

EMPLOYMENTS OF THE "STANDARD PATTERN" IN YORUBA MUSIC

by

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The term "Standard Pattern" refers to that twelve quaver length phrase which, in its simplest form, can be represented by the following rhythmic pattern:-



Fig. 1. The standard pattern.

The essential characteristic of this phrase is its division into a seven quaver section followed by one of five quaver length.

The titling of this phrase as the "Standard Pattern" is suggested by A. M. Jones's discussion of its widespread occurrence throughout Africa, and included in his excellent "Studies in African Music" (O.U.P.*). While Father Jones has never, to my knowledge, committed himself to the above title in any of his writings, I am certain that he will find no objection to its use in thus defining this ubiquitous pattern, for he often refers to it by this title in actual speech. This plea for the adoption of a definite label for one of the most common and characteristic of African rhythmic forms is occasioned by the difficulty of referring to it by any but the most laboured of written descriptions.

The purpose of this article is to show some of the uses of the "Standard Pattern" in Yoruba traditional music. Among most African races this pattern is relegated to those instruments forming a rhythmic bond between the song (if any) and the drumming. Thus we usually find it performed on metal bells and gongs, rattles and allied instruments, or by handclapping. The Yoruba music in question, drawn from the Ekiti area, does not permit the mixing of any alien sounds with those of the drums, the only and obvious exception being the voices of the singers rendering the song. This means that gongs, bells, rattles and handclapping are never employed in any performance in which the drums are used.

The drums themselves are kept in the watertight compartments of their different families. There are a great number of these drum families still in use among the Yoruba, and they range from those of standing drums to those of portable instruments. The former kind are represented by such families as *Ìgbin*, *Ìpèsi*, *Ògidàn* and *Gbèdu*, while representatives of the latter variety may be found in the *Bàtá*, *Dùndún*, *Kósó* and *Apintí* families, to mention a few only of many such sets. I must stress that the above remarks on the purity of the different drum families do not apply to Yoruba music as a whole, but are limited to the purely traditional music. In the more recent types of music (e.g. Apala, Highlife and Ghana) any available combination of sounds is permissible, while in some areas this adulteration of drum tones is extended to the traditional music, and sometimes, though rarely, allows even the combination of handclapping with drumming.

The drum family with which we are concerned in this article is known as *Dùndún*. This is one of the most popular of Yoruba drum sets, and normally consists of five instruments:- 1. *Ìyá Ìlú*. 2. *Aguda*. 3. *Kànàngó*. 4. *Ìsájú*. 5. *Gudugudu*. These instruments, with the exception of the last, form one of the most talkative of African drum groups, for with their bodies shaped like hour glasses and the two membranes, one at either end, joined by 80 to 90 leather thongs which control their tension, they are capable of an exact imitation of speech tones, including glides, this being obtained by hand pressure exerted on the "tensioning thongs". However, when these drums are used in an

* Pp. 210-213 (Reviewed in the last number of this Journal).

ensemble only one is allowed a free tongue, this instrument usually being the largest of the set, *Ìyá Ìlù* (the mother drum). To curb the talkativeness of the other instruments, leather strings are tied around the tensioning thongs on each, thus resulting in a pre-determined pitch which can only be raised by muting.

The music on which this article is based calls for only three drums—*Ìyá Ìlù*, *Aguda* and *Kàṅàngó*. In view of my remarks on the Yoruba avoidance of a rhythmic section separate to the drums, and as such a rhythmic section has the task, in other African music, of supplying the rhythmic link between the song and the drums, it is not surprising to find one of the drums in question supplying this link. This is *Kàṅàngó*, which being the smallest of the three drums, and having its tensioning thongs bound into the body, like *Aguda*, has the highest pitch of the three instruments. The choice of the highest pitched instrument for this role corresponds with the normal African practice, it being a matter of common sense that the instruments supplying the rhythmic link should be easily recognisable, e.g. bells and gongs through their high pitch, rattles and hand claps through their penetrating sound.

The “Standard Pattern” is very frequently employed by those instruments engaged in the above role, and it is thus no surprise to find *Kàṅàngó* using one of its many possible variants.

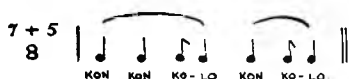


Fig. 2.

The relationship between this *Kàṅàngó* variant and the simplest form of the “Standard Pattern” as quoted at the beginning of this article is so obvious that it needs no elaboration. The syllables placed under this version are “nonsense syllables” whose sole function is to serve as a mnemonic to the *Kàṅàngó* drummer (and possibly to the other drummers and singers who are relying on this pattern as their rhythmic guide). These syllables confirm, by their structure, the division of the total phrase into a seven quaver subphrase followed by one of five quavers. There is no variation of pitch within this pattern, for all the beats are free and result in an even, unstressed, *Aḅ* (414 v.p.s.).

The attraction of the “Standard Pattern” for African musicians is due to two of its most important features:-

1. Its length being twelve quavers, it allows combination with phrases two, three, four or six quavers in length.
2. When played in combination with other rhythmic phrases, as suggested above, its irregular division (seven and five quaver length subphrases) ensures that there will always be a fair amount of cross rhythm.

