

OPERATIONAL ARRANGEMENT OF RHYTHM IN NIGERIAN REGGAE SONGS

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Abstract

Certain elements are globally accepted as intrinsic commonalities in the phenomenon of sound. Such elements as rhythm, pitch, timbre, and duration when consciously or subconsciously manipulated distinguish the musical sound from the rest. Nigerian popular music—especially the highlife genre—is an acculturative product of the folk music of the traditional environment. The recently renewed scholarly interest in the rhythmic languages of African music has unveiled the centrality of rhythm as the distinctive element of relationship between the Nigerian popular and folk music types. As the argument on the musical value of popular music persists, this scholarly presentation relied on descriptive and analytical methods to show the dominating place of rhythm in the creative rationalization in Nigeria's reggae songs of the 1970s and '80s.

Keywords: Rhythm, Nigerian popular music, functional, reggae rhythm, song structure

Introduction

Why is it that *Afro-reggae*'s biggest exponents come from West Africa? What is/are there in *reggae* that it quickly found a point of anchorage in Africa? Is it possible that there are similarities between the two Caribbean Island's *calypso* and *reggae* styles and the predominant popular style of West Africa, the *highlife*?

It has been reported that the early stages of Western influence on the popular music of West, East, and Central Africa came from the Caribbean. While *calypso*, *reggae* and *rumba* represent the Caribbean influential styles; *highlife*, *soukous*, and *makossa* remain the most enduring of the styles performed in these sub-regions of Africa (Collins, 1992; Waterman, 2012). Borde (1973) has affirmed that the *calypso* is an Afro-American re-interpretation of a folk practice that was introduced into the Caribbean community by former slaves imported from the Igbo ethnic group of Eastern Nigeria. The *calypso* is the antecedent of *highlife*. *Ere-ere*, a style of entertainment music performed by the Yoruba ethnic group of Western Nigeria, is the root of *reggae*. Cuban *rumba*, the precursor of *soukous*, has been reported (Graham, 1994; Onwuegbuna, 2015) to exist in Congo and Kenya as an ethnic pop style, called *rumba*. After all is said and done, a closer study of *highlife*, *soukous*, and *makossa* would reveal that the latter two styles are actually variants of the *highlife* genre.

The streets of New York are the least of places where one would expect to find the connection between the Jamaican *reggae* and the West African *highlife*. Yet it happened! In 1974, Sonny Okosuns, Africa's first known exponent of *Afro-reggae*, met with Jimmy Cliff, the first recognized international star of the *reggae* style, in a studio in New York. In this chance meeting, Cliff admitted to Okosuns that the *reggae* music was actually a modified beat of the Nigerian *highlife* music (Collins, 1996; Kehinde, 2011). It should be remembered that *reggae*'s first journey of modifications started with *mento*; and that *mento* was Jamaica's first version of the Trinidadian *calypso*. In another development, Bob Marley's first tour of Africa was to Gabon where, in January 1980, he thrilled a select audience in a birthday party organized in honour of the Gabonese President, Omar Bongo. While in Gabon, Bob listened to snatches of recorded *highlife* tunes imported from neighbouring Nigeria, and became convinced that at last, he found the root of his *reggae* music. In

reaction, he drilled his *rock*-oriented lead guitarist, Junior Marvin, to play the Nigerian *highlife* rhythm guitar style of plucking the strings while picking the notes. This became the rhythmic style in his song *Could You Be Loved*, which appeared in his *Uprising* album released in May of that year (Davis, 1985; Farley, 2009). As the parallels between the Nigerian *highlife* and Jamaican *reggae* genres engendered ethnomusicological analyses, Middleton (2002) informs that most Western popular music styles, such as *jazz* and *swing*, borrowed their rhythmic structures from West African traditional rhythmic patterns. Kehinde (2011) corroborates the foregoing by insisting that *ragtime*, *jazz*, *samba*, *blues*, *calypso*, *rumba*, *swing*, *rhythm and blues*, *soul*, *reggae* and *disco* are stylistic fusions of the West African *highlife* music. Since rhythm has been identified as the definitive denominator between the popular music styles of Jamaica and Nigeria, it became necessary to structurally scrutinize the Nigerian *early reggae*—which has been accepted as a cross-current of Jamaican *roots reggae*—for operational arrangement of rhythm. According to Middleton (2002),

African traditions have influenced religion and art, and popular music the world over owes much to African rhythms and musical styles. This global presence is due largely to the African diaspora—a movement of people of African descent to areas outside their homeland (p. 203).

