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Abstract
The paper examines how activist aesthetics – lyrical satire and ritualised public critique, operate in Àpẹ́pẹ́ music of the Rẹ́mọ people of Nigeria. It examines how these mechanisms contribute to institutional sustainability, understood as the continuity of the communal institutions that bind communal duty to collective well-being. Drawing on Turner's liminality and communitas, Schechner's restored behaviour and Taylor's repertoire, the qualitative ethnographic study combined in-depth interviews with three purposively selected Àpẹ́pẹ́ song leaders in Ipara and Irolu Rẹ́mọ, participant observation of performances, and the transcription of song texts. Interview data were analysed thematically, and song texts and transcriptions through content and musical analysis. Participants located Àpẹ́pẹ́'s critical licence in the communal ownership of groups and songs, succession-based leadership, and the customary shield of the Orò institution. Songs address leadership failure, neglect of civic duty, idleness and theft through veiled satire, appeals to the king and graduated disclosure, carried by pentatonic melodies and a collective chorus. The shield is, however, negotiated rather than absolute: the encounters recorded include an attempted arrest, a palace summons and a suspension of the Orò festival. Àpẹ́pẹ́ functions as grassroots, ritually sanctioned check on power and conduct whose efficacy depends on customary recognition rather than statutory law. Cultural policy should support the tradition while addressing its ethical limits, particularly the absence of a right of reply and the exclusion of women's voices. The findings rest on a small, male sample from two towns, accessed by an insider researcher, and are not generalisable beyond comparable customary settings.

Introduction

The Rẹ́mọ people form a significant part of Ogun State, Nigeria, sharing boundaries with the Egba, Ijebu, Egun/Awori, and several other Yorùbá sub-groups in Oyo and Ondo States, Nigeria. With its headquarters in Sagamu, under the Akarigbo of Rẹ́mọland as the spiritual and traditional leader, the Rẹ́mọ occupy a strategic territory that serves as a gateway between the Atlantic and the other hinterlands of the Yorùbá nation. Although they share the Yorùbá language with other Yorùbá subgroups, the Rẹ́mọ speak a distinct dialect. Àpẹ́pẹ́ is a prominent traditional music of the Rẹ́mọ people, and it plays significant cultural roles across Rẹ́mọ territories at festivals and social events (Sofola et al., 2026). Beyond its entertainment roles in these events, Àpẹ́pẹ́ functions as a cultural institution that unites communities, addresses social issues, and regulates social behaviour, mainly through lyrical satire, the veiled public critique of erring community members and leaders, and moral instruction delivered in song. Similar to the broader characteristics of music in several African societies, Àpẹ́pẹ́ music embodies the identity of the Rẹ́mọ people and also serves as a significant tool in cultural preservation. Although each Rẹ́mọ town has its own Àpẹ́pẹ́ groups, usually two factions that compete against each other during significant cultural events, these groups are unified by shared style, instrumentation, outspokenness on societal issues, inter-town synergy, and the upholding of traditional institutions.

Despite the significant role of Àpẹ́pẹ́ and other musical styles of the Rẹ́mọ people, scholarship on Rẹ́mọ music remains limited. Studies of Yorùbá and wider African performance have shown how satire and ritual licence allow communities to criticise rulers and wrongdoers (Apter, 1992; Avorgbedor, 1994; Drewal & Drewal, 1983), and Sanni and Boge (2021) have linked Eré Orò songs in neighbouring Ìkòròdú to the control of antisocial behaviour. However, the Rẹ́mọ Àpẹ́pẹ́ tradition itself has received little scholarly attention, and the way its collective authorship and ritual protection sustain local institutions has not been examined. In addition, much of the scholarly work on indigenous music in African societies has prioritised documentation, often treating these styles as relics of the past, so that their capacity to address contemporary issues has received less attention. Similarly, the study of musical activism in Africa has largely focused on popular music, leaving out traditional musical contexts.

Two constructs guide the paper. "Activist aesthetics" refers to the expressive means through which Àpẹ́pẹ́ makes critique audible, persuasive and safe to voice: principally lyrical satire and ritualised public critique, carried by call-and-response singing, veiled reference and the collective chorus of the ensemble. "Sustainability" is used in a social and institutional sense rather than an environmental one. It denotes the continuity of the communal framework (communal labour, customary leadership and the Orò institution) that binds communal duty to collective well-being in Rẹ́mọ towns. The cultural sustainability of Àpẹ́pẹ́ as a musical tradition is treated as related to, but distinct from, this institutional role. The aim of the paper is to examine how activist aesthetics operate in Àpẹ́pẹ́ performance and how they contribute to institutional sustainability in contemporary Rẹ́mọ society. It addresses three questions: (1) What social and institutional arrangements enable Àpẹ́pẹ́ musicians to criticise leaders and community members? (2) Through what lyrical, musical and performative means is this critique articulated? (3) What are the reach and the limits of the protection that Àpẹ́pẹ́ performers enjoy? Given the gap between local realities and the frequent reliance on externally derived strategies for solving local problems, the paper offers insight into the place of indigenous

knowledge repositories, such as music, in sustaining community cohesion, accountable leadership and social participation.

Literature Review

Situating Àpẹ́pẹ́ requires two bodies of work. Scholarship on music as social intervention in Africa shows how communities use music to mend relationships and shape conduct, while scholarship on satire, ritual licence and activist aesthetics shows how performance creates protected spaces for critique. Read together, they place Àpẹ́pẹ́ at an under-examined intersection: an indigenous, ritually sanctioned genre whose critical work is neither a designed therapeutic programme nor popular protest.

