

A Semiotic Analysis of Orin Òtẹ̀: Yorùbá Performance Art in Song- Lashing

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Abstract

Fela Kuti pronounced music a weapon, but nowhere in the Nigerian space is the weaponization of music more prominent than in the political space. This study identifies and examines fifteen of such songs—known as Orin Òtẹ̀— from Nigeria’s 2023 election, analysing how they employ metaphors, proverbs, and cultural symbols to critique political figures and mobilize public opinion. Rooted in Yorùbá oral traditions and encapsulated by the proverb “*orin níi sàájú òtẹ̀*” (songs herald hostilities), these songs represent a unique performance art. Using semiotic frameworks from Peirce and Saussure, alongside ethnographic methods like participant observation and interviews, the research reveals how *orin òtẹ̀* functions as a tool for social accountability, influencing perceptions of political actors. The study showcases the continued relevance of traditional Yorùbá art in modern political discourse, highlighting its role in citizen engagement and democratic processes.

Keywords: *Orin Òtẹ̀*, Semiotic Analysis, Yorùbá Oral Traditions, Political Communication

Introduction

Music functions as a form of oral art that depends on both aural consumption and oral production, establishing its fundamental relationship with oral artistic traditions. Within traditional Yorùbá society, oral art served as a cornerstone in constructing and reinforcing moral frameworks while preserving

collective experiences through sophisticated linguistic devices, idiomatic expressions, and cultural heritage elements (Isola 1992, 18). This tradition provided moral foundation and awareness from early childhood development through adult engagement with contemporary social issues.

The pervasive nature of oral art in Yorùbá society manifested across all significant life events: hunters received *Ìjálá* (panegyric poetry), newborns were blessed with *Oríki* (praise names), monarchs depended on praise-singers for legitimacy, marriages featured *Ekún Ìyàwó* (bridal chants), and death rites incorporated specific oral performances. Oral artists functioned as social commentators, weaving moral precepts into their critique of contemporary issues affecting entire communities.

African music, as oral art, carries rich cultural connotations that require understanding of African value systems for complete interpretation and meaning extraction (Nzewi 1991, 162). Music serves as a powerful communication medium that transcends linguistic boundaries while encapsulating cultural expressions (Titus & Bello 2012, 166). Within Yorùbá society, songs extend beyond entertainment to encompass religious, social, revolutionary, and military dimensions (Olutoye & Olapade, 1998; Ilesanmi, 1998). Beyond its apparent entertainment function, music serves as a communicative device, inspiring warriors and launching verbal assaults in interpersonal conflicts. The linguistic devices employed in these songs, often dismissed as mere metaphors, prove to be far from innocuous, carrying profound cultural and political implications. In documenting history orally, especially through songs, Ilesanmi holds that the songs may not preserve the details of a past event. They however record key points, skeleton allusions which can be enflashed by the culturally minded audience (Ilesanmi 1998, 463). The songs were composed by chanters, drummers, and singers, known as the *Ìpàyè*, who would follow the warriors to the war camps and even to the battlefield to entertain them and in the process gather facts, only to withdraw before the battles started. After the war, stories and songs and poems are formed around the heroics or otherwise of the war. The artists even sometimes re-enacted the war events and adapted. They then passed down these stories and songs to their descendants before they die.

Central to this musical heritage is *Orin Òtẹ̀*, a distinctive performance art characterized by verbal assaults conveyed through song. The Yorùbá proverb “*orin ní ìṣàájú òtẹ̀*” (meaning: songs herald hostilities) encapsulates this tradition’s essence (Olanrewaju 2011, 3). While existing scholarship has explored Yorùbá music’s cultural significance, a notable gap exists in applying semiotic frameworks to analyse *orin òtẹ̀*, particularly within contemporary political contexts such as elections. This study addresses this lacuna through detailed semiotic analysis of *orin òtẹ̀* songs from Nigeria’s 2023 election, demonstrating their function as dynamic political instruments.

Research Objectives

This study conducts a rigorous semiotic analysis of Orin Òtẹ̀, examining linguistic devices such as metaphors, proverbs, and cultural symbols within fifteen songs from Nigeria's 2023 election. The analysis seeks to unveil nuanced meanings and communicative strategies employed in song-lashing performances, revealing how these elements construct political critiques while simultaneously mystifying and demystifying political actors. Additionally, it examines the influence of these linguistic features on societal perceptions and their function as mechanisms for social accountability.

Furthermore, the study contextualizes Orin Òtẹ̀ within Yorùbá political traditions, exploring its role in critiquing power structures during electoral periods. Through this exploration, the research contributes to scholarly understanding of the intersections between music, culture, and politics, using Orin Òtẹ̀ as a lens to examine the multidimensional nature of Yorùbá performance art.

Literature Review

Historical Context of Songs in Yorùbá Society

Music, embedded within traditional Yorùbá cultural fabric, served multifaceted roles extending beyond entertainment. Oladipo (2019, 434) demonstrates its communicative function during traditional marriage ceremonies, where song texts conveyed messages and established behavioral frameworks. This oral tradition, preserved by master musicians across generations, emphasized non-written transmission methods (Akpabot 1986, 1).

Music emerged as a potent informal education tool, with master musicians transmitting traditional knowledge and values through oral instruction, apprenticeships, and communal activities (Olusoji 2013, 59). It functioned as mediator between temporal and spiritual realms, facilitating social interaction and divine connection within Yorùbá performance contexts (Omojola 2010, 233). This spiritual-social interplay was particularly evident in masquerade rituals, where music carried deeper metaphysical meanings beyond visual and performative acts (Kasfir 1998, 18). They were also evident in festivals where music served as an integral expression of the people's culture, contributing to religious observance (Olugbenga, 2014, 618).

