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Folkism in African Choral Music Performance: Cultural Expression and Identity in Leke Joel's Folk Cantata *370*

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Abstract
This research aims to explore the concept of folkism as a framework for analyzing African choral music performances, with a specific focus on Leke Joel's folk cantata titled "370" as a study. Folkism, characterized by the preservation and promotion of cultural traditions and heritage, serves as a lens to explore the cultural expression and identity embedded in African choral music. The study employs a combination of musicological analysis, ethnographic research, and critical interpretation to delve into the integration of traditional elements, including melodies, rhythms, vocal techniques, language, and performance structures, within the context of African choral performance. By analyzing the performance of Leke Joel's "370," this research aims to elucidate how folkism is manifested in the delivery of the musical performance, showcasing the ways in which performers engage with and embody the cultural heritage. Findings reveal that the cantata incorporates distinct African musical features, such as the use of call and response, and polyphony, creating a complex and dynamic musical texture. These elements contribute to the immersive nature of the composition, engaging the audience with the vibrancy of African musical traditions. In conclusion, this study emphasizes the importance of embracing compositions like Leke Joel's "370" Cantata, which celebrates African cultural heritage through music. It is therefore recommended that more African composers embark on similar journeys, creating compositions that promotes the continent's rich culture and ensure the continuity of African heritage for future generations.

Keywords: Folkism, African Choral Music, Cultural Expression, Ethnomusicology, African Performance Aesthetics.

Introduction

African choral music is a vibrant and diverse musical tradition that reflects the rich cultural heritage of the continent. It encompasses a wide range of styles, languages, and performance practices, representing the varied ethnic groups and their unique artistic expressions. Within this musical landscape, the concept of folkism has emerged as a framework for understanding and appreciating the cultural expression and identity embedded in African choral music performance. Folkism, defined as the preservation and promotion of cultural traditions and heritage, provides a lens through which the significance and impact of this musical tradition can be examined. Huynh (2023) in his submission emphasized the importance of folk elements in African music, highlighting their role in preserving cultural identity and fostering a sense of community. In the context of choral music, folkism becomes particularly relevant as performers and composers draw inspiration from traditional melodies, rhythms, vocal techniques, and languages, integrating them into their artistic creations.

However, despite the growing scholarly attention to African choral music and the acknowledged importance of indigenous musical elements, there remains a limited body of research that explicitly examines folkism as a distinct analytical framework. Existing studies have largely focused on structural, stylistic, or historical dimensions of the music, often treating folk elements as compositional features rather than as part of a broader cultural and performative ideology. In addition, there is a noticeable lack of performance-centered studies that interrogate how these folkist elements are embodied and communicated in live choral presentations, particularly in extended works such as the cantata. This gap creates the need for a more focused inquiry into how folkism operates not only at the level of composition but also within performance practice.

Therefore, this research aims to explore the concept of folkism as a framework for analyzing African choral music performances, with a specific focus on Leke Joel's "370" as a case study. By employing ethnographic methods of research through participant observation, critical interpretation, with musicological analysis of some of the songs in the cantata, this study seeks to delve into the ways in which folkism shapes and influences the performance of African choral music. It will investigate the integration of traditional elements within the performance, including vocal styles, choreography, staging, and other performative elements, to uncover the nuances of cultural expression and identity present in the live musical presentation.

Thus, this study aims to contribute to the growing body of literature on folkism in African choral music. This research will also shed light on the ways in which the concept of folkism enhances cultural expression and identity within the context of African choral music performance.

Theoretical Framework: Sam Ukala's theory of *Folkism*

Folkism, rooted in the rich tradition of African folktales and folklore, provides a compelling window into the values, beliefs, and social structures of African societies. Folktales, as a fundamental component of oral performance art, function not merely as entertainment but as powerful tools for education and cultural transmission. In many African communities, elders gather the younger generation to share these stories, using them as vehicles to impart moral lessons, wisdom, and communal values. While the specific content of these tales may vary, their underlying themes and character archetypes often reflect shared cultural perspectives (Olugbemi-Gabriel & Ukpi, 2022). Within different ethnic traditions, these stories carry distinct names; *Tatsunoyi* in Hausa culture and *Aalo* among the Yoruba, yet they serve a common purpose: to connect past and present through narrative. Whether entirely fictional or loosely grounded in embellished historical events, these narratives resist empirical validation, focusing instead on preserving collective memory and cultural ethos.

