

‘AMERICAN VISA’: A YORÙBÁ SOCIO-CULTURAL MUSIC COMPOSITION THAT EXEMPLIFIES CROSS- CULTURAL LINKAGES



Grace OLÁOLÚWA, Ph.D.

Abstract

‘American Visa’ becomes an intuitively suggestive piece for the interrogation of Yorùbá cultural linkages with America. Although the narrative in the text of this music anchor on immigration and specifically the manner in which, Nigerians respond to the country’s economic challenges, the music composition is concurrently ingrained in cross-cultural and acculturative musical processes and elements. ‘American Visa’ is a composition written in 2005 by a Nigerian composer of art music, Dayò Oyèdùń. It is a secular cantata piece and the last number in his collection of *Hospital Cantata*. This is evidently a Yorùbá music composition that recognizes and articulates the interface between the social and cultural realities of Nigerian societies and the transcendence and continuity of cultural activities outside Nigeria. The role of topical work as an ‘American visa’ is suggestive of music’s role as a link between the Yorùbá culture and its representations in countries other than Nigeria. While music serves as a cultural link, it also creates an awareness of human complexities and how they navigate through them to find meaning in living. This paper, through content analyses and interview methods, analyzes the music score and video recording of ‘American Visa’ and interrogates the convergences or divergences articulated in this music. It investigates how African cultural nuances are exemplified in Oyèdùń’s ‘American Visa’ and the role of music in a broader social context. It reveals how a topical socio-political issue can be addressed through Yoruba art music compositions and suggests that more African compositions should engage intercultural works that serve socio-cultural, political, and economic purposes.

Keywords: Yorùbá art music, intercultural music, identity formation, immigration, satire.

Introduction

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, popularly called '9/11' have been referred to as the most tragic day in New York's history. As a result of the attacks, measures and policies, the topmost of which were to tighten security and seal the United States borders, were put in place by the government in order to combat terrorism (*cf.* "9/11 and the transformation of U.S. Immigration law and policy", 2012). This gave rise to changes in visa policies, which in turn had an effect on prospective immigrants, who hoped to travel or relocate to America. This situation birthed the piece 'American Visa'.³

'American Visa' was composed or say completed in the year 2005. It is the sixth and last number in Dayò Oyèdún's collection of the *Hospital Cantata*. This piece, he says, is drawn from his personal experience of a visa denial. It became a traumatic experience for the composer when he thought his relocation was undisputable and certain. He had quit his job as a practicing doctor, dismissed good offers, and even given away his personal properties, while he looked forward to starting a new life in America (on a supposed 'golden platter' – just as many Nigerians could have assumed too). The rude shock of his visa denial eventually got him admitted as a patient in the hospital.

Rather than solely writing about his travail of visa procurement and denial, Oyèdún in this piece resorted to satire and humor. The piece extends beyond Oyèdún's experience of a visa denial as the plot ends with the story of one who eventually outwitted the embassy officials to secure a visa. Importantly, the piece 'American Visa' as a Yorùbá music composition recognizes and articulates the interface between the social and cultural realities of Nigerian societies and the transcendence and continuity of cultural activities outside Nigeria. My aim in this paper is to interrogate through an analytical lens, the

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convergences and divergences articulated in the music. Then, to examine how African cultural nuances are exemplified in this piece and music's role as a cultural link in a broader social context.

'American Visa' Narrative: A Yoruba Satirical Music

The narrative pictures the Nigerian aspiring to leave the country for America for a greener pasture. The text in the music is written in the form of a monologue or soliloquy of some kind. The character speaks of his frustration and how difficult life has been in his home country and insists on relocating to America. He speaks of obtaining a visa and his insistence on getting out of Nigeria by all means. He, thereafter, invites everyone to aspire or join him to flee from the country, not minding wherever they may eventually find themselves in America. He mentions some of the cities in the States (Boston, New York, and Chicago) as possible places to stay, but what is more important is that they fly out (relocate) of Nigeria. He proceeds to another issue, telling people to warn the terrifying white man who has refused him a visa. He continues by stating some of the reasons he is fed up with Nigeria as a country; no electricity, no job, and because he is tired of consuming just one type of staple food (eba) daily. He begins to eulogize the 'white' man's food (hot dog), and how it tastes so nice. To him, those kinds of food are the reason the white man is obese and full of fat, something he considers a good living.

