

YORUBA FOLK SONGS AS HISTORICAL EVIDENCE OF TAXATION AND CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY IN OYO COMMUNITIES

Sunday Olufemi Akande, Ph.D
olufemi.akande@oouagoiwoye.edu.ng

Solomon Oladimeji Ogundare
ogundare.solomon@oouagoiwoye.edu.ng
Department of Music
Olabisi Onabanjo University Ago-Iwoye

Abstract

This study examines Yoruba folk songs as historical evidence of taxation and civic responsibility in Oyo communities. In many African societies, oral traditions including songs, proverbs, and folktales serve as repositories of cultural memory, preserving social, political, and economic experiences that are often absent from written records. Focusing, primarily on Owo ori dode a Yoruba folk song, this research explores how music functioned as a medium through which communities expressed public opinion, reinforced civic obligations, and monitored the use of tax revenues during the colonial and early post-colonial periods. Using oral interviews with elderly residents and narrative analysis of song lyrics, the study reveals that folk songs served multiple roles: celebrating responsible citizens, critiquing government policies, and promoting compliance with communal norms. The findings demonstrate that Yoruba folk songs were not merely artistic expressions but also instruments of social regulation and moral education, reflecting citizens' expectations of accountability, transparency, and community development. By highlighting the intersection of music, governance, and civic responsibility, this research underscores the value of oral traditions as credible historical sources and as mechanisms for understanding social organization, cultural values, and community memory in Yoruba society.

Keywords: Yoruba Folk Songs, Historical Evidence, Taxation and Civic Responsibility

Introduction

In many African societies, historical knowledge has traditionally been preserved through oral traditions rather than written documentation. Before the widespread use of written records, communities relied on oral forms such as myths, proverbs, folktales, chants, and songs to transmit knowledge from one generation to another. These oral forms served as important repositories of cultural values, social history, and political experiences. Scholars of African studies have emphasized that oral traditions function as reliable historical sources that provide insight into the worldview, cultural practices, and social organization of African communities (Finnegan, 2012; Vansina, 1985). In many cases, oral traditions have preserved historical narratives that were not documented in colonial archives, thereby providing alternative perspectives on African history (Okpewho, 1992).

Among the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria, oral traditions play a particularly significant role in preserving collective memory and documenting social life. Yoruba cultural expression includes various oral genres such as oríkì (praise poetry), folktales, proverbs, chants, and folk

songs. These forms of oral literature are often performed during festivals, communal gatherings, and everyday social interactions. Through these performances, historical experiences, moral lessons, and cultural values are transmitted across generations (Barber, 1991; Owomoyela, 2005). Scholars of Yoruba culture have noted that oral literature serves as an important medium for understanding Yoruba social institutions, belief systems, and historical consciousness (Oloruntoba-Oju, 1997).

Folk songs, in particular, serve as powerful tools for communicating community experiences and reflecting on social realities. Yoruba music scholars emphasize that traditional songs often contain narratives that describe social events, political conditions, and community relationships (Euba, 1990; Omojola, 2012). These songs are usually performed collectively and allow members of the community to participate in cultural dialogue about shared experiences. As a result, folk music functions not only as entertainment but also as a medium for transmitting historical knowledge and reinforcing communal values.

Yoruba folk songs often address a wide range of social issues, including leadership, morality, economic activities, and relationships within the community. These songs provide a means through which individuals and groups can express their opinions about social conditions and political developments. According to scholars of ethnomusicology, folk songs in African societies frequently function as forms of social commentary, enabling communities to praise good leadership, criticize injustice, and preserve memories of important historical events (Akporobaro, 2012; Okpewho, 1992). Similarly, Euba (1990) argues that traditional Yoruba music has historically served as a channel for communicating political messages and expressing communal sentiments. One important theme reflected in Yoruba folk songs is taxation and civic responsibility. During the colonial period in Nigeria, taxation policies were introduced by British administrators as part of the colonial economic and administrative system. Taxes were imposed on local populations to generate revenue for infrastructure development and government administration. In many Yoruba communities, these taxes were used to fund public works projects such as road construction, water supply, electricity provision, and other community development initiatives (Afigbo, 1972; Ajayi & Crowder, 1985). Colonial taxation policies significantly shaped the relationship between government authorities and local communities.