Political Performance in Post-Independence Nigeria

Post-independence Southwest Nigeria witnessed continued deployment of music for political communication, becoming crucial in shaping political narratives and influencing public opinion. Political campaigns strategically employed music to connect with electorates, convey messages, and

mobilise citizens during electoral periods. A notable early example is Ulli Beier's analysis of electioneering in 1960s Nigeria, where he examines the role of Yorùbá oral humor and satire in campaigns. Beier describes Yorùbá humor as "baroque and earthy, never vicious. It is playful banter that knows about the weaknesses of human beings, but it never despises them" (Beier 1960/2001, 144). This characterization resonates with the function of Orin Òtẹ̀ as a non-malicious tool for critiquing political figures, extending traditional oral traditions into modern electoral battles. Beier's observations demonstrate the playful yet accountable nature of such performances, providing historical precedent for the song-lashing analyzed in this study.

Semiotics and Cultural Studies in Campaign Songs

Semiotic analysis unveils symbols, metaphors, and cultural elements employed in political music communication, proving instrumental in deciphering nuanced meanings and understanding cultural contexts within which messages operate. Cultural studies enriches this analysis by providing insights into music's role as medium for persuasion, mobilisation, socialisation, and empowerment in political communication (McNaire 2011, 4).

McCombs and Shaw's (1972) Agenda Setting theory underscores mass media's role, including music media, in directing public attention to specific political issues. This unidirectional influence suggests that music can shape public perceptions by highlighting or downplaying particular political landscape features (McCombs and Shaw 1972, 177). Littlejohn (2002) further emphasizes media's spiral influence on society, wherein media agenda affects and shapes public agenda (Littlejohn 2002, 230).

While these previous studies including Oladipo (2019) and Titus and Bello (2012), have highlighted Yorùbá music's cultural and communicative roles, they rarely employ semiotic approaches to examine specific linguistic and symbolic elements within political contexts. Research on Orin Òtẹ̀ remains scarce, with minimal attention to contemporary political applications during elections. This study addresses these limitations by providing focused semiotic analysis of Orin Òtẹ̀ songs from Nigeria's 2023 election, offering new insights into their political efficacy.

Theoretical Framework

Semiotics: Linguistic Devices and Metaphors

Semiotics examines signs as entities significantly substituting for something else (Peirce 1940, 101). Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model identifies three integral components: representamen (the sign itself), object (what the sign refers to), and interpretant (the product of their connection). These

elements remain inseparable in semiosis, functioning to determine each other and elucidate the sign (Peirce 1940, 99-100).

Peirce classifies representamen into qualisign (qualities like color), sinsign (physical reality or shape), and legisign (laws or rules governing a concept, such as the sound of a whistle in a football match) (Peirce 1940, 101). This classification system contributes to understanding how signs operate within given contexts, highlighting their varied roles and applications.

Saussure's contributions focus on signifier-signified relationships, where signs emerge from their association, termed 'signification' (Saussure 1983, 67). Saussure emphasizes the arbitrariness of signs, asserting that their relationship relies on social and cultural conventions. This arbitrariness is particularly evident in linguistic signs, where collective agreement determines the meaning of a word (Saussure, 1983, 101). Saussure's model challenges the notion of naturalised meanings, cautioning against assuming that signs perceived as natural inherently possess intrinsic meanings (Culler 1975, 5).

Riffaterre introduces nuanced literary analysis perspectives, emphasizing textual representation multiplicity and meaning's dual nature (Riffaterre 1978, 3). His concept of "stylistic unit" reveals how grammatical disruptions lead to semiosis, allowing readers to access textual significance (Riffaterre 1983, 12).

Barthes extends semiotic discourse by emphasizing signs' arbitrary nature and artificiality in communication systems. His anti-essentialist stance asserts that signs operate on continuums from 'iconic' to 'arbitrary' (Rosita 2017, 61), providing frameworks for understanding varying meaning degrees embedded in songs.

Cultural Studies Perspective

Cultural studies amalgamates diverse intellectual fields, redirecting attention to power margins and examining subcultures, popular media, and music. Rather than reinforcing established authority, it explores subversive potential of ordinary and marginal social groups (Czaplicka et al. 1995, 3), viewing people as potential producers of new social values and cultural languages.

Raymond Williams' cultural materialism provides critical theoretical framework, rejecting idealist culture conceptions while advocating focus on communities' ways of life and values at specific times. Williams categorizes culture into dominant, residual, and emergent forms, reflecting Antonio Gramsci's hegemony model and introducing the concept of a "structure of feeling" to elucidate the intangibles that define an era (Williams 1977, 19; 1989, 151).

Historical and Sociopolitical Contexts

Yorùbá history demonstrates oral art's pivotal role in navigating complex sociopolitical situations through daily life integration. Oral poets functioned as

stewards of knowledge and hope while communicating moral precepts related to contemporary issues. Their intrinsic connection to societal values granted them immunity, exemplified by the aphorism “Oba kii polorin” (the King does not kill the singer).

Historical instances illustrate power struggles between authorities and oral artists using their medium for social critique. During festivals, artists fearlessly criticised privileged society members who transgressed moral boundaries. This dynamic proved so potent that it led to Alááfin Jáàyin’s suicide when masquerade singers arranged performances to expose his alleged murder of his son Olúsi. The accompanying song preserved this event: “Ó kù déédé ká kó iwì wò Akéşan, Oba Jáàyin terí gbàşò” (Just before iwì chanters started performing at Akéşan, King Jáàyin caused his own head to be wrapped in a shroud) (Isola 1992, 19).

