



Is African music communal or a social ritual? An analysis of film music in Idrissa Ouédraogo's *Yaaba* and Biyi Bandele's *Elesin Oba: The King's Horseman*

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Article History

Received: 2026-03-16

Revised: 2026-07-24

Accepted: 2026-07-31

Published: 2026-08-01

Keywords

Aesthetics

African music

Film music

Social ritual

How to cite:

Omoera, O. S., & Aketema, J. (2026). Is African music communal or a social ritual? An analysis of film music in Idrissa Ouédraogo's *Yaaba* and Biyi Bandele's *Elesin Oba: The King's Horseman*. *African Musicology Online*, 15(1), 96-109.

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Abstract

Globally, there is a common understanding of what film sound and film music entail. However, since films are cultural and ideological products, their nuanced meanings could well be appreciated within their unique socio-cultural contexts. The purpose of this paper is to interrogate the extent to which African music functions as a communal art form and as a social ritual using a qualitative analysis of two films: Idrissa Ouédraogo's *Yaaba* (1989) and Biyi Bandele's *Elesin Oba: The King's Horseman* (2022). Drawing from African aesthetic theory and extant literature, the paper explores how film music in the selected films articulate collective identity, express communal memory, and mediate social obligations. The findings suggest that musical traditions in African films sustain important cultural elements while functioning as both communal expressions and social rituals. Through close readings of musical sequences, the relationship between dialogue and music, and culturally grounded symbolic cues, the analysis demonstrates that African music in these films transcends mere entertainment; it performs communal bonding, reinforces cosmological worldviews, and structures ritual action. *Yaaba* foregrounds music as an everyday communal practice embedded in unity of purpose and intergenerational cohesion, while *Elesin Oba* situates music within sacred Yoruba cosmologies, emphasising its function in rites of passage, ancestral mediation, and social order. The paper argues that the cinematic soundtracks in both films embody culturally specific epistemologies in which music is a living, participatory force that shapes social experience, preserves indigenous aesthetics, and enacts the moral fabric of their respective societies.

Introduction

Cinema is inherently a multimodal art form which deploys visuals, performance, narrative, and importantly, sound to craft immersive experiences (Oyebamiji & Olutayo, 2025; Morandini, 2021). Among these elements, music plays a particularly powerful role. A growing body of scholarship demonstrates that film music shapes not only the mood of individual scenes but also the emotional architecture, narrative rhythm, and cultural resonance of entire films (Spence & Di Stefano, 2025; Bennett & Rogers, 2016). For example, audiovisual studies show that music significantly guides



viewers' visual attention and shapes their emotional responses, enhancing engagement and empathy with characters' situations (Balint, 2024; Brown, Howe & Belyk, 2020). Globally, the aesthetics of music in filmmaking has become central to cinematic storytelling for several reasons. First, music adds an additional expressive layer, capable of evoking complex emotional states that images alone may not communicate—joy, melancholy, tension, nostalgia (Kalinak, 2023; Yacavone, 2014). Second, music helps construct atmosphere, define temporal and spatial settings, and convey subtext: the unspoken desires, fears, or collective memory of characters and communities.¹ Third, film music contributes to a film's "identity"; it can reflect cultural heritage, social belonging, or historical context, thereby transforming cinema into a medium of cultural expression and preservation (Cohen, 2013; Shafik, 2007).

Thus, as global cinema continues to evolve, the aesthetic design of music remains indispensable. In Africa, music occupies a central place in the continent's cultural and social landscapes, functioning as both a form of communal expression and a vehicle for ritualistic practice (Oyedokun & Ajayi, 2026; Kuwor, 2025). Most indigenous African music and performance are inherently rooted in collective participation. Depending on the cultural context, participation may be restricted to spiritually secluded communities or may involve the wider public or a general social performance, depending on what is culturally at stake. In general, African music brings communities together to celebrate, mourn, or commemorate significant events, reflecting shared values, histories, and identities. Indigenous African music is deeply embedded in social and religious rituals, marking life-cycle events, spiritual ceremonies, and rites of passage. In these contexts, performances follow structured symbolic patterns (Drewal, 1991). It is in these instances that, even within a community of performers, there is a selection criterion based on age, cult groups, and gender. Since most aspects of film are inspired by the social and lived realities of communities (Black, 2013), this paper explores the dual dimensions of African music, examining how it negotiates the boundaries between communal engagement and ritualised social functions, revealing its multifaceted cultural significance in Idrissa Ouédraogo's *Yaaba* (1989) and Biyi Bandele's *Elesin Oba: The King's Horseman* (2022).