Although taxation contributed to infrastructural development, it also generated tension between colonial authorities and local populations. Many citizens believed that their financial contributions should lead directly to visible improvements in their communities. As a result, the success or failure of development projects often influenced public perceptions of government accountability. When tax revenues were used effectively to provide infrastructure and public services, community members expressed satisfaction and appreciation. However, when government officials failed to fulfill their promises or redirected funds to other projects, citizens expressed their frustration through various forms of cultural expression, including folk songs.

Music has historically served as a powerful medium for expressing public opinion in many African societies. Folk songs, in particular, have often been used as subtle forms of protest and social criticism. Through song performance, communities could voice their dissatisfaction with government policies without engaging in direct confrontation with authorities. This practice demonstrates how music functions not only as entertainment but also as a political and social communication tool (Turino, 2008). In Yoruba musical culture, songs have traditionally been used to comment on leadership, criticize corruption, and encourage social responsibility (Omojola, 2012).

Within Yoruba communities, songs associated with the *Owo Ori* (Tax Money) tradition provide an important example of how folk music reflects experiences of taxation and governance. These songs capture the expectations, frustrations, and collective responses of community members toward government policies related to tax collection and development projects. The lyrics of these songs reveal how citizens monitored the use of tax revenues and demanded accountability from authorities. As Omojola (2012) observes, Yoruba traditional music often reflects everyday socio-political realities and serves as a cultural platform for public discourse.

This study therefore examines how Yoruba folk songs serve as historical evidence of taxation and civic responsibility in Oyo communities. By analyzing oral testimonies from elderly residents alongside songs associated taxation, the research explores how music functioned as a cultural archive documenting the relationship between citizens and government. The study highlights the role of folk songs not only as artistic expressions but also as valuable historical sources that preserve memories of governance, community participation, and social accountability.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the theories of oral tradition, cultural memory, and the functional role of music in society. The concept of oral tradition as a reliable historical source was developed by Jan Vansina in 1961, who argued that orally transmitted narratives can provide credible historical evidence when critically analyzed. Similarly, Ruth Finnegan (1970) emphasized that African oral literature such as songs, proverbs, and folktales; preserves communal experiences, cultural values, and historical knowledge across generations. The study also draws on the theory of collective or cultural memory, first proposed by Maurice Halbwachs in 1925, which explains how societies construct and maintain memories of the past through shared cultural expressions. This idea was later expanded by Jan Assmann in 1992, who highlighted the role of traditions, rituals, and artistic expressions in sustaining long-term historical consciousness. In Yoruba communities, where written records were historically limited, oral traditions therefore function as important repositories of collective memory, preserving information about governance, social norms, and communal responsibilities.

In addition, the research adopts the functionalist perspective in anthropology and sociology, associated with scholars such as Bronisław Malinowski (1922) and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1935), who argued that cultural practices exist because they serve important roles in maintaining social order. Extending this idea to music, Alan P. Merriam (1964) demonstrated that music performs vital functions such as communication, social control, and moral education. Within Yoruba society, folk songs therefore serve not only as artistic expressions but also as tools for reinforcing civic responsibility, expressing public opinion, and regulating social behavior. Guided by these theoretical perspectives, this study examines the Yoruba folk song *Owo ori dode* as a cultural text reflecting historical experiences of taxation and civic responsibility in Oyo communities. Through oral interviews and narrative analysis of song lyrics, the research explores how such songs conveyed public attitudes toward taxation and governance during the colonial and early post-colonial periods.

Taxation and Community Development in Oyo

Taxation has historically played a significant role in the economic and social development of many societies. In pre-colonial and colonial Africa, systems of tribute, levies, and communal contributions were commonly used to support local governance and development activities.

Among the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria, taxation became more structured during the colonial period when British administrators introduced formal tax systems to finance administrative activities and infrastructural development (Afigbo, 1972; Ajayi & Crowder, 1985). These policies were integrated into existing local governance structures and became part of the socio-economic life of many Yoruba communities.