A musical note is the minimal unit of musical organisation that represents the pitch and duration of a tone. Musical notes are also seen as beats of different durations, and the arrangement of these beats in a piece of music takes a rhythmic pattern. These beats are stressed at certain points and not at others; some stresses are strong while others are weak—all forming accents. The beats are further grouped in parts as measures, and a group of measures moves towards punctuations at certain points to form a phrase. Hence, a better understanding of the pulse of a piece of music is aided by these rhythmic sub-divisions that put the piece into sections (Agawu, 2009; Ammer, 2004; Apel, 1966; Hanninen, 2004). Sounding authoritative, Scholes (2013) writes:

Rhythm covers the ensemble of everything pertaining to what may be called the time side of music, i.e., it takes in beats, accents, measures of bars, grouping of notes into bars, grouping of beats into measures, grouping of measures into phrases, and so forth (p. 313).

Accent-wise, musical notes arranged in measures are not often expressed equally in performance. The first note normally receives a sharper attack than the others. In the time of $\frac{4}{4}$ for instance, the accent is on the first beat, followed by the weaker accent on the third beat; while in $\frac{3}{4}$ time, the first beat is often the only accented beat. In compound time, the rhythmic pattern of notes that are accentuated take a regular sub-division; therefore, they are said to be 'divisive'. When the natural pulse of a piece of music is misplaced, it is said to be syncopated in beat. Such rhythmic modifications that shift the accent to the weak beat, which is the basis of the 'swing' in most *jazz* styles, creates an effect of uneven rhythm. This practice is most evident in Nigerian popular music. Since occasional imposition of triplets results in irregular sub-division of notes, its rhythmic pattern is said to be 'additive'. Additive rhythmic patterns occur when three notes of equal value occupy the position of two notes of the same value in any measure. This practice, as the basis of triplets, equally

contributes to the rhythmic complexity of Nigerian popular music. Another contributing element to the much discussed complexity of rhythm in African music generally is the use of notes of short durational values as the basic units of movement (Agawu, 2003; Arom, 2004; Collins, 2005; Hawkins, 2003; Omojola, 2014; Onyeji, 2014; Stewart, 2000). In all considerations, rhythm stands out as conscious combination of sound and silence, achieved through the employment of notes of various durational values, expressed in the progression of any musical piece. This unique characteristic of rhythm makes it the vital spur of any musical piece since it betrays the patterned arrangement of weak and strong beats (Onwuegbuna, 2012).

Rhythm in Nigerian popular music

The movement of popular music through time happens in patterns of lengths of tunes in a group of notes of various durational values. Basically, the metre is composed in groupings of simple quadruple time of $\frac{4}{4}$ or its compound equivalent of $\frac{12}{8}$, and also in compound duple of $\frac{6}{8}$. Simple triple time of $\frac{3}{4}$ is a rarity in Nigerian popular music. Accentuation of strong and weak beats on each group of notes is a little concealed by the consortium of sounds produced by various instruments that comprise the band; rather, the pulse is ascertained through the guide of the time referent often assigned to the claves and/or hi-hats (see Anku, 2000; Locke, 2011).

The short melodic phrases of the melody, which are extended by repetitions and extemporizations often lead to sentences and sections in the music. This practice often drives the music to acceleration in tempo, creating a rhythm that changes at certain stages from $\frac{4}{4}$ to $\frac{6}{8}$ or $\frac{12}{8}$. Nigerian popular music rhythm also has conversational attributes, whereby a lively interchange of riffs is witnessed between two instruments of different timbre. In all the instrumental conversations, individual instruments explore additive rhythms freely, and syncopations are allowed even in the bass drum. Sometimes, the bass guitar holds a swing-like bass line. This is a consistent undulating pulse that underlies and supports the entire piece of music. It is all this variety of rhythm and cross-rhythm that Nigerian popular music employs to cancel out what would have been a boredom presented by repetitive arpeggios, riffs, and simultaneous plucking of two notes on the guitar (known as double-shooting). The reggae pop musical style, especially, leans heavily on off-beat rhythms, repetitive, but pulsating drum patterns, and a driving melodic bass line.

