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## Forms and Compositional Devices in Nigerian Gospel Music: A Structural and Contextual Analysis

Taiye Shola Adeola

Department of Performing and Film Arts  
University of Ilorin, Nigeria  
[adeola.ts@unilorin.edu.ng](mailto:adeola.ts@unilorin.edu.ng)  
[taiyeadeola@gmail.com](mailto:taiyeadeola@gmail.com)

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### Abstract



*Nigerian gospel music has evolved into a distinct genre within the Nigerian music scene, marked by a unique blend of African rhythmic elements, Western harmonic structures, and Christian theological themes. As a dynamic and expressive art form, it employs various musical forms and compositional devices to engage audiences, convey spiritual messages, evoke emotion, and inspire devotion. Although scholarly attention has been given to its historical, sociological, textual, and theological dimensions, its structural and compositional elements remain underexplored. This study applies musical semiotic theory, viewing music as a symbolic language, to identify and analyse musical forms, notate selected examples, and examine compositional techniques in Nigerian gospel music. Using a qualitative methodology, it employs cultural hermeneutics, content and discographical analysis, and musicological approaches. Findings reveal recurring formal structures and distinctive compositional devices employed by gospel musicians, shaped by performance context and socio-cultural realities. The study concludes that Nigerian gospel music continues to grow in influence and calls for greater scholarly attention to its structural and aesthetic dimensions.*

**Keywords:** Forms, compositional devices, Nigerian gospel music

## Introduction

The Nigerian music space is permeated with several secular and religious musical genres that are rooted in and reflect the country's rich cultural heritage and its complex socio-economic and spiritual landscape. The Nigerian gospel music stands out and takes a centre stage among the Christian religious music genres that have evolved over the years, consistently expanding its popularity in the Nigerian music industry. It has grown into a distinct music, characterised by its unique blend of African rhythmic evocations with the Western harmonic configurations and instrumentations, and Christian theological declarations. Adjagbara (2023) submits that Nigerian gospel songs stand out for their blend of traditional rhythms, native musical components, and western influences. Reflecting on the popularity of gospel music in Nigeria, Oyeniyi (2025) observes that one of the factors of influence that has defined the growing popularity of Nigerian gospel music is its multicultural and multilingual engagements.

The origin of gospel music in Nigeria has been put in the 1960s. This is the position of scholars like Adedeji (2004, 2005) and Collins (2014). The term 'gospel music' was first used in Nigeria by the pioneers in the same period although its antecedents actually appeared thirty years earlier (Adedeji, 2005, p.146). Collins (2014) submits that gospel dance music appeared at roughly the same time in Ghana and Nigeria, between the 1960s and the early 1970s. However, Adedeji (2004) speculates more specifically that it was probably between 1964 and 1965, by reflecting upon the musical activities that predominated the practices of the Nigerian indigenous Pentecostal Churches and their influence upon evangelistic parades from the 1930s, reaching a climax in the mid-1960s. The work of Ibude and Ossaiga (2024) traces the origin of Nigerian gospel music to a process of fusion of Nigerian religious musical genres with popular music cultures influenced by the interaction of African and American musical traditions.

As a dynamic and expressive art form, Nigerian gospel music engages a number of forms and compositional devices in the execution of the musical art to engage the audience, convey spiritual messages, evoke emotions, and inspire devotion. The constantly growing popularity and influence of this music genre has drawn the attention of many scholars generating discussions on different aspects of it ranging from historical, musical, sociological, textual, and theological to extramusical, performance and ethnomusicological. Obi (2020) explores the history and development of Nigerian gospel music, from its roots in traditional church music to its current global popularity. The author notes that Nigerian gospel music has become a significant part of popular culture, providing a sense of relief and hope for many Nigerians. Ayorinde and Ajose (2022) in their discussions on music and spirituality in Africa explore gospel music as one of the ways people negotiate spirituality and everyday meaning-making in

Lagos. The authors provide insight into ways in which people perform spirituality and negotiate wellbeing amidst Nigeria's social, political, and economic uncertainty. Agbo and Sylvanus (2023) focused their discussions on how trends in contemporary Nigerian popular gospel music shape religious pedagogy, presenting evidence of convergence between the sacred and popular culture to reveal both engaging and emerging ways for communicating theological truths in Nigeria. Adedeji (2023) in a paper titled "Rhythm and Beat in Contemporary Nigerian Music: Gospel Music as a Case Study" establish, describe and analyse the theory and practice of rhythm and beat in Nigerian gospel music as an hybrid of church and popular music. The author shows that there are diversities of rhythmic and beat structures, and patterns drawn from Western and African styles. In addition, there are features that are common to some gospel styles just as there are distinguishing features. It is the conclusion of the author that rhythm and beat constitute parts of stylistic elements of Nigerian gospel music.

Whereas several literatures indicate studies on gospel music in aspects of its history (Adjagbara, 2023; Obi, 2020), sociology (Osuagwu, 2023), musical (Adedeji, 2023), ethnomusicological (Oikelome, 2010), theological (Ayorinde & Ajose, 2022; Agbo & Sylvanus, 2023), and so on, there is still more to be studied in the aspect of structures and compositional techniques underlying Nigerian gospel music. The focus of this paper is to identify forms and elucidate the compositional devices in Nigerian gospel music with specific examples. In this regard, the study is an avenue to gain a deeper understanding of the structure and creative processes that shape this genre and insight into the unique characteristics and significance in Nigerian culture. Specifically, this paper will identify and analyse the different forms and styles within the Nigerian gospel music, notate some musical examples for documentation, and examine the compositional devices used in Nigerian gospel music. This study is significant because it contributes to the existing discourse on gospel music and aids our understanding of the music especially in the structure and the techniques engaged in generating the composition. By examining the forms and compositional devices in Nigerian gospel music, we can gain insight into the creative processes and artistic choices of the musicians.