In Oyo communities, taxation was primarily associated with community development and public welfare. Oral testimonies collected in this research indicate that taxes were used to finance infrastructural projects that benefited the entire community. According to Ogundiran (2026), tax contributions were collected from citizens to support the activities of the Public Works Department (PWD), which was responsible for carrying out development projects such as road construction, road maintenance, water supply through boreholes, and electricity connections. These projects were considered essential for improving the living conditions of the people and facilitating economic activities within the community.

The importance of taxation in promoting community development is further confirmed by the testimony of Alonge (2026), who explained that tax payments were intended to support the growth and development of towns. According to him, citizens were required to contribute financially toward development initiatives, and failure to do so resulted in punishment by local authorities. He recalled that during the 1960s, the tax amount was approximately twenty naira, which represented a significant contribution toward communal development. This system demonstrates how taxation functioned not only as a government policy but also as a communal obligation that reinforced civic responsibility among members of the society.

Similarly, Ali (2026) noted that taxation was compulsory and widely accepted as a civic duty during that period. He explained that tax officials, often referred to as tax councils, moved around communities to verify whether individuals had paid their taxes. Citizens were required to present tax receipts as proof of payment. Anyone who failed to provide evidence of payment could be arrested and punished until their family members paid the outstanding amount. These practices illustrate the importance attached to taxation as a mechanism for sustaining government projects and community development initiatives.

Historical studies on colonial taxation in Nigeria suggest that the British administration introduced taxes partly to fund infrastructure and public services, including transportation networks and administrative institutions (Afigbo, 1972). In Yoruba communities, these development projects often included the construction of roads, markets, water systems, and other facilities that improved economic activities and mobility. As Ajayi and Crowder (1985) observe, colonial taxation systems significantly influenced local governance structures and contributed to the development of public infrastructure across many parts of Nigeria.

However, while taxation contributed to development, it also created expectations among citizens regarding government accountability. Members of the community expected that the money they contributed would be used for projects that directly benefited them. When development projects were implemented successfully, citizens expressed appreciation and satisfaction. Conversely, when government authorities failed to fulfill their promises or changed development priorities, the people expressed their dissatisfaction through various cultural expressions, including folk songs. This dynamic relationship between taxation and community expectations is reflected in folk songs. According to Ogundiran (2026), people sang songs celebrating government development efforts when projects such as road construction were initiated. The song lyrics expressed optimism and trust in the government's commitment to using tax revenue for community development.

However, when promised projects were not completed or when government officials redirected resources toward other projects, the same songs were modified to express frustration and criticism.

In this way, taxation not only served as a mechanism for funding development but also became a central theme in community discourse about governance and accountability. Folk songs therefore functioned as cultural platforms through which citizens evaluated government performance and expressed their expectations regarding the proper use of public resources. As scholars of African music have noted, traditional songs often serve as mediums for social commentary and collective reflection on political and economic issues (Omojola, 2012; Euba, 1990).

The experiences documented in the testimonies of elderly residents of Oyo communities demonstrate that taxation was closely linked to the concept of civic responsibility. Paying taxes was seen as a duty toward the community, and individuals who fulfilled this obligation were often praised in songs and public discourse. At the same time, the community expected government authorities to act responsibly by using tax revenue for the benefit of the people. This reciprocal relationship between citizens and government highlights the importance of taxation as both a financial and social institution in Yoruba communities.

Overall, the role of taxation in Oyo communities illustrates how economic policies were embedded within broader cultural practices and social expectations. Through oral testimonies and folk songs such as *Owo Ori Dode*, it becomes evident that taxation was not merely a financial transaction but also a social contract that linked civic responsibility with community development and government accountability.

Folk Songs as Expressions of Public Opinion

In many African societies, folk songs serve as an important medium through which communities express collective opinions, social values, and political concerns. Among the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria, music has traditionally functioned not only as entertainment but also as a powerful form of communication that reflects public sentiment on social, economic, and political issues. Through folk songs, ordinary citizens are able to comment on governance, praise responsible leadership, and criticize actions that negatively affect the community. As a result, these songs often serve as informal channels for expressing public opinion and shaping community attitudes.