Soon, he shifts to soliloquizing about other issues he foresees in America. First, he starts by praying for protection, because he does not wish to encounter Bin Laden, as though Bin Laden was physically present during the 9/11 attacks. In this case, Bin Laden is an image of insecurity or crime, which he prays not to encounter. Secondly, he talks about the climate condition - cold weather in America, and how he does not wish to sleep and freezes up. Lastly, he prays not to turn into a bleating sheep that eat raw leaves (because the white man can afford to eat fresh/raw veggies without parboiling or heating them up, something not so common in the typical Nigerian feeding). Quickly, he makes up his mind never to try those uncooked vegetables, and he then says, that he is wise enough to have packaged some Nigerian yam flour along for his journey.

Swiftly, he returns to speak about going to the embassy to obtain a visa and praying that he is perhaps granted by chance because he is resolute about going to the United States especially Chicago. He then calls on his comrades to come along with him, and now he does not mind if he is granted just a month's stay, he would still go. Finally, he narrates his tactics and tricks at the embassy, saying, the white man thought he could get at him, but he failed. Moreover, he has gallantly escaped as typical Nigerian that he is (using the black man's wit) which, he says should never be underestimated.

Contexts

The piece 'American Visa' is an entry point into discussing the societal challenge brought about by economic hardship and failures in the Nigerian systems, but also, beyond the litany of complaints about unemployment, lack of basic amenities, 'American Visa' reveals the complex nature of humans and their intelligence or ingenuities. I suggest that Immigration and Identity formation is at the core of this narrative.

Identity formation is constructed and maintained through social interaction (Fandrem, 2015). Even when it changes over time, contexts, and across generations through factors like social mobility, immigration, and globalization, it requires a continuous process of explorations, adaptations, and consolidations. In addition, Identity formation is at the core of the individual dealings with communal culture, and how individuals handle uncertainties and ambiguities (Erickson 1959).

Many Nigerians aspire to travel abroad to improve the quality of their lives. While some believe that life is all trouble-free, rosy, and beautiful outside of Nigeria, some are aware of the societal dynamics in some of the countries they wish to migrate, but still prefer to find a better life there. Erickson (1959) a foremost Identity theorist regards this kind of status in his divisions of psychosocial development as 'Identity diffusion', which is more like an indecisive state. It is believed that developed countries such as America have functional systems and are economically and politically stable. True, but many are oblivious to the dynamics of such places. In many cases, people who aspire to leave Nigeria are arguably living an average life and are somewhat comfortable. Some who when they eventually leave in their

ignorance, encounter the hard realities of life abroad but still opt to remain either because of shame, ego, or the continual hopes of a better living.

A common idiosyncratic behavior typical of Nigerians is resilience in the face of adversity and added to that is desperation. The reading of 'American Visa' is an example of this kind of resilience and desperation. The piece portrays a character who would never give up on securing a visa. For such a one, the tough situation makes him even get tougher. As though, the difficulty is a motivation to push harder for his aspirations (Phinney, J. S., Berry, J. W., Vedder, P., & Liebkind, K., 2006). This is sometimes the case when one is aware of human complexities and how people find meaning to life. For instance, the character in the music aims to relocate to the United States by all means, he does not mind even if he would be granted a month's stay, he is determined to travel. In the end, he rejoices because even after all the travail, he says, he outwitted the white man (because he tricked him to get what he needed). In another instance, the character expresses his fears of leaving behind Nigerian food. Even when he complained about eating staple meals in Nigeria, still he does not hope to survive on the white man's food, so he plans to travel with his Nigerian foods. Still, food will not withhold him from leaving the country. This same thought applies in his narrative of climate conditions in America. For Identity theorists, this desperation or drive only becomes meaningful after an interaction with other identities giving the chance for the 'other' (the desperate immigrant) to observe, appraise or evaluate itself (*cf.* Cinoglu & Arıkan 2012:1117). The narrative in 'American Visa' within the socio-cultural and political contexts portrays briefly, the convergences and divergences regarding identity formations and immigration in the Nigerian economic spheres.

