ji a-ra

Verse

Nàìjíríà dídè,
 Nàìjíríà dídè,
 Tètè, tètè, tètè, tètè o, isẹ yá.
 Òmìnira, òmìnira,
 Nàìjíríà òmìnira.
 Àwa nílẹ wa,
 Àwa Nàìjíríà,
 A kì í gbé òmìnira sí mú sínkò yé.
 Nàìjíríà isẹ yá o,
 Nàìjíríà isẹ pọ̀ fún wa.

Chorus

Ẹ jẹ ká mú isẹ ẹ,
 Ẹ jẹ ká mú isẹ ẹ.
 Nàìjíríà ẹ dídè,
 Ẹ jẹ ká mú isẹ ẹ.
 Ẹlẹyà kó yé wa,
 Nàìjíríà gára mi.
 Ẹ jẹ ká fẹ ara wa,
 Ká lẹ gbógun.
 Ẹ mú isẹ ẹ,
 Ẹ mú isẹ ẹ.
 Ará má ẹ sùn fọnfọn,
 Ẹ jí gírí o.

Prayer Section

Bàbá ràn wá lẹwọ,
 Dákùn yé ràn wá lẹwọ.
 Ìwà ìbàjẹ kó yé wa,
 Ẹ jàwọ, ẹ jàwọ.
 Ìwà ìbàjẹ kó sunwọn,
 Ẹ jàwọ.
 Dákùn yé má ní wà lára,
 Má ẹ fi wá sílẹ Olúwa.

Final Section

Ẹ jàwọ o, ẹ jàwọ o,
 Ará ilé olókíkí Nàìjíríà.
 Àṣẹ fún wa,
 Ká pe fún Ọlórún.
 Ilé wa ràá tó yín,
 Ẹ jàwọ o, ẹ jàwọ o.
 Ará ilé olókíkí Nàìjíríà,
 Pẹ tíú o.

Form and Tempo

The work is marked *Moderato*, which is a tempo indicating a measured pace that resists the triumphalist march-like quality of many patriotic anthems. Instead, it invites a quality of deliberate, thoughtful seriousness. This is not a song of premature celebration; it is a song of considered purpose. The moderate tempo allows the text to be heard with clarity and gives space for the harmonic and rhythmic complexities of the writing to register in the minds of the listeners. The overall form of the composition is through-composed with recurring elements that mirror its lyrical logic. Like the argument it embodies, the music moves forward through distinct successive sections rather than circling back to mere repetition. The returning phrases, where the voices repeatedly echoed the *È jí gírí* (Arise in strength) and *È mú sẹ sẹ* (Let us work) motifs, are an intentional attempt to strengthen the feeble minds of the people.

Voicing and Texture

The music score employs a standard SATB (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) choral arrangement, a format introduced by the Western missionaries to Africa. This format was primarily integrated through Western educational tradition and was subsequently naturalized into Nigerian church and school music culture. The composer deploys this format with considerable sophistication. The texture shifts dynamically across the work via passages of homophonic writing where all four voices move together in chordal blocks. It alternates with moments of imitative polyphony, where one voice section introduces a phrase that is then taken up by other voices in sequence.

This textural variety is accentuated by homophonic sections that enact the communal unity that the lyrics demand. This is demonstrated literally in the sections where all voices sing together. The polyphonic passages, by contrast, create a sense of conversation and multiplicity, of different elements of the national body speaking in overlapping solidarity. The music score reveals particular care in the parts assigned to the male voices. The Tenor and Bass lines provide harmonic support. They also carry melodic weight and, in several passages, lead the musical argument in ways that mirror the stability that the composer's vision of Nigeria yearns for.