Scholars of African oral traditions have long emphasized the social significance of music in communicating communal experiences and perspectives. Euba (1990) observes that traditional Yoruba music is deeply embedded in the everyday life of the people and often mirrors the social realities of the communities in which it is performed. Songs frequently address issues such as leadership, morality, economic hardship, and communal responsibility (Euba, 1990). Similarly, indigenous African music functions as a platform through which communities articulate collective experiences and respond to political and social developments (Omojola, 2012). Akande (2023) emphasizes the cultural importance of folk music in shaping societal values and civic consciousness. According to Akande (2023):

music is a share of culture and therefore establishes an integral part of the life of people. The inherent value of folk music cannot be challenged in the promotion of cultural values and social interaction in a Yoruba child and in the making of a child as being resourceful, useful and a good citizen living according to societal norms and customs.

This perspective highlights the broader educational and social functions of folk music in Yoruba society, where songs not only entertain but also transmit values, norms, and expectations about responsible citizenship. Within Yoruba communities, folk songs are commonly performed during festivals, community gatherings, work activities, and other social events. These performances create opportunities for individuals to express opinions and reflect on issues affecting their society. Unlike formal political discussions, songs allow people to communicate their thoughts in creative and culturally acceptable ways. Through metaphor, repetition, satire, and symbolism, singers can convey criticism or approval without directly confronting authority figures. In this way, folk songs function as subtle yet powerful instruments of public communication.

In the context of taxation and civic responsibility in Oyo communities, folk songs played a particularly significant role in reflecting public attitudes toward government policies and development initiatives. Oral testimonies collected during this research indicate that songs were frequently composed or modified to express people's reactions to taxation practices and government development projects. When citizens believed that tax revenue was being used effectively to support community development such as road construction, water supply, and electricity installation they expressed appreciation and satisfaction through celebratory songs.

However, when government actions failed to meet community expectations, folk songs became instruments of protest and dissatisfaction. Instead of engaging in direct confrontation with authorities, citizens often used music as a culturally acceptable means of expressing criticism and questioning government decisions. This form of musical commentary enabled communities to collectively voice their concerns while maintaining social cohesion and respect for traditional authority structures. One notable example is the *Owo Ori Dode* song tradition found in Oyo communities. Oral testimonies from elderly residents indicate that the song was originally performed to celebrate government efforts toward infrastructural development. When projects such as road construction began, people sang songs expressing gratitude and optimism regarding the benefits that would arise from their tax contributions. These songs reinforced the belief that taxation was a shared civic responsibility that contributed to the collective progress of the community.

Over time, however, the meaning and tone of the song evolved in response to changing public perceptions. When certain development promises were not fulfilled or when government priorities shifted away from projects that communities expected, the lyrics of the song were modified to express disappointment and criticism. Thus, the same song that once praised government initiatives later became a medium for questioning how tax revenue was being utilized. This transformation illustrates the dynamic nature of folk songs as living cultural expressions that respond to changing social and political realities.

The ability of folk songs to capture shifts in public opinion highlights their significance as valuable historical sources. Unlike written government records, which often reflect official perspectives, oral songs provide insight into how ordinary people experienced and interpreted government policies. Afigbo (1972) and Ajayi (1965) have emphasized the importance of oral traditions in reconstructing African history, particularly in societies where written documentation was limited. Oral performances including songs, chants, and praise poetry, often reveal the perspectives and experiences of ordinary people who are frequently absent from formal historical records.

Furthermore, folk songs often carry moral and educational messages that reinforce civic values within the community. In many cases, songs encourage individuals to fulfill their civic

responsibilities, including paying taxes and contributing to communal development. At the same time, they remind leaders and government officials of their obligation to manage public resources responsibly and transparently. This dual function; promoting civic duty while encouraging accountability demonstrates the broader social role of folk songs in Yoruba culture. The use of music as a means of expressing public opinion is not unique to Yoruba society but is widely observed across many African cultures. Oral performance traditions frequently serve as mechanisms through which communities negotiate power relationships, evaluate leadership, and communicate collective expectations. Through praise, satire, and criticism, these cultural expressions enable societies to maintain a balance between authority and accountability.