Another instance involved Alááfin Ládìgbòlù (1911-1944) attempting to punish the Àgbórako masquerade for criticizing his messengers’ lawless behaviour. Public demonstration demanding the masquerade’s release reminded the king of the rule: “*Oba kii polorin.*” Agborako was released. On yet another occasion, anonymous popular poetry was used to banish an erring Ibadan chief from the town. Suspected of masterminding several burglaries, he became the butt of scathing satiric songs: “*Eégún sọ kókó / Òrişà sọ kókó / Dàda Ìbàdàn sọ kókó mórùn / Kò lè bàà rilé kó!*” [meaning: Masquerades tie bells / Deities tie bells / Dada of Ibadan ties a bell around his neck / Looking for a house to burgle]. The public shame caused by the song resulted in the chiefs exile. A similar and more familiar example is the song used by the women in Soyinka’s *Áké* to Aláké’s insensitivity and Atùpá’s duplicity: “*Òbò Atùpá ló dijà silẹ / Aláké olókò eşẹ*” (Soyinka 1981, 220) [meaning: Atùpá’s vagina started the strife, Aláké, with the penis of a poisonous rat]. In fact, there are countless examples of the way in which Yorùbá oral artist used their medium to criticise those in power.

These examples highlight oral literature’s potency as social accountability tool, bringing tangible consequences for power abuse. The cleansing role extended beyond individuals to societal moral lapses, with oral artists using annual festivals to expose recent moral transgressions. Echoing this tradition, Ulli Beier (1960/2001), emphasizes the non-vicious essence of Yorùbá humor: “baroque and earthy, never vicious. It is playful banter that knows about the weaknesses of human beings, but it never despises them” (p. 144). This perspective explains how Orin Òtẹ, as a modern extension, employs metaphors and proverbs for political critique while maintaining cultural respect, aligning with historical uses in power struggles. This oral literary ecosystem became an essential information repository, imparting knowledge about tradition, culture,

language, and moral instruction while ensuring cultural continuity and guiding contemporary behaviour.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design, utilizing semiotic analysis as the primary method to examine *orin òtẹ̀* songs from the 2023 Nigerian election. The research aims to uncover the linguistic devices, cultural elements, and symbolic meanings embedded in these songs, and to understand their role in political communication and social commentary within Yorùbá society.

Data Collection

Selection of Songs

The data for this study consists of fifteen Orin Òtẹ̀ songs selected based on their relevance to the 2023 Nigerian election. The selection criteria included the songs' prominence in campaign events, their popularity on social media platforms, and their representation of diverse themes related to the election. This purposive sampling ensured a comprehensive analysis of the songs' political and cultural significance.

Ethnographic Approach

To gain a deeper understanding of the context and cultural nuances of Orin Òtẹ̀, an ethnographic approach was adopted. This involved participant observation at campaign rallies where the songs were performed, as well as interviews with oral artists and audience members. The participant observation allowed for the collection of data on the performative aspects of the songs, including gestures, expressions, and audience interactions. Interviews provided insights into the artists' intentions and the audience's interpretations of the songs.

Semiotic Analysis

The semiotic analysis of the songs was conducted using the frameworks of Charles Sanders Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure. The lyrics of the selected songs were transcribed and analysed to identify signifiers and signified, as well as representamen's, objects, and interpretants. Musical elements such as melody, rhythm, and instrumentation were also examined to understand their semiotic significance. Additionally, the performative aspects observed during participant observation were analysed to uncover non-verbal signs and their contributions to the overall meaning of the songs.

For the transcription of lyrics, audio recordings of the songs were used, and the transcriptions were cross verified by multiple researchers to ensure

accuracy. The analysis of musical elements was conducted using audio analysis software to identify key features such as tempo, key, and instrumentation.

Limitations

One limitation of this study is the study's focus on a specific election and a limited number of songs may limit the generalisability of the findings. However, the in-depth analysis provides valuable insights into the role of Orin Ọ̀tẹ̀ in political communication during the 2023 Nigerian election.

Data Presentation:

Song Lyrics

English Translation

Song 1:

Call: Fúnkẹ̀ ò l'òkọ,

Fúnkẹ̀ is without a husband

Response: Bí Jẹ̀ndò ò l'aya

Jẹ̀ndò is without a wife

Call: Fúnkẹ̀ ò l'òkọ o,

Funke is without a husband o

Response: Jẹ̀ndò ò l'aya

And Jandor is without a wife

Call: E sọ́ fún wọn pé, ayé ẹ̀ wádìí

Tell them that we have done our findings

Response: Kọ́ yé má t'Èkó jẹ́ mọ́

They should stop trying to deceive Lagos

Call: Èkó ò gò

Lagosians are not fools

Response: Kán yé má t'Èkó jẹ́ mọ́

They should stop trying to deceive Lagos

Drum: Ẹ̀ni tó bá ẹ̀lenu jẹ̀mbé

(Sound of the *gangan* drum)

Song 2

Call: Bó wù yín ẹ́ kó Nàirà

If they like they should hoard the Naira

Response: Ohun ẹ́ rí ẹ́ kó

Anything they see they should hoard

Call: Bó wù yín ẹ̀gbẹ̀pò lé

If you like release the hoarded fuel

Response: Ohun ẹ́ rí ẹ́ kó

Anything they see they should hoard

Call: Ìgbò òtẹ́ yín

Your disgrace-intended electoral system

Response: Bùkọ́lá máa ní

Will result in blessings for us

Call: Ìgbò òtẹ́ yín

Your disgrace-intended electoral system

Response: Àwa l'òkàn o

It is our turn

Call: Bó wù yín Èkó Nàirà

If they like they should hoard the Naira

Response: Ohun ẹ́ rí ẹ́ kó

Anything they see they should
hoard

Song 3

Call: Èlẹ̀wòn ni Jẹ̀ndò, Sánwó ni
Gómìnà

Jandor is a prisoner, Sanwo
is the Governor

Call: Sára sọ pé...

Let's all say...