## **2. Theoretical Framework and Review of Related Literature**

This paper relies on musical semiotic theory, which is the study of how musical structures convey meaning, exploring music as a symbolic language as developed by theorists such as Philip Tagg (1987) and Jean-Jacques Nattiez (1990) to analyse the meaning and significance of musical elements in Nigerian gospel music. Tagg's music semiotic theory explores how music communicates meaning through a systematic analysis of its various parameters, including timbre, rhythm, and loudness using the concepts of "musemes" – universal meaning units – to understand how musical elements, like chords, timbre,

and rhythm convey specific meanings and emotions. His work emphasises the socio and cultural context in which music is created and interpreted, highlighting how music participates in broader cultural dialogue (Zielonka, 2020; Negus, 2015). Jean-Jacques Nattiez a French musicologist views music and discourse about it as products of human activity, with varying interpretations across cultures. He proposes a framework for understanding musical meaning by examining the relationship between musical signs, their interpretation and the broader context of human perception.

Musical semiotic theory helps us understand how musical forms and compositional devices convey meaning and create emotional resonance in the genre.

## **2.1 Conceptualising Nigerian Gospel Music**

In discoursing gospel music people have variously defined the subject based on their perceptions, involvement and analysis of the music as well as the historical development of gospel music in Nigeria. While this is not the focus of this paper it is important to have a conceptual frame work of what Nigerian gospel music is within the general concept of gospel music. Gospel music is defined differently by various groups ranging from the musicians themselves, the audience or patrons and the scholars with emphasis on various aspects of it such as its origin, its functions and its contents. The definition of gospel music is also influenced by the culture within which it is developed and practised.

Adedeji (2007, p. 86) defines gospel music as a branch of Christian music which has become so popular and well grown albeit in divergent dimensions. Samuel (2013) in his discussion of "Church Music in Nigeria: A Historical Trend" identifies gospel music as one of the new forms that emerged from the liturgical music of the church in Nigeria which has become the most popular with the general public out of the various musical forms practiced as church music in Nigeria today. Nigerian gospel music is described by Adjabara (2023) as a powerful medium for unity among Christians of various denominations, active participation in worship, spiritual expression, cultural preservation, and communal worship. According to Ibude and Ossaiga (2024),

Gospel music in Nigeria is a transatlantic resonation of contemporary Nigerian religious genres with offshoots of Negro spirituals in America, and popular music culture which are all together offshoot of African music ingenuity. Thus, the African music that became Negro spiritual, and later gospel music in America, has returned to collaborate with African musical arts practices to create a consortium of gospel music in Nigeria. Gospel music in Nigeria is essentially similar to gospel music in America. (p.57)

We have described Nigerian gospel music as an emblematic and significantly informative entertainment industry; it is both an artistic and a contemporary religious genre that reveals social transformations nationally, regionally and globally (Adeola, 2020, p.81). Gospel music refers to the Christian branch of religious music employed for the purpose of propagating the gospel of Christ to non-Christians, as well as edifying and inspiring believers in Christ through its performance in both strict religious contexts (in church sanctuaries and congregation halls during worship services) and in all kinds of other social contexts and entertainment spaces (outside of church buildings) (Adeola, 2020, p.82; Adeola, 2023, p.119).

## **2.2 Gospel Music and African Musical Aesthetics**

African gospel music, particularly in Nigeria, reflects a rich tapestry of rhythmic complexity, vocal layering, improvisation, and performance dynamism that aligns closely with broader African musical traditions (Agordoh, 2005; Nzewi, 1991). These aesthetic qualities are deeply rooted in communal expression, oral transmission, and participatory performance practices. The call-and-response format, polyrhythms, and the integration of dance and gesture further reinforce its grounding in traditional African performance systems. Scholars like Ekwueme (2004) and Nketia (1974) have noted that African art music, especially in liturgical and popular Christian settings, often merges indigenous idioms with Western harmonic and formal principles. This fusion illustrates a creative continuity that enables African gospel musicians to localise Christian worship through culturally familiar expressions. Gospel music becomes a platform not only for spiritual edification but also for cultural affirmation, where melodic lines, rhythmic drive and linguistic choices reflect both sacred intent and socio-cultural identity.

The adaptability of gospel music to indigenous styles has also facilitated its growth and relevance, especially in Pentecostal and charismatic movements, where expressive freedom is encouraged. As such, Nigerian gospel music serves as a sonic embodiment of African musical aesthetics, reinterpreted within Christian theological frameworks and contemporary performance contexts.

## **2.3 Formal Analysis in African Music Studies**

In recent decades, African music scholarship has increasingly focused on the structural analysis of musical forms as a pathway to understanding deeper aesthetic intentions and socio-cultural functions (Nzewi, 2007; Dor, 2005). This approach moves beyond the thematic or lyrical interpretation of songs and centres on the internal logic of music—its organisation, development, and communicative framework. Such formal analysis reveals how structural choices in African music are rarely arbitrary; instead, they are culturally grounded and often symbolically significant. Omojola (2012), for example, explores the structural patterns of Yoruba sacred songs and highlights the prevalence

of strophic, call-and-response and responsorial forms. These forms, while seemingly simple, serve critical roles in reinforcing memory, participation, and spiritual resonance. Similar formal characteristics are evident in Nigerian gospel music, where repetition, variation, and cyclical forms create both emotional intensity and congregational accessibility.