In the context of African cinema, music assumes a particularly rich and multifaceted function. In many African films, music is not simply a background accompaniment; it acts as a narrative voice, a cultural signifier, and sometimes as a character (Kalinak, 2023; Samuel & Adejube, 2021). From the earliest decades of post-colonial African filmmaking, directors used music to assert historical memory and cultural identity and to critique undesirable social conduct. Filmmakers achieve this by challenging reductive Western representations and offering deeply rooted aesthetic alternatives (Ukadike, 2023; Murphy & Williams, 2019). In most indigenous African films, it is not uncommon to notice that musical aesthetics often draw on traditional oral and performance cultures: rhythms, instrumentation, vocal styles, and musical structures that resonate with communal histories and cosmologies (Addaquay, 2025). Many African films, such as *Elesin Oba: The King's Horseman* (2022) and *Yaaba* (1989), explore socio-cultural and ritual realities steeped in notions of spiritual divinities (Linze & Desa, 2024). As is well recognised, music and film sound, in general, serve several functions not merely as entertainment but also as narrative transitions and moments of visual pause (Kalinak, 2023; Diffrient, 2023). The functions and meanings of film music vary across genres and according to the narrative's socio-cultural contexts.

In most films, music serves as a bridge between the visual narrative and lived cultural experience, grounding stories in African epistemologies and social realities. Moreover, music in African cinema

¹ See Souleymane Cissé's *Yeelen* 1989



can mark critical moments of transition, rites of passage, collective trauma, memory, and celebration, while embodying communal values and shared identity (Fabusuyi, 2025; Diffrient, 2023). For these reasons, African filmmakers increasingly foreground music as a deliberate aesthetic and ideological tool, not as an afterthought – but as a fundamental component of storytelling (Mututa, 2026; Kalinak, 2023). In recognising this, we appreciate how African cinema uses music to reclaim narrative agency, celebrate cultural plurality, and offer filmic experiences deeply anchored in African sensibilities (Fabusuyi, 2025; Ukadike, 2023). It is clear from the foregoing that in African cinema, music functions as more than accompaniment; it shapes narrative, evokes emotion, and reflects cultural identity. Rooted in communal and ritual practices, it bridges visual storytelling and lived experience, marking rites, memory, and collective values. Films like *Yaaba* (1989) and *Elesin Oba: The King's Horseman* (2022) exemplify this cultural and aesthetic significance. In African performance traditions, communal artistic practices are collectively created and socially shared to strengthen unity through participation and rhythmic interaction, while social rituals are structured ceremonial performances associated with spiritual, ancestral, or cultural occasions, such as funerals and festivals (Onuoha, 2025). For instance, within a society's social structure, people may express their sense of belonging by prioritising shared identity, mutual responsibility, and cooperation through participation in generally sanctioned activities. While these may contain elements of ritual, there is often a purely ritualistic sacred component observed by sacred cults, devotees, and initiates. The two occasionally intersect. For instance, a general social gathering could watch a venerated traditional figure sing and perform open dance moves such as the dance “of or for the gods” (Begho, 1996; p. 165). In this regard, songs and performances, sacred as they may be, are linked to the cosmology, lore, values, and traditions that undergird the society. It is observed that African cosmology reflects an interconnected worldview linking humans, ancestors, spirits, nature, and the universe, often expressed through sacred songs and performance practices.

Methodology

The paper adopted a qualitative methodological approach to examine how African music operates as both a communal expression and a social ritual in film. The selection of scenes for analysis in *Yaaba* (1989) and *Elesin Oba: The King's Horseman* (2022) was informed by a qualitative purposive sampling strategy, which enabled the identification of sequences that most clearly depict the communal and ritual functions of African music, dance, and performance. Rather than analysing every musical moment, the study selected scenes where music serves as a narrative, cultural, and symbolic device within collective social practices. These include ceremonies, communal gatherings, processions, ritual performances, and celebratory events in which music and dance mediate social interaction, reinforce cultural values, and facilitate communication between individuals and the community. The selected scenes were examined through the lens of African aesthetics and film analysis, integrating visual, auditory, and performative elements to understand how music, performance, and mise-en-scène construct meaning. The analysis was further guided by thematic analysis, allowing recurrent themes such as communal identity, spirituality, ancestral continuity, social cohesion, and ritual obligation to emerge across both films. This methodological approach acknowledges that African music is rarely an isolated artistic expression but rather a communal practice embedded in ritual, performance, and everyday life. These selected scenes provide rich textual evidence for examining how film music embodies indigenous African philosophies, preserves cultural memory, and presents music as a participatory social ritual rather than merely an aesthetic accompaniment to cinematic storytelling.