Music and Social Intervention in African Contexts

In a traditional African context, music is a social process that involves community participation and that, beyond entertainment, addresses crucial societal issues. Participation in community music fosters communal healing, spiritual experience and a sense of belonging (van der Merwe & Morelli, 2022), and Yende and Moshugi (2024) show how gospel music has been used to counter xenophobia and promote interracial and interethnic acceptance in South Africa. Music-based interventions have also been designed for health and well-being in The Gambia and Uganda (Philip et al., 2021; Sanfilippo et al., 2020), and music served as a channel of information and commentary during the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria (Owoaje & Sofola, 2021b; Sofola et al., 2020). These studies, however, largely concern designed or externally framed interventions. Closer to Àpẹ́pẹ́ are indigenous mechanisms in which song itself regulates conduct. Song disputes among the Tiv of Nigeria and political calypso in Trinidad have been described as non-formal channels for airing grievances and transforming conflict (Phillips, 2013), and Sanni and Boge (2021) show that Gbàrà and Eré Orò songs in Ìkòròdú are used to censure antisocial behaviour.

Satire, Ritual Licence and Activist Aesthetics in African Performance

A substantial literature shows that ritual and festival settings often licence speech that would otherwise be sanctioned. Gluckman's (1954) "rituals of rebellion" described ceremonies in which subjects openly insult their rulers, a licence he read as ultimately reinforcing the order it mocks. Apter (1992) challenges that conclusion for the Yorùbá: in Ekiti festivals, ritual songs that criticise the king form part of a critical hermeneutics through which power is contested and, at times, redistributed. In Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ́, the night-time Ẹ̀fẹ̀ performance uses witty and often biting songs to censure wrongdoers within a sacred frame (Drewal & Drewal, 1983). Among the Anlo-Ewe of Ghana, the licence to insult in haló song competitions escalated into social violence and led to the genre's official proscription (Avorgbedor, 1994), a reminder that ritual satire carries risks as well as benefits. Bakhtin's (1984) carnivalesque likewise treats satire as a temporary inversion of hierarchy. These studies establish that satire and ritual licence are recognised modes of critique in African performance. What they leave open is how the protection is structured and whether it endures beyond the ritual moment, questions this paper takes up for Àpẹ́pẹ́.

Existing studies on activist aesthetics in African contexts have also been tied to identity and decolonisation, particularly in South Africa. Opondo (2006) shows how indigenous South African women's ensembles carried their heritage into local, urban and international arenas, contributing to contemporary African music and dance rooted in indigenous epistemologies, while Brown and

Deumert (2017) examine how the hip-hop opera *Afrikaaps*, alongside language and cultural ceremonies, served Khoisan language activists in Cape Town as a form of activist aesthetics that resists colonial influence and asserts an autonomous cultural identity. In a Nigerian context, Abe and Oladele (2025) examined youth activism in the digital political landscape, emphasising the essence of political activism for meaningful youth engagement.

Research on musical activism in sub-Saharan Africa has focused largely on popular music, particularly on human rights, governance, and political events. André et al. (2021) highlight how African performance arts function as political acts that blend ritual, protest, and creativity, challenging the artificial divide between aesthetics and activism. Interrogating the activist music of Fela, studies like Tella (2022) highlight the evolving nature of protest music as people redefine their role in society and improve their social standing through transformative means such as education and wealth creation. Abah (2021) and Sofola et al. (2025) also explore the use of music, theatre, and performance by African women to address social issues and, in some cases, to instigate social and political protests. Owoaje et al. (2020), in the same light, examine the use of music by Teni, a female Nigerian artist, to address issues surrounding sexual decorum within the Nigerian space. Studies have examined musical and performance activism in recent socio-political events in Africa, including the #EndSARS protests in Nigeria and the Gen-Z protests in Kenya, during which a popular party song, *Anguka Nayo*, was reappropriated as a protest anthem (Simiyu, 2026). Performance activism has also been employed to mobilise youth and influence political movements, and to foster collective identity, as evident in the Pan-Africanist dance activism of Omar Séne in Senegal, the proliferation of protest music through digital platforms such as TikTok, and the political engagement of musicians like Bobi Wine in Uganda and Wasiu Ayinde in Nigeria (Friesinger, 2021; Séne et al., 2023; Sofola, 2022).

Ezeugwu et al. (2021) investigate how performances in music, comedy, and acting amplified the issues that led to Nigeria's #EndSARS protest. The study highlights how street performance can be of significance in addressing socio-political issues without resorting to violence. Within the same context, studies such as Owoaje and Sofola (2021a) and Ajose (2024) have also explored the use of music in collective activist performances in relation to Nigeria's #EndSARS protests. Taken together, this scholarship has documented musical activism in popular and staged forms and has recognised ritual satire in several Yorùbá and African traditions. It has, however, paid limited attention to how an indigenous ensemble's collective authorship and its ritual affiliation combine to protect critics and sustain the institutions they address. Unlike popular musical activism, in which artists sometimes face direct confrontation with the authorities (Omojola, 2007), Àpẹ́pẹ́ offers a customary model that can reduce, though not eliminate, confrontation and that operates only within a local context. Examining this model in Rẹ́mọ society is the contribution of the present paper.

Theoretical Framework: Performance as Ritual, Restored Behaviour and Repertoire

The paper draws on a specific strand of performance theory: Turner's (1969, 1982) concepts of liminality and communitas, Schechner's (1985) notion of restored behaviour, and Taylor's (2003) concept of the repertoire. Turner and Schechner examine performance as a human activity that transcends art and theatre to include ritual, play and the wider life of society. Turner (1982) uses liminality and communitas to describe moments in performance when ordinary structures of life are loosened and participants are united in shared participation that relativises existing hierarchies. Schechner (1985) emphasises restored behaviour, showing that performance consists of repeated and

re-enacted actions that are preserved across generations but also adjusted to meet the demands of present contexts. Taylor (2003) distinguishes the archive of enduring documents from the repertoire of embodied practice (song, gesture and ritual) through which communities store and transmit knowledge, including political memory. The theory has been employed in the study of indigenous performance, for example, in Mazer's (2011) account of Kapa Haka as a repertoire that sustains links between past and present and to which audiences "act back", and in Papesch's (2019) analysis of Kapa Haka as a platform for Māori cultural expression and identity.