Furthermore, scholars argue that African musical structures often align with extra-musical ideas such as communal solidarity, cosmology, and ritual flow (Nzewi, 1991). In this context, form is not only a compositional tool but also a narrative device—one that reflects and reinforces communal values. By applying formal analysis to Nigerian gospel music, researchers can uncover the ways in which musical structure becomes a vehicle for both spiritual expression and cultural continuity.

## **2.4 Compositional Devices in Contemporary Worship Music**

Contemporary gospel music—particularly within Pentecostal and charismatic worship contexts—employs a range of compositional strategies designed to balance artistic expression with theological intent and emotional resonance. Composers often rely on repetitive motifs, ostinati, call-and-response structures, and sequential melodic patterns to establish familiarity and encourage congregational participation (Walton, 2009; Adedeji, 2020). These devices not only aid in memorability but also serve as conduits for communal spiritual engagement, allowing worshippers to internalise and emotionally respond to the music. Harmonic progressions in gospel music tend to blend Western tonal traditions with modal inflections and Afrocentric chordal patterns. This fusion creates a dynamic harmonic palette that underpins the emotive quality of the genre. Additionally, rhythmic layering, syncopation and the strategic use of silence and breaks further enhance expressive delivery, building tension and release within performance.

These compositional elements are rarely used in isolation; rather, they function synergistically to deliver layered spiritual and cultural messages. For instance, the repetition of a lyrical phrase over a gradually intensifying harmonic background can simulate the experience of spiritual elevation or catharsis, which is central to Pentecostal worship aesthetics. Importantly, these devices also function theologically—emphasising themes such as divine sovereignty, personal salvation, and collective praise. Thus, the compositional strategies in contemporary gospel music are deeply intertwined with the genre’s spiritual mission, performance practice and cultural relevance

## **2.5 Nigerian Gospel Music**

The body of literature on Nigerian gospel music has grown steadily over the past two decades, with scholars exploring the genre’s sociological, theological, and cultural dimensions. Studies such as those by Adeogun (2017) and Oikelome (2013) have

examined gospel music's role in the Pentecostal movement, its influence on youth culture and its function as a tool for spiritual edification and moral instruction. These works provide valuable insights into the broader social functions of gospel music in contemporary Nigerian society. However, despite this rich sociocultural discourse, relatively few studies have focused on the music itself—its forms, structures, compositional logic and stylistic evolution. The genre is often treated as a functional medium for religious experience rather than a site of artistic innovation and structural complexity. This imbalance highlights a critical gap in scholarship and calls for closer attention to the internal workings of gospel compositions. Understanding gospel music purely through its spiritual or ideological lenses risks overlooking its musical sophistication and the creativity of composers and performers who engage with both indigenous and global musical idioms. A deeper exploration of form, arrangement, harmonic language, and performance practice will not only enrich our understanding of Nigerian gospel music but also position it more firmly within the canon of African musicological research. Such an approach recognises gospel music not merely as a devotional tool, but as a dynamic, evolving art form reflective of Nigeria's cultural and musical hybridity.

### **3. Methodology**

In this study, based on the theoretical framework, we analyse the use of musical elements such as forms and lyrics, and extra musical elements such as contextual occurrence, socio, political and economic realities in Nigerian gospel music, and explore how these contribute to the genre's emotional and spiritual impact. This analysis reveals the ways in which Nigerian gospel musicians use musical forms and compositional devices to convey spiritual and emotional messages, and how these messages resonate with listeners. The choice of Nigerian gospel music for this study among other popular music genres is determined by the author's exposure to the practice of gospel music as a participant and the desire to join the academic discourse of the subject matter. Relying on a qualitative research method, this study largely employs cultural hermeneutical, content analysis, descriptive, musicological, and discographical methods. Cultural – hermeneutical method is used to interpret the song texts in their cultural contexts while discographical and content analysis methods relying on existing recordings are used as resources for analysis of song texts. The content analysis which relies on the song text of the music involves a careful analysis of the overall meanings implied and generated by the various themes developed in the music. The musical analysis involves a discussion of the forms employed by the gospel musicians and the performance analysis looks at the acts and procedures in gospel music performance practice that influence the compositions. Again, participant-observation and interview were used

as instruments of data collection. Unstructured interview method was used to elicit information from the musicians. Previous audio and video recordings of some gospel musicians were collected from the archives of recording studios. In addition to this, recordings of live performances by purposively selected gospel musicians were done and the performances critically observed. These recordings were analysed in order to describe the forms and compositional devices in Nigerian gospel music. This approach allowed for the identification of recurring structures and devices that reflect both musical innovation and theological intention within the musical pieces.

### **3.1 Forms and Compositional Devices**

Forms are conceived here as formal structures and designs consistent with the song constructions and arrangement of Nigerian gospel music and compositional and performance devices here refer to methods employed by Nigerian gospel musicians to develop their musical compositions and execution of the same at performances covering both the musical and textual dimensions of their music. It is observed that certain factors evidently influence the musical compositions and performance styles ranging from the concept of gospel, prevailing socio-political and economic realities in the country to popular musical styles in vogue and contextual occurrence. The Nigerian gospel musicians exhibit creativity in a number of ways as evident in their compositions as they employ melody, song text and in their performance styles. Composing a song is a creative and imaginative process and various devices are employed in the development of the compositions. Composition is a process of creating that culminates into a finished work that can be interpreted by others either on paper or through recordings. The composer like an architect must plan the music with the same care as when a building is been designed. The composition must have shape, proportion, direction, balance, and an overall design that is conceivable and ultimately appealing to the listener or live audience.

