

MUSICAL REPRESENTATION OF HUMAN BIRD INTERACTIONS IN YORÙBÁLAND: THE CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE AND STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF SELECTED POPULAR SONGS ON BIRD.

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Abstract

Birds occupy a distinctive place in Yorùbá musical imagination because their calls, colours, movements and behaviour are transformed into symbols through song, proverb and oral narrative. This study examines the cultural meanings and musical structures of selected bird related songs in Yorùbáland, with emphasis on pigeon/dove, parrot, hornbill and related avian images. A qualitative ethnomusicological design combines a corpus of 10 purposively selected songs with reported evidence from 20 music practitioners and 15 community/cultural participants. The analysis also uses the surviving score sheets in the source manuscript as documentary evidence of metre, phrase repetition, syllabic text setting and responsorial organisation. Ecomusicology provides the principal theoretical lens, supplemented by semiotic mediation. Findings show that birds function as culturally intelligible signs of peace, honour, good fortune, danger, wisdom, restraint, communication and moral accountability. Musically, these meanings are reinforced through recurring motives, compound metre, syllabic delivery, repetitions and call and response organisation. The paper argues that Yorùbá bird songs preserve indigenous ecological knowledge while simultaneously transmitting ethics, social memory and performance practice.

Keywords: Musical, Representation, Human Bird Interactions, Yorùbáland, Cultural Significance, Structural Analysis.

Introduction

Human societies have long listened to birds as more than biological sound sources. Bird calls and behaviour become materials for naming, storytelling, religious interpretation, proverbs and musical invention. In Yorùbá communities, this relationship is especially productive because music is embedded in speech, social memory, ritual action and moral commentary. The tonal character of Yorùbá language, the importance of proverbial expression, and the speech surrogate capacity of instruments create a musical culture in which natural observation can be translated into socially meaningful sound (Euba, 1990; Omojola, 2012; Babatope, 2024). Birds consequently

appear not simply as objects described in songs, but as culturally recognised figures through which human conduct, relationships and environmental knowledge are interpreted.

Building on this speech-grounded musical culture, recent Nigerian scholarship has strengthened the music environment conversation. Titus (2019) specifically examines birdsong and its socio cultural and environmental implications among the Yorùbá people, while Titus (2019, 2022, 2023) demonstrates more broadly that Nigerian music can preserve indigenous ecological knowledge, interpret environmental disruption and construct nature as a social and moral space. Adekogbe (2023) similarly shows how the àparò (partridge) becomes an eco-proverbial signifier in Yorùbá worldview. More recent studies extend this ecological orientation to Yorùbá plants, animal welfare and Nigerian environmental soundscapes (Lawal, 2025; Olaleye & Loko, 2025; Olaleye & Sofola, 2026). These works support the view that music is an archive through which communities store and renew environmental meanings.

Alongside this ecological turn, and within Yorùbá music scholarship more specifically, cultural meaning is inseparable from musical organisation. Omojola (2009, 2011, 2012) demonstrates that Yorùbá performance continuously negotiates identity, history, power and local aesthetics, while Adekola (2018) and Adekola and Awolere (2024) show how indigenous repertoires archive ethics and didactic knowledge. Recent structural studies have also foregrounded rhythm, phrase organisation, melodic contour and speech-tone intelligibility as important analytical parameters in Yorùbá music (Babatope, 2024; Eluwole, 2024; Osewa & Nwamara, 2024). Yet bird related studies often privilege symbolic meaning without sufficiently explaining how those meanings are made musically memorable.

It is precisely this gap between symbolic meaning and musical explanation that the present study addresses. Omotosho (2024) previously examined symbolic and functional meanings of birdsongs in Yorùbáland, and the present paper is deliberately differentiated from that earlier study, as it shifts the centre of analysis from symbolism alone to the interaction between cultural signification and musical structure. It asks not only what birds mean, but how melody, repetition, text setting and responsorial organisation convert bird imagery into communal knowledge. This structural-cultural linkage constitutes the principal contribution of the paper.