Also, the methodology draws on African aesthetics theory and African cultural and philosophical studies to interpret how music and performance construct collective identity and ritual significance. The analysis of musical practices in both films showed convergences and divergences in musical



usage, revealing how cinematic representation mediates indigenous practices and audience reception within specific socio-cultural and historical frameworks in the films.

African Aesthetic Theory

Generally, African aesthetic theory refers to indigenous and scholarly interpretations of beauty, creativity, artistic expression, and cultural value rooted in African worldviews. Unlike most Euro-American notions of aesthetics that often emphasise art for art's sake, individual genius, and formalism, African aesthetics are deeply embedded in communal life. It entails spirituality, morality, functionality, and performance (Wemega-Kwawu, 2024; Ibanga, 2017). Art in African societies is not isolated from everyday existence; rather, it is integral to social organisation, ritual practice, political authority, and historical memory (Abiodun, 2014; Asante, 2007). African aesthetic theory therefore challenges Eurocentric conceptions of art by privileging cultural use-value, symbolism, process, and collective meaning over purely visual pleasure. The indigenous African notions of rituals, rites of passage, and communal performativity that anchor music and dance are not the same in the Euro-American context. African scholars and, later, European scholars have argued that the perception of beauty in sound, art, and broader African practice was scorned by passive European scholars as primitive (Abiodun, 2018; Coombes, 1994; Perani & Smith, 1998). For these reasons, most African scholars wrote in response to the ways European explorers and academics saw and wrote about Africa. Paulin Hountondji demonstrates this with the burial rites of King Ghezo (Hountondji, 2000), whose ritual process is akin to the ritual suicide of the Elesin of Oba. African material art forms were generally seen as inferior. For instance, Perani and Smith claim that after the Oba of Benin's palace was raided by the British, the objects were initially classified as primitive art, devoid of any inherent value and of superior knowledge forms. In recent years, music by African icons such as Baba Maal and Salif Keita has been used in Hollywood films, including Ridley Scott's *Black Hawk Down* (2001).

Philosophical Foundations of African Aesthetics

Understanding the philosophical foundations of these practices is key to appreciating not only music and dance but also the culture of the people on its own terms (Regelski, 2006; Elliott, 1990). In many African societies, beauty is not autonomous but moral and social. Among the Akan of Ghana, for instance, the concept of beauty (*ahoɔfɛ*) is closely associated with good character (*suban pa*), suggesting that what is aesthetically pleasing must also be ethically sound (Wiredu, 1996). Ibanga (2017) recognises that, "Beauty must serve to communicate values, norms, morals, and purpose. Beauty must edify the community" (p. 225). Similarly, Yoruba aesthetics emphasise character (*iwa*) as a prerequisite for true beauty, reinforcing the idea that aesthetics and morality are intertwined (Abiodun, 2014). In the work of Sofola and Adedeji (2025), they recognise that "Music plays an important role in cultural preservation, helping to maintain and transmit cultural heritage across generations. It helps to safeguard intangible cultural heritage, thereby enhancing community identity and promoting cultural diversity" (p. 124). A defining principle of African aesthetic theory is communalism, which is manifested in Chiwara, Adowa, and Egungun performances. Most of these performances are anchored in sacred rituals which are observed and performed by most initiated groups, which are themselves revered social groups and communities. Most African communities confer their general notions of aesthetics on sound and performative human conduct. As Ibanga (2017) shares, "In the language of Shona in Zimbabwe, the word "kunaka" (beauty) denotes well-groomed character and physical attractiveness. In Annang of Nigeria (native to Grace Ibanga, the word "ntuen-akpo" is used metaphorically to refer to a woman who only has physical attractiveness but lacks good manners. Ntuen-akpo is a type of attractive pepper that can hurt the tongue when tasted or eaten. A woman described as ntuen-akpo is usually avoided, despised and not desired or valued despite her sparkling physical beauty" (Ibanga, 2017, p. 254).