In this context, Sam Ukala's theory of Folkism emerges as a significant literary and theatrical framework that re-centers African cultural heritage within contemporary creative expression. Ukala conceptualizes Folkism as a response to the dominance of Western paradigms in African literature and drama, advocating for a return to indigenous forms such as folklore, proverbs, communal storytelling, and traditional music. At the heart of his theory is the conviction that African art should not only preserve cultural identity but also serve as a medium for social reflection and transformation. Ugwu and Orjinta (2013) affirm that Ukala's approach urges playwrights and performers to draw inspiration from the historical and cultural realities of African life, integrating them into performances that resonate with the aesthetic principles of traditional oral narratives. This approach ensures that such works remain culturally authentic and deeply relatable to their intended audiences.

A distinctive feature of Ukala's Folkism is the formulation of the eight laws of Aesthetic Response, specifically designed for African folk theatre and performance. These laws; the law of opening, joint performance, creativity, free enactment and responsibility, judgement, protest against suspense, emotional expression, ego projection, and closing, form the structural backbone of the theory. Each law contributes to the immersive and participatory nature of African performance, fostering a dynamic exchange between performer and audience. They ensure that African dramatic works retain their cultural integrity while remaining engaging and accessible.

In relation to this study, the theoretical lens of Folkism proves particularly relevant in exploring how African choral music functions as a medium for cultural preservation and expression. Using *Leke Joel's 370* as a case study, Folkism provides a framework for analyzing how choral performances integrate folktales, indigenous musical elements, and communal participation. Through this lens, the music is seen not only as an artistic expression but also as a repository of cultural knowledge, capable of nurturing emotional resonance and a shared sense of identity among African audiences. Furthermore, it highlights the delicate balance between artistic creativity and cultural responsibility, ensuring that such performances remain grounded in the lived realities and traditions of the people they represent.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design using ethnographic and musicological approaches. The primary data is drawn from *Leke Joel's* folk cantata *370*. Data collection was carried out through participant observation, with the researcher actively involved in the production process of the cantata. This provided direct access to rehearsals, performance decisions, and stage presentation. Additional data was obtained from recorded performances of the work. Attention was given to vocal delivery, language use, rhythmic and melodic patterns, as well as staging and movement. Data was analysed through musicological analysis and critical interpretation. Selected sections of the cantata were examined to identify features such as call and response, polyphony, and other elements linked to African musical practice. Observations from the production process were then used to interpret how these elements were applied in performance. This approach made it possible to examine folkism both in the structure of the music and in its practical realisation on stage.

African Choral Music Performances from Inception till Date

African choral music performances possess a rich and deeply rooted heritage that spans centuries, embodying the cultural and artistic expressions of diverse communities across the continent. From ancient vocal ensembles to contemporary choral groups, these performances have continuously evolved, shaped by shifting social, political, and cultural landscapes. Central to this tradition is the communal ethos that defines much of African life. Historically, singing has functioned not merely as an artistic endeavor but as a communal experience woven into the daily rhythms, rituals, and ceremonies of African societies. As De Beer and Shitandi (2012) observe, "Singing as a group activity existed in Africa long before colonization," a fact supported by anthropological findings, archaeological evidence, and oral history recordings that point to a longstanding, quasi-choral tradition across the continent.

These communal vocal practices have long served a multiplicity of purposes. They have been vital in religious worship, oral storytelling, rites of passage, and social communication, often accompanied by traditional instruments whose resonances mirror the communal heartbeat. The performance techniques that animate African choral traditions such as call-and-response, polyphonic layering, and vocal improvisation form a musical vocabulary that is as expressive as it is functional. As Moshugi (2023) explains, these elements generate a dynamic soundscape that embodies collective identity, cultural memory, and celebratory spirit. The result is a deeply immersive auditory experience that connects individuals to their community and heritage.