Significance, Scope and Limitations of the Study

The study is significant because it connects Nigerian musicology, indigenous ecological knowledge and structural musical analysis, showing how environmental experience becomes culturally meaningful through sound. Its scope is restricted to selected bird related songs and associated interpretations in Southwestern Nigeria, using a reported corpus of 10 songs linked to four artists, together with evidence from 19 music practitioners and 15 community/cultural participants. The paper does not claim to represent all Yorùbá sub regions, genres or bird classifications, and the participant evidence is limited by the absence of a complete archived interview schedule in the source manuscript. A further limitation is that the available notation is reproduced from scanned score sheets; accordingly, structural discussion is confined to clearly legible features and should be checked against original scores and recordings in any critical edition. These limitations are balanced by triangulating musical notation, lyrics, reported community interpretation and relevant Nigerian scholarship.

Objectives of the Study

- To identify and interpret the cultural and semiotic meanings assigned to selected bird figures in Yorùbá songs.
- To analyse the principal musical structures through which bird imagery and bird-related narratives are organised and communicated.
- To explain how these musical representations mediate human-bird relations, moral instruction, cultural memory and environmental consciousness in Yorùbá society.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative ethnomusicological design, combining documentary/recording analysis with reported interview and focus-group evidence. This design is appropriate because the research questions concern meaning, musical organisation and culturally situated interpretation rather than population estimates. The analysis is strengthened by triangulating three forms of evidence: recorded/notated songs, interpretations supplied by music practitioners, and community/cultural commentary. Comparable Nigerian studies have successfully combined ethnography, interviews, musical analysis and textual interpretation when investigating Yorùbá music, nature and social meaning (Titus, 2019, 2023; Adekogbe, 2023; Adekola & Awolere, 2024).

Table 1. Data sources and analytical use

Source	Reported number	Selection	Analytical purpose
Recorded songs	10	Purposive	Lyrics, melody, phrase, repetition, response and text tone relation
Music practitioners	20	Purposive	Performance knowledge and bird meanings
Community participants	10	Snowball	Local meanings, proverbs, beliefs and social functions
Named artist corpus	4 artists	Purposive archival selection	Cross artist contextual comparison

The musical corpus consisted of 10 selected song items associated with the four named artists in the source manuscript. The revised procedure distinguishes corpus creators from interview participants: recordings attributed to deceased musicians were analysed as archival musical texts rather than presented as contemporary interviews. Human participants were reported as 34 in total (19 music practitioners and 15 community/cultural participants). The practitioners were purposively selected because of their familiarity with Yorùbá musical practice and bird-related repertoires; the community participants were reached through snowballing because culturally specific knowledge of proverbs, bird beliefs and local performance contexts is often held within social networks.

Data collection consisted of listening to recordings, reviewing the notated score sheets contained in the source manuscript, examining lyric translations, and organising field notes from interviews and focus-group discussion. For the present revision, four legible notated excerpts; ‘Ta ló ná’, ‘Èmi inú mi gbere bọ’, ‘Yèyèyè l’omi yè’lé’ and ‘Sòrò sòrò ni mi’ - were selected from the uploaded scan for direct visual-musical analysis in the findings because they illustrate recurring melodic-rhythmic organisation, syllabic text setting and responsorial design. Observed motifs were examined within their immediate textual-musical context, while reported bird meanings

were cross-checked against the broader analytical framework and Nigerian scholarship on Yorùbá music, birdsong and environmental knowledge.

Analysis proceeded in three stages corresponding to the objectives. First, bird references were coded thematically for attributes such as peace, fortune, wisdom, danger, speech, loyalty, protection and moral caution. Second, each selected musical item was examined for the structural devices carrying these meanings. Third, the two levels were interpreted together through the theoretical framework below. Convergences between participant interpretations, song texts and musical features were treated as stronger evidence than isolated claims. No new numerical percentages were generated because the design and surviving data do not support inferential statistics.