To move from assertion to analysis, the three concepts are operationalised as observable features. Liminality refers to the ritually bounded time and space of the Orò festival (the curfew, the overnight vigil and the market-square contest), during which songs that would be actionable on ordinary days are performed. Communitas is identified in the undifferentiated participation of the chorus and the ẹwẹlẹ players, in the absence of individual song ownership, and in the convention that leadership is signalled by holding the ìrùkẹ̀rẹ̀ (fly-whisk) rather than by social rank. Turner's communitas is used here in a qualified sense. It is a bounded, male communitas that suspends some distinctions among participants while leaving priestly, royal and gender hierarchies intact, and it is in fact underwritten by the priestly hierarchy of the Orò institution. Restored behaviour is traced in the recurring formulas of the genre: the 12/8 timeline, call-and-response, the annual rivalry between the two divisions of each town, and the re-texting of familiar melodic formulas with new commentary. The repertoire is examined in how critique is learnt and transmitted through the body: newly composed songs are taught at a slow tempo to seated members before the procession, so that younger men acquire the songs and the conventions of veiled critique together (Sofola, 2026).

Using a framework developed largely outside Africa requires justification, given this paper's own argument that externally derived approaches are often ill-suited to local contexts. The framework is therefore used heuristically and in dialogue with African-centred concepts, rather than as a template. Turner's concepts were themselves formed in his ethnography of Ndembu ritual in Zambia, and Apter's (1992) account of Yorùbá ritual critique, together with Gyekye's (1997) view of African communitarianism, in which individual rights and communal duties are mutually dependent, ground the analysis in local thought. The framework also complements the theory of acoustic immunity in social arbitration (Sofola et al., 2026), which holds that the shared ownership and collective performance of songs dissolve individual culpability within indigenous justice systems. Acoustic immunity explains why Àpẹ́pẹ́ performers are protected; performance theory explains how the critique is staged, felt and transmitted. The paper uses the former to frame the protective mechanism and the latter to analyse its aesthetic and performative dimensions, while testing the limits of both against the field evidence.

From this perspective, Àpẹ́pẹ́ performance can be understood as a social space in which music serves as entertainment while also providing an avenue for social intervention and cohesion. In Rẹ́mọ society, when Àpẹ́pẹ́ musicians sing about the shortcomings of political and traditional leadership, morality, or the lack of conformity to established and widely accepted norms, they create moments of liminality in which sensitive issues are openly addressed with fewer of the constraints that everyday hierarchy imposes. Participants attributed the resulting immunity to two features: Àpẹ́pẹ́ groups belong to the community and are affiliated with the Orò institution, and their songs are jointly composed and modified, so that even publicly known song leaders act as custodians rather than

owners of the songs. Within this context, Àpẹ́pẹ́ music plays a dual role: sustaining cultural identity and serving as an activist tool for addressing social issues in contemporary Rẹ́mọ society.

Methodology

Research Design and Positionality

The study employs a constructivist research paradigm and a qualitative, ethnographic design, given its reliance on participants' perspectives and participant observation as primary data sources. The first author is a Rẹ́mọ indigene who grew up performing Àpẹ́pẹ́ and, during fieldwork, played the ẹwẹ̀lẹ within the ensembles observed. This insider position provided access, rapport with gatekeepers and fluency in the Rẹ́mọ dialect, but it also carried the risk of taking cultural practices for granted. To mitigate this risk, the first author kept a reflexive journal after each observation session, bracketed prior assumptions during interviews and analysis, and discussed emerging interpretations with fellow researchers outside the community in peer-debriefing sessions.

Participants and Sample Adequacy

Interview data were gathered from three purposively selected Àpẹ́pẹ́ musicians in Ipara Rẹ́mọ and Irolu Rẹ́mọ, referred to here as P1, P2 and P3. These musicians were selected for their long-term experience in Àpẹ́pẹ́ performance, having risen from ordinary membership of their Àpẹ́pẹ́ groups to becoming song leaders and composers. All three are men, reflecting the all-male constitution of the genre. The sample size was guided by the principle of information power (Malterud et al., 2016) rather than by numerical saturation. The aim was narrow (the critical function of Àpẹ́pẹ́ songs); the sample was highly specific, comprising song leaders who compose the critical songs and had personally experienced the episodes examined; the analysis was supported by established theory; the interviews were conducted in the participants' dialect by an insider, which yielded dense dialogue; and the analysis was case-oriented, examining specific songs and episodes in-depth. Interview data were further triangulated with observation and with song texts. The small number of participants and towns nevertheless limits the range of perspectives, as acknowledged under Limitations.

Data Collection

Data were gathered between July 2024 and April 2025. In-depth interviews were conducted face to face in Yorùbá and the Rẹ́mọ dialect, using an open-ended guide covering the history and organisation of Àpẹ́pẹ́, song composition, the targets and reception of songs, and participants' experiences of responses from those in authority. With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded by two trained research assistants and supplemented by field notes. Participant observation covered three Àpẹ́pẹ́ performances in the two towns. These included the main day of the Orò festival, from the Friday-night vigil, which runs until about 4 a.m., through the daytime procession (about 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.) to the closing contest between rival groups at the market-square, as well as performances at social events. An observation checklist guided attention to the distribution of roles, cueing with the ìrùkẹ̀rẹ̀, song texts and audience response. Song texts were recorded during performance and confirmed with the song leaders.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim in the Rẹ́mọ dialect and translated into English by the first author, a native speaker, and the transcriptions and translations of song texts were checked with the song leaders. Interview transcripts and field notes were analysed thematically following Braun and

Clarke (2006): familiarisation, open coding (for example, "song ownership", "summons" and "veiling"), the clustering of codes into candidate themes, and the review of themes against the raw data. Three themes resulted: the organisation of Àpẹ́pẹ́, the Orò festival as a customary shield, and the targets and techniques of critique. Song texts were subjected to content analysis of their address, imagery and strategies of concealment, and the songs were transcribed into staff notation and analysed for scale, range, contour, phrase structure and the relationship between text and tune, in line with the theoretical framework.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was pursued through Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria. Credibility was supported by prolonged engagement, the triangulation of interviews, observation and song texts, and member checking of translations with participants. Dependability was supported by an audit trail from the interview guide through coding to themes, confirmability by the reflexive journal and peer-debriefing, and transferability by thick description of the performance context.