The colonial era introduced a significant transformation to the trajectory of African choral music. With the arrival of missionaries came Western musical paradigms, particularly those associated with Christian worship and European choral traditions. Missionary efforts led to the establishment of church choirs and educational institutions that emphasized Western harmonic structures, voice training, and formal music notation (Ademiluka, 2023). However, rather than eroding indigenous practices, this encounter sparked a unique cultural synthesis. African musicians began to integrate Western harmonic techniques with traditional vocal

styles, giving rise to new, hybrid forms of choral expression. This fusion not only broadened the sonic palette of African choral music but also exemplified the resilience and adaptability of African musical traditions, which absorbed and reinterpreted foreign elements to create distinctly African choral idioms.

The post-colonial period ushered in a renewed focus on cultural identity and heritage, spurred by nationalist movements and Pan-Africanist ideals that emphasized the reclamation and revitalization of indigenous traditions (Okigbo, 2010). During this era, a new generation of composers and scholars emerged, committed to integrating African musical elements into formal choral compositions. Figures such as Fela Sowande, Joshua Uzoigwe, Amos Labi, and Akin Euba were instrumental in articulating a modern African choral style, one that harmonized indigenous rhythms, modes, and vocal techniques with contemporary compositional frameworks. Their pioneering work laid the foundation for a distinctly African aesthetic within global choral music.

By the latter half of the twentieth century, African choral music experienced an extraordinary renaissance, marked by the growth of professional choirs and increased institutional support for music education. This period witnessed the rise of celebrated ensembles that would go on to gain international recognition. Groups such as the Soweto Gospel Choir, Lagos City Chorale, and Harmonious Chorale of Ghana emerged as cultural ambassadors, showcasing the artistic excellence and diversity of African choral traditions on global stages. Their achievements not only highlighted the enduring appeal of African choral music but also reflected the creative ingenuity with which African musicians continue to evolve their art.

In recent years, African choral music has entered yet another dynamic phase, characterized by a seamless blending of traditional motifs with contemporary musical influences. This evolving soundscape incorporates elements from genres such as jazz, pop, and hip-hop, offering fresh interpretations while remaining anchored in cultural authenticity (Ayodele, 2024). The result is a vibrant, boundary-crossing musical language that appeals to diverse audiences and reflects the lived realities of a modern, interconnected Africa. Simultaneously, the rise of high-profile choral competitions and festivals including the Naija Choral Music Festival (NCMFEST) and the Africa Sings Festival, has provided platforms for both established and emerging choirs to engage in artistic exchange and showcase their talents. These events serve as more than just competitive arenas; they are vibrant celebrations of cultural diversity and collective creativity, fostering a renewed sense of community, collaboration, and cultural pride.

370 - A Folk Cantata

"370" is a folk cantata composed and directed by Leke Joel, and performed at the Performing Arts Theatre of the University of Ilorin, Nigeria, in August 2014. The performance, enthralls the audience with rich elements of African music. Commencing with a drummer-dancer act, the audience's knowledge of Yoruba dundun drum sayings is tested. The cantata narrates the tale of three diligent young men who invest their energy in farming for their benefit.



Plate 1: Showing the Drummer and Dancer Performance
Source: Picture taken by the researcher

However, one of them, named Tamedo or "370," betrays their trust and steals the entire harvest behind their backs. As the other two notice their missing yields, they seek the assistance of an herbalist who grants them a charm in the form of a broom to protect their farm. Tamedo attempts to steal again but gets hypnotized when he touches the broom, impulsively sweeping the entire farm. Fellow farmers and friends join him, and he is apprehended. Though initially intended for a deadly punishment, an elder intervenes, leading to his surrender to the police for proper judgment.



Plate 2: Showing Tamedo Sweeping after being Hypnotized
Source: Picture taken by the researcher.

Leke Joel employs the African storytelling style to compose this music. The performance features a full SATB choir, serving as both actors and singers, an elderly narrator, and soloists who add beauty and aesthetics to the singing. Energetic dances elevate the tempo of the cantata, enhancing the overall experience. This form of music performance receives an

enthusiastic response from the audience, who cannot contain their applause throughout the show. "370" resonates as a resounding success, impressing with its captivating narrative, rich African musical elements, and engaging performance style.