Response: Tí Sánwó bá wòlé,

If Sanwo, gets to win,

Response: Jẹ̀ndò á sì máa
gbá lẹ̀ fún un

Jandor would be sweeping
for him

Song 4

Úmbẹ̀rẹ̀là wòn ma ti já

Their umbrella is broken

Ó ti já pátá

It is completely broken

Òjò á pa,

The rain would beat them

Òjò á pa kìşà l'ara wòn

The rain would beat hell out of
them

Úmbẹ̀rẹ̀là wòn ti já

Their umbrella is broken

Song 5

Ìpàdé d'ọ̀jọ̀ ibò,

We will meet at the polls

B'ẹ̀yin lẹ̀ jùwá lọ,

Whether you are superior to us

B'áwa la jù yín lọ,

Or we are superior to you

Ìpàdé d'ọ̀jọ̀ ibò.

We will meet at the polls

Èbí bàbá yín lèrè,

Go and ask your fathers some
questions

B'áwa la jù yín lọ,

Whether we are superior to you

B'ẹ̀yin lẹ̀ jùwá lọ,

Or you are superior to us

Èbí bàbá yín lèrè,

Go and ask your fathers some
questions

Kài l'ọ̀lọ̀hun lówó

Hand him over to God

Ọ̀rẹ̀ t'án lékú sí, t'ín léde sí ni,

The friend we are sending death to
one

Kài l'ọ̀lọ̀hun lówó

Hand him over to God

‘Dẹ̀bísí, ọ̀wọ̀ wá l'óbòsí,

‘Debisi, It fell right on our laps

ọ̀wọ̀ wá l'óbòsí

It fell right on our laps

Ìwé t'ẹ̀ kọ, kọ, kọ,

The Letters you wrote tirelessly

T'ẹ̀ sùn, t'ẹ̀ wò,

With sleeplessness and undivided
attention

ọ̀wọ̀ wá l'óbòsí

It fell right on our laps

Àtẹ̀nì kìnì, Àtẹ̀nì kejì,

And the first person, and second
person,

Àtẹ̀ní kẹ̀ta, Àtẹ̀ní kẹ̀rin,
 Àtẹ̀ní karùn-ún, Àtẹ̀ní kẹ̀fà,
 Àtẹ̀ní keje, Àtẹ̀ní kẹ̀jọ,
 Àtẹ̀ní kẹ̀sàn-án, Àtẹ̀ní kẹ̀wàá,
 Wón ó jẹ̀ gbèsè kún gbèsè ni,
 Alárú tó l'òun ó pe Oba léjọ́,
 Wón ó jẹ̀ gbèsè kún gbèsè ni
 Ìpàdẹ̀ d'òjọ̀ ibò.

and the third person, and the fourth
 person
 and the fifth person and the sixth
 person,
 and the seventh person, and eight
 person,
 and the ninth person, and the tenth
 person
 They will pile debts upon debts
 The messenger who goes to query
 the king
 They will pile debts upon debts
 We will meet at the polls

Song 6:

Ebí n p'ejò, ahún yọ
 Àtàhùn àti ejò, ẹ̀ran jije
 Ìjàpá ò lè jẹ̀ okuta
 Afẹ̀ní tí a bá t'ìjù fún
 B'án ẹ̀ kó bàjẹ̀
 Kò má lè bàjẹ̀ fún ẹ̀
 Láyé yìí o
 Tinubu ni Leader
 Èni n bínú, ó bì sí yàrà ẹ̀ nikan

the tortoise wanders, The snake is
 hungry
 Both snake and tortoise are also
 preys
 The tortoise cannot eat stones
 Except we let it
 If they try to ruin it for you
 It won't get ruined
 Tinubu is the leader
 whoever is dissatisfied
 Must hide the dissatisfaction in
 their closet.

Song 7

B'ókọ̀ mi ẹ̀ PDP,
 Mára yà p'ábẹ̀ mi mó,
 Ohun tí ó desire yẹn,
 T'ó bá dì l'alẹ̀ kò s'àyè fún,
 T'ó bá dì l'alẹ̀ kò s'àyè fún o,
 B'ókọ̀ mi ẹ̀ PDP,
 Mára yá fún l'óyàn mu,
 B'ókọ̀ mi ẹ̀ APC,
 Mára yá fún l'óyàn mu,

If my husband supports PDP
 I will close my legs
 (I will deny him of) That thing he
 desires
 At night, he doesn't gets what he
 wants
 At night, he doesn't gets what he
 wants
 If my husband supports PDP
 I will close my legs
 If my husband supports APC
 I will give him my breasts

T'ó bá dì l'alẹ́ àyè wà fún,	When night comes, he gets what he wants
T'ó bá dì l'alẹ́ àyè wà fún o,	When night comes, he gets what he wants
B'ókọ mi ẹ APC,	If my husband supports APC
Máa yá fún l'ọyàn mu o,	I will give him my breasts

Song 8

Èdìgbò f'Akínjide,	Vote for Akinjide
Èdìgbò f'Akínjide o	Vote for Akinjide o
Kò ní f'owó mu beer,	He won't use your money to drink beer
Kò ní f'owó ta tẹ́tẹ́	He won't use your money to play bet

Song 9

Alákòrí lọ n'ílẹ̀ yìi ooo,	The stubborn one is gone from our land
Ajànkòró dùgbẹ̀ dùgbẹ̀,	We celebrate
Alákòrí lọ n'ílẹ̀ yìi ooo,	The stubborn one is gone from our land
Ajànkòró dùgbẹ̀ dùgbẹ̀,	We celebrate

Song 10

Èrùkù là rí o, ak'èròdá	All we have seen is dust, without any coatings
Jìbìtì lẹ̀yí o	This is fraudulent
Bùkọ́lá ọ̀lẹ̀	Bukola the thief
Èni ayé bá sùn	Whoever is tired of life
Kó kòrí sí t'ẹ́	Should leave this life
Ayé ọ̀ sù wá o	We are not tired of life
Ó bá Ramoni lọ	So we follow Ramoni
Èni ayé bá sùn, kó kòrí sí t'ẹ́	Whoever is tired of life should leave this life

Song 11

Odò ti gb'òníyẹ̀yẹ̀ lọ,	The river has taken the unserious ones away
Kò wà tán?	Is it not finished?
Èni bá wù	If anyone likes
Kó jẹ̀ sódà	let them jump in the river

Kó má b'ò mí lọ!

and drown away

Song 12

Kò sí ìdáríjì f'èni tó bá dà'lẹ̀

There is no forgiveness for
betrayal

Ayà fi kàn bá'lẹ̀ lọ

Except the betrayer exiles
themselves

Song 13

Alábòsí inú à run wọn pé
Jinnà sí wọn k'ì sánmọ̀ sílẹ̀ o

The mischievous are evil-minded
Stay far from them as the sky is far
from the earth

Ará ló n tà wọn

They have uneasiness in their body,

Şẹ̀ mọ̀ o?

