



YORUBA TALKING DRUMS

GENERATIVE PRINCIPLES OF DÙNDÚN AND BÀTÁ DRUM LANGUAGE AND MUSIC

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The *dùndún*, *iyáàlù 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.

High *mi*

Mid *re*

Low *do*

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

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?



Master drummer Bábá Àyànléré Alájédé

Tonal principles

In Yoruba drum music, **speech surrogacy** plays a major role, whereby each drum type relies on its own system of imitation of language sounds, including not only lexical tones, but also some consonantal sounds.

The melodies of drum soli are largely **determined** by speech. **Music and language** are thus strongly **intertwined** in Yoruba drum music making.

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

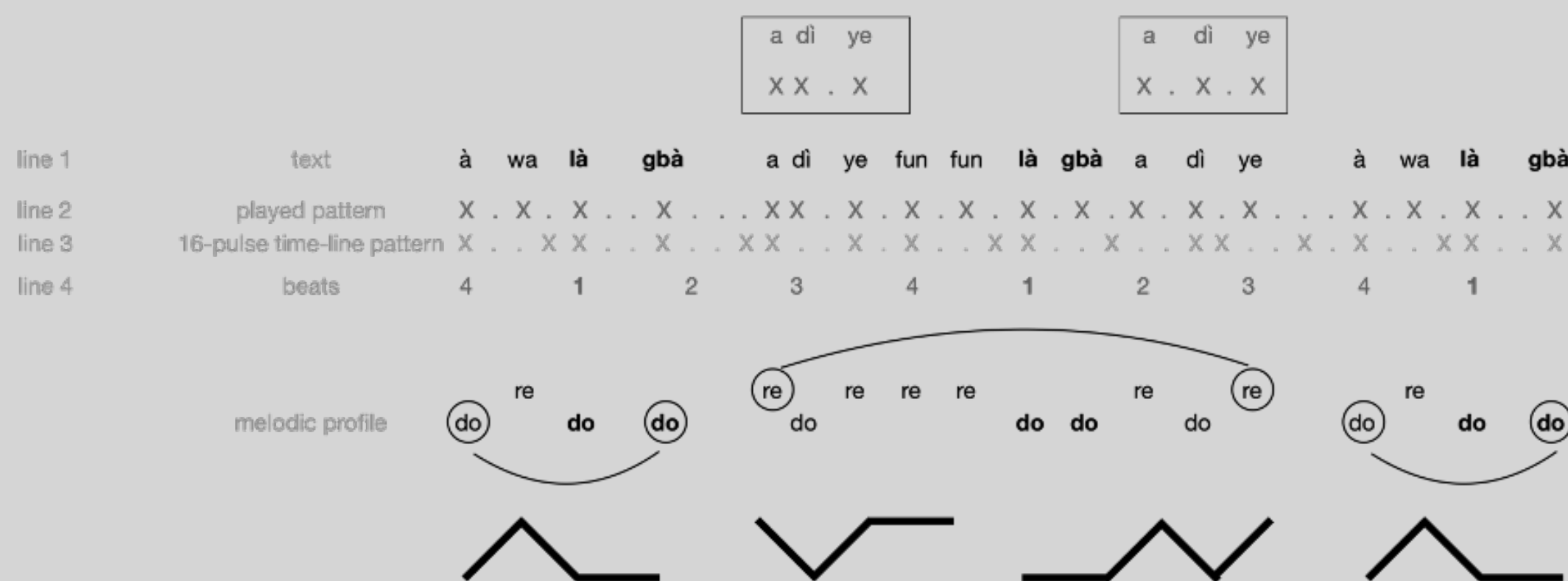
Yoruba music making includes a vast traditional repertoire of texts, songs and dances, and is also guided by a series of **stylistic, cultural and ritual codes**, which must be taken into account by music analysis.

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

Our data

In our experiment, master drummers heard a series of sentences in spoken Yoruba and were asked to provide drummed versions of these on spot. Every sentence was recorded in three rhythmically distinct variants. This data set enables the comparison between distinct drummed versions of the same utterance.

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 melo-rhythmic *Gestalts*. On this example, the words „làgbà“ and „adiye“ have been highlighted to show their distinct renderings in the same phrase.

Literature

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