Two of the above mentioned combinations with the “Standard Pattern” are very common in Yoruba music, and are those of either three quaver length or six quaver length. Before proceeding to examples I must point out that as the object of this article is to discuss the Yoruba employment of the “Standard Pattern”, which is here performed without tonal variation, I have likewise omitted any indications as to the pitch and the melodic shape of the *Ìyá Ìlù* and *Aguda* phrases. It will be sufficient to note that *Ìyá Ìlù*, being the largest of the three instruments, is the lowest in pitch, while *Aguda* is the middle drum both in pitch and size.

In drumming in honour of *Sàngó*, (the god of thunder and lightning) the combination of both a three quaver length and a six quaver length phrase occurs with the *Kàṅàngó* variant, and as can be seen, *Ìyá Ìlù* and *Aguda* are so positioned in relation to each other that their main beats coincide.

Fig. 3. Sàngó drumming.

Note how neatly the *Aguda* rhythm supplements that of *Kànàngó* so that when the two are taken on their own there is only one point where the continuous quaver movement of their combination is broken, and then only for the duration of a quaver beat. The combination of *Iyá Ilù* and *Aguda* would, from its rhythmic monotony, seem completely un-African, but this *Iyá Ilù* pattern is only the starting point for numerous rhythmic variations which would certainly contain the essence of African music—cross rhythm.

In drumming in honour of *Ògún* (the god of war and iron, and worshipped by soldiers, blacksmiths and hunters) we find a different combination, that of two six quaver length phrases with the same *Kànàngó* variant:-

Fig. 4. Ògún drumming.

The main difference between the drum combination in the above example and that in the *Sàngó* drumming lies in the relationship of *Iyá Ilù's* pattern to those of the other two drums. In both instances *Aguda* has the same basic relationship to *Kànàngó*, though in the *Ògún* drumming it has a slightly more elaborate phrase. This relationship is based on the "lo" syllable of *Kànàngó's* "kon kon ko-lo" subphrase, for *Aguda* uses this each time in the positioning of its main beats. Where *Iyá Ilù's* relationship to *Aguda* and *Kànàngó* differs in the two examples is that, in *Sàngó* drumming, its main beats coincide with those of *Aguda*, and it is consequently in the same relationship to *Kànàngó* as is *Aguda*, while in *Ògún* drumming it is so positioned that its main beats fall each time a quaver after those of *Aguda*, thus also altering its position relative to *Kànàngó*.

My final example of an employment of the "Standard Pattern" lies not in the drumming but in the rhythm of a song. The song in question, though not used in *Ekiti* area for *Sàngó* worship, should, as is the practice in *Oyo* Province, be sung in honour of *Obátálá* (also known as *Òrìsànlá*) a god concerned in the creation of the human form.

"Egungun asèkè nró woroworo l' àjà o."

"The skeleton of the liar rattles in the attic".

The rhythm of this song is an exact duplication of the rhythm of the "Standard Pattern", as can be seen when the two are placed one under the other:-

Standard Pattern $\frac{3}{8}$ | $\frac{2}{8}$ | $\frac{3}{8}$ | $\frac{2}{4}$ | $\frac{3}{8}$ | $\frac{2}{4}$ | $\frac{3}{8}$ | $\frac{2}{8}$ | $\frac{2}{4}$ | $\frac{2}{4}$ | $\frac{3}{8}$ |

Song $\frac{7+5}{8}$ | $\frac{7+5}{8}$ | $\frac{7+5}{8}$ | $\frac{7+5}{8}$ | $\frac{7+5}{8}$ | $\frac{7+5}{8}$ | $\frac{7+5}{8}$ | $\frac{7+5}{8}$ | $\frac{7+5}{8}$ | $\frac{7+5}{8}$ | $\frac{7+5}{8}$ |

E - GUN - GUN A - SE - KE NRO WO - RO - WO - RO L'A - JA O
 KOH KOH KO - LO, KOH KOH KO - LO KOH KO - LO, KOH KOH

Fig. 5.

In view of this duplication of the *Kànàngó* variant in the rhythm of the song, one might expect this drum to assist the singers by beating in time with the song. Such a practice would, of course, be completely un-African, and it is thus no surprise to find *Kànàngó* playing its variant in a completely new relationship to the same variant as part of the song:-

Song $\frac{3}{8}$ | $\frac{2}{8}$ | $\frac{3}{8}$ | $\frac{2}{4}$ | $\frac{3}{8}$ | $\frac{2}{4}$ | $\frac{3}{8}$ | $\frac{2}{8}$ | $\frac{2}{4}$ | $\frac{2}{4}$ | $\frac{3}{8}$ |

E - GUN - GUN A - SE - KE NRO WO - RO - WO - RO L'A - JA O
 KOH KOH KO - LO KOH KO - LO, KOH KOH KO - LO KOH KO - LO,

Fig. 6.

The two combine to give a very attractive resultant pattern, yet differing in terms of actual note values by only one quaver from the original as performed on *Kànàngó*.

At the beginning of this article it was stated that the function of *Kànàngó* was to supply the rhythmic bond not only between the song and the drums, but also between the drums themselves. In the examples quoted, *Kànàngó* has used the "Standard Pattern" as the basis of this bond, though of course in other drummings other patterns might be, and often are, more suitable. As has been seen, this rhythmic bond functions, not by a precise definition of the main beats of the other drums and of the song, but by the provision of a rhythmic background against which the other parts may so fit their patterns that an interesting resultant emerges. The structural value of the "Standard Pattern" in this role has already been stressed, and it would be of great value to see a study of its function made for the whole of Africa.