Yoruba folk songs represent an important form of public discourse that reflects community attitudes toward governance and civic responsibility. Through creative expression, these songs give voice to public opinion and provide communities with a means of evaluating government performance. In the case of Oyo communities, songs related to taxation and development projects demonstrate how music served as a cultural medium through which citizens expressed expectations for accountability and responsible leadership. As such, folk songs remain valuable historical sources for understanding the relationship between taxation, governance, and civic responsibility in Yoruba society.

Enforcement of Tax Payment

Tax payment in Oyo communities during the colonial and early post-colonial periods was compulsory, and authorities implemented strict measures to ensure compliance. Taxation was not only a financial obligation but also a civic duty, closely linked to community development and social order (Afigbo, 1972; Ajayi & Crowder, 1985).

Oral testimonies from elderly residents highlight how tax compliance was monitored and enforced. Ali (2026) explained that tax officers regularly moved around towns to verify whether individuals had paid their taxes. Citizens were required to present official receipts as proof of payment, and anyone unable to produce a receipt could be arrested. This means the practice reinforced accountability and ensured that community members contributed to the funding of local infrastructure projects, such as roads, water supply, and public facilities.

Punishment for tax evasion often involved public humiliation. According to Alonge (2026), individuals who had not paid their taxes were sometimes exposed under the sun for extended periods until their families settled the outstanding amounts. This form of sanction was not intended to criminalize individuals but to reinforce civic responsibility and communal norms (Omojola, 2012). The use of public visibility in punishment also served as a deterrent, signaling to the wider community the importance of fulfilling tax obligations.

Olaniyan (2026) recalled that these practices began during British colonial rule. Tax councils conducted regular inspections of homes to ensure compliance, reflecting the colonial administration's emphasis on organized revenue collection. Olaniyan emphasized that while defaulters were detained, they were not considered criminals in the legal sense; they were citizens who had failed to meet communal responsibilities. This distinction highlights the communal and moral dimension of tax enforcement, which intertwined legal authority with social expectation.

Scholars of African governance and social control note that taxation systems during colonial rule often relied on both formal legal mechanisms and informal social pressures to ensure compliance. Vansina (1985) argues that in many African societies, enforcement was embedded within social

networks, using public accountability and moral sanction rather than purely punitive legal measures. Similarly, Finnegan (2012) emphasizes that oral traditions, including songs, often served to communicate the consequences of non-compliance and reinforce social norms.

Adding to this perspective, Falola (2001) notes that in Yoruba towns, taxation was not simply a financial process but a social practice that created reciprocal obligations between rulers and the ruled. Compliance was reinforced through ceremonies, public inspection, and community monitoring. Ajayi (1965) similarly highlights that colonial taxation was often adapted to local norms, integrating pre-existing forms of social accountability with administrative oversight. Additionally, Oyedele (2010) observes that music and oral performance in Yoruba society often codified these civic expectations, embedding them in everyday cultural practice so that social enforcement operated alongside formal legal structures.

Folk songs and Civic Responsibilities

Scholars studying the role of folk music in Yoruba culture emphasized that folk songs are not merely artistic expressions but also instruments of social regulation and moral teaching. According to Ojelabi and Olagoke (2021), Yoruba folk music embeds moral values and ethical principles that help curtail social vices and support good governance. They argue that these songs transmit community norms and expectations about behavior, making music a tool for reinforcing civic duties such as honesty, responsibility, and social accountability.

Likewise, research by Adesoji and Ajewole (2024) highlights that Yoruba folk songs are used not just for entertainment but as moral instruction within the community. These songs guide individuals on ethical behavior, respect for societal norms, and community solidarity, thus reinforcing social order and encouraging responsible citizenship. Ikumapayi (2023) notes that folk songs in Yoruba society act as agents of cultural transmission that shape attitudes, beliefs, and social behaviors across generations. His work shows that music teaches norms and expectations about proper conduct, often including communal obligations and responsibilities, making it a medium through which civic values are lodged and reinforced within the psyche of community members. Beyond Yoruba-specific research, cross-cultural studies on folk music suggest that songs often reflect and reinforce community expectations regarding behavior and social responsibility. For example, studies of folk music traditions in other cultures show that songs can transmit collective wisdom about social norms and moral influence audience behavior and reinforce community cohesion. (Nketia, 1979).