Theoretical Framework: Ecomusicology and Semiotic Mediation

Ecomusicology provides the primary theoretical frame because it examines relationships among music, sound, culture and the environment. Allen (2011) positions ecomusicology as an ecocritical musicology concerned with the interconnections among musical practices and the natural/social world, while Titon (2013) emphasises relationality, co-presence and sustainability. Nigerian scholars have adapted this orientation productively. Titus (2019b) shows how Yorùbá popular music preserves environmental knowledge in Ibadan; his later work demonstrates how animals, environmental crisis and place can be heard as culturally encoded musical narratives (Titus, 2022, 2023). Lawal (2025), Forchu (2025), Olaleye and Loko (2025), and Olaleye and Sofola (2026) further show that ecomusicology in Nigerian contexts can illuminate environmental health, indigenous ecological knowledge, spirituality and animal welfare.

For the present study, ecomusicology is supplemented by a semiotic principle: a bird in a song operates as a sign whose meaning exceeds the physical animal. Its call, colour, behaviour or habitat becomes linked to a culturally learned interpretant such as peace, cunning, warning, fertility, restraint or spiritual mediation. Crucially, the interpretant here is not a fixed label attached permanently to a bird; following Peirce's semiotic triad of sign, object and interpretant, meaning is relational and discursive rather than intrinsic, it is generated anew in the relation between the sign (the bird's call, colour or behaviour), the object it stands for, a moral or social value, and the community that interprets it within a specific performance context. An interpretant is therefore best understood as meaning in relation to discourse: it is activated, confirmed or revised each time the song is performed, and it accumulates significance through its ongoing relationship with other songs, proverbs and everyday speech in the wider Yorùbá discursive network. Musical performance then stabilises and circulates that association through repetition, melody, rhythm and communal response. This is particularly appropriate in Yorùbá culture, where proverbs and speech derived musical practices regularly convert observable qualities into moral and social commentary (Euba, 1990; Omojola, 2012; Adekogbe, 2023).

The analytical proposition is therefore that human bird interaction moves through a chain: ecological observation, culturally shared sign, verbal/proverbial formulation, musical structuring, communal interpretation and cultural memory. The model prevents two reductionisms. It avoids treating bird songs as merely aesthetic imitations of nature, and it also avoids treating lyrics as detachable texts without musical organisation. Instead, cultural meaning and musical form are analysed as mutually reinforcing. The findings presented below apply this relational model directly: each bird sign's interpretant is traced not in isolation but through its relations to other

signs, songs and proverbs within the discourse, showing how meaning is built cumulatively rather than assigned once and for all.

Findings and Discussion

Cultural and Semiotic Meanings of Bird Figures

The first finding is that bird representation is strongly anthropomorphic: birds become social persons through which human qualities are evaluated. In the source corpus, the *ẹyẹlé/adàbà* (pigeon/dove complex) is repeatedly associated with gentleness, honour, peace, comfort and favourable spiritual or social outcomes. Such meanings align with the broader pattern identified by Omotosho (2024), where bird species operate as markers of identity and spiritual significance. The function is not zoological classification; rather, the bird becomes a culturally economical sign for virtues that listeners already recognise.

A second cluster concerns communication and moral accountability. Parrot like birds and other vocal birds are valued for their perceived capacity to imitate, announce or transmit messages. This acoustic property is mapped onto human speech: a good mouth can bless, persuade and preserve reputation, while uncontrolled speech can destroy relationships. The song materials built around warnings about the mouth therefore transform avian vocality into an ethical discourse on language. This reflects Adekola and Awolere's (2024) finding that Yorùbá musical/oral repertoires preserve moral and philosophical instruction, and Adekola's (2018) wider argument that indigenous music can function as an archive of ethics and identity.

The hawk pigeon relationship introduces a third meaning cluster: vulnerability, danger and discernment. In the song image of the hawk "playing" with the pigeon, play is not interpreted innocently; it carries the possibility of predation. The metaphor teaches listeners to distinguish apparent friendship from hidden threat. Similar eco proverbial reasoning is central to Adekogbe's (2023) study of the partridge, where observable animal behaviour is culturally transformed into commentary on human conduct. Bird relations therefore provide a compact language for discussing trust, caution and consequence.