Ethical Considerations

The authors obtained ethical approval from Kabarak University, Kenya (KUREC-030226) and the University of Ibadan, Nigeria (UI/SSHREC/2026/056). Participants were informed of the study's purpose and their role, and they gave verbal informed consent, which they preferred to written consent, to be interviewed and audio-recorded and to have their accounts and song texts published. They were told that they could withdraw at any stage. To protect participants and third parties, participants' names are withheld, the towns in which the disputes described below occurred are not specified, and no attempt was made to identify the individuals targeted by songs, in keeping with the singers' own choice to conceal them. Information that could compromise the restricted rites of Orò is not reported.

Results

This section presents the findings under three themes: the organisation of Àpẹ́pẹ́, the Orò festival as a customary shield, and the targets and techniques of critique, illustrated with three songs. Interpretations are attributed to participants where they originate from them.

Àpẹ́pẹ́ Music at a Glance

Àpẹ́pẹ́ music is one of the oldest traditional musical performances among the Rẹ́mọ people. It is also performed by the neighbouring Ìjẹ̀bú people, with whom the Rẹ́mọ share some level of linguistic and cultural similarities. It is rooted in religious and communal social structure, given its participatory nature, which subordinates individual expertise to collective participation. Participants explained that Àpẹ́pẹ́ belongs to the community: leaders emerge through succession within the group, and songs are jointly composed and modified by the vocalists, so no individual, including a song leader, can claim ownership of a song. While singing is led by a few song leaders who emerge from years of active participation and mentoring, every member of each group serves in both the role of backup singer and instrumentalist. The lead singers, although they do not play instruments in Àpẹ́pẹ́, also perform a dual role as lead and backup singers. While the lead role in a song is held by a lead singer, other lead singers whose turn to lead is on hold contribute to backup singing, thereby fostering a sense of community within the group. This practice aligns with the social structure of the Rẹ́mọ people, in which there can be only one king at a time. In the case where the king is not available due to ill health,

death or deposition, a regent emerges to occupy a leadership position until a new king emerges. This communal structure of the Àpẹ́pẹ́ ensemble is important for understanding the activist dynamics in the music (Sofola, 2026).

The instruments of Àpẹ́pẹ́ include kálákolo (the lead drum carved from bamboo), ẹwẹlẹ (flat bamboo sticks beaten against each other to produce sound), and àgídìgbo (popularly referred to as a thumb piano, like the kalimba). Àgídìgbo, however, has a larger resonator and a larger body that cannot be handled with two hands and is carried on a belt worn around the neck for support. Kálákolo, named from its dominant two-layered sounds, plays the lead role in the Àpẹ́pẹ́ ensemble. First, it is used to alert participants who are expected to gather at the designated community meeting place in preparation for the day's outing. Secondly, it is the coordinating instrument of the ensemble. Smaller kálákolo are also played by a few members of the ensemble, whose role is to support the energetic metronomic sound produced by the more numerous ẹwẹlẹ (Sofola, 2026). The àgídìgbo, although it has a deep sound that resonates sufficiently to provide a grounded basis for the ensemble, plays only an interstitial role, similar to that of the father in a family setting, as described in existing studies on Yorùbá drum ensembles and family organisation (Olaniyan, 2007; Oludare, 2021). Ẹwẹlẹ is performed by a larger number of ensemble members who also serve as backup singers. The ensemble performs within a compound quadruple (12/8) framework: songs are sung at a slow tempo while new compositions are being taught to seated members, and at about 160–175 dotted-crotchet beats per minute during processions (Sofola, 2026).

Orò Festival as a Customary Shield for Activism

Àpẹ́pẹ́ music operates within a traditional system that empowers its role in Rẹ́mọ society. It possesses two identities, each governed differently. The first aspect of Àpẹ́pẹ́ is its identity in social gatherings, where it functions as a symbol of cultural presence and entertainment. The second identity of Àpẹ́pẹ́ is connected to the Orò festival, in which it plays a religious role and enjoys the immunity provided by the customary code of non-disclosure associated with the Orò institution. The Orò festival is a male-centred cultural event among the Yorùbá, typically celebrated annually in honour of Òrìṣà Orò (Orò deity), which is associated with justice and identified with the sound of bullroarers (Sofola, 2026). Due to its affiliation with the Orò festival, Àpẹ́pẹ́ music is performed by men only. Activities pertaining to Orò are of a two-fold nature. The first is the special worship or sacrifice to Òrìṣà Orò, which is done strictly by the devotees of Òrìṣà Orò, whose emergence is hereditary. Across Rẹ́mọ societies, the devotees of Òrìṣà Orò are led by Olúmalẹ̀ and Aláhá Orò. While Olúmalẹ̀ occupies the exalted position of Chief Priest to Òrìṣà Orò, Aláhá Orò acts as curate to the Olúmalẹ̀. During this religious rite, which is usually carried out at night, only the devotees of Òrìṣà Orò are allowed to step out of their houses for the ritual. Everyone else in the town, including men, is to remain indoors.