Rhythm and Metre

The rhythmic language of *Nàìjíríà Dìdè* draws on both European choral tradition and West African rhythmic sensibility. The basic metric framework is regular, providing the ensemble with the kind of stable pulse that facilitates collective choral singing. Within this framework, however, the composer introduces rhythmic inflections characteristic of Yorùbá speech rhythm. The natural rise and fall of syllables in a tonal language is reflected in the melodic contour and rhythmic placement of the vocal lines. This is a crucial feature of the score's linguistic intelligence. Yorùbá is a tonal language in which the pitch of a syllable can change its meaning (Agawu, 2016). A composer setting Yorùbá text to music faces the challenge of aligning musical pitch with speech pitch in ways that preserve semantic clarity. The composer navigates this challenge by allowing the melodic lines to follow the natural tonal patterns of the Yorùbá words. He ensured that the text remains intelligible and that the musical setting does not create unintended semantic confusion. This attention to tonal alignment is a hallmark of skilled Yorùbá choral writing (Omojola, 2012).

The rhythmic energy of the work was intensified at key moments within the work. Most notably in the *È jí gírí*, *gì gí gí Ará* passages, where a sharper, more driving rhythmic profile creates a sense of urgency and forward momentum. These passages are the musical equivalent of a rallying chant. They lift the energy of the performance and, by implication, the energy of the listeners.

Harmonic Language

The harmonic language of the work is broadly diatonic, employing the functional harmonic progressions of Western tonal music. The harmony accommodates the melodic demands of the Yoruba text setting. The key is clearly established, providing the singers and listeners with a sense of harmonic balance. Cadential patterns are applied at phrase endings in ways that are immediately noticeable by audiences familiar with either Western choral tradition or Nigerian church music. There are moments in the music score where the harmony reaches toward the subdominant chord in ways that create a gentle melancholy, corresponding to the supplicatory passages of the lyrics. This is more prominent in the later sections where the composer turns toward prayer. The harmonic vocabulary used in *Nàìjíríà Dìdè* is deployed with expressive precision, which is why the music resonates with those who hear it.

Yorùbá Language and Poetic Devices

The Tonal Dimension of Yorùbá

Yorùbá is one of the most widely spoken languages in Nigeria, with approximately thirty million native speakers predominantly in southwestern Nigeria (Omojola, 2012). As a tonal language with three primary pitch levels, high, mid, and low, it presents unique compositional challenges and opportunities when set to music (Agawu, 2023; Nketia, 1974). The relationship between spoken Yorùbá and musical melody is structural: the tonal contours of words carry meaning. Therefore, a musical setting that violates tonal integrity can produce unintended or even comic misreadings of the lyrics.

Nàìjíríà Dìdè demonstrates consistent sensitivity to this dimension of the Yorùbá language. The melodic lines assigned to each voice part largely follow the natural tonal patterns of the words. It contains ascending melodic intervals corresponding to syllables with high tones and descending intervals corresponding to low-tone syllables. This attentiveness to tonal integrity is both a mark of compositional prowess and evidence of the work's communicative effectiveness. If the listeners cannot understand the words, the message of the composition is compromised.

Repetition and Oral-Formulaic Tradition

One of the most distinctive features of *Nàìjíríà Dìdè*'s lyrical construction is its consideration for Yorùbá oral tradition. Yorùbá oral poetry, praise singing (*oríkì*), and ceremonial speech all employ anaphoric repetition as a device of intensification and emphasis (Barber, 1991). That is why the repeated phrases in the song are not redundant; they carry emotional weight with each return. In *Nàìjíríà Dìdè*, phrases such as *È jí gírí* (Arise in strength) and *È mú sẹ́ se* (Let us work) appear repeatedly across the score, each recurrence deepening the urgency of the appeal. The opening (*Nàìjíríà Dìdè*) motif is similarly reiterated, each time with slightly varied harmony. This stylistic endeavour makes the repetitions feel developmental rather than static. This compositional strategy is simultaneously musical and rhetorical as it uses the logic of oral-formulaic tradition to make its argument persuasively and memorably.