It is evident in *Elesin Oba: The King's Horseman* (2022) that Euro-Americans, such as Wole Soyinka's Pilkings, did not associate the same notion of beauty and artistic worth with the Egungun masks precisely because they did not share the Yoruba community's communal notion of beauty. The tango belongs to a social world of secular entertainment and voyeurism, while the Yoruba saw theirs as a serious religious ceremony of a rite of transition. This affirms the notion that African art is created by and for the community rather than for individual contemplation. This communal orientation shapes both artistic production and evaluation (Onyeaghalaji, 2018). Music, dance, sculpture, masquerade, storytelling, and body arts are assessed based on how effectively they serve communal purposes such as social cohesion, education, healing, or ritual efficacy (Afolaranmi & Afolaranmi, 2024; Nketia, 1974). Functionality is therefore central. African art and music are often described as "functional," not in a reductive utilitarian sense, but in their capacity to perform social, spiritual, and political functions (Grillo, 2012). Indigenous dances and masks, for example, are not merely sculptural objects but active agents used in rituals to invoke ancestors, enforce moral order, or negotiate power relations (Grillo, 2012). An artwork's success lies in its effectiveness within its context rather than its permanence or originality.

Music and dance occupy central roles in African societies, functioning not only as artistic expressions but also as vital social, communicative, and ritualistic tools. They are embedded in community life, serving as markers of identity, historical memory, cosmology, and collective emotion (Solomon, 2025; Akinyemi & Falola, 2021). This is particularly evident in African cinema, where filmmakers use sound and indigenous performative traditions to convey cultural philosophies and heighten narrative tension (Ukadike, 2023). Two significant films that illustrate these dynamics are *Elesin Oba: The King's Horseman* (2022), a Nigerian adaptation of Wole Soyinka's canonical text *Death and the King's Horseman*, and *Yaaba* (1989), Idrissa Ouédraogo's acclaimed Burkinabé film. Though set in different cultural contexts – the Yoruba society of southwestern Nigeria and the Mossi community of Burkina Faso, both films highlight the ways music and dance mediate communal obligations, social relationships, identity formation, and rites of transition.

While film music is often composed within the confines of universal principles of sound and their application in filmmaking, it is important to investigate the communal and social functions of music and dance that reflect the films' social world, cognisant of the cultural context. In both films and their corresponding cultural contexts, unravelling how African filmmakers use music and dance to communicate communal values, mediate conflict, reinforce ritual systems, and structure interpersonal relationships (Afolaranmi & Afolaranmi, 2024; Cook & Dodds, 2016) is essential to the global audience and, in this case, the reader. Drawing from performance theory, the essay argues that in both *Elesin Oba: The King's Horseman* (2022) and *Yaaba*, music and dance constitute a narrative grammar that expresses cultural identity, shapes social behaviour, and reaffirms communal solidarity.

Music and Dance as Communal Ritual in Yaaba and Elesin Oba: The King's Horseman

In Yoruba culture, music is inseparable from cosmology. Examples of these can be seen from Tundé Kèlání's political satire, *Şaworoide* (1999) and *Àrùgbá* (2008). Drums, chants, and praise-songs function as a socio-cultural awakening, a critique of the socio-cultural world (Akinola, 2024; Nyarko & Aketema, 2022; Amusan, 2018) and as vessels for spiritual communication, linking the tangible world and the metaphysical realm of the ancestors (Olaleye & Adeyeye, 2020). In *Elesin Oba: The King's Horseman* (2022), music is the medium through which Elesin's impending ritual death is framed and validated. From the film's opening scenes, Elesin is accompanied by an ensemble of drummers, praise singers, and dancers who follow him through the marketplace.