That the Nigerian gospel musicians are creative is evident in the fact that one can talk about forms, styles and structure in Nigerian gospel music. Nzewi (2012, p.8) in his discourse on the principles of form asserts that:

Form attains perceivable reality as the normative compass and replicable structural order that marks an object or experience. Form in music is the floor plan for creative configurations. It frames and maps a performative sonic landscape that typifies a creative enterprise. Constructing form with original African musicological intellect commands evidence of indigenously creative logic framed by the purpose of music in a culture. (p.8)



Four types of musical forms identified by Vidal (2004) as common to Yoruba songs are evident in Nigerian gospel songs. These are the call and response form, the strophic form, the strophic responsorial, and the through composed form.

Excerpts from some gospel songs illustrate these forms:

### 1. **Call and response form**

Call and response form in gospel music presents a number of possibilities, such as the solo singer taking a line to which the chorus responds with either exact textual and melodic phrase or exact text with a different melody or a different text with exact melody. There is also the possibility of the response by the chorus being a different text and a different melody from the call by the solo singer.

<b>Call and response form</b>	<b>Translation</b>
Solo—Ìwọ lópé yẹ	You are worthy of thanksgiving
All—Ìwọ, Ìwọ, Ìwọ	You are x3
Solo—Ìwọ niyín yẹ	You are worthy of praise
All—Ìwọ, Ìwọ, Ìwọ	You are x3
Solo—Ìwọ lópé yẹ o	You are worthy of thanksgiving
All—Ìwọ iwọ iwọ	You are x3
Solo—Ìwọ lópé yẹ	You are worthy of thanksgiving
All— Ìwọ ni o	It is you
Solo—Ọlórún ayò	God of joy
All—Ìwọ lópé yẹ	You are worthy of praise
Solo—Kò mà sọba bíi rẹ	There is no king like you
All—Rárá, rárá, rárá	No! No! No
Solo—Kò mà sọba bíi rẹ	There is no king like you
All—Rárá, rárá, rárá	No! No! No
Solo—Kò mà sọba bíi rẹ	There is no king like you
All—Láyé yíí	Here on earth
Solo—Ọlórún ayò	God of joy
All—Ìwọ lópé yẹ	You are worthy of thanksgiving

In the above song, the response by the chorus carries a different text but the same response to different calls by the solo singer. A musical excerpt is given below:

# Iwo lope ye

Joseph Adedokun

Call

I wo lo pe ye, I wo ni yin ye

I wo, I wo, I wo I wo, I wo, I wo

4

I wo lo pe ye o O lo run a yo

I wo ni o I wo lo pe ye

9

ko ma s'o ba bi i re, Ko ma s'o ba bi i re

Ra ra, Ra ra, Ra ra, Ra ra, Ra ra, Ra ra,

13

Ko ma s'o ba bi i re O lo run a yo

La ye yi o I wo lo pe ye

The next example illustrates the chorus responding to the call by the solo singer with exact text and melody

## I have a living hope

unknown

The musical score is written in 4/4 time with a key signature of one flat (Bb). It consists of four systems of music, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment line. The lyrics are: 'I have a living hope, I have a future, God has a plan for me, Of this I'm sure, Je sus, you're my firm foundation, I know I can stand secure, Je sus, you're my firm foundation, I put my hope in your holy word.' The score includes triplet markings and rests for both parts.

- Solo:** I have a living hope  
**Chorus:** I have a living hope  
**Solo:** I have a future  
**Chorus:** I have a future  
**Solo:** God has a plan for me  
**Chorus:** God has a plan for me  
**Solo:** Of this I'm sure  
**Chorus:** Of this I'm sure  
**All:** Jesus, you're my firm foundation  
I know I can stand secure  
Jesus, you're my firm foundation  
I put my hope in your holy word x2

Another example is given below:

**Solo Call:** Praise the Lord

**Response:** Haleee

**Solo call:** Praise the Lord

**Response:** Haleee

**Solo Call:** Praise the Lord

**Response:** Haleee

**Solo Call:** Give him glory

**Response:** Haleee

**All:** Hale e e, E yin Oluwa logo Halee

The musical excerpt is given below:

### Prase the Lord, Halee

Unknown

The musical score is presented in three systems, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment line. The key signature has one flat (Bb) and the time signature is 4/4. The first system (measures 1-4) features the vocal line with lyrics 'Praise the Lord, Praise the Lor - d' and the piano accompaniment with lyrics 'Ha le e e' under a triplet. The second system (measures 5-8) features the vocal line with lyrics 'Praise the Lord Give him glo ry Ha le e e' and the piano accompaniment with lyrics 'Ha le e e' under a triplet. The third system (measures 9-12) features the vocal line with lyrics 'E yin O lu wa lo go Ha lee' and the piano accompaniment with lyrics 'e, E yin o lu wa lo go Ha lee' under a triplet.

## 2. Strophic form

In this form the same melody with little or no variation is used for all of the stanzas, although the texts are different. An excerpt is given below:

## Ara e dide e bami jo

Dupe Olulana

### Ará E Dide E Bámi Jó

Ará ẹ dide ẹ bá mi jó  
 Èniyàn mi ẹ bá mi yò  
 Olúwa mi ló gbé mi ga  
 Solo: Nínú ewu gbogbo ó pa mí mọ  
 Nínú ewu gbogbo, ó mú mi yè  
 Kí ló tún yẹ mí bí kò se ọpẹ?  
 Ọpẹ ni tèmí lójó gbogbo  
 Ó wá fire gbogbo dá mi lólá  
 Ó tún fohun gbogbo tó tún ga jù  
 Kí ló tún yẹ mí bí kò se ọpẹ?  
 Ọpẹ ni tẹmi lójó gbogbo  
 Ó tún fọmọ rere dá mi lólá  
 Ó tún fohun rere tó tún ga jù  
 Kí ló tún yẹ mí bí kò se ọpẹ?  
 Ọpẹ ìyìn ni fólúwa wa  
 Ó fẹ gbogbo wa dójú ikú  
 Ó mú gbogbo wa délé ayò  
 Kí ló tún yẹ wá bí kòse ọpẹ?

