Symposium: The Representation of Musical Practice and the Practice of Representation*

"Our Tradition is a Very Modern Tradition": Popular Music and the Construction of Pan-Yoruba Identity

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In *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* George Marcus and Michael Fischer pose a dilemma for those human sciences which rely upon ethnography as a mode of inquiry and representation, that is: "how to represent the embedding of richly described local cultural worlds in larger impersonal systems of political economy." This dilemma suggests a repositioning of ethnomusicological clichés about the "continuity of change" within an analytical framework concerned with global networks, the creation of nation-states and peoples, and the invention of tradition. "What makes representation challenging," they continue, "is the perception that the 'outside forces' in fact are an integral part of the construction and constitution of the 'inside,' the cultural unit itself, and must so be registered, even at the most intimate levels of cultural process" (1986:77).

In this article I deal with the role of contemporary popular music in the production of cultural identity among the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria. My argument rests upon the axiom that all human identities, no matter how deeply felt, are from an historical point-of-view mixed, relational, and conjunctural (Clifford 1988:10-11). Ethnomusicologists concerned to demonstrate the depth and authenticity of the traditions they study have

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often projected contemporary patterns of identity into the past. In sub-Saharan Africa, this habit of projection has sometimes involved unquestioning acceptance of reified cultural units (or "tribes") and bodies of tradition codified by "colonial administrators, missionaries, 'progressive traditionalists,' elders and anthropologists" (Ranger 1983:261-62). It appears that a good number of the societies represented in authoritative books about Africa—and, for that matter, in Murdock's Human Relations Area Files—are at least in part the products of colonialism, which had to create its objects in order to control its subjects.[1] The point—not in fact a terribly novel one, for those who study the origins of, say, European nationalisms—is that the temptation to read contemporary categories into the past, *especially when authoritative scholarly sources and informants do it as a matter of course*, is strong. In relation to the study of popular music I want to push this point a bit further, arguing that this sort of logical fallacy—seeing the ancestors of oysters as oysters—may distort our analyses not only of the past but also of contemporary sociomusical processes.

Early ethnomusicological references to change in African music generally portray it as a pathological index of cultural decay (see, for example, Hornbostel 1928:59-62). The notion of syncretism, introduced into ethnomusicology from anthropological acculturation theory after World War II (R. Waterman 1952), cast a more positive light upon musical change, and has frequently been deployed in analyses of African popular music (e.g., Hampton 1980; Coplan 1985:236-37; C. Waterman 1990:9). Recent writings on African popular music have focused on relationships among performance style, musical experience, and social identity, within a larger conceptual framework concerned with the distribution of power in society (see, for example, Keil and Keil 1977; Bemba 1984; Coplan 1985; Erlmann 1987; Kaemmer 1989; Meintjes 1990; C. Waterman 1990).

Africanist ethnomusicologists have written a good deal about the role of syncretic expressive forms in the construction of cosmopolitan cultures and ideologies, and in local processes of adaptation to the changes triggered by European colonialism and the incorporation of Africa into the capitalist world system. Thus far, however, little attention has been paid to another

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[1]For example, Wim van Binsbergen, in questioning the validity of "Chewa identity" as an organizing concept for historical research, suggests that,

> modern Central African tribes are not so much survivals from a pre-colonial past but rather largely colonial creations by colonial officers and African intellectuals. . . . Historians fail to qualify the alleged Chewa homogeneity against the historical evidence of incessant assimilation and dissociation of peripheral groups. . . . They do not differentiate between a seniority system of rulers imposed by the colonial freezing of political dynamics and the pre-colonial competitive, shifting, fluid imbalance of power and influence (van Binsbergen 1976:73-75; cited in Ranger 1983:248).

interesting dimension of popular music as a means of making history: not only as a form of social action directed at realizing a future, but also as a medium for the retrospective definition of tradition.