During the Orò festival, however, every male individual, regardless of age, may participate in activities that mark the festival, while women remain indoors for a full day and thereafter observe a 9 p.m. curfew until the ninth day of the festival. Participants explained this restriction in terms of the ritual's purpose. Orò is an indigenous mechanism for cleansing the town of malevolent spirits, which are believed to seek refuge during the rite; women, by virtue of their capacity to incubate life, are considered liable to incubate these spirits, and they therefore remain indoors and care for the children. The rite nonetheless depends on women, since it cannot begin until a hereditary priestess leads a procession of women who summon Orò in song at the entrance of its grove (Sofola, 2026). Whatever

lawful act takes place during the festival is regarded as ending with the festival, and, by this unwritten code, no one is expected to raise such matters once Orò is over. Over the years, this has provided a high level of immunity to all participants in the Orò festival, provided they do not engage in criminal acts. The role of Àpẹ́pẹ́ music in this festival is, therefore, to provide entertainment and serve as an avenue for positive engagement, ensuring that men channel their freedom and energy towards something beneficial to all. Apart from Àpẹ́pẹ́, Èkùtẹ̀ music also features in the Orò festival, having emanated from Àpẹ́pẹ́ itself. While Àpẹ́pẹ́ has a communal face and is led only by succession among song leaders, Èkùtẹ̀ groups are usually formed by an individual. Both Àpẹ́pẹ́ and Èkùtẹ̀ music provide entertainment during the Orò festival and also address social issues as instruments of activism. The focus of this paper is, however, on Àpẹ́pẹ́. The lack of personal ownership of, and the widespread communal participation in, Àpẹ́pẹ́ groups in Rẹ́mọ society complicate efforts to challenge the group for lampooning or satirising anyone, including kings, through songs.

"Anonymity" in this context does not mean that performers are unseen; Àpẹ́pẹ́ singers are visible and known members of their communities. It refers rather to ritual depersonalisation. During Orò, a song is treated as the voice of the community under the protection of the Orò institution, not as the utterance of the individual who leads it, and the code of non-disclosure discourages anyone from pursuing the singer once the festival ends. The known song leader is thus shielded not by the concealment of his identity but by the customary refusal to individualise responsibility for collectively owned songs.

Testing the Shield: Two Encounters with Authority

P1 recalled an event from the early stage of his singing career in Àpẹ́pẹ́. The Àpẹ́pẹ́ group to which he belonged had sung and recorded newly composed songs for the year's Orò festival, one of which satirised the king and his chiefs for their shortcomings. According to P1, the king, offended by the song, dispatched several police officers to arrest the singer and his team. P1 recounted that he and his group calmly declined to submit to arrest, informing the lead police officer that issues concerning Orò and Àpẹ́pẹ́ could not be handled by the police, given that they were a purely customary matter. In P1's understanding, the police had been told that the group was rioting, which would have been the only reason for them to intervene in matters concerning the Orò festival. Finding no evidence of rioting, the police concluded that there was no basis for arresting anyone, and they left.

In another episode, P2 was summoned to the king's palace, where he was questioned about a song that addressed critical concerns regarding the king's mishandling of communal matters. He had been summoned alongside other singers and instrumentalists to what amounted to a trial at the king's court. Rather than attending with members of the group, he chose to be accompanied by an elderly man who served as a fatherly figure to him. In his own words:

> "They played the song and asked if I was the one who did the lead singing. I answered yes, and the king's council asked about other members of the group. I told them I did not know them, and that I could only affirm the fact that I was the lead singer. They asked about the person who recorded the performance and I told them I did not know him either. When probed further about the identities of these people, I told them to summon Orò and assured them that as soon as Orò was summoned again, all of these people would naturally reveal themselves during the

> communal music-making, once again. I assured them that once Orò festival took place and I sang, there would certainly be people to chorus it."

P2 interpreted the episode as a demonstration of communal immunity: he could not be held individually for a song that had been performed by a group of about fifty people. He had declined to go with the entire group as a precaution, given the possibility that members might be triggered to make harsh comments that could escalate the tension. The episode nevertheless had consequences, as the king suspended the Orò festival in the town for the following four years. Although the king threatened to press charges because he felt ridiculed by the Àpẹ́pẹ́ group, P2 reported that he did not carry out the threat, which P2 attributed to the strong link between Àpẹ́pẹ́ music and the traditional institution of which the king himself was the custodian. Both episodes show that the shield is real but not absolute: it protected individuals from arrest and prosecution, yet the authority being criticised still attempted coercion and imposed a collective sanction on the whole community. Activism in Àpẹ́pẹ́ music, however, is not limited to addressing traditional leadership. Àpẹ́pẹ́ musicians employ satire and lampooning to address a myriad of issues that pertain to morality, societal ills, and civic duty, as the following three songs show.
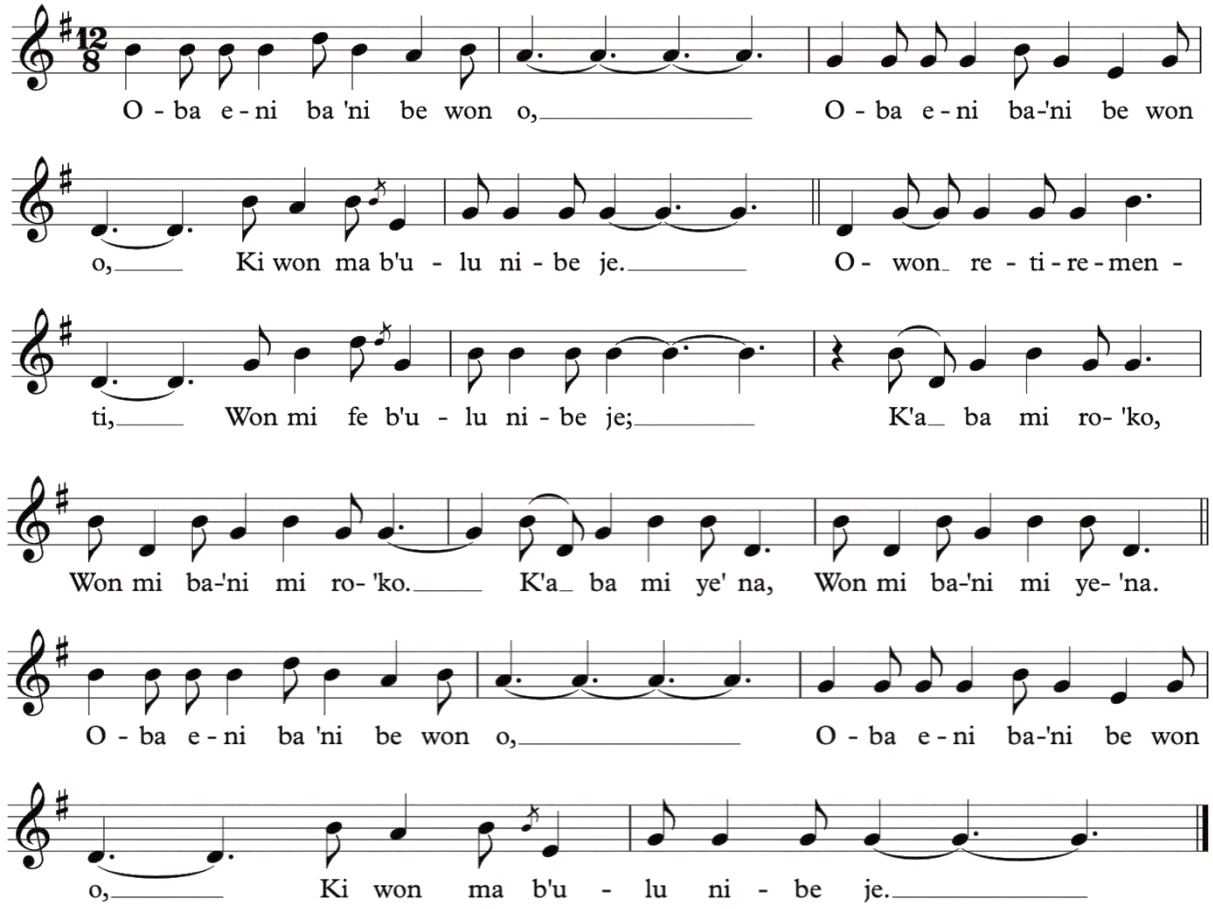
Targets and Techniques of Critique in Three Songs