In *Elesin Oba: The King's Horseman* (2022), the film's music enhances the narrative's aesthetic quality and emotional depth through tempo, instrumentation, rhythm, and call-and-response structures rooted in Yoruba musical traditions. In film music and African aesthetics in particular, slow tempos and modal tonalities intensify the solemn atmosphere surrounding death, ritual transition, and ancestral communion (Agawu, 2023; Mollaghan, 2015). In contrast, faster rhythmic patterns accompany communal celebrations and ceremonial processions (Tomlinson, 2014). Film sound is used as a narrative hook in *Elesin Oba: The King's Horseman* (2022). For instance, in the opening marketplace sequence and during Elesin's ostracism in prison, the call-and-response vocal structure strengthens communal participation and spiritual dialogue, reflecting Yoruba cosmology. The pitch and timbre accompanying these musical elements collectively mediate tension, spirituality, and ritual transformation, thereby deepening the audience's emotional and cultural engagement with the film. The lively mood and tempo of the marketplace are reinforced as the women accompanying the Elesin Oba extol:

Elesin Oba!

You are the King's Horseman!

You are the thread that holds Oyo kingdom steady!

A true child of Oyo,
who knows the rhythm of the shekere...

Oh Iyaloja!
Mother of the market,
the one who guides us all with wisdom..."

No matter how I stand,
I cannot match your grandeur.

When Olunde committed the ritual suicide, the tempo of the music is slow alongside the song of the women pallbearers. The graceful movements of the women, accompanied by songs, lend Olunde's death cultural richness and evoke emotion.

Even though the hero in the film *Elesin Oba: The King's Horseman* (2022) is male and the heroine in *Yaaba* (1989), Sana, is female, music is used as both a leitmotif and a thematic element in the film. This music evokes emotions such as longing (52:37–55:15), love, and desire (*Yaaba*, 1989, 20:00–20:58; 46:00–47:25). The visuals, accompanied by the music, show the poor wooden rafters beneath which Sana sleeps and what she looks like. In *Yaaba*, sombre music is used in the accompanying scenes not only as a breather but also for healing and emotional transition. When Nopoko becomes ill, traditional healers use rhythmic chanting and low drumming as part of the healing ritual. Though understated, these scenes reveal the Mossi belief that music is connected to health, emotional balance, and communal responsibility.

Contrary to Euro-American frameworks, African healing practices view sound and rhythm as tools for restoring communal harmony. The film's sonic design underscores this worldview, presenting healing as a collective event rather than an individual experience. The theme music used to portray her under these conditions is the same as the one played when Sana was escaping her community. A fraudulent traditional healer pronounced a wrong verdict on Sana, accusing her of striking Nopoko with sickness. Sana, whose dilapidated hut was burnt, was now trekking to escape her lynchers. The filmmaker uses wide shots to establish her loneliness and to advance the wide and hostile journey that a wrongfully accused seventy-year-old woman is facing (*Yaaba* 53: 58 to 55: 15). Idrissa Ouédraogo foreshadows this event by showing how alcohol is stealing the life and conjugal duties of Noaga (13:



15 to 16: 47). While there are contrasting wants and desires for the two casts; Elesin Oba (Odunlade Jonathan Adekola) and Noaga (Rasmané Ouédraogo) in the films, there are some character flaws that make us share in their pain and grief from the films' beginning to its catharsis to the denouement. However, in the challenging and sordid lives of individuals, there is great evidence where music is used to soothe and comfort the soul, as in the drunk character Noaga (Rasmané Ouédraogo) (*Yaaba* 1989; 36: 49 to 38: 15).

It may be argued that in every society, individuals experience challenges, pain, and struggles. However, the collective performance of music and dance functions as a communal ritual that situates people not merely as individuals (Lewis, 2013; Phelan, 2008), but as embodiments of a collective entity with shared cultural and social responsibilities (Seye, 2014). In *Elesin Oba: The King's Horseman* (2022), the musical procession affirms Elesin Oba as the king's horseman whose death is necessary to accompany the deceased king into the ancestral realm. The Elesin Oba occupies a central point because his own death would ensure that the king continues to be served as one while on earth (Abakporo, 2022; Mekunda, 2019). While the praise-singers chant and a horde of women's songs are rendered in Yoruba poetic language in celebration of the Elesin's lineage, valour, and cosmic responsibility (Sotimirin, 2020), the contrast is with Sana. The theme of Sana evokes sympathy, social neglect, and ridicule, which is drawn using music (Murphy & Williams, 2019). The music in *Elesin Oba: The King's Horseman* (2022) is slow-paced, allowing the words to register in our minds and on the screen. In affirmation of this, Barber (1991) submits that Yoruba oral performances are dialogical acts that constitute social negotiations between performers and audiences. In the film, this dynamic is visible in the way Elesin responds to praise-chants with boastful dance movements, signalling his acceptance of communal expectations. His body becomes an expressive instrument of ritual consent. Music in *Yaaba* (1989) is also used during moments of conflict and misunderstanding.