### Translation

People rise up and dance with me  
 My brethren rejoice with me  
 It is my God that has promoted me  
 He kept me from all dangers  
 He saved me from all dangers  
 What else can I do but to give thanks?  
 Mine is thanksgiving every day  
 He blessed me with every good thing  
 He also gives great blessings  
 What else can I do but to give thanks?  
 Mine is thanksgiving every day  
 He blessed me with good children  
 He also gives great blessings  
 What else can I do but to give thanks?  
 Mine is thanksgiving every day  
 He loved all of us to the point of death  
 He brought all of us to the house of joy  
 What else can we do but to give thanks?

Ọpẹ iyin ni f'ólúwa wa

Thanksgiving and praises to our God

(Dúpẹ Olúlàna in her album "Jésù mbò" Lagos, Hosannah Records. HR 001. 1986)

### 3. Strophic responsorial form

The strophic responsorial form is similar to the strophic form except for the response that is given by the chorus after each stanza. The response is the same throughout for all the stanzas. In this case the first sixteen bars of the music notated above forms the recurring chorus taken as response after the soloist sings the different stanzas.

#### Jésù O Seun Tó O Fomo Rere Dé Wa Ládé

Jésù o se é tó o fọmọ rere dé wa ládé  
Ẹkún, òsé padà lẹyìn wa  
E bá wa dúpẹ  
Àwọn àgàn tó ní wọmọ o  
bàbá dá wọn lóhùn  
Jé kí wọn ríre gbà baba, dákún dá wọn lólá  
Àwá fẹ Olúwa Olódùmarè  
Nítorí o gbọ ohùn ẹbẹ wa látòrun  
O fún wa lómọ ayọ Jésù àwá dúpẹ  
Ẹ wà bá wa yọ lóníí o tọmọtọmọ  
Àwọn tó ní wojú olúwa ẹ fọkàn balẹ  
Baba onílẹ ayọ á fi rere bá yín gbé  
Olódùmarè á sẹgun ọtá,  
ẹ tujú ká  
Ará, má mikàn rárá o ire ti dé  
Ẹ fi wọn mojú olúwa wọn yó sì wúlò  
Ẹ fi èkọ Jésù sáyà wọn láti èwe wọn  
Ayé á rọrùn láti èwe dojọ ogbó  
Ẹ jẹ ká tójú ọmọ wa ará ẹ gbọ  
Ẹyin ará tẹ ẹ bá wa pé o tẹ ẹ wa bá wa yọ  
Ẹ fọmọ yín lé Jésù ọba olúwa lówọ  
A múnú wọn dùn a sì tún fún wọn lọgbọn  
Ire yó bá yín délé o takotabọ  
(Dupe Olulana "Jesu mbo" 1986)

#### Translation

Thank you Jesus for blessing us with a good child  
Crying and hissing is no longer ours  
Join us to give thanks  
The barren that are looking for children  
Father answer them  
Let them receive favour father please bless them  
we love the Lord the owner of the universe  
Because he hearkened to our cry from heaven  
he gave us a child that brings joy, we give thanks  
come and rejoice with us with your children  
those looking up to God, don't be troubled  
Father (God) whose house is full of joy will do you good  
the owner of the universe will overcome the enemy  
so be cheerful  
Brethren do not doubt, good has come  
let your children know the Lord and they will do well  
instill the teaching of Christ in their heart from infancy  
life will be easy from childhood to old age  
let us take care of our children, people listen  
people who gather to rejoice with us  
we commit your children to Jesus Christ the Lord  
he will make them glad and give them wisdom  
Good will follow you home male and female

#### 4. Through composed form

This form which is a common feature in gospel music sets different music to different texts from the beginning of a song to the end with occasional repetition of some lines, verses or without repetition at all. The issues addressed in terms of content may also vary as the song progresses from the beginning to the end as demonstrated in the next song.

<b>Ìdáríjì Kò Sí Lórun</b>	<b>Translation</b>
Ìdáríjì kò sí lórùn o ará	There is no forgiveness in heaven
Jòwọ gba Jésù kí ó tó fayé sílẹ̀	Please accept Jesus before departing this world
Bíkú bá mú ọ lọ o, àtúnse kò ní sí mọ	When death takes you there will be no remedy
dákun dákun o, kò mà sí lórun	There will be no begging in heaven
Ó pẹ tí a ti ní figbàlà yìí hàn ọ o	we have talked to you about salvation for so long
Wípé kí o gba Jésù kí o má ba sègbè	that you should accept Jesus so you will not perish
Àmọ́ bí o bá kọ́ tí o kò ronú piwàdà	But if you refuse to repent
Bíkú bá mú ọ lọ o, àtúnse kò ní sí mọ	when death takes you there will be no remedy
dákun dákun o, kò mà sí lórun	There will be no begging in heaven
Ó ti tákòókò láti sàtúnse	It is time to mend your way
Bá Ọlórún làjà ó ti tákòókò	reconcile with God, it is time
Oró ẹ̀sẹ̀ ló ní pa ni o ará mi	The sting of sin kills my brethren
Ọ̀n ló ní ti ni sọrun ẹ̀gbé	it sends people to destruction
Oró ẹ̀sẹ̀ ló ní pa ni o ará mi	The sting of sin kills my brethren
Tètè wá gba Jésù tó le gbà ọ	Quickly come and accept Jesus who can save you
Torí ikú lè dé lójíjì	because death can come suddenly
Kíwọ má báa sègbé bóo bá dọrun	so that you will not perish when you get to heaven
Ó pẹ tí a ti ní figbàlà yìí hàn ọ o	We have talked to you about salvation for long
Akéwì ní sọ tirẹ̀, Ọlórún kò dákẹ	Poets tell you and singers have not kept quiet
Àwọ̀n aláre pèlú ní sèwọ̀n tí wọ̀n lè se	the watchmen have tried their best
Àmọ́ bí o bá kọ́ tí o kò ronú piwàdà	But if you refuse to repent
Bíkú bá mú ọ lọ o, àtúnse kò ní sí mọ	when death takes you there will be no remedy
dákun dákun o, kò mà sí lórun	There will be no begging in heaven