In dividing the instruments of Nigerian popular music into sections, the 'Rhythm Section' consists of guitars, bass guitar, drums, congas, bongo and other percussion instruments. The 'Reed Section' has two altos and one-tenor saxophones, while the 'Brass Section' features one or two trumpets and a trombone. The 'Vocal Section' is constituted of three singers—one alto, one tenor, and one bass. This compartmental arrangement in Nigerian popular music band constitutes a standard instrumentation and instrumental line-up.

The rhythm section of Nigerian reggae, for instance, is assigned to the basic instruments that supply the groove. The instruments are the rhythm guitar, the bass guitar, the set of trap drums, and the set of percussions (hand-drums, scrappers, claves, bells, etc.). The foundation of the entire rhythm is a simple quadruple metric division of the entire measure, expressed differently by each instrument of the rhythm section. While the hi-hats subdivide the $\frac{4}{4}$ metre into a $\frac{12}{8}$, the snare and the bass drums

simultaneously hit the second and the fourth weak accents of the $\frac{4}{4}$ in an offbeat style. It is this style of emphasizing the off-beats that reggae musicians describe as the 'one drop' pattern.

The musical notation shows three staves. The top staff, labeled 'Hi-Hats', is in 12/8 time and contains a series of eighth notes with some rests, creating a steady eighth-note pattern. The middle staff, labeled 'Snare Drum', and the bottom staff, labeled 'Bass Drum', are in 4/4 time. Both show a 'one drop' pattern where the instrument hits on the second and fourth beats of each measure.

Example 1: A basic reggae rhythm—emphasizing the 'one drop' pattern

The rest of the percussion instruments are expressed at the liberty of their players—filling out spaces created by the trap drums. Next is the rhythm guitar. Much of the rhythmic stress is taken by the rhythm guitar, which remains busy almost throughout the duration of the piece. The chords of the rhythm guitar are strummed, and the resonance dampened to produce a chopping sound that is heard on the second beat of each quarter note of the $\frac{4}{4}$ metre. Finally, the flowing bass lines of the bass guitar raps up the rhythm section. The bassist approaches the $\frac{4}{4}$ metre in a sub-division of quarter notes, and flows through the notes as if he is singing a vocal bass melody.

Adopting the historical-descriptive research design, an analysis of Harry Mosco's *Country Boy* and Evi-Edna Ogholi's *One Kilometre* is presented hereunder for functional deployment of rhythm. *Country Boy* has the basic song formal structure of **ACBACB** (**A** section is the Verse, **B** section is the Chorus, and **C** section, the Bridge). Each of the sections is easily discernible by the distinctive manipulation of rhythm materials employed by Harry Mosco. The pattern of the vocal melody of *Country Boy* is motivic. It employs small phrasal fragments woven and extended through variation, imitation, and repetition. The entire melody is founded on a dominant melodic idea sung by the lead vocalist, in the first stave of the score. Notes of short durational values (with syllabic setting of the lyrics) mark the peculiarity of the rhythmic structure of this section.

COUNTRY BOY

Harry Mosco

♩ = 90

Lead Vox
Back-up Vox
Rhythm Guitar
Bass Guitar
Hi-Hat
Snare Drum
Bass Drum

6

L.V.
B.V.
R.G.
B.G.
H/H
S.D.
B.D.

I was born in the coun-t-ry I was born, born, born, born, in the coun-t-ry
My ma-ma said to me - you must go to town My pa-pa said to me - you must go to town

Example 2: An 8-Bar (2-9) Excerpt of the A Section

In the Lead Vox (LD) part of this section, quaver and semi-quaver notes are deployed as units of melodic movements, while the dotted quaver beats serve as punctuation tools in the vocal melody. On the other hand, the motivic melody of the Bass Guitar (BG) part is driven by dotted quavers and semi-quavers, while each motif is punctuated by a minim note.

A combination of notes of short and long durational values gives section B its significant difference from section A.