Socio-Cultural Exclusion of Music and Performance

When Sana, the elderly woman, is falsely accused of witchcraft and ostracised, she is noticeably excluded from communal gatherings where music and dance occur. This defies "the notion that traditional music is something that emerges out of a community, belongs to everyone, and is, therefore, not protectable by modern copyright laws" (Kwakwa 2008; p. 45). Silence around Sana is symbolic, representing social abandonment, thus affirming the notion that music operates not only as a tool for inclusion but also as an index of exclusion (Laes & Schmidt, 2016). Apart from diegetic sound, whose source exists within the story world that characters can hear, the filmmaker creates non-diegetic sound for the actress Sana to appeal to our emotions and to establish that she is excluded from most community performances (Samuel & Adejube, 2021; Knight-Hill, 2019). The absence of Sana's musical participation establishes a moral critique: a community's cohesion is compromised by unfounded stigma. Later, Bila's affectionate relationship with Sana becomes an act of cultural correction, symbolically reintegrating her into the community's moral fabric.

Dance as Collective Spiritual Preparation

Dance in the film is not merely aesthetic; it is a spiritual exercise. In the opening scene, Elesin Oba's rhythmic movement in the marketplace, hands lifted, feet stamping, body oscillating to the bata drums, serves as a symbolic marker of his transition from the human world into the liminal space between life and ancestral union. In Turner (1979), study of liminality he submits that, "Such rites are found in all cultures, and are seen as both indicators and vehicles of transition from one sociocultural state and status to another - childhood to maturity, virginity to marriage, childlessness to parenthood, ghosthood to ancestorhood, sickness to health, peace to war and vice versa, scarcity to plenty, winter to spring, and so on" (p. 466). As such, African music and dance forms use gestures, sombre



movements, and soul-wrenching music to communicate inner thoughts and connect with the ancestors. An outsider who is not deeply rooted in the culture may miss the essential elements of art and philosophical meanings of the performances (Strother, 2025; Mabingo, 2020). The collective dance of villagers around him reflects communal participation in this rite of passage. In Yoruba ritual philosophy, the community plays an indispensable role in preparing an individual for spiritual transformation (Abiodun, 2014). The film translates this immaterial belief into visual form. During the culminating ritual night, Elesin performs a trance-like dance. His swaying motions, heavy breath, and trembling arms signal his spiritual loosening (*Elesin Oba: The King's Horseman* (2022), 47: 52 to 50: 00). Drums intensify, dancers circle him, and chants grow more repetitive. This rhythmic intensification reflects the Yoruba aesthetic of *ifarabalẹ* (ritual concentration), underscoring that dance serves as a conduit for the activation of spiritual energy. The music in this film offers a philosophical foundation of worldly desires and divine duties. Although the music reflects Yoruba aesthetics, it ultimately becomes an unnecessary distraction from Elesin Oba's divine obligation. The slow-paced and sombre movements give sufficient time for the colonial administrators to arrest him for his willingness to die alongside the king. This needless delay led to his own son, whom he had sent abroad to acquire western education, killing himself to fulfil the ritual requirements for the king's funeral.