The Emergence of Pan-Yoruba Identity

There were no Yoruba—that is, no one who would have said "I am Yoruba"—before the early 19th century. As one writer has perhaps overzealously phrased the matter, "the word 'Yoruba' was nothing short of pure Greek to no less than 99% of the people now called Yorubas, when they first heard it being used for them as a common name" (Ademakinwa n.d.:49). The peoples of southwestern Nigeria, the Benin Republic, and Togo who are today referred to by scholars as "the Yoruba" were, until the late 19th century, organized into a series of some 15 to 20 independent polities, linked by shifting patterns of allegiance and competition. Politicians and others with a strategic interest in anchoring themselves in *ìjinlèẹ̀* (literally, "deep-in-the-ground") Yoruba tradition have long appealed to myths recounting the origins of all terrestrial life at the sacred city of Ile-Ifẹ̀. These narratives link the various monarchs to Oduduwa, the deified culture hero whose sons are said to have established the precolonial polities. None of the mythic narratives upon which claims of Yoruba ontological identity are based were collected before the mid-19th century, and it has been demonstrated that each was shaped by multiple, strategic reinterpretations in the light of competition among factions and kingdoms (Law 1973). Ethnic designations used in European and Arabic accounts of the 15th to 18th centuries refer exclusively to the individual polities, that is, to the Ọyọ́, the Ifẹ̀, the Ijẹ̀bu, and so on.

The term *Yariba* or *Yarba* appears to have originated among the Hausa, who applied it to their southern neighbors, the Ọyọ́. By 1800 Muslim Hausa clerics used this term to refer to the subjects of other kingdoms that had fallen under the suzerainty of the Ọyọ́ Empire, which by that time extended west to the present border of the Benin Republic, south almost to the Atlantic coast, and east to a frontier with the Benin Empire (Clapperton and Denham 1826, II:165). The Ọyọ́ themselves had adopted the designation *Yoruba* as a mode of self-reference by the early 19th century, a process probably encouraged by the high status associations of Hausa regal culture and Islam.

The first use of the term *Yoruba* in its modern sense appears in the writings of European missionary linguists in Sierra Leone, who worked with freed slaves deposited there by the British anti-slavery squadrons in the 1820s and 1830s. This usage, which implicitly supported the imperial claims of Ọyọ́ (often referred to as "Yoruba proper") and its powerful successor state, Ibadan, did not go unchallenged. For several decades the term *Aku*—

the name for the Yoruba community in Freetown, Sierra Leone, derived from the beginning of a standard greeting pattern—competed with the term *Yoruba* as an authoritative ethnological designation.[2]

The British administration, which sought to create manageable political units, and indigenous power brokers in hinterland towns, who sought strategic advantage in a still fluid colonial setting, were important agents in the emergence of modern pan-Yoruba identity. Of paramount importance, however, were two groups of repatriated slaves, the Saro—educated at mission schools in Sierra Leone—and the Amaro—*emancipados* from Brazil and Cuba who introduced distinctive syncretic styles of worship, food, dress, dance, and music developed under slavery in the Americas. These repatriate communities provided paradigms of a modern black culture grounded in indigenous tradition yet oriented toward the wider world.

Consciousness of a common Yoruba identity appears first to have emerged among the Sierra Leonean repatriates, who formed a literate black elite in the colonial power center of Lagos in the 19th century. The printing press, like the two world religions, was a crucial factor in the construction of modern Yoruba identity. Standard Yoruba, a lingua franca based on the Ọyọ dialect, was reduced to Roman script by Saro missionaries and disseminated via early translations of the Qur'an and Bible,[3] grammar school texts, and the first authoritative histories of the Yoruba. Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther, born in the Ọyọ area and educated in Freetown, published his *Yoruba Vocabulary and Yoruba Grammar*, both based upon the Ọyọ dialect, in 1842. The first newspaper in Standard Yoruba was printed in 1859 in the hinterland town of Abeokuta, a center for Christian proselytization. The most influential example of historical reconstruction by a Sierra Leonean repatriate, The Reverend Samuel Johnson's *The History of the Yorubas*, accepted Ọyọ mythology and imperial propaganda as historical fact, and served as the model for textbooks until the mid-20th century.

The racist exclusion of blacks from the highest ranks of the colonial hierarchy beginning in the 1890s led to the formation after World War I of

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[2]An editorial in the *Church Missionary Intelligencer* of January, 1856 exemplifies the controversy. For the last few years the name "Yoruba" has been very erroneously made use of in reference to the whole nation, supposing the Yoruba is the most powerful Aku tribe. But this appelation is liable to far greater objection than that of "Aku" and ought to be forthwith abandoned, for it is in the first place unhistorical, having never been used of the whole Aku nation by anybody except for the last few years conventionally by the Missionaries (cited in Fadipe 1970[1939]:29).