Did you know?

T'án bá n sunkún s'ójú

When they have tears in their eyes
the weeping stretches till the farm
for the birds

T'érèmo tí tí tì s'òkò f'ẹ̀yẹ

Let it be that the tree disappears
into the forest

Ẹ̀ jẹ̀ kó lọ ìgi s'ònu sí igbó

They stretched so high, yet they
couldn't meet it

Wọn dúró tí tí owó wọn ò tó

The rope is difficult to tie

Ìsò ò máa ẹ̀ tán ní kókó

The trouser without ropes has be
come a problem

Şòkòtò tí kò l'òkùn ó dákítí yàn o

On the head of the mischievous

Ó dọ̀rì àwọn òlòtẹ̀ o

Song 14

Tinubu l'áwa ò ẹ̀ ẹ̀ x2

We will support Tinubu

Ẹ̀ bá gbógbógbó bí ajá

If you like, you may bark like a dog

Ẹ̀ bá kan-kan-kan bí àgbò
ram

If you like, you may hoof like a

Tinubu l'áwa ò ẹ̀ ẹ̀

We will support Tinubu

Ẹ̀ bá d'ènu wógẹ̀

If you like raise your mouth up

K'ẹ̀ d'ènu wàsẹ̀

If you like put your mouth down

Tinubu l'áwa ò ẹ̀ ẹ̀.

We will support Tinubu

Song 15

Àwa ti gbà ìjọba lówọ̀ wọn

We have taken power from them

Ní ilú Abuja

In Abuja

Yòò máa dùn wọn ní	It will continue to pain them
Yòò máa dùn wọn ní	It will continue to pain them
Àwọn ń s'ẹ́jọ́,	They are fighting cases in court
Àwa ń s'ìjọba	We are handling the affairs of the state
Yòò máa dùn wọn ní	It will be painning them

Semiotics of Orin Òtẹ̀: Linguistic Devices, Cultural Elements, and Symbolic Meanings in Political Satire

In this section, we explore the semiotics of *orin òtẹ̀* by analysing how its linguistic devices, cultural elements, and symbolic meanings function as signs to convey political critiques. Drawing on Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model of the representamen (the sign itself), object (what the sign refers to), and interpretant (the meaning derived from the sign), as well as Ferdinand de Saussure's dyadic model of the signifier (the form of the sign) and signified (the concept it represents), we examine how these songs communicate complex messages within Yorùbá oral traditions. An application of these theoretical frameworks help illuminate the ways in which metaphors, proverbs, and cultural symbols serve as powerful tools for political commentary, thereby resonating with audiences through shared cultural knowledge.

These Orin Òtẹ̀ songs showcase a nuanced and sophisticated use of linguistic devices and metaphors, designed to convey political messages with finesse and satire. Rooted in the Yorùbá language, these songs amplify cultural resonance, imparting profound depth to political commentary. One discernible linguistic device prevalent in these songs is the adept incorporation of proverbs, idioms, and colloquial expressions—integral components of Yorùbá culture—utilised to convey nuanced meanings and facilitate layered interpretations. Across the spectrum of selected *orin òtẹ̀* songs, a commonality is the use of metaphors as powerful tools for song-lashing, collectively weaving a narrative tapestry of political critique.

The following analyses of individual Orin Òtẹ̀ songs demonstrate how semiotic concepts deepen our understanding of their political significance.

Song 1: "Fúnkẹ̀ ọ̀ l'ọ̀kọ̀, Bí Jẹ̀ndọ̀ ọ̀ l'aya"

This song targets rival political candidates by exploring the theme of failed marriages, using the metaphor "aye ti se wadi" (the earth has done its findings) to engage the audience in its critique.

The phrases "Fúnkẹ̀ ọ̀ l'ọ̀kọ̀" (Fúnkẹ̀ is without a husband) and "Bí Jẹ̀ndọ̀ ọ̀ l'aya" (Jẹ̀ndọ̀ is without a wife) serve as representamens (Peirce), symbolizing personal and political inadequacies (object). The metaphor "aye ti se wadi" acts as another representamen, with "the earth" signifying a collective

judgment or universal truth. The interpretant is the audience's recognition that the candidates' personal failings mirror their unsuitability for leadership. Alternatively, in Saussure's terms, these phrases function as signifiers, evoking the signified concept of incompetence, deeply tied to Yorùbá cultural values associating marital stability with reliability.

The daring approach to sensitive issues exemplified in this song employs metaphors that tap into cultural perceptions surrounding marriage in Yorùbá society. The metaphor "aye ti se wadi / the earth has done its findings" employs a commonality across all humans—the earth—and subtly attempts to co-opt everyone in the agenda of the song, adding a layer of indirectness that commands attention and engagement. This artful choice not only exemplifies linguistic prowess but also serves to criticise the opposition by highlighting personal shortcomings.