Communal Identity and Social Cohesion Through Performance

The film's musical scenes are inherently communal. Non-segregated performance, where villagers of different genders, ages, and statuses participate, reflects the Yoruba belief that rituals are collective responsibilities. Music and dance establish social cohesion by reinforcing shared cosmological beliefs (Omoera & Aluede, 2016). For example, when Elesin requests to marry a young woman on the eve of his death, the community debates but ultimately participates in the wedding, with singing and dancing framing the ceremony. In many African societies, it is uncommon to deny a person their last wish (De Souza et al, 2024; Ekore, 2016). This, coupled with the position of Elesin Oba as one who cannot traditionally be denied such requests even if they look culturally absurd, should not be ignored. The performance here functions as a form of social negotiation: through music, tension is transformed into communal affirmation. The ritual wedding becomes a means for the community to indulge Elesin while still reinforcing his responsibility. Even when initiated groups performed and danced to specific sacred music, there is still a sense of communal cohesion. Communal and social sacredness in African ritual music lies in its deep connection to spirituality, ancestry, and communal identity (Sele, 2025). In the social, communal and ritual sense, music functions as a bridge between the physical and metaphysical realms, often invoking deities, spirits, and ancestors (Yüceland & Savaş, 2026). Among the Yoruba, drumming in Egungun festivals summons ancestral presence, while in Akan traditions, fontomfrom drums communicate with royal and spiritual authorities during sacred rites (Famule, 2024). Similarly, Zulu healing ceremonies employ rhythmic chants and dances to channel spiritual forces for restoration. These musical forms are not merely aesthetic but are imbued with symbolic meaning, governed by strict cultural protocols, and performed within consecrated contexts that affirm belief systems and sustain communal continuity.

Music as Narrative Counterpoint

When music and sound, in general, are used as counterpoints, their purposes are used to establish opposing events, such as a crime scene occurring concurrently with a pious religious teaching in a church (*The Godfather*, 1972). A central device in *Elesin Oba: The King's Horseman* (2022) is the contrast between Yoruba indigenous music and Euro-American social music performed at the British district officer's residence. The British dance to stylised tango music is structured and devoid of spiritual meaning. This juxtaposition highlights the cultural gap between the colonisers and the Yoruba. Western music symbolises social pleasure, while Yoruba music symbolises spiritual duty and



collective survival. This contrast climaxes during Elesin's interrupted ritual. As he dances to ancestral drums, British officials, accompanied by Western dance music, interfere, misunderstanding the ritual's significance. Thus, music comes as a tool for dramatising cultural misunderstanding and colonial disruption.

Music and Dance as an Environmental and Social Texture in *Yaaba*

Unlike *Elesin Oba: The King's Horseman* (2022), where music is intense and ritualistic, *Yaaba* (1989) utilises music more subtly, relying on the membranophones rather than the human vocalist as in *Elesin Oba: The King's Horseman* (2022). Idrissa Ouédraogo uses sound alongside wide shots which show everyday life within the community and highlight the natural rhythms of communal existence. Music functions as a narrative texture, creating a sense of place (Murphy & Williams, 2019). The traditional Mossi flutes, soft drumming, and ululations appear during communal gatherings, weddings, and festivals. These sounds anchor the audience in the cultural world of the village, suggesting stability, continuity, and interconnectedness (Addaquay, 2025). Music and dance shown in the two films reaffirm the indigenous African notions on the applications of socialisation. Children learn to dance or perform not in formal training sessions but through communal playgrounds, especially at night (Nweke & Olokodana-James, 2024; Mabingo, 2021). For instance, the performance scenes in *Yaaba* often appear in scenes involving children and youth, emphasising its role in socialisation and communal bonding. For example, Bila and Nopoko observe or participate in playful dances during village gatherings (*Yaaba*, Scene 1: 09: 14 to 1:10: 09). The communal dancing of young people demonstrates how the community transmits values horizontally across generations (Edwards, 2024). Ouédraogo's depiction of dance is naturalistic. Unlike the ritual severity in *Elesin Oba: The King's Horseman* (2022), dance in *Yaaba* is relaxed, spontaneous, and woven into the rhythm of daily life. According to Diawara (1992), Ouédraogo's filmmaking style presents African sociality with visual and sonic simplicity, allowing communal interactions to take precedence in the narrative. Dance thus becomes a soft but powerful expression of belonging and relationality.

Music as Cultural Identity: A Comparative Analysis of Communal Functions

The film *Elesin Oba: The King's Horseman* (2022) uses music and dance primarily in ritual contexts, focusing on spiritual duties, cosmic balance, and ancestral linkage. The collective performances signify metaphysical obligations. In contrast, *Yaaba* uses music to depict everyday sociality, play, friendship, labour, and communal celebration. Dance is a tool of leisure, social integration, and identity formation. Thus, although both films are rooted in communal and indigenous structures, they represent these traditions through distinct aesthetic lenses: *Elesin Oba: The King's Horseman* (2022) emphasises ritual solemnity, whereas *Yaaba* (1989) foregrounds social realism. In both films, music establishes cultural authenticity. In *Elesin Oba: The King's Horseman* (2022), bata drums, Yoruba chants, and call-and-response patterns reflect specific ethnic identity. In *Yaaba*, Mossi melodies and flutes provide regional texture. In both contexts, music serves as an audible manifestation of culture, sound as identity.