[3]The interaction of Islam—which had probably entered what is now Yorubaland by the 16th century—and Christianity is a complex topic. The first translation of the Qur'an into Yoruba was the work of Christian missionaries, who also incorporated Muslim terms (e.g., *adura*, "prayer") into the Bible.

nationalist alliances between Western-educated Saro leaders such as Herbert Macaulay, Muslim clerics and indigenous royalty, and the expanding population of migrant workers from hinterland towns and villages. The 1920s and 1930s saw an efflorescence of political activity, the formation of scores of independent syncretic churches (e.g., Cherubim and Seraphim, Christ Apostolic Church), the rise of modern Muslim associations formed to provide a combination of Qur'anic and European education (e.g., Ansar-Ud-Din, Nawar-Ud-Din), and the emergence and diffusion of popular theatrical and musical styles that self-consciously referred to a generalized Yoruba tradition, and for the most part utilized Standard Yoruba dialect. In the period following World War II, the contemporary pattern of tripolar competition among the Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa crystallized, and the cooptation of traditional symbols—such as chieftaincy titles and the *dùndún* talking drum—became a crucial resource for politicians seeking to mobilize the newly enfranchised masses. The need to create allegiances across precolonial boundaries lent added intensity to the manipulation of symbols of Yoruba unity.

If the reach of pan-Yoruba identity is today wide, it is also shallow, particularly in marginal areas of Yorubaland. The historian Ọbayemi, for example, has recently asserted that "there are no exclusive cultural institutions that are universal among all Yoruba-speaking peoples" (Obayemi 1983:74). Even the notion of a unified Yoruba language is open to question. As I have suggested, Standard Yoruba, codified by missionary linguists, is in fact based upon one dialectical variant. In its broadest definition, the Yoruba language is in fact a dialect chain whose most distant members verge on mutual incomprehensibility. Code-switching, particularly moving to "deeper" levels of a dialect to elude the comprehension of strangers, is common. Similarly, what most scholars and government cultural officers refer to as Yoruba music is an amorphous category comprised of numerous, often quite distinctive local practices. When ethnomusicologists write about "traditional Yoruba music" they are generally referring either to a core set of genres disseminated over a wide area by the indigenous empires of the 18th and 19th centuries (for example, *dùndún* or *bàtá* drumming and certain specialized styles of praise singing), or to localized styles performed by and for people who would identify themselves as Yoruba only in interethnic contexts and certainly not while participating in community-based ceremonial events.

For most individuals, the most common and deeply felt allegiances are still focused on the ancestral kingdoms, symbolized by facial scarification patterns and dialect. Interviews with elders in rural areas and smaller towns suggest that Yoruba was not a common unit of political identification until as late as the 1930s (Laitin 1986:7). Writing around 1950, a Yoruba historian stated that "many aged people of Abeokuta, Ijebu, Ile-Ife, Ilesha, Ekiti and

Ondo had, and still have a very strong aversion for being known and called 'Yorubas' " (Ademakinwa n.d.:49). In 1982 a *jùjú* bandleader from the eastern region of Ekiti, in discussing marketing strategies, told me that he commonly recorded the A side of a record in his dialect, and the B side in what he called "Yoruba," so that it would sell over a wider area. In this context, he saw Ekiti and Yoruba as distinct levels of identification, subject to strategic manipulation; yet it was clear that his primary sense of self resided in the local ancestral region. When members of the other groups make derogatory remarks about the Ọyọ and Ibadan, they often refer to them as "those Yoruba."

Local allegiances perdure, yet it is clear that the image of a unified Yoruba people has increasingly gained a foothold as a hegemonic (that is, a taken-for-granted) framework for cultural identity. This is particularly true for those individuals most closely articulated with the capitalist world system that links Nigeria to Europe and the Americas. We have seen how the focusing of Yoruba identity has depended at every stage upon interaction with others; that the nascent sense of belonging to a larger cultural collectivity has been catalyzed by external perspectives introduced through regional and international political and economic networks. Distance encourages generalization, and it is easier to see the Yoruba as an undifferentiated whole from Sokoto, London, Freetown, or Bahia.

Popular Music and Yoruba Identity

Popular music—suspended in and energized by a web of socioeconomic relationships connecting international markets to local boom-bust economies—is a privileged medium for the imaginative modeling of Yoruba society. The role of neo-traditional music in enacting and disseminating a hegemonic Yoruba identity is grounded in the iconic representation of social relationships as sonic relationships. Following Geertz, I would suggest that patterns of Yoruba popular performance are not merely "reflections of a pre-existing sensibility analogically represented; they are positive agents in the creation and maintenance of such a sensibility" (Geertz 1973:451).