Song 2: "Bó wù yín ẹ́ kó Nàìrà"

This song critiques cash and fuel scarcities during the election, using the metaphor "Bó wù yín ẹ́ kó Nàìrà" (If they like they should hoard the Naira) to accuse the ruling party of economic sabotage. The phrase "Bó wù yín ẹ́ kó Nàìrà" functions as a signifier (Saussure), directly linked to the signified concept of economic mismanagement. In Peirce's framework, it serves as a representamen, with the hoarding of money and fuel representing the ruling party's manipulation of resources (object). The interpretant is the audience's understanding of this as a pointed critique, amplified by the song's repetition, which underscores the urgency and public frustration.

The metaphorical use of "Bó wù yín ẹ́ kó Nàìrà / If they like they should hoard the Naira / Ohun ẹ́ rí ẹ́ kó / Anything they see they should hoard" creates a vivid image of economic challenges during the 2023 election period, subtly accusing the ruling party and the President of deliberate resource manipulation.

Song 3: "Èlẹ̀wòṅ ni Jẹ̀ndò, Sánwó ni Gómìnà"

The song derogatorily labels the opposition candidate "Èlẹ̀wòṅ" (prisoner) to disgrace him, contrasting him with the incumbent governor. The term "Èlẹ̀wòṅ" acts as a signifier (Saussure), evoking the signified concept of disgrace and inadequacy. In Peirce's terms, it is a representamen, with the object being the candidate Jandor, and the interpretant being the audience's perception of his unfitness for office. This direct insult leverages the cultural stigma of imprisonment, making it a blunt yet effective sign of political critique. The metaphorical narrative aligns with cultural values, portraying imprisonment as a disgraceful act and strategically aiming to disgrace and de-popularise the opposition candidate.

Song 4: "Úmbérélà wọn ma ti já"

The song employs the metaphor of a "broken umbrella" to highlight the opposition party's disunity and vulnerability, with rain symbolizing their exposure. The umbrella is the main opposition party's symbol which implies unity and protection. Thus, the "broken umbrella" serves as a representamen (Peirce), symbolizing the opposition's fractured unity (object). The interpretant is the audience's recognition of the party's weakness, reinforced by the imagery "Òjò á pa kiṣà l'ara wọn" (Rain will beat them). As a signifier (Saussure), the broken umbrella directly signifies political disintegration, drawing on its cultural role as a symbol of protection to emphasise the party's failure. This song vividly employs the metaphor of a broken umbrella as a double entendre symbolizing both the opposition party's identity (their logo) and their compromised unity. The vivid imagery, coupled with the statement "Òjò á pa kiṣà l'ara wọn / The rain would beat hell out of them," utilizes natural elements to deride the opposition, portraying them as vulnerable and ineffective. The repetitive nature of the chorus enhances the impact, making it a derisive anthem that paints the opposition as inept.

Song 5: "Ìpàdé d'ọjọ ibò"

This song adapts a war chant, using provocative lyrics like "Èbí bàbá yín lèrè" (Go ask your father) to disrespect the opposition and rally supporters. The phrase "Èbi baba yin lere" functions as a representamen, with the act of questioning one's father symbolizing a challenge to the opposition's legitimacy (object). The interpretant is the audience's recognition of this as a cultural insult, rooted in Yorùbá values of familial respect. In Saussurean terms, it acts as a signifier, evoking the signified concept of disrespect, framing the political contest as a battle of honour. The disrespectful language is used to challenge the honour and reputation of the opposition, framing the political contest as a battle itself. The metaphorical use of a contest song's communicates a sense of readiness for this political battle, tapping into cultural sensitivities to provoke a reaction.

Song 6: "Èbí ń p'ejò, ahún yọ"

Drawing on a historical Yorùbá chant, the song uses the tortoise, snake, and hunter as symbols of political actors to depict power dynamics. The tortoise, snake, and hunter are representamens, symbolizing cunning vulnerability (tortoise), limited danger (snake), and ultimate authority (hunter) as political entities (objects). The interpretant is the audience's understanding of the power struggles, with the hunter representing the preferred candidate. This cultural allegory enriches the critique by connecting it to shared historical narratives.

This song draws on a historical Yorùbá civil war chant to symbolise power dynamics within the ruling party—APC. While the snake is more dangerous than the tortoise, it cannot eat the tortoise due to its shell, so the tortoise sprouts around in the presence of the snake. Meanwhile, both the tortoise and the snake are game for the hunter. The tortoise, the snake, and the hunter were originally used to represent Ibadan and other smaller Yorùbá towns during the Yorùbá civil war, while the hunter was used to represent the colonial authorities. This memorable chant was then repurposed during the election to belittle the opposition and elevate their preferred candidate to the position of ‘hunter’. By referencing this historical context, the song subtly communicates complex relationships and power struggles within the party.

Song 7: “B’ókọ mi ẹ̀ ẹ̀ PDP”

The song uses metaphors of intimate relationships, humorously threatening to withhold “bedroom action” based on political allegiance. The metaphor of withholding intimacy serves as a representamen, with political allegiance as the object. The interpretant is the humorous message that political choices carry personal stakes. As a signifier (Saussure), the intimate act directly signifies loyalty, using cultural taboos to create a memorable critique.

By threatening to withhold “bedroom action” based on their husband’s political choice, the women introduce a humorous yet impactful dimension to the campaign. The call-and-response style adds a communal and participatory element to the performance. This technique, rooted in African musical traditions, ensures a sense of unity and collective engagement, aligning with Yorùbá cultural practices.

Song 8: “Èdìgbò f’ Akínjìde”

The song contrasts two candidates’ personas, using metaphors to highlight one’s discipline versus the other’s frivolity. The phrase “Kò ní f’owó mu beer” (He won’t use your money to drink beer) acts as a signifier, signifying fiscal responsibility and integrity (signified). In Peirce’s terms, it is a representamen, with the object being the candidate’s moral character, and the interpretant being the audience’s perception of his suitability, rooted in cultural values of discipline. This song strategically exploits the public persona of the opposition’s candidate as a vivacious socialite, contrasting it with the disciplined image of the rival candidate, Akínjìde, a retired Captain in the Military. This clever use of metaphor and direct language taps into cultural perceptions of morality, discipline, and suitability for public office.