a. Civic Responsibility

The communal nature of African societies, and particularly Yorùbá societies, has been widely discussed, and sometimes overstated, in the literature (Oladipupo, 2024; Táíwò, 2016). Like the larger Yorùbá group, the Rẹ́mọ people also cherish communal living, despite urbanisation and social change. Communal living is evident in activities such as road clearing, sanitation, music-making, traditional age-grade societies, clubs and associations, and broader community development. At the heart of these communal activities lies civic responsibility. The song "Ọba ẹni ba'ní bẹ́ wọ̀n-ọ́n" (Figure 1) embodies activism born from the spirit of civic responsibility. According to the participants, it addresses the shortcomings of some members of the elite class within the community of one of the Àpẹ́pẹ́ groups with respect to civic responsibility. The elites, who are largely retirees from the civil service, had refused to participate in various communal activities, such as bush clearing, community meetings, and sanitation exercises. Participants attributed this to the individualistic lifestyle the retirees had adopted while working in cities and corporations, away from home. Rather than engage in physical altercations with these elites, the community addressed the issue through Àpẹ́pẹ́ during the next Orò festival.

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Traditional Music as Social Intervention: Activist Aesthetics and Institutional Sustainability in Apepe Music of the Remo, Southwestern Nigeria

Figure 1: "Ọba ẹni ba'ní bẹ́ wọ̀n-ọ́n": transcription by the authors



Lyrics in Rẹ́mọ dialect	**English translation**
Ọba ẹni ba'ní bẹ́ wọ̀n o (2x)	Dear king, help us to appeal to them
Kí wọ́n má bùlù nibe jẹ̀ẹ́	Let them not destabilise our town
Ọwọn retirementi, wọn mi fẹ búlù nibe jẹ̀ẹ́	The retired elites are about to destabilise our town
Káà ba mi róko, wọ́n mì ba'ní mi róko	They refuse to participate in communal sanitation
Káà ba mi yẹ́nà, wọ́n mì ba'ní mi yẹ́nà	They refuse to participate in communal road clearing
Ọba ẹni ba'ní bẹ́ wọ̀n o (2x)	Dear king, help us to appeal to them
Kí wọ́n má bùlù nibe jẹ̀ẹ́	Let them not destabilise our town

The song is addressed to the king, who is admonished to mediate in the matter of the retirees' refusal to participate in communal and civic duties, to ensure that the age-old communal system that caters to the well-being of all is not destroyed by the precedent set by these retirees. Directing this admonition to the king is strategic, given that he is the custodian of the traditional institution and responsible for ensuring that it does not collapse. Moreover, avoiding a face-off between the dedicated men of the community and the retirees in question was necessary to sustain communal peace and not to cripple other functioning institutions. Despite not participating in civic duties such as clearing

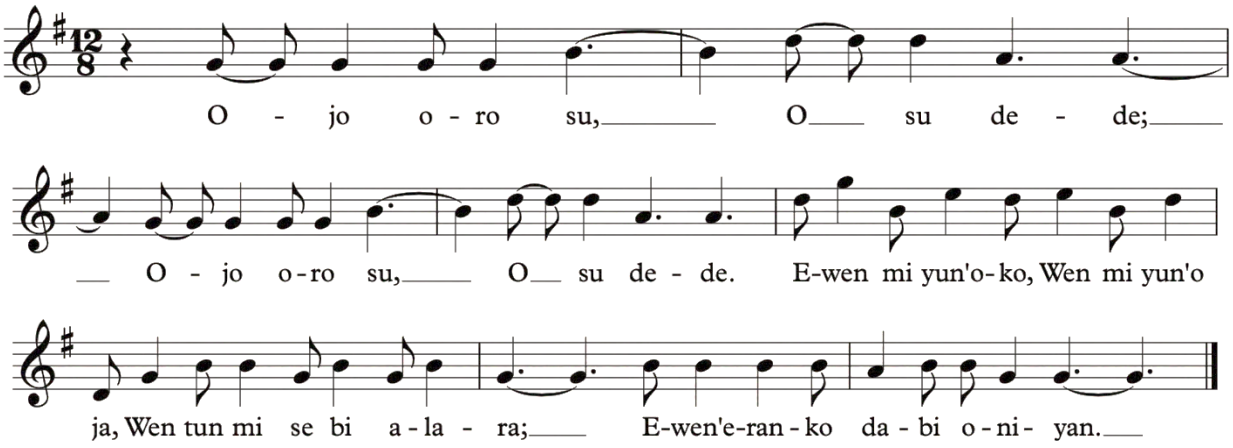
bushes and roads and performing general sanitation, these retirees continued to function within traditional age groups and religious institutions. The resort to musical activism in addressing this issue was therefore strategic for safeguarding communal well-being.

