The dundùn, iyáalù bàtá and omele bàtá are three of the most popular talking drums of the Nigerian Yoruba people and are all used for delivering textual messages in diverse contexts, including festivities, civic activities and religious rituals.

The Yoruba language makes use of three lexical tones. This is the main phonological foundation of the Yoruba drum language.

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Our main research questions

How are musical and linguistic generative principles combined in this form of art?

What can we learn from the study of Yoruba drum music about the differences and similarities between music and language?

Rhythmic principles

Like many African music traditions, Yoruba drum music relies on time-line patterns (structured cyclic rhythmic patterns), which guide the performance. Furthermore, its rhythmic layer can be interpreted according to an elementary pulsation, whereby sound events are placed along a string of equidistant time instants.

These two elements facilitate a discrete mathematical account of musical time.

Cultural principles

Yoruba music making includes a vast traditional repertoire of texts, songs and dances, and is also guided by a series of stylistic, cultural and ritual codes, which must be taken into account by music analysis.

Therefore, this project also seeks to understand how Yoruba master drummers conceptualize their own craft.

Example

Our proposal for a layered transcription of Yoruba drum phrases as a main analytical methodology enables the simultaneous visualization of the textual, rhythmic and melodic material, as well as the observation of underlying structures and melodic Gestalts. On this example, the words „làgbà“ and „adìye“ have been highlighted to show their distinct renderings in the same phrase.

Conclusion (preliminary)

In Yoruba drum music, master drummers generate drum patterns from a series of sources, such as speech surrogacy, rhythmic principles and cultural conventions. When making music, master drummers navigate between these constraints favoring one over the other according to principles that we are still investigating.

Studying the creative process of Yoruba master drummers can help us to understand and compare the specific nature and generative potential of musical and linguistic grammars.