Song 9: "Alákọrì lọ n'ílẹ̀ yìí ooo"

The song mocks a governor with metaphors like "celebrating" the departure of the "stubborn one." "Alákọrì" (stubborn one) serves as a representamen, symbolizing the governor's disobedience (object). The interpretant is the audience's recognition of this as a critique, with the celebratory "Ajànkòró dùgbẹ̀ dùgbẹ̀" acting as a signifier of victory (signified), leveraging cultural disdain for stubbornness.

This song mocks Governor Akinwùmí Ambòdé after the 2018 APC Gubernatorial Elections primaries, drawing on Yorùbá cultural beliefs about stubbornness and disobedience. The line "Ajànkòró dùgbẹ̀ dùgbẹ̀" intentionally uses folk traditional Yorùbá tunes, evoking a sense of cultural nostalgia and making the song resonate deeply with the audience.

Song 10: "Èrùkù là rí o, ak'èròdá"

The song uses "dust" and "fraudulent" metaphors to criticise a past administration's neglect and corruption. "Èrùkù" (dust) is a representamen, symbolizing neglect (object), while "jibìtì" (fraudulent) acts as a signifier of corruption (signified). The interpretant is the audience's understanding of the administration's failures, conveyed through symbols of decay and deceit.

The metaphorical reference to "dust" symbolizes an untarred road—neglect and abandonment of government responsibility under the previous administration, while the term "fraudulent" serves as a pointed accusation, emphasizing perceived shortcomings in the past administration.

Song 11: "Odò ti gb'òníyèyè lọ"

The song uses a "flooded river" metaphor to depict political defeat. The "flooded river" functions as a representamen, with the flood symbolizing overwhelming defeat (object). The interpretant is the audience's perception of the opposition's inevitable loss, enhanced by water's cultural significance as a force of destruction and renewal. The vivid imagery of a flooded river creates a visual representation of political defeat with the force of a flooded river drowning its opposition which is dismissed as "òníyèyè / unserious ones."

Song 12: "Kò sí idárijì f'eni tó bá dà'lé"

The song emphasizes zero tolerance for betrayal, using exile as a metaphor for traitors. "Kò sí idárijì" (There is no forgiveness) is a signifier, linked to the signified unforgivability of betrayal. The exile metaphor serves as a representamen, with exclusion as the object, and the interpretant as the audience's recognition of disloyalty's severe consequences. This metaphorical perspective on betrayal emphasizes zero tolerance for betrayal in their political game,

leaving self-imposed exile as the only choice available to one who betrays, thereby adds a dramatic element to the political discourse.

Song 13: “Alábòsí inú à run wọn pé”

The song warns against “evil-minded” individuals, using metaphors to create a dichotomy between loyalists and dissenters. “Alábòsí” (mischievous) is a representamen, symbolizing dissenters (object), with the distance metaphor (“Jinnà sí wọn”) reinforcing their otherness. The interpretant is the call for unity, with the signifier evoking the signified need for vigilance.

This song therefore warns against trusting those with “evil-minded” intentions. It features a heightened emotional impact and contributes to a sense of unity among supporters. The use of the Waka musical style is a nod to post-colonial Yorùbá music traditions, carrying cultural significance and establishing a connection with historical forms of expression within the Yorùbá context.

Song 14: “Tinubu l’áwa ò şe”

The song demeans adversaries with “barking dogs” and “hoofing rams” metaphors. These animal comparisons are representamens, symbolizing rivals’ ineffectiveness (object). The interpretant is their perceived irrelevance, with the signifiers signifying powerlessness through ridicule. The metaphorical language demeans and diminishes the credibility of political adversaries, and it does have a persuasive impact.

Song 15: “Àwa ti gbà ijọba lówó wọn”

The song contrasts the ruling party’s governance with the opposition’s legal battles, using triumph and defeat metaphors. “Àwọn ń ṣ’ẹ́jọ́, Àwa ń ṣ’ijọba” (They are fighting cases, we are governing) acts as a signifier, signifying the opposition’s impotence (signified). As a representamen, it symbolizes their defeat (object), with the interpretant being the ruling party’s dominance. The metaphor creates a vivid contrast. Its use of legal battles as a symbol for political defeat, as has become the norm in Nigerian politics, introduces a layer of irony and mockery while underscoring the triumphal tone through the metaphorical dichotomy between legal battles and governance.

Musical Analysis and Semiotic Significance

The musical elements within Orin Òtẹ̀ function as sophisticated vehicles for political communication, with melody, rhythm, and instrumentation operating semiotically to amplify both meaning and emotional resonance. This analysis reveals distinct patterns across the song corpus that demonstrate strategic musical choices aligned with communicative intent.

Traditional Yorùbá talking drums in Song 1 establish cultural authenticity while creating participatory frameworks through call-and-response structures. These elements ensure a collective identity formation and shared political purpose among audiences. Similarly, Songs 3 and 4 employ fast-paced gyration formats that enhance communal engagement, with repetitive structures facilitating widespread participation and transforming individual performances into collective expressions of political allegiance.

The adoption of Fuji style in Song 2 demonstrates genre-specific political messaging, where accelerated rhythmic patterns intensify emotional impact and cultivate preparatory sentiment for political engagement. This musical urgency mirrors the lyrical content's dual battles, creating synesthetic reinforcement of the political message. Songs 5 and 7 employ similar competitive musical structures, with traditional instrumentation (gongs, drums) maintaining cultural resonance while the contest-song format amplifies competitive political atmospheres.

Song 9's integration of traditional melodies with processional performance creates authenticity through spontaneous verse creation, while Song 10's chant-like structure and unaccompanied vocal delivery emphasizes raw communicative directness. The absence of instrumentation in Song 10 serves as deliberate aesthetic choice, prioritizing vocal purity and immediate message transmission.