Musically, the song is built on an anhemitonic pentatonic collection (G–A–B–D–E) in 12/8 and spans an octave, from D to D. It is in ternary (ABA) form: a refrain addressed to the king (A) frames a verse that names the grievance (B), and the refrain returns at the close. The refrain's phrases end on long notes tied across the bar, leaving room for the chorus to overlap and sustain the appeal, while its melodic line falls from B to G and D, following the falling speech tones of the text. The verse shifts to a narrower, more syllabic and repetitive line built on paired phrases ("Káà ba mi róko, wọ́n mì ba'ní mi róko"; "Káà ba mi yẹ́nà, wọ́n mì ba'ní mi yẹ́nà") that juxtapose communal effort with the retirees' non-participation. The accusation is thus delivered as a chanted list, while the more lyrical, collectively sustained refrain carries the appeal. The aesthetic shapes the critique: it is framed as a petition rather than an attack, and the voice that sings it is plural.

b. Morality and Social Ills

Societies are sustained by moral codes that help maintain order through the sanctity of life, reciprocity, socially accepted behaviours, and respect for one another, as well as cultural and political institutions (Bicchieri, 2016; Fukuyama, 2018). For this reason, rules are established in every society to clearly delineate social and antisocial behaviours and the possible consequences of engaging in antisocial behaviour. Antisocial behaviours include but are not limited to stealing, armed and unarmed robbery, fighting, corrupt practices, abuse of power and institutions, acts of wickedness, and several other acts of criminality. Such acts are often addressed in Rẹ́mọ society through Àpẹ́pẹ́ music during the annual Orò festival. The following two songs protest against idleness and theft, both of which are frowned upon in Rẹ́mọ society. The song "Ojoò ọ̀rọ̀ ṣuú" (The clouds of revelation are heavily formed; Figure 2) is an activist song that does not specify its intended audience. However, according to participants from whom the song was collected, the individuals whose idleness was addressed received the song's message. One participant noted that, apart from matters of leadership, where Àpẹ́pẹ́ songs are directed toward leaders, songs that concern individuals usually do not provide identifiable clues. This enables the songs to address the targeted individuals and others who may be involved in such acts.

Figure 2: "Ojoò ọ̀rọ̀ ṣuú": transcription by the authors



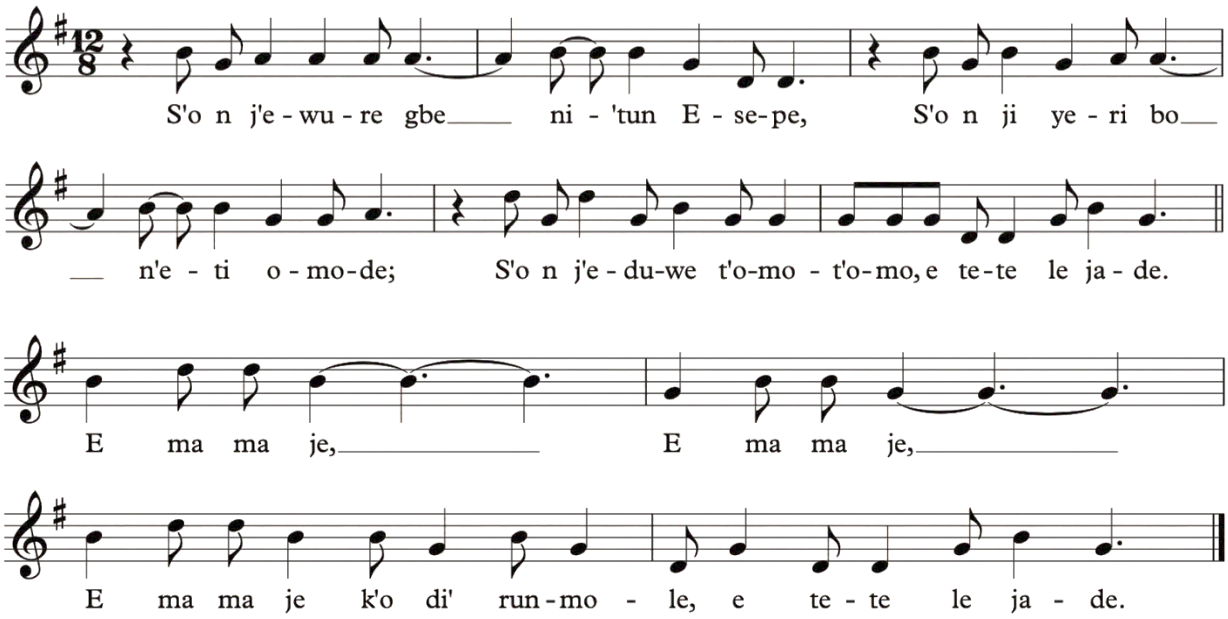
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Lyrics in Rẹ́mọ dialect	**English translation**
Ojoò ọ̀rọ̀ ṣú, o ṣu dẹdẹ̀ẹ́ (2x)	The cloud of revelation is heavily formed
Ẹ̀wẹ́n mì yun'o-kó	You do not farm
Wẹ́n mì yun'ọjáà	You do not trade
Wẹn tun mi ṣé bí alará	Yet, you portray yourself as though you are important
Ẹwẹn ẹranko dabì onìyàn!	Animals in human clothing!