The two dominant styles of contemporary Yoruba popular music are *jùjú*, best known through the recordings of King Sunny Ade and Chief Commander Ebeneezer Obey, and *fújì*, a secularized outgrowth of *ajisaari* music, traditionally performed at 3 a.m. during the Ramadan fast by amateur Muslim musicians. Both of these genres combine the traditional functions of praise song and social dance music. They are widely disseminated via mass media and performed at urban nightspots, but make their greatest ideological impact at the hundreds of naming, wedding, and funeral ceremonies hosted every weekend by Yoruba businessmen, traders, chiefs, professors, executives, and civil servants throughout southwestern Nigeria.

Traditional principles of social hierarchy are vividly represented by the stylized behavior of wealthy celebrants, who press paper money to the sweaty forehead of the band leader. The leader or "captain" is invariably a praise singer, who inserts relevant biographical data into formulaic patterns laced with "deep" Yoruba proverbs, and, as I have described elsewhere (Waterman 1982), takes most of the money. The social distinction between captain and band boys, leader and chorus, individual call and communal response, is also encoded in apparel and spatial relationships. Subordinate musicians stand behind or flank the band captain. In one successful *jùjú* band, the captain wears a tuxedo, while his boys are clothed in matching Yoruba gowns (*agbada*; see Figure 1). In another band, the leader wears expensive lace, radiant against a background of dull grey safari suits (see Figure 2). Bands of the 1950s and 1960s enclosed the leader in a protective semicircular pocket, evoking indigenous models of social order conventionally represented in wood sculptures of the 19th and early 20th century (Thompson 1971, 1974). Bands of the 1970s and 1980s show the influence of presentation strategies derived from Las Vegas-style show business, with the band boys forming wings stretching to either side of the bandleader. However, the core image remains that of a leader clearly distinguished from, and positionally defined by, his subordinates.