27

L.V. *coun-try boy I don't wanna go... Uuuh - huuh - uuh - uuh! Uuuh huuh uuh*

B.V.

R.G.

B.G.

H/H

S.D.

B.D.

Example 3: A 5-Bar (27-31) Excerpt of the B Section

In this section, while the BG part maintains its melodic expression as it did in section A, the LV part changes to motivic melody that is driven by quavers and semi-quavers on one side (27-28) and rhythmic ululations that are driven by minims and crotchets on the other side (29-31).

Section C clearly explores the relative minor mode of G, which is key E minor.

46

L.V. *food for me_ to eat All the mo-ney they have they just*

B.V.

R.G.

B.G.

H/H

S.D.

B.D.

50

L.V. share by them-selves All the food they have they just share by them-selves I'm a coun-try boy - - I don't

B.V.

R.G.

B.G.

H/H

S.D.

B.D.

Example 4: A 4-Bar (49-52) Excerpt of the C Section

The rhythmic difference between this section and the other sections is that the motivic melody moves in units of quavers and semi-quavers while each motif is punctuated by either a crotchet or a crotchet tied to a semi-quaver.

However, there is a **PreC** section, made up of a short melodic phrase that introduces the C section.

47

L.V.

B.V.

R.G.

B.G.

H/H

S.D.

B.D.

Example 5: A 2-Bar (47-48) Excerpt of the PreC Section

The PreC section is a short rhythm guitar and bass guitar motivic phrases—driven mainly by notes of short durational values but punctuated by those of longer durational values, playing in unison. This section serves as an introduction to the Bridge section—C.

In *One Kilometre*, Evi-Edna Ogholi achieves an intense marriage of an enchanting vocal melody and a compact instrumental groove. The piece has basically a simple ternary song structure of **ACABCAB**—whereby **A** is verse, **B** is chorus, and **C** is refrain. In addition, it has other sub-sections of **Intro**, **Pre B**, **Pre C**, and a fusion of **Pre B & C**.

The distinctive differences in the various sections are thus: The **Intro** is made up of a short, 1-bar melodic phrase that repeats the rhetorical question, “Which one of them we go speak?”

5

Ld. Vox. Which one of them we go speak? I say

Bk. Vox.

Rhythm

Bass

H/H

S. D.

B. D.

Example 6: The Intro Section in Bar 5

The **A** Section is made up of a lyrical melodic continuum that delivers the verses of the song. Also in this section, the accompanying melody of the bass guitar is busy and flowing, driving the groove constantly.

7

Ld. Vox. *tra vel to E me de dem go speak I - sa - ko, tra vel to Bor - no say na Ful - fu - de,*

Bk. Vox.

Rhythm

Bass

H/H $\frac{12}{8}$

S. D. $\frac{4}{4}$

B. D. $\frac{4}{4}$

9

Ld. Vox. *tra vel to U ghe li dem go speak Uh ro - bo, we tra vel to Bu gu masay na Ka la ba - ri,*

Bk. Vox.

Rhythm

Bass

H/H $\frac{12}{8}$

S. D. $\frac{4}{4}$

B. D. $\frac{4}{4}$

Example 7: A 4-Bar Excerpt of Section A

For **Pre B** Section, the melodic word-painting of the phrase “We travel...” (combining the textual meaning with the appropriate musical imagery) simulates the motion of physical movement in space, leading to the chorus, “All I’m saying...Lingua Franca...”

31

Ld. Vox.

Bk. Vox.

Rhythm

Bass

H/H

S. D.

B. D.

tra vel, wetra vel, wetra vel, tra vel, tra vel. We tra vel, wetra vel, wetra vel, tra vel, tra vel.

Example 8: A 2-Bar Excerpt of Pre B Section

In Section B, which is the chorus section, the vocal melody becomes more relaxed as it employs notes of larger durational values, and the bass melody of the bass guitar also becomes less busy, jerky, and more punctuated in rhythm.

61

Ld. Vox.

Bk. Vox.

Rhythm

Bass

H/H

S. D.

B. D.

All I'm say - ing, Lin - gua Fran - ca.

63

Ld. Vox. All I'm say - ing, Lin - gua Fran - ca.