'American Visa', Musical Form and Examples

The musical form of this choral piece has been set to a four-part structure, beginning in F major with a number modulation and meter; changes and ending in B flat major; (see the table below). Each section of the music commences with key and metrical changes not confined to structural divisions. I will discuss some sparse examples of striking features in this

piece and draw some generalizations based on my understanding of the music.⁴

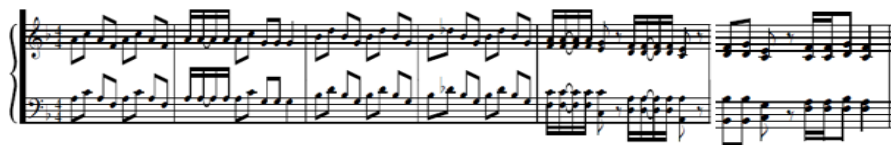
Section/ Bar	Section A	Tonality
A bars 1 - 18 A^I – bars 19 -34	Piano opening on a $\frac{4}{4}$ time signature (bars 1-6) Theme - bars 7-18 Repeat of theme with extension - bars 19-34; melody in Alto- bars 19-22	F major
B - bars 35 - 66	Transitory passage bars 35- 38 Change of time sig. $\frac{12}{8}$ from bar 39 Melody on pentatonic scale bars 39-50 Another theme - bars 51-66	F major
C - bars 67 – 118	Starts with anacrusis and change of time signature $\frac{6}{8}$ (Bar re-numbering from 67 onwards) Change of Key signature, alternating between C major and A minor tonality Main theme in a Song form: Verse I – (A) bars 67-74; Verse II – (A) bars 74-82 Verse III – (A ^I) bars 82-90 Bridge – (B) bars 90-98. Change of time sig. $\frac{4}{4}$ for one bar only (bar 96) and to $\frac{12}{8}$ from bar 97 onwards, bridge ends in bar 98. Coda(A) – bars 99-102 ends with a perfect cadence	C major/A minor

⁴ The analysis of 'American Visa' and musical examples in this article is a miniature version of the elaborate reading done by this author in her doctoral dissertation (*cf.* Tàlábí 2020, pp 147-180)

	Soprano/melody on pentatonic bar 67-100 except for a note on bar 96 Sub-theme (bars 103-110) Change of key sig. common chord modulation sub-theme repeated (bars 111 – 118) Pivot chord modulation	F major G major
D - bars 119 -156	New theme from bar 119-122 and theme is alternated between all voices (T,B,A,S) in turns till bar 134 Modulation in bar 123 Modulation in bar 127 Modulation in bar 131 Sub-theme bars 135-138; sub-theme extension - bars 139-142; sub-theme repeat- bars 143-146 Coda 146-156, ending on a perfect cadence	G major C major/G major (bi-tonality) F major B flat major B flat major

Accompaniment: 'American Visa' opens with a piano introduction from bars 1 to 6. This happens to be the only point in the music where Oyèdún assigns an opening/interlude to the piano. Apart from the accompaniment role given to the piano, no other place in this music is the piano assigned an opening or interlude to a section. In the musical example, the right- and left-hand pianos play the same notes octaves apart from bars 1 to 4 and then moves into harmonization from bars 5. Oyèdún treats the piano introduction using fragments from choral melody/parts and sequences. The first two bars, that is, bars 1 and 2 are a fragment that begins the choral melody in bars 7 to 8. Bars 3 and 4 is a sequential treatment of bar 1, which moves up in the interval of a second while bars 5 and 6 is the consequent phrase of the choral part in bars 9 and 10. The piano introduction ends on an unusual imperfect

cadence, II⁷d – I (that is, it progresses from the third inversion of a supertonic seventh chord to a tonic chord (bar 6). Generally, Oyèdún's piano accompaniment in this piece is very simple, as it is usually derived from the choral parts. The accompaniment which follows a varied pattern (arpeggiation, responsorial, chordal, choral, etc.) serves to support the voices this show how important he places the voice (text inclusive) in this music.



Bars 1-6 'American Visa', (Oyedun 2005: 1).

Thematic material: The four structural sections in this music (A B C D) are thematized. Each section has a theme and its subordinate theme. For example, Section A has two main themes and subordinate themes; the second theme (bars 19 to 34) is a modification of the first (bars 1 to 18).

The themes are mostly broken into period structures. In addition, each section even though not verse-like naturally flows with a new textual and musical idea. Another characteristic feature of the thematic divisions is, key changes/modulations as well as change of time signature; however, Oyèdún maintains the same $\frac{12}{8}$ timing from the sub-theme of section C to the end of the music (i.e. bars 97 to 156). Apart from the extrinsic features of time and key signature that heralds every thematic and structural division, time and key changes still unfold within the sections of the music.