Plate 3: Showing the SATB choir performing.
Source: Picture taken by the researcher.

Music, Cultural Expression and Identity in Leke Joel's 370 Performance

One of the prevalent and deeply ingrained patterns of singing in African musical traditions is the Call and Response pattern. This method is characterized by a leader who initiates a musical phrase, with a chorus responding in kind. Often, two or more melodies intertwine, forming larger sectional compositions. The cantata's choir, vocal soloists, and narrator skillfully employ various vocal techniques, including call-and-response patterns and vocal improvisation, reminiscent of African vocal traditions (Keegan, 2005). These elements not only showcase the diversity of African music but also serve as a means of cultural preservation and expression. This approach creates musical contrast through a series of distinct movements or acts, each comprised of sections that are repeated multiple times. As elucidated by Omobiyi (2005, p. 38), there are two primary varieties of call and response antiphony: "call and response proper" and "call and refrain." "Call and response proper" involve a soloist presenting an antecedent, which is then echoed by the larger group, while "call and refrain" features the lead singer performing alongside other members of the ensemble, with the audience providing the response. In the cantata "370," Leke Joel masterfully employs the Call and Response pattern, infusing it into nearly every movement of the performance. This usage not only pays homage to the rich African musical traditions but also imbues the cantata with a deep sense of communal participation and cultural resonance. The frequent incorporation of this pattern throughout the composition showcases Joel's commitment to preserving and celebrating the musical heritage of Africa while delivering a captivating and immersive musical experience.



Fig 1: Showing an excerpt of a musical score

Furthermore, this performance also showcases the deliberate use of Polyphony, a musical technique characterized by the creation of multiple, simultaneous, and rhythmically independent parts. In polyphonic singing, the primary melody takes precedence over the resulting harmony. Each individual voice enters the performance at distinct moments in a cyclical and continuous fashion, resulting in a multifaceted and ever-evolving musical texture. Leke Joel incorporates this polyphonic technique, particularly in the song titled 'Ise Agbe,' which translates to 'Farming.' Within this performance, the interplay of various voices in a polyphonic manner not only adds depth and complexity to the musical arrangement but also serves as a testament to Joel's artistry and his commitment to celebrating the multifaceted aspects of African musical traditions. The use of polyphony in "370" enriches the musical narrative, creating a vibrant and engaging sonic experience that resonates with both traditional and contemporary elements, mirroring the dynamism of African culture.



Fig 2: Showing an excerpt of a musical score

Moreover, Leke Joel's "370" is a showcase of cultural expression through music. This cantata captures and celebrates African cultural elements, drawing from traditional music, language, and storytelling techniques. Joel weaves together indigenous musical idioms, rhythmic

patterns, and melodic motifs that resonate with African heritage. This infusion of cultural elements creates a rich and immersive musical experience, reflecting the deep respect for others embedded in African traditions. For instance, in the first scene of the cantata, young maidens play in the village square, accompanied by a Yoruba game song that says, "It is not good to poke nose."

Table 1: Showing the Yoruba game song translated to English

Yoruba Language	**English Translation**
Call: E ma we'hin o	*Do not look back*
Response: We'hin	*Look back*
Call: E ma s'ofofo	*Do not be nose-pokers*
Response: Ofofo	*Nose-pokers*
Call: Ofofo ko dara	*It is not good to poke nose*
Response: Ko dara…	*It is not good…*

This game song exemplifies the core values of the Yoruba culture, emphasizing respect for others and the importance of minding one's own business. Leke Joel incorporates this chant to convey the profound African principle of valuing and respecting others. Through these cultural expressions, "370" becomes a powerful testament to the significance of African traditions in shaping the music and values of the continent.