Bk. Vox.

Rhythm

Bass

H/H

S. D.

B. D.

Example 9: A 4-Bar Excerpt of Section B

Pre C, just like **Pre B**, is also a melodic word-painting phrase that uses the title of the song, “One kilometre...” to introduce the complexity of languages exposed in the subsequent verse that comes after the bridge section.

15

Ld. Vox. Oneki lo metreis a no ther languagee vena halfa ki lo metreis a no ther lan guageWalme say...

Bk. Vox.

Rhythm

Bass

H/H

S. D.

B. D.

Example 10: A 2-Bar Excerpt of Pre C Section

The creative use of glissando in the bass melody of the bass guitar and the responding effect created by the jerky rhythm guitar chords mark off the peculiarity of Section C—the bridge section.

Example 11: A 2-Bar Excerpt of Section C

The fusion on Pre B and Pre C is a unique manipulation of varying rhythmic patterns in the lyrical melody of the Leading and Back-up Vocals, the jerky movement of the Rhythm Guitar, the glissando in the Bass melody, and the cross-rhythm in the percussion groove.

Example 12: A 2-Bar Excerpt of Pre B & C Section

The piece is a very good example of lyrical melody, whereby movement is mostly by repetition of the dominating pitch, and a few stepwise and narrow leaps. *One Kilometre* explores a compact melodic movement in the Lead Vocals, concentrating mostly on the tonic note of E.

Conclusion

While rhythm is considered the conscious combination of sound and silence, achieved through the employment of notes of various durational values, expressed in the progression of any musical piece; it is also perceived as the vital spur of any musical piece since it betrays the patterned

arrangement of weak and strong beats. Rhythm therefore gives the piece of music its distinctive character. The sound event of popular music generates its fascination from the sonic, musical, and visual packaging of the finished musical product. In the treatment of the sonic elements, rhythm is designed to excite motoric stimulation for bodily responses, reveal the formal structure of the piece, simulate the passage of time, and betray the changes in emotional feelings of the performers.

Rhythm, in the hands of a creative Nigerian popular music composer-arranger, is functionally designed to excite motoric stimulation for bodily responses. The flowing bass lines of the bass guitar and the intricate rhythmic patterns of the percussion instruments combine to cause the audience to move their bodies to the compulsive call to the dance floor. In this same vein, rhythm functionally helps to betray the changes in emotional feelings of the performers (Mapaya, 2014). Rhythm equally reveals the formal structure of the piece. Through a conscious manipulation of varying note values, the various sections of the piece stand out. The analysis of *One Kilometre* has shown how rhythm is functionally deployed to simulate the passage of time. Melody, which is also driven by rhythm, is structured for psychical compensation of stress, presentation of emotional conflicts, and revelation of the socio-cultural tilt of the piece. Chordal arrangements are used to direct and control the attention of the audience, and further consolidate the formal structure. In the production proper, sonic synthesis is employed to guarantee the use-value of the piece. It is also used to express the personal artistry of the producer, for simulation of human/animal/plastic emotions, and for expression of aesthetics (see Brower, 2000; Garnett, 1999; Kronengold, 2005; Wicke & Mayer, 1982).

The computer age that has enlarged the magic of electronics also has the credit of enriching the creative possibilities in popular music rhythm. Studio sequencing, lay-downs, mix-downs, and over-dubs are electronic music approaches to rhythmic manipulations in popular music production. Rhythm, therefore, characterises, invigorates, propels, and sustains the sound events in the popular music of Africa—at home and in the diaspora.

Discography

Evi-Edna Ogholi (1988), *On the Move* [LP], POLP 187

Felix Lebarty (1979), *Felix Lebarty & the Dynamite Rock* [LP], ZAD 101

Harry Mosco (1978), *Country Boy* [LP], TTL 131

Majek Fashek (1988), *Prisoner of Conscience* [Audio Cassette], TTL 367

Oby Nwankwo (1990), *Loneliness* [Audio Cassette], TTL 586

Sonny Okosuns (1978), *Holy Wars* [LP], NEMI 0350

Sonny Okosuns (1980), *Give Peace A Chance* [LP], RADIC 001

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