Contemporary adaptations appear in Songs 12 and 13, which blend traditional and modern instrumentation within festive contexts, creating hybrid musical experiences that bridge cultural authenticity with contemporary accessibility. Song 14's adaptation of established Yorùbá folk songs enhances cultural relatability, while gestural performance without instrumental accompaniment maximizes message clarity and directness.

The talking drum's prominence in Song 15 exemplifies traditional communicative practices adapted for digital dissemination, maintaining cultural engagement methods while expanding audience reach through social media platforms. This synthesis of traditional and contemporary distribution methods demonstrates the adaptive capacity of Orin Òtẹ̀ within evolving media reality.

The Role of Orin Òtẹ̀ and Song-Lashing in Social Order Maintenance

Orin Òtẹ̀ operates as a satirical discourse mechanism that critiques political figures through metaphorical language systems deeply embedded in Yorùbá cultural frameworks. The strategic deployment of cultural taboos—including references to marital failure and incarceration—leverages existing value

systems to reinforce social norms while simultaneously providing sanctioned spaces for political dissent.

This satirical function serves multiple societal purposes: it enables community expression of discontent, facilitates questioning of authority, and maintains dialogical engagement with political developments within culturally appropriate boundaries. The practice of song-lashing offers symbolic protest mechanisms that circumvent direct confrontation while preserving social cohesion through culturally recognised forms of criticism.

The cultural grounding of these songs through traditional melodies, rhythmic patterns, and metaphorical systems functions as identity reinforcement mechanism, maintaining continuity with historical practices while addressing contemporary political realities. This dual temporal engagement strengthens collective identity formation and ensures cultural transmission across generational boundaries.

Furthermore, the public nature of song-lashing creates accountability mechanisms for political figures, as the threat of satirical targeting serves as behavioural deterrent. This system contributes to social order maintenance by establishing consequences for actions deemed culturally inappropriate or politically problematic, operating within traditional frameworks of community regulation.

Orin Òtẹ̀ as Political Communication Strategy

The strategic employment of metaphorical language in *orin òtẹ̀* enhances persuasive capacity by simplifying complex political narratives into accessible and memorable formats. This communicative efficiency positions these songs as effective tools for public opinion influence and political allegiance formation.

The emotional and psychological dimensions of *orin òtẹ̀* create significant mobilisation potential through rhythmic and participatory elements that foster unity and collective purpose among political supporters. By engaging emotional registers including humour, nostalgia, triumph, and discontent, these songs generate strong audience responses that translate into active political engagement through voting behaviours and public demonstrations.

The subversive capacity of *orin òtẹ̀* operates through systematic undermining of opposition credibility via metaphorical ridicule and symbolic manipulation. This approach weakens rival political standing while strengthening preferred candidates through positive association and cultural validation.

Cultural authenticity embedded within these songs enhances their credibility and deepens audience resonance, creating stronger connections between

political messages and cultural identity. The integration with digital platforms amplifies reach and impact, transforming local cultural practices into viral political communication tools that influence opinion formation across expanded geographical and demographic boundaries.

Contemporary Relevance and Societal Implications

Orin òtẹ̀ maintains significant relevance within contemporary Yorùbá society as a dynamic cultural expression that adapts traditional forms to address modern political realities. The persistence of political and social discourse needs ensures continued relevance for these songs as communication vehicles that combine linguistic, cultural, and musical elements for maximum audience engagement.

The evolution of *orin òtẹ̀* reflects successful adaptation to changing media environments, with traditional forms now disseminated through social media platforms, expanding reach beyond geographical constraints. The 2023 electoral period demonstrated this expanded capacity, with songs like Song 15 achieving viral status on Twitter and TikTok, thereby influencing national discourse through digitally mediated cultural expression.

However, several challenges accompany this contemporary relevance. The oral nature of *orin òtẹ̀* creates preservation vulnerabilities, with many songs remaining undocumented and at risk of cultural loss without systematic archival intervention by cultural institutions. Additionally, the sharp satirical content, while culturally sanctioned, raises ethical considerations regarding the boundaries between legitimate political criticism and potentially defamatory personal attacks.

The contemporary deployment of *orin òtẹ̀* for political mobilisation, activism, and satirical commentary demonstrates both its adaptability and its potential for creating political divisiveness. While these songs effectively critique political figures and mobilise supporters, their capacity for exacerbating political tensions through personal attacks and inflammatory rhetoric warrants careful consideration of ethical boundaries within democratic discourse.

The global recognition achieved by some *orin òtẹ̀* performances reflects the universal appeal of culturally grounded political expression, suggesting broader implications for understanding how traditional forms can maintain relevance while adapting to contemporary communication technologies and political environments.

Recommendations for Preserving and Understanding This Unique Form of Cultural Expression

Preserving and understanding *orin òtẹ̀* requires a concerted effort to document, archive, and transmit this oral tradition to future generations. The following recommendations may contribute to the preservation of this unique form of cultural expression:

There should be collaborations with oral artists, scholars, and cultural institutions to document and transcribe *orin òtẹ̀* songs. Priority should be given to older ones as they are witnesses to the old and the new. Archives that house recordings, transcriptions, and contextual information should be created. A safe space for this might be Institute of African or Yorùbá Studies in various Nigerian Universities. These institutions should organise workshops and events that bring together oral artists, community members, and scholars. Such events can facilitate discussions, performances, and knowledge exchange to deepen the understanding of *orin òtẹ̀*. They could also establish digital platforms or repositories dedicated to *orin òtẹ̀*. This allows for broader access, facilitates research, and ensures that the tradition is not lost in the digital age.

Efforts should be made to integrate *orin òtẹ̀* into educational curricula at various levels. This ensures that younger generations are exposed to and understand the cultural significance and historical context of these songs. This is why we should encourage collaborations between oral artists, musicians, and contemporary artists to create new compositions that build upon the tradition while exploring modern themes.

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