The use of vocatives that directly address Nigeria is a reflection of the Yorùbá rhetorical convention. In Yorùbá public speech and poetry, direct address to an absent or abstract entity is a recognised form of intensification (Barber, 1991). By addressing Nigeria as if it were a person capable of hearing and responding, the composer places his composition within a tradition of Yorùbá civic rhetoric that treats collective identity as an addressable subject, not merely an abstraction.

The Interplay of Yorùbá and Theology

One of the most interesting features of the text is the way it moves between a civic-nationalist register and a Christian-theological register without any sense of contradiction or disjunction. Expressions such as *Bàbá* (Father), *dákun ye ràn wá lówó* (Please help us) and *Olúwa* (Lord) are integral to the lyrical structure. They appear at the compositional climax of the work, as the argument moves from civic exhortation to theological petition. Yet even the prayer is civic in content because the request is not for personal or material blessing but for national flourishing, that the country should thrive and prosper (Idowu, 1962; Ojo, 2006). The composition is thus not merely a reflection of cultural reality but an artistic elaboration of it: through music, giving room for faith and civic responsibilities to be fully expressed.

Choral Music and Nation-Building in Nigeria

The role of choral music in Nigeria's nation-building project is a subject that has received increasing attention from ethnomusicologists and historians in recent decades. Scholars such as John Collins, Kofi Agawu, and Veit Erlmann have drawn attention to the ways in which musical performance serves as a site of collective identity formation, political imagination, and cultural negotiation in postcolonial Africa (Collins, 1992; Agawu, 2003; Erlmann, 1999; Agawu, 2023). *Nàìjíríà Dìde* fits squarely within this scholarly framework while also exemplifying its distinctly Yoruba dimensions. The SATB choral format itself carries historical and political significance in the Nigerian context. Introduced by European missionaries and taken up enthusiastically by Nigerian church and school communities, the choral tradition became a form of cultural synthesis of Western musical ideals and African creative expression (Omojola, 1995; Obijiaku, 2023).

The collective vocal production that choral performance requires demonstrates the possibility of coordinated collective action. Many voices, each distinct, combine to produce something more powerful than any individual voice alone. This is precisely the social and political ideal that *Nàìjíríà Dìde* articulates in its lyrics. There is also a pedagogical dimension to the work that merits attention. Choral compositions of this kind are typically performed in schools and civic gatherings, in which the audience is not passive but participatory. *Nàìjíríà Dìde* was composed to be sung, not merely heard. This means that the civic and theological argument embedded within is expected to birth a collective purpose in the hearts of performers and listeners. The pedagogical power of such an experience, repeated across schools and communities over years and decades, cannot be underestimated (Okafor, 2005; Nketia, 1974).

Conclusion

Nàìjíríà Dìde is a remarkable composition of less than one hundred and fifty bars of choral music. The composer, S.A. Makinde, constructs a musical argument that weaves together nationalist politics, Yorùbá poetic tradition, Christian theology, and choral craft into a coherent and emotionally whole work. The analysis presented in this paper has traced the operation of this argument across several dimensions: the formal and textural features of the score, the tonal and rhetorical strategies of the Yorùbá text, the historical and political contexts of composition, and the theological logic that gives the work its moral urgency.

The composition exemplifies a model of African choral music in which Western form and African sensibility are in productive synthesis, each enriching the expressive possibilities of the other. It demonstrates that the choral tradition in Nigeria is not a mere import but a genuinely indigenous art form, shaped by Nigerian composers for Nigerian purposes in response to Nigerian realities. And it makes a persuasive argument that the civic and the spiritual are not separate domains but aspects of a single human vocation.

In the current times, when Nigeria faces ongoing challenges of governance and national cohesion, and when the role of culture in civic life is increasingly contested, the scholarly analysis of works such as *Nàìjíríà Dìde* performs a function that is not merely academic. It recovers from the archive a vision of what collective life can be. A life that is demanding, joyful, humble before God, and insistently hopeful, and makes it available again to those who might need it.

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