Music and Power

In *Elesin Oba*, music is connected to spiritual and political power. The horseman's authority is reinforced by musicians and dancers who accompany him. When the colonial state interrupts the ritual (Scene 59: 18 to 1: 01: 15), the disruption of music symbolises the erosion of indigenous authority structures. In *Yaaba*, music expresses communal moral power. It reveals social dynamics: who belongs, who is excluded, whose voice matters. Sana's exclusion from musical life reveals her marginalisation. Even though they are wrongfully accused, the point is made that individuals perceived as having violated communal norms are often excluded from communal music and dance practices. Conversely, both films use musical contrasts to highlight narrative tension. The film *Elesin Oba: The King's*



Horseman (2022) uses dance moves set to the throbbing drums and the musical rhythms of colonial tango. There is a counterpoint section in *Yaaba* where music enforces the communal gatherings of fantasy and socialisation, in contrast to the silence surrounding Sana. These contrasts serve as symbolic commentaries on cultural conflict, social injustice, and the fragility of community. Children's interactions with music differ across the films. In *Elesin Oba*, children observe ritual performances as spectators, thereby indirectly inheriting cultural knowledge. In *Yaaba*, children actively participate in dances and chants, learning communal values through embodied experience. This distinction shows differing pedagogical practices: ritual observation versus participatory learning. Since the musical forms used are rooted in indigenous African systems and reflect culture, we cannot discount the enchanting role of unseen forces. According to Kwakwa (2008), "In worship and ritual healing, dancers serve as mediums for characterising and impersonating communal spirits, enabling them to converse with living persons" (p. 55-56). Both films reflect the African belief that music encodes memory. Songs preserve histories, genealogies, and moral wisdom. In *Elesin Oba: The King's Horseman* (2022), praise-chants recall lineage and cosmological duties. In *Yaaba*, folk songs and playful dances transmit intergenerational memory. In *Elesin Oba: The King's Horseman* (2022), maintaining traditional music and ritual dance in the face of colonial intrusion is a form of resistance. Music becomes a symbol of indigenous self-assertion. In *Yaaba*, communal music resists internal fragmentation by emphasising cohesion over ostracism. African cinema often uses sound to articulate cultural space. In *Elesin Oba: The King's Horseman* (2022), drums transform the marketplace into a sacred arena. In *Yaaba*, music integrates the landscape, fields, compounds, and markets into a harmonious sonic environment. In each case, sound roots characters within communal and ecological belonging.

Beyond African cinema, this study contributes to the broader field of film sound studies by demonstrating that film music should be understood not merely as an aesthetic accompaniment but as a culturally embedded narrative system that constructs social meaning, mediates collective memory, and articulates philosophical worldviews. By foregrounding indigenous African sonic traditions, the paper also extends contemporary debates in film sound scholarship, arguing for analytical frameworks that recognise culturally specific sound practices as central to understanding how cinema communicates identity, ritual, and communal experience.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has examined how African film music functions beyond entertainment as a communal art form and social ritual within culturally grounded cinematic traditions. Using a qualitative methodology grounded in close textual and sonic analysis of Idrissa Ouédraogo's *Yaaba* (1989) and Biyi Bandele's *Elesin Oba: The King's Horseman* (2022), the paper explored the relationship among music, ritual performance, communal identity, and indigenous cosmologies. Drawing on African aesthetic theory and Victor Turner's concept of liminality, the analysis demonstrated how rhythm, tonal shifts, silence, ceremonial soundscapes, and call-and-response structures mediate ritual transition, ancestral communion, and collective social experience. The findings reveal that African film music preserves indigenous epistemologies by reinforcing communal memory, social obligations, intergenerational cohesion, and cosmological worldviews. In *Yaaba*, music functions as an expression of everyday communal life, while in *Elesin Oba*, it structures rites of passage and mediates the liminal movement between the material and ancestral realms. The study contributes to scholarship on African cinema and sound studies by foregrounding film music as a participatory cultural force that sustains indigenous aesthetics, ritual meaning, and the moral fabric of African societies.



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