Plate 4: Showing some of the Young Girls Playing and Singing.
Source: Picture taken by the researcher**.**

Also, the use of indigenous musical instruments and vocal styles contributes to the authentic representation of African musical heritage. Traditional percussion instruments, such as the dundun drum, add an African rhythmic foundation to the composition, evoking a sense of community and communal celebration (Durojaiye, 2020). The communal essence of Africa

deeply permeates the music and performance of the cantata. Leke Joel masterfully leverages Africa's predominant occupation, agriculture, to narrate the story of communalism through music. In the performance, he vividly portrays the idea that in Africa, activities are often accomplished collectively. This is exemplified when the men engage in a game of 'ayo' while singing:

Table 2: Showing the Yoruba game song translated to English

Yoruba	English Translation
E je ka m'emu	*Let us drink palm wine*
Ka m'emu funfun	*White palm wine*
E je ka m'emu	*Let us drink palm wine*
Ka m'emu amuyo	*Let's drink to stupor*
Ka m'emu ka m'emu	*We'll drink and drink*
E je ka m'emu	*Let us drink*

This musical and performance element communicates the profound sense of communalism in Africa. Joel's incorporation of the communal aspects of daily life showcases the importance of togetherness and cooperation in African societies. Through these expressions, the cantata emphasizes the enduring values of unity and shared experiences that define African communities.

The cantata "370" also delves into themes of identity, exploring the complexities of human character and morality within an African cultural context. Through the narrative of the three young men and Tamedo (also known as "370"), the cantata touches on universal themes of trust, betrayal, and the consequences of one's actions. However, these themes are framed within an African cultural setting, enabling the audience to relate to the story from an African perspective. The characters in the cantata embody different aspects of cultural identity. The young men represent hard work, diligence, and a commitment to community, which are often valued traits in many African societies. On the other hand, Tamedo's actions of deceit and theft challenge these cultural values, serving as a reflection of the complexities within individuals and communities. The cantata also explores the notion of justice and conflict resolution within an African cultural context. The involvement of an elder in the story, who intervenes to stop Tamedo's violent punishment and instead advocates for legal justice, reflects African communal values of wisdom and mediation. This portrayal of conflict resolution contributes to a deeper understanding of cultural identity and the importance of community cohesion.

Findings and General Observations

Leke Joel's "370" Cantata stands as a testament to the power of music in expressing and celebrating African cultural heritage. The cantata weaves together elements of traditional music, language, and storytelling techniques, creating an immersive musical experience that resonates with the rich tapestry of African traditions. This performance provides valuable insights into the preservation of African cultural heritage through music. Joel's work expertly

incorporates indigenous musical idioms, rhythmic patterns, and melodic motifs. In doing so, it not only showcases African heritage but also ensures its preservation for future generations. The result is a musical journey that immerses the audience in the vibrant and diverse cultures of Africa. Moreover, the cantata vividly portrays the communal nature of African societies. By centering the narrative around the theme of farming, Joel underscores the idea that in Africa, many tasks are undertaken collectively. The music becomes a reflection of the spirit of togetherness and community that is deeply ingrained in African social life.

Leke Joel's work also embraces the call and response pattern, a common feature of African music. This pattern, where a leader sings a phrase with a chorus responding, infuses dynamic engagement into the music. It not only brings the performance to life but also connects with the audience, creating an interactive and participatory experience. Also, the use of polyphony, where multiple, simultaneous, and rhythmically independent parts are incorporated, adds depth and complexity to the composition. The song "Ise Agbe" within the cantata beautifully showcases this polyphonic complexity, reflecting the multifaceted nature of African music traditions. "370" emerges as a compelling example of how African choral music performances can serve as a vehicle for cultural expression, heritage preservation, and the incorporation of traditional musical elements. Through its masterful composition, it exemplifies the vibrant tapestry of African traditions and the dynamic nature of music as a cultural form.

Recommendations and Conclusion

As we move forward, it is essential that more African music composers and artists take inspiration from performances like "370." They should endeavor to compose works that embrace and celebrate African cultural elements, thus contributing to the preservation of our cultural heritage. These compositions can serve as a means to engage with our roots, to share our traditions, and to foster a sense of collective identity and pride. It is through the creation and performance of such culturally rich compositions that we can ensure the continuity of Africa's cultural values and traditions. Just as Leke Joel's "370" has illuminated the path to preserving and promoting African heritage, more African composers have the opportunity to join this noble endeavor. In this way, we can continue to resonate with the time-honored traditions and values that define us as Africans, and we can ensure that future generations, like the generations before them, will find themselves enraptured by the melodies, rhythms, and stories that echo the vibrant tapestry of our African musical culture.

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