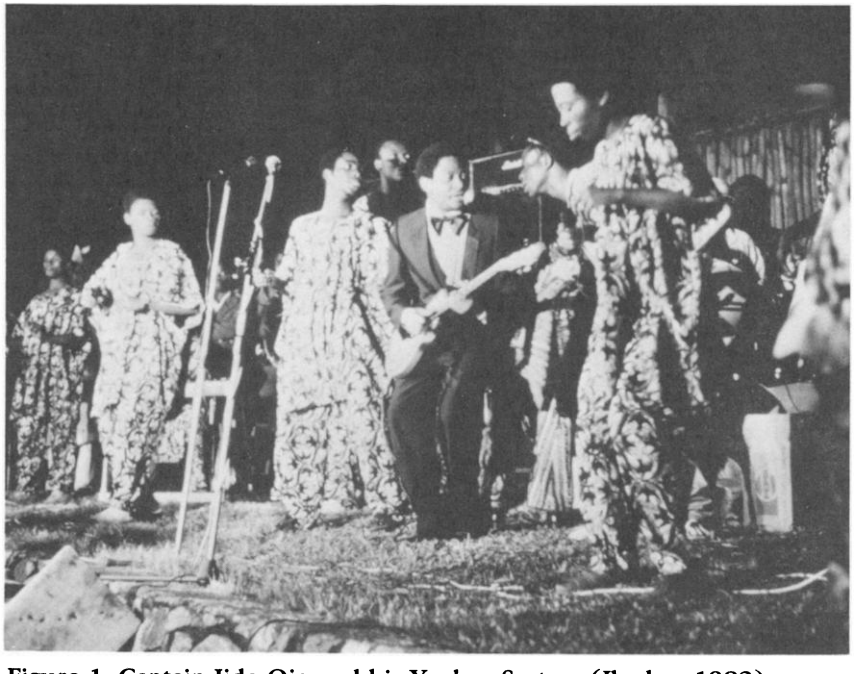


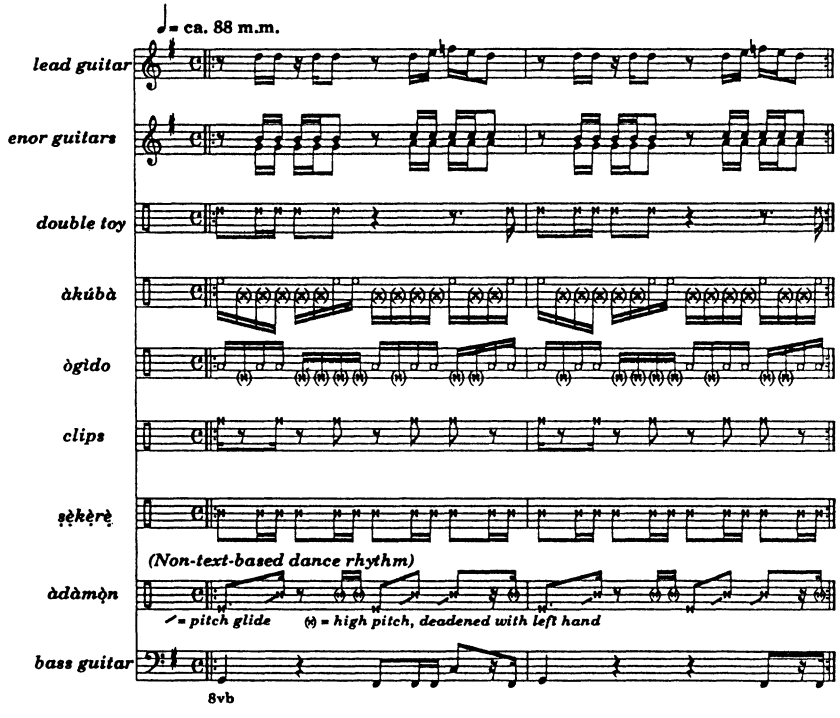
Figure 1. Captain Jide Ojo and his Yankee System (Ibadan, 1982)

Figure 2. The Honourable Joshua Olufemi and his band (Ibadan, 1982)

Hierarchical values are embodied in the aural structure of Yoruba popular music. The most successful *jùjú* bands, for instance, are comprised of three semiautonomous units. The guitar section is made up of a lead or solo player supported by rhythmically interlocked tenor and bass guitars. The senior talking drummer improvises on a rhythmic base created by the interaction of repetitive supporting patterns (see Example 1). The praise singer is flanked by his *ègbè* (the chorus, literally, "supporters" or "followers"). The fundamental relationship between the *elé* (the lead vocal part, literally, "that which drives ahead of or into something else") and the *ègbè* (signifying both the chorus and the responsorial patterns it sings) is thus reproduced within each section of the band. The aural gestalt generated by the intersection of these micro-hierarchies metaphorically predicates an idealized social order: a congeries of localized networks focused on big men.[4]

A countervailing ethic of mutual responsibility and equal opportunity is also enacted in popular music. In much Yoruba instrumental music, each part defines, as it is defined by, the others. The whole is always contingent

Example 1. Typical interlocking patterns in *jùjú* music (Uncle Toye Ajagun and his Olumo Soundmakers, 1979)



upon the principled interaction of the parts. In Yoruba thought, power (*ágbárà*) is also a gestalt process generated through communicative relationships. A person becomes powerful only if he or she can maintain a broad network of willing supporters. In precolonial communities "seniority conveyed authority and access to the productive services of others but was also dependent on them" (Berry 1985:8). *Jùjú* and *fújì* performances at modern outdoor celebrations where the wealthy boost their reputations, the struggling entrepreneur seeks elite status, and the urban poor are afforded free food, drink, and entertainment, externalize these values and give them palpable form.

[4]The social anthropologist P.C. Lloyd writes that:

> In the traditional Yoruba town, the achieved statuses of wealth or power were gained by those who substantially upheld the norms of the society—the trader relying on his popularity with his customers, the chief on the support of the members of his descent group (his constituents). Each stood at the apex of a pyramidal network of social relationships. (Lloyd 1973:117)

This metaphoric predication of correspondences between musical and social order is not limited to formal or structural analogies. The tendency in Western analytical thought to divorce structure from content finds its counterpart in musicological approaches which presume a radical distinction between reified musical structures (forms, scales, melodic and rhythmic modes) and qualitative parameters such as timbre, texture, gesture, and flow. This is not a meaningful distinction for Yoruba musicians and listeners. The experiential impact of the base metaphor "good music is good consociation" depends upon the generation of sensuous textures. An effective performance of *jùjú* or *fújì* predicates not only the structure of the ideal society, but also its interactive ethos or "feel": intensive, vibrant, buzzing, and fluid.