Finally, colours and behavioural contrasts in the repertory carry culturally situated associations with fortune, danger, friendliness, spirituality and social character. These should not be universalised as fixed meanings for all Yorùbá communities. Rather, they operate as context-dependent interpretive conventions sustained by storytelling, ritual knowledge and performance. The important finding is the process of signification itself: environmental observation supplies material from which society constructs symbolic vocabulary.

Musical Structures Used to Encode Bird Meaning

Structural analysis shows that the bird meanings are carried by musical devices that favour textual clarity and collective recall. The surviving notated excerpts frequently use short recurring phrases, repeated pitches or stepwise melodic movement, and predominantly syllabic text setting. These features keep the verbal message audible while allowing performers and listeners to join easily. Babatope (2024) identifies textual intelligibility and speech-mode sensitivity as central issues in Yorùbá vocal composition, while Euba (1990) and Omojola (2012) demonstrate the deep relationship between speech rhythm, verbal meaning and musical organisation in Yorùbá practice.

Responsorial organisation is also prominent. A leader introduces a statement, warning or image and a response confirms or amplifies it. This structure is socially important because it converts meaning from an individual utterance into communal affirmation. Repetition performs a related function: bird names, warnings and proverbial phrases return as memory anchors. The musical logic is therefore not repetition for its own sake; recurring cells make ethical and ecological knowledge transmissible. Recent analyses of Yorùbá rhythmic and festival repertoires similarly show that repeated patterns, phrase organisation and layered rhythmic processes are central to cultural meaning (Eluwole, 2024; Osewa & Nwamara, 2024).

Musical Score Evidence from Data Collection and Selected Popular Songs.

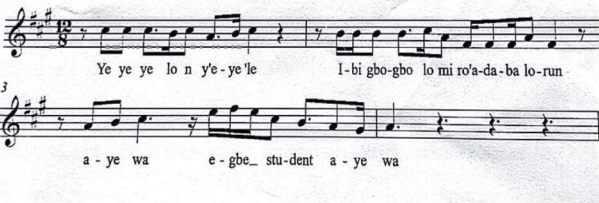
Ta lo na (Chant 11) Ta lo na - Chant 11 	Emi inu mi ghere bo 
Yeyeye l'omi ye'le Ayewa, egbe student ayewa it shall be well with us 	Soro soro ni mi - Call/Response 

Image source by the researcher.

Building on the responsorial and repetition based patterns just outlined, the notated examples provide direct evidence for the structural interpretation. ‘Ta ló ná’ uses compound metre, predominantly syllabic text setting, short recurring melodic cells and phrase repetition, supporting its mnemonic nursery/folktale function. In ‘Èmi inú mi ghere bọ’, repeated melodic material places adàbà and òrófó inside a recurrent verbal musical formula, reinforcing their association with good tidings and fortune. ‘Yeyéyé l’omi ye’lé’ similarly uses recurring rhythmic melodic units to project honour, comfort and communal well-being, these songs are associated to Yoruba folk tunes gotten on field. ‘Sòrò sòrò ni mi’ is explicitly laid out on Call and Response staves; this responsorial design converts an admonition about speech into participatory musical discourse according to Aminat Ajao in her debut album. Across the excerpts, compound metre, syllabic delivery, repetition and responsorial organisation make bird symbolism memorable and socially repeatable rather than leaving it at the level of verbal imagery alone.

Human Bird Interaction, Cultural Memory and Environmental Consciousness

The third objective reveals that human bird interaction in the songs is relational rather than observational. Birds are listened to, imitated, interpreted, feared, admired and converted into ethical companions. The repertory consequently documents how humans position themselves within a more-than-human environment. Titus (2019a) makes this point directly in relation to Yorùbá birdsong; Titus (2023) further shows that animals and nature spaces in Yorùbá related music can anchor social values and environmental sustainability awareness. The present corpus extends that insight by showing how musical structure reinforces the cultural interpretation.