Textural material: Polyphonic and homophonic textures are the dominant texture. Many times, the composer employs a mixed texture. He approaches this in creative ways. For instance, the vocal parts may use contrapuntal movements while the piano accompaniment remains chordal; it may also be that the voice moves homophonically while the piano accompaniment doubles the voices for a fuller and richer texture (e.g. bars 6 to 17). He employs these textures (together with other musical elements) strategically to create a varied effect that enhances the message of the music.

Modulation: This is another important device that not only depicts tonal shift but also structural changes. Tonal shifts occur from F major – Cmajor/Aminor – F – G – C/G – F -Bb. (see the table above). Change in keys is approached in varied forms, sometimes-abrupt modulation, tonicization, bi-tonality, and pivot chord modulations.

Other special devices employed: canonic round (bar 49), song form(bars 67 to 102), pentatonic melodies (bars 39 to 50; 67 to 95; 97 to 102), responsorial-sequential-chromatic elaborations (e.g. bars 19 to 34), repetitions (e.g. bar 111 to 118; 146 to 148; 148 to 152; 152 to 156, etc.) interlaced melodies (bars 111 to 122), the antiphonal alternation between piano and choral parts (bar 141), melodic and rhythmic contrast (e.g. bars 47 to 48, 82), the juxtaposition of melodies (bars 82 to 86), sound effects to mimic the bleating sheep with a text that shows an oscillating sign - 'Me~~~~~' (bars 86 to 88), inverted rhythm (bar 97), and chromatic colorization (bars 106, 114, 136, 140).

Discussion and Conclusion

On a more general note, even though 'American Visa' is African in character considering the Yoruba text of the music, the compositional style and form of the music is much more structured in the Western music idiom. Asides from the apparent disjuncture in connecting sections of the piece, the harmonic and structural configurations of this piece can be viewed in the context of Western music of the tonal era. He adopts musical forms of the classical and early romantic periods. While Oyèdún writes the text of the piece in the Yorùbá language, he flouts the tonal inflection of the language in this piece. This appears intentional as he maintained a pentatonic melody in section B (bars 39 to 50) and in the song form of section C (bars 67 to 96).⁵ Whichever way, the message being passed across is mostly very clear.

⁵ The pentatonic melody in a song form is maintained for about 36 bars – (that is, bars 67 to 102, but for the slight alteration in bars 96). The melody, which is folk-like aligns with the Yoruba tonal inflection. The composer is able to achieve this employing musical devices such as repetition, unison singing, verse-like melody with slight modification of tones, modal / relative minor tonal feel for colour, etc which helps to sustain the pentatonics.

The structural construction and qualities of the music for the most part align with the Schenkerian musical thoughts. 'American Visa' casts my mind back to the conversation I had with Oyèdún on musical styles and form. When he spoke about the decision made lately in his compositional career – a desire to have his works studied analytically. He says:

The major challenge I have in my composition is trying to have a defined objective for the composition. For example, questions like - Is it a composition to make the audience/listener laugh? Or is it one that would have a specific form and structure that can be studied? (Oyèdún, personal communication, January 30, 2017).

In conclusion, Oyèdún's 'American Visa' sits well as an intercultural musical work. With the acculturative nuances and syncretic musical elements exemplified above, 'American Visa' bridges the cross-cultural link of Western/European and African music scholarship. More so, it addresses a complex but dynamic topical issue in the Nigerian socio-political environment. In essence, this piece adheres with Eúbà, Nketia, and other African scholar's thoughts on the kind of intercultural awareness for contemporary African composers (Eúbà, 1970, Kimberlin & Eúbà, 1995, Nketia, 2004, Adédèjì, 2010, Tàlàbí, 2020). For Nketia, it is important that the creative works of African composers (art music) should be guided by cosmological, moral and social theories and that the aesthetic theories should be considered as art for life's sake and not just art for art sake (Nketia, 2004:10). In Supičić's words, 'The further we look back into the history of humanity, the more we see music existing not in the form of entertainment or as purely artistic manifestation, but as an element bound up in the most earthy details of daily social life' (Supičić, 1987:86).

This article, therefore, suggests that art musical works that attend to social, cultural, economic and political challenges, written in a language well understood by a local environment, and at the same time appreciated by a global audience because of the musical medium, should be explored by African composers. In this way, such musical work serves to reach a wider audience regardless of its contemplative characteristics usually known to reach a limited few and as well creates an awareness or addresses national and global issues.

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