Popular Music and the Imagined Community

In an essay on the origins of nationalism, Benedict Anderson argues that nations—and societies within nations—are imagined communities. He suggests that "the members of even the smallest nations will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion"; and further, that "all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined." This assertion applies to American, German, Italian, Indonesian, and Quechua, as well as Yoruba nationalist identity. For the student of expressive culture the most intriguing part of Anderson's argument is the notion that imagined communities are to be distinguished not by their falsity or genuineness, but by "the style in which they are imagined" (Anderson 1983:16).

I have argued that the notion of a unified Yoruba tradition is a modern development. Hegemonic values enacted and reproduced in musical performance portray the Yoruba as a community, a deep comradeship founded in shared language, political interests, ethos, and blood. Musical metaphor plays a role in the imaginative modeling of Yoruba society as a flexible hierarchy anchored in communal values, or, as a popular idiom would have it, a hand (*owo*) comprised of interdependent fingers. Robert Nisbet has suggested that "the larger, the more general, abstract and distant in experience the object of our interest, the greater the utility of the metaphor" (Nisbet 1969:240). Simultaneously articulating communality and an urbane sense of historical perspective, syncretic musical styles such as *jùjú* and *fújì* embody in sound, proxemics, and behavior the image of a deeply-grounded yet modern society, a kind of cosmopolitan electronic kingdom. Yoruba popular music portrays an imagined community of some 30 million people—a sodality that no individual could know in entirety through first-hand experience—and embodies the ideal affective texture of social life and the melding of new and old, exotic and indigenous within a unifying syncretic framework.

The forms of popular expression that have flowered in Yoruba cities during the 20th century are not best represented as the products of interaction between preexistent, internally unified, and well-bounded cultural systems, but rather as *parties to the imaginative apostatization of tradition*. Yoruba modernity, like any modernity, has had to focus retrospectively, fix ideologically, and contour aesthetically a master tradition in terms of which its own pragmatic and up-to-date identity makes sense and appears inevitable. The hegemonic mainstream styles of *jùjú* and *fújì* music project compelling images of a generic Yoruba kingdom, stripped for the most part of regional particularities.

Regional and personal stylistic variations—for example, New Brain *Fújì*, Garbage *Fújì*, *Olumo* Sound, or Why Worry? *Jùjú*—continue to exist, are appreciated, and may augment a band captain's chances for securing lucrative engagements at the local level. However, such variants are implicitly defined by their relationship to the dominant pan-Yoruba styles performed by the Lagos-based superstars. Variant styles comment upon and play a role in reproducing local patronage networks. The mainstream styles are articulated with macro-networks centered on Lagos and on what has been referred to as the "Paul Simon cargo cult" (Averill 1989): the perceived opportunity to sign a contract with a powerful *afehinti* ("the person upon whom one rests one's back"), perhaps an ethno-beat/wo-pop/techno-hut impresario who will arrange bookings in the United States, Europe, and Japan, and provide access to a multi-national music conglomerate.

Conclusion

I have argued that cultural identity may be viewed as relational and conjunctural, rather than self-constituting and essential, and that this may have relevance to the way we represent the relationship of tradition and modernity in ethnomusicology. From this point-of-view, the core question for those of us interested in the relationship of cultural identity and musical style might be, as jazz pianist Les McCann put it, "make it real compared to what?" I do not mean to suggest that contemporary Yoruba music exhibits no continuity with the precolonial past, for even the most self-consciously hip and hi-tech of Yoruba popular genres makes use of musical techniques and rhetorical devices that have ancient precedents. It might be useful for us to draw an analytical distinction between *invented traditions*—in which continuity with the past is demonstrably factitious (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983:2)—and everyday processes of *stereotypic reproduction*, in which "supposedly factual accounts of what has happened can never be entirely separated from . . . mythical-persuasive elaborations of what exists eternally and what might be" (Peel 1984:129).

Although historical imagery is a vital aspect of the self-production of any society through time, the past can never be "a limitless and plastic resource" (Appadurai 1981:201). The images of cultural unity and depth externalized and socially reproduced in Yoruba popular music are neither etched in stone nor spun of thin air. As one *jùjú* band captain succinctly phrased the matter, "Our Yoruba tradition is a very modern tradition" (The Honourable Joshua Olufemi pers. com., Ibadan, 1982).

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