The songs also function as cultural memory. A bird proverb can outlive the immediate ecological encounter that produced it because music repeatedly reactivates the association. This archival role parallels Adekola's (2018) account of indigenous music as a repository of ethics and identity and recent arguments that Yorùbá indigenous music remains a vehicle for heritage and language transmission (Odusanya, 2024; Oluwadamilare & Oyadiji, 2025). Such transmission is especially important as urbanisation and changing listening practices reduce everyday familiarity with traditional environmental knowledge.

This archival function, in turn, shapes the kind of environmental awareness the songs carry: environmental consciousness in this repertory is not equivalent to modern conservation campaigning. It is better understood as an indigenous ecological ethic in which animals are meaningful co-presences in social imagination. Contemporary Nigerian ecomusicology increasingly emphasises this broader conception: plants, animals, landscapes and environmental crises are interpreted through local knowledge systems rather than only through scientific environmental vocabulary (Forchu, 2025; Olaleye & Loko, 2025; Olaleye & Sofola, 2026). The bird songs therefore provide a culturally grounded resource for discussing biodiversity, animal respect and environmental education without stripping the material of its Yorùbá philosophical context.

Integrated Interpretation of Objectives and Method

Taken together, the objectives and methods establish a clear analytical sequence. Participant and community evidence identifies culturally plausible bird meanings; lyric and proverb analysis clarifies their moral and symbolic functions; score reading shows how metre, repetition, syllabic setting and responsorial organisation carry those meanings musically; and comparison with Nigerian ecomusicological scholarship prevents isolated interpretation. The method therefore links cultural interpretation to observable musical evidence rather than treating symbolism and structure as separate analytical domains.

This integrated approach fills an identifiable scholarly space by bringing ecomusicological interpretation into direct dialogue with musical structure. Earlier Nigerian work establishes the importance of birdsong and environmental sound, but the present study demonstrates how symbolic meanings become durable through specific compositional and performance devices visible in the surviving notation.

Summary

This study examined cultural meaning and musical structure in selected Yorùbá bird songs using ethnomusicological interpretation, reported participant evidence, lyrics and surviving score sheets. The analysis shows that birds operate as signs of peace, honour, fortune, danger, wisdom, communication and moral restraint, while compound metre, recurring motives, syllabic text setting and responsorial forms help stabilise these meanings in performance. Human bird interaction in the repertory is therefore simultaneously ecological, symbolic, musical and pedagogical.

Conclusion

Yorùbá musical representations of birds demonstrate that human-environment relations are encoded simultaneously in words, sound and performance. Birds become culturally intelligible because their observed behaviour is translated into proverb, song and musical form. The reproduced score sheets strengthen this conclusion by showing that repetition, metre, syllabic delivery and responsorial organisation are central vehicles of cultural memory.

The findings reinforce a wider Nigerian ecomusicological argument: indigenous musical knowledge is a serious resource for understanding environmental perception, ethics and cultural continuity. By linking symbolic interpretation to score-based structural evidence, the study offers a more integrated account of Yorùbá human-bird relations and a replicable direction for future Nigerian music research.

Recommendations

1. Music scholars should document bird related repertoires with complete metadata, audio/video records, translations and musical transcriptions so that future structural and comparative analysis rests on auditable evidence.
2. Yorùbá music curricula should use selected bird songs to teach melody, rhythm, tonal-text relationships, proverbs, indigenous ecological knowledge and cultural ethics in an integrated manner.
3. Future fieldwork should record participant demographics, interview dates, consent procedures and institutional ethics approval, and should distinguish clearly between archival artist recordings and living interview participants.
4. Collaborative research involving musicologists, linguists, ecologists and culture bearers should verify species names and local bird classifications before assigning fixed biological labels to indigenous terms.
5. Digital archives and community repositories should prioritise older bird related recordings and oral explanations that are vulnerable to loss through urbanisation, media change and generational discontinuity.
6. Researchers should extend the analysis comparatively across Yorùbá sub regions and genres to determine which bird meanings are widespread and which are locally specific, while avoiding the assumption that one symbolic interpretation represents all Yorùbá communities.

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