(Shola Rotimi and the triple 'S''Idariji Kosi l'orun, Lagos: Ibukun Orisun Iye Records. NRLP 021, 1985)

The music excerpt is given below:

## Idariji Kosi Lorun

Shola Rotimi

I da ri ji Ko si lo run o a-ra, Jo wo gba Je su Ki o to fa ye si le  
4 B'i ku ba mu o lo o a tun se ko ni si mo, Da kun, Da kun o o ko ma si lo run  
8 O pe ti a ti n ff' gba la yi han o o, wi pe ki o gba Je su ki  
12 o ma ba s'e gbe a mo bi o ba ko ti o ko ro nu pi wa da, B'i ku ba mu o lo o a  
16 tun se ko ni si mo Da kun, Da kun o o ko ma si lo run. O ti ta ko  
20 ko La ti s'a tun se Ba o lo run la ja O ti ta a ko  
24 ko O ro e se lon pa ni o a ra mi, O hun lon ti ni so run e gbe  
28 O ro e se lon pa ni o a ra mi te te wa gba Je su to le gba o

## Compositional Devices

### 1. Setting scriptures to music

The gospel musicians generally generate their themes and content of songs from the Holy Bible which serves as the basis for the proclamation of the gospel which gospel music is essentially to project. Verses of the scriptures are therefore either directly set to music, paraphrased, or references made to them in order to generate compositional ideas. Since gospel musicians see themselves as ministers in their own right the word of God contained in the bible is the power tool to drive home the message of the gospel in their music. For example the following song by 'Bois Olorun' is a direct setting of Psalm 103, verse 2, 3 and 5 to music in Yorùbá language.



## Translation

Ó yá f'ìbùkún o	O bless
Fi ibùkún f'ólúwa iwọ ọkàn mi	Bless the Lord o my soul
Máṣe gbàgbé ore t'ólúwa ẹ	And forget not all his benefits
Ó yá f'ìbùkún o	O bless
Fi ibùkún f'ólúwa iwọ ọkàn mi	Bless the Lord o my soul
Máṣe gbàgbé ore t'ólúwa se	And forget not all his benefits
Ẹni tí ó fi ohun dídára tẹ ọ lórùn X2	Who satisfieth thy mouth with good things;
Ìgbà èwe ẹ ó wá di ọtun bí ti idì x2	so that thy youth is renewed like the eagle's.
Ó yá f'ìbùkún o	O bless
Fi ibùkún f'ólúwa iwọ ọkàn mi	Bless the Lord o my soul
Máṣe gbàgbé ore t'ólúwa se	And forget not all his benefits

## 2. Contextual occurrences

Contextual occurrences also generate compositional materials and influence the performance of gospel musicians in Nigeria. This usually happens during live performances leading to on the spot composition and performance or becoming a tool for developing new compositional ideas at a later time. Gospel musicians like other musicians capitalise on the context and realities of situations of their performance to develop compositions and device performance methods that will help them achieve maximum audience appeal. Olaniyan (2016, p.13) submitted that it is essential for a composer-performer of Yoruba music to be able to adapt his music to the performance situation. The ability to do this is highly respected. According to him, musicians build up their performance-compositions from events that are happening around them. Some examples of contextual occurrences that influence composition and performance are: the type of people at the performance; the behaviour or attitudes of such people; special requests for specific songs or performances by the audience and what many gospel musicians call on-the-spot inspiration.

The context of performance is also a factor in this case. Gospel musicians feature mainly at gospel crusades or revivals, church services, Christian musical concerts, and Christian social gatherings such as house warming, naming ceremonies, burial services, chieftaincy titles and so on. The nature of the programme to a great extent defines the styles and content of performance. This is reflected in the utterances by the musicians and the types of songs rendered. It is observed that the entertainment content of performances at Christian social functions and musical concerts is more than it is when gospel musicians perform at crusades, revivals and other formal church or strict religious settings. It is observed that some gospel musicians venture into praise singing during live performances especially at social gatherings

during which they can really adapt their music for entertainment. At such moments, generating compositions in relation to personalities' names, profession, towns and their status in society is a common feature.

The type of audience in a performance setting is also a key factor in contextual occurrences. The behaviour of youths at performances differs a lot from that of the elders and the requests and demands they make at performances also vary. The desire to satisfy the musical demands in a performance context, therefore, influences and generates musical ideas.

### 3. Social, political and economic realities

The social, political and economic realities in the country at any given time also constitute compositional materials for the Nigerian gospel musicians. The gospel musicians as members of the same society comment on these realities and generate ideas about them either to express their personal views or those of the society that they tend to represent. This is usually done either in the form of prayers to God to change the situation for the better or offer suggestions that they think can be of help to the leadership and even the citizens. Some gospel musicians criticise the ills in society through their compositions. The social, political and economic realities of the country are either directly addressed in the song texts or can be inferred. They are also either directed or addressed to Nigeria as a nation or expressed at personal levels as prayers or comments reflecting how the situation has affected the musician as a person or the nation at large.