OWO ORI D'ODE



Analysis of the Yoruba Folk Song "*Owo Ori D'ode*"

The title "*Owo Ori D'ode*" is rooted in the Yoruba language, where "*Owo*" or "tax," means "money" and "*Ori*" translates as "head" or "responsibility," and "*D'ode*" can mean "from outside" or "from the town." Collectively, the title means "The Tax (or Money) from the Town" or "The Money Collected for the Town," reflecting its thematic focus on taxation and civic responsibility within the community. Initially, the song is usually commonly sung by married women as a show of pride. The lyrics of the song predominantly feature repetitive phrases that emphasize the communal experience of taxation. "*Owo ori dode o do de o*" can be interpreted as "Tax money has come" or "The town's money is ready." This repetition underlines the importance and regularity of tax collection. "*Baba wa loko san*" means "Our father is the one who pays," praising a responsible figure; likely a household or community leader; who fulfills their tax obligations, thereby modeling civic duty. "*Awon agba ti ko san o*" translates as "The elders who did not pay..." signaling social critique towards those neglecting their responsibilities. "*Won be lati mole*" means "They have been locked up" or "They have been punished," indicating consequences for tax evasion or non-payment.

The song highlights critical aspects of civic life in Yoruba communities. It underscores the social obligation to pay taxes, portraying compliance as honorable and essential for community welfare. The song reflects enforcement practices, where non-compliance results in punishment ("locked up"), demonstrating the community's commitment to fairness and social order. The repetitive lyrical structure helps reinforce communal values about taxation and responsibility, facilitating oral transmission across generations. The song is composed in a 6/8 time signature, typical of Yoruba folk music, which lends a rhythmic, flowing, and danceable quality. The melody is simple and repetitive, characteristic of folk songs designed for communal participation and easy memorization.

The song educates community members; especially the youth about the importance of paying taxes and the social repercussions of neglecting this duty. By praising those who fulfill their obligations and shaming defaulters, the song strengthens social bonds and communal accountability. Serving as an oral historical document, the song preserves collective memories and community practices related to taxation and governance.

The folk song, "*Owo Ori D'ode*" functions not only as a musical expression but also as a vital cultural artifact that encapsulates the values of civic responsibility, social enforcement, and collective memory in Yoruba communities. Through its lyrics and musical structure, the song educates, unites, and preserves the history of taxation and governance in Oyo society.

Won lo da nbo

Won lo da nbo, atara da 'wo le 2ce

The government says they will make road with paint, we strived to pay for tax

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Yoruba folk songs are invaluable historical sources that illuminate the intertwined dynamics of taxation, governance, and civic responsibility in Oyo communities. Far beyond mere artistic expressions, these songs served as vibrant repositories of collective memory, preserving the lived experiences and social expectations of ordinary citizens during the colonial and early post-colonial periods. Through their lyrics and performance, folk songs articulated public opinion; celebrating those who fulfilled their tax obligations, critiquing government inefficiencies, and reinforcing communal norms of accountability and transparency.

The oral testimonies and narrative analyses presented confirm that taxation in Yoruba society was deeply embedded within social and moral frameworks, where compliance was both a legal duty and a respected cultural practice. The use of song as a tool for social regulation and moral education reveals how music functioned as a powerful medium for community participation in governance, enabling citizens to monitor and influence the use of public resources indirectly.

Ultimately, this research highlights the critical role of oral traditions in reconstructing African histories often overlooked by written records. Yoruba folk songs like those studied here provide rich insights into social organization, cultural values, and the collective memory of community development. By embracing such indigenous sources, scholars gain a more nuanced and holistic understanding of the past, affirming the significance of music as a form of historical evidence and a vehicle for civic engagement in Yoruba society.

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Interviewees

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Alonge, I (2026). Oyo Town, 67 Years Old

Ogundiran, A (2026). Oyo Town, 87 Years Old

Olaniyan, I (2026). Oyo Town, 95 Years Old