Prayer features prominently in the song texts of gospel music. Prayer is said both on a personal level by the musician as well as on behalf of other people like praying for the nation and praying for other groups of people like the sick, the jobless, and little children. The content of prayers rendered in songs also include praying for personal, communal or societal healing, deliverance, break-through, a turnaround of the nation's economy, and the political situation in the country especially for peace to reign, wisdom for leadership and good governance. Songs of prayer comes in the form of petitions or positive confessions. Hope of the oppressed people is raised through these prayer songs, trusting that some day they will be released from the power of oppression against their lives. An example is given in this excerpt by Sunday Adelokun (1984):

#### WA BAMI GBERU MI BABA

**Solo-** *Wá bá mi gbèrù mi bàbá*  
*Bá mi gbèrù mi dórí*  
*Má ɛe dá mi dá bùkáátà mi o*  
*Jésù oba iyè*

#### TRANSLATION

Come and help me to carry my load father  
Help me to carry my load on my head  
do not leave me alone with my responsibilities  
Jesus king of life

**All - Repeat!**

**Solo-** *Erù ayé mi tó wúwo bí irin*

*Bàbá wá bá mi gbé e*

*Ìṣòro ayé mi tó ñ bá mí lẹ̀rù*

*Jésù wá fòpìn sí*

*Sátáni ló ñ dikúta*

*Ló ñ dikúta sẹ̀rù ẹ̀ni tó fúyẹ.*

*Jésù Kristì ní kán labáni gbé*

*Tó ñ báni gbẹ̀rù tó wúwo*

*Wá sọ 'bànújé. mi dayò*

*Má mà jé n dèrò ẹ̀yìn*

*Odi Jerikó nínú aiyé mi*

*Bàbá wó wọ̀n palẹ̀*

*Ati mọ̀nà èdà láyẹ,*

*Kò sòro f'ólúwa*

*B'ólúwa bá ti médàá mọ̀nà*

*Ìbànújé má ti pàrìi*

**All - Repeat chorus**

The load of my life that is as heavy as iron

Father come and help me to carry it

the difficulty in my life that makes me afraid

Jesus put an end to it

It is Satan that packs stones

he packs stone in the some one's light load

It is only Jesus that helps

to carry heavy loads

Come and turn my sorrow into joy

let me not retrogress

walls of Jericho in my life

Father pull them down

for a man to make his way

is not difficult with God

when God shows man the way

sorrow comes to an end

(Joseph A. Adelakun and his Ayewa International Gospel Singers, "Wa ba mi gberu mi Baba" in *Amona tete ma bo*, Lagos, Ogo Oluwa Kiitan Records. Ayewa 9 OKLP 168 1984).

Issues of social concern feature prominently in Nigerian Gospel music. The musicians being members of the society express their views and run commentaries on happenings in the society and as such one is able to have insights into the prevailing situations in the society. Martins (1995, p.11) puts it more succinctly when he wrote that music is a social product, social resources and social practice. As such, it is not autonomous but it is created and performed by real people in particular times and places. In doing so, they reveal much about themselves and their societies. He states further that the form and character of music somehow reflect or echo the nature of the society in which it is produced.

Social concerns expressed in Nigerian gospel music address various societal issues such as the effect of the economic situation on the citizens; moral decadence in the society; lack of basic amenities like water, light, good roads and Shelter. As such, different aspects of the life of the society are referred to in gospel songs as needing the visitation of God as well as pointing the attention of the government to them to bring the desired change. Some examples of songs in this category include "Ilu le koko", "Oro aiye nfe adura", "Ranti Nigeria si rere Oluwa" and "Agbara

atunse nbe lowo olurun” by late Bayo Adegboyega and Evangelist J.A. Adelokun’s “Amona tete mabo”

Economic hardship in the country seems to be what makes gospel musicians compose songs with economic themes. The songs usually reflect the sufferings of the masses under a repressed economy. Prayer for God to turn around the economy of the nation, prayer for financial blessings of individuals and a call to the leaders to do what they can to turn around the situation forms the content of the songs with economic themes. Economic hardship is regarded as a form of illness in its description by the gospel musicians in their songs and this is believed to lead to other forms of illnesses such as physical illness because people fall sick when they are unable to eat good food and take proper care of themselves. It ultimately leads to death because in a repressed economy the government is unable to provide adequate health facilities and even when such facilities are provided people are unable to afford the money required for treatment as such many live with their illnesses.

Songs with economic themes by the gospel musicians come in the form of prayer for divine intervention to turn around the economic situation of the nation; a call to leaders to create jobs; and encouragement for citizens to hope in God who is able to change the situation for the better. A good example is Bayo Adegboyega’s song titled “Airina, airilo oluwa je ko dopin” meaning God let poverty and lack come to an end. Excerpts of the song are given below:

ÀÌRÍNÁ, ÀÌRÌLÒ OLÚWA JÉ KÓ DÓPIN

#### TRANSLATION

Chorus: *Ipá èsù gbogbo kó dópín x 2*

all of Satan’s power should cease

Àìríná, àìrìlò tó wà nígboro

poverty, lack that is prevalent in the town

Àìrìṣe, àìrìṣe tó gbayé kan

joblessness, hunger that has overtaken the world

Èmí òkùnkùn tí ñ gbéra ga níwájú ìmọ̀lẹ̀

the spirit of darkness that brags before the light

*iṣẹ̀ èsù ní, a fẹ̀ kó dópín*

it is the work of the Satan, we want it to cease

Solo: *Látọ́jọ̀ òní lọ*

From today onwards

All: *Ipá èsù gbogbo kò dópín*

Let Satan’s power cease completely

Solo: *Nílé gbogbo wa*

In our homes

All: *Ipá èsù gbogbo kó dópín*

Let Satan’s power cease completely

All: Repeat Chorus

Solo: *Gbogbo agbára láyẹ̀ àtòrun*

all power on earth and in heaven

*ń bẹ̀ lọwọ̀ Jẹ́sù*

is in the hand of Jesus

All: *Kí Jẹ́sù yára wá o, bá wa tayé se*

Let Jesus come quickly and restore the world

Nigerian gospel musicians serve as the mouth piece of the citizens and the conscience of the society. During political eras, political songs are presented in form of satires, commentaries and outright expressions of the minds of the citizens. A peculiarity is the declaration by some of the musicians that God has given them the message they are proclaiming to the nation through their music. Gospel musicians like Evangelist Niyi Adedokun and Evangelist Ojo Ade are known for their use of satire in passing their messages across to the people while musicians like Bayo Adegboyega (late) and Pastor J.A Adelokun stand out in the use of commentaries and expression of the citizen's mind presented in the form of appeal, complain, warning or criticism. Ojo (1998, p. 219) opines that most of Adedokun's records have been satires or criticisms of the socio-economic and political milieu. Adedokun who became popular in 1988 with his release titled 'Mr Awaye malo' (the man who imagines that he will not die) which was targeted at the corruption in the police force in Nigeria has remained popular in the Nigerian gospel music scene with his style of storytelling in a manner that his audience can relate the characters in his story to the Nigerian situation. Pastor Adelokun's song "B'aye bayeni" (When life is good for one) is a good example of a gospel song in this category. In this song Adelokun emphasises the transience of power and authority with particular reference to the political situation of Nigeria. He challenges the political office holders to be careful of what they do and how they do it when they are in power because a time will come when they will no longer be in power. With the use of figurative expressions, Yoruba proverbs, images and biblical examples, Adelokun warned the politicians against sycophants and political opportunists and to be careful of extravagant living because "no one knows tomorrow". He also challenged all citizens to work very hard to make Nigeria a great country. Some excerpts from the song are given below:

### **BÁYÉ BÁ YENI**

Solo - *Báyé bá yẹ ni ká rọra jayé*

*Òní la rí, kò sẹdàá tó mọla*

*Tó bá ń dara tó ń dùn yùngbà*

*E jẹkà máa wẹyin wò*

*Alágbára òní, ó tún le dí aláílágbára*

All - Repeat

Solo – *Ọba tó joye tílùú fí dàrú o*

*Ó dá mi lójú, orúkọ rẹ ò ní paré*

*Èyí tó wá gorí oyè tílùú fí tòrò*

*Ó dá mi lójú, orúkọ rẹ ò ní paré*

### **TRANSLATION**

when life is good for one, care must be taken

we only see today, no one knows tomorrow

when things are good and rosy

let us always look back

the powerful today may lose the power

the king that reigns and brings  
instability in the town

I am sure his name will not be forgotten

the one that is enthroned and brings peace

I am sure his name will not be forgotten

<i>Ipòkípò tí a wà, olúwa má jẹ n siwà hù</i>	Whatever position I am in, God help me not to misbehave
<i>Èmí Júdási má jẹ kó wọnú mi</i>	do not let the spirit of Judas enter into me
<i>Mo ní báyé bá ń yẹ ní o, ká rọra jayé</i>	I say when life is good for one, care must be taken
<i>Òní la rí, kò sẹdàá tó mọla</i>	we see today, no one knows tomorrow

It is worthy of note that all gospel songs are regarded by gospel musicians as spiritual whether they address political, economic or social issues. This is because the musicians believe that they are spiritually inspired to write the songs in the context of their religious affiliation. The gospel musicians also claim that they are inspired by the Holy Spirit to come up with the various forms of songs and styles of musical performances especially in the content of the music to address practical realities affecting the nation at large and individuals in particular. Evangelist Adelakun, Dupe Olulana and Bukola Akinade all claim that compositions are generated after moments of prayer and fasting to seek the face of God. The guidance of the Holy Spirit is also said to come into play at performances to instruct on the specific song to sing at a particular time or how to go about singing it. This was alluded to by Bukola Akinade in an interview (24<sup>th</sup> May, 2014) when she said that she does not select songs for performance but it is determined by how God wants it to happen at every performance. We can conclude that gospel musicians recognise the place of the Holy Spirit in inspiring their compositions and helping them during performances. However, we cannot also rule out the influence of the circumstances of the performance situation as a possible factor that determines composition and performance. According to Dupe Olulana (2013), most of her compositions start on stage during performances and she later goes back to develop the songs.

## Conclusion

This study has examined the forms and compositional devices employed in Nigerian gospel music. It identified four primary musical forms commonly found in the genre: the call-and-response form, the strophic form, the strophic responsorial form, and the through-composed form. These reflect performance traditions rooted in African musical aesthetics and align with the cultural and spiritual functions of the genre. The choice of form often reflects both the individual musician's background and the broader musical practices within their performance context. In terms of compositional devices, the study highlights three key sources of creative material: scriptural texts, socio-political and economic realities, and the context of performance. These shape not only lyrical content but also structural and stylistic decisions. The genre's orientation toward worship and theological reflection makes the integration of scripture a defining feature, while engagement with lived realities allows gospel music to fulfil both spiritual and social roles.

Nigerian gospel music continues to evolve in popularity and influence. It shapes spiritual identity and moral consciousness while reflecting the societal dynamics that inform its aesthetic choices. Its use of contemporary musical styles, instrumentation and visual culture further underscores its reciprocal relationship with the society in which it thrives. While many studies have addressed its cultural and theological significance, this paper affirms the need for continued scholarly engagement with its formal and structural elements. Deeper focus in this area will contribute to a fuller understanding of Nigerian gospel music as a complex, contextually embedded art form.

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