The song is rooted in the principles of diligence and hard work, which are generally upheld by the Rẹ́mọ people. Beyond engaging in profitable ventures for sustenance, being gainfully employed and able to earn a living through verifiable means are virtues that qualify a man to have a voice in communal matters. This is so because an idle or lazy man is believed to be a potential thief, whose resort to stealing or other antisocial behaviours for survival threatens the well-being of society. The song lyrics hint at certain individuals who had begun to position themselves to express opinions on communal matters, despite not being involved in a known trade or occupation that would justify their livelihood. The song likens these individuals to animals because they were perceived as bad examples for young people. In the participants' view, composing and singing this kind of song sends a signal to every such individual, potentially prompting self-reflection.

The melody uses the same pentatonic collection over a wider range, from D to the G an octave and a fourth above. The opening phrase, the image of gathering clouds, rises gradually from G to D. The accusation ("Ẹ̀wẹ́n mì yun'o-kó, wẹ́n mì yun'ọjáà") is set at the highest point of the song, reaching the upper G and E, after which the line descends stepwise to the tonal centre for the closing insult, "Ẹwẹn ẹranko dabì onìyàn!" This rise–climax–fall contour, consistent with the speech-tone-led melodic practice of Yorùbá song, gives the indictment maximal audibility and lets the punchline settle on the tonal centre, where the chorus joins.

Figure 3: "Ṣó ṅ j'ewurẹ gbèé": transcription by the authors



Lyrics in Rẹ́mọ dialect	**English translation**
Ṣó ǹ j'ewurẹ gbèé, nitún Ẹsẹ̀pẹ̀	He stole a goat in Ẹsẹ̀pẹ̀ division
Ṣó ǹ ji yẹ́ri bọ̀ọ́ n'etí ọmọdèé	He stole earrings from the ears of little children
Ṣó ǹ j'ẹdúwẹ t'ọmọtọmọ	He even stole a fowl with its chicks
Ẹ teteè le jáde	Don't hesitate to banish him
Ẹ má mà jẹ̀ẹ́, Ẹ má mà jẹ̀ẹ́	Please, don't wait, please don't wait
Ẹ má mà jẹ̀ ko dírùnmọlẹ̀ẹ̀	Please don't wait until he becomes a divinity (spirit)
Ẹ teteè le jáde	Don't hesitate to banish him

As a way of addressing social ills, the song "Ṣó ǹ j'ewurẹ gbèé" addresses an act of stealing by a certain individual. It is important to note that the use of the pronoun "he" is only for the purpose of translation, as the song does not specify whether the culprit was a male or female. The song describes a habitual thief who stole anything and everything as opportunity permitted, including removing earrings from the ears of children, stealing goats, and even fowls with their chicks. Its refrain, however, urges the community to banish the culprit ("Ẹ teteè le jáde") before he becomes a menace to the entire community. The song is therefore less a non-confrontational appeal than a public call for a severe customary sanction, a point taken up in the Discussion.

Musically, the first section is built on anaphora. Each line opens with "Ṣó ǹ" ("he stole") on the same rising figure after a rest, so that the list of thefts accumulates like evidence, each item set to a variant of the same melodic cell. The second section changes register and pace: "Ẹ má mà jẹ̀ẹ́" ("please, don't wait") is sung twice on long held notes, the second time a third lower, before the final line descends to cadence on G. The narrower range (D to D) and the insistent repetition give the song the character of a communal demand rather than a lament.

Discussion

The findings indicate that the activist aesthetics of Àpẹ́pẹ́ lie in the conjunction of lyrical satire and ritualised public critique with musical and performative form. Across the three songs, critique is veiled (targets are unnamed, or named only by a title such as ọba) yet decipherable to those who know the community, and participants described a graduated logic whereby further identifying details may be added if the conduct persists. Critique is also addressed through mediators, such as the king or the community, rather than directly to the offender, and it is voiced in the plural through call-and-response and a collective chorus. The pentatonic, speech-tone-led melodies keep texts intelligible, and the placement of accusations at points of melodic climax or in chanted, repetitive verses makes them memorable. In Turner's (1982) terms, the Orò festival supplies the liminal frame in which such songs can be performed; in Schechner's (1985) terms, the critique is restored behaviour that re-texts familiar musical formulas with new commentary each year; and in Taylor's (2003) terms, the songs form a repertoire through which communal judgements are stored and transmitted in performance rather than in written records.

The two encounters with authority qualify the claim that communal ownership confers immunity. Participants consistently framed the police's withdrawal and the king's unexecuted threat as recognition of customary rules, but these rules are not legally binding. Nigeria is a multi-ethnic nation in which each ethnic group maintains cultural institutions regulated by its own unwritten codes, and state agencies often respect such codes without being bound by them. The police episode is therefore

best understood as a negotiation between competing authorities (state policing, royal authority and the Orò institution) rather than as an absolute legal bar; the police might well have acted had there been evidence of rioting. The outcome also complicates Gluckman's (1954) reading of ritual licence as reinforcing the order it mocks: the king's own position as custodian of the tradition constrained his response, which is closer to Apter's (1992) account of Yorùbá ritual critique as a genuine check on power. Yet the four-year suspension of the festival shows that authority could still retaliate collectively, shifting the cost of critique from the singer to the whole community and to the tradition itself. Àpẹ́pẹ́ is therefore better described as reducing direct confrontation than as preventing it.

In Àpẹ́pẹ́ music, participants described activism as a social responsibility rather than a means of settling personal scores. In addressing issues concerning people in traditional leadership positions, such as kings and chiefs, activism is not regarded by participants as rebellion; rather, it is understood as a social and cultural responsibility. While the Òṣùgbó society, as the senatorial arm of each Rẹ́mọ town, provides a traditional legislative balance of power (Sofola, 2026), Àpẹ́pẹ́ music serves as one of the people-centred mechanisms for regulating power. In other words, the consciousness of Àpẹ́pẹ́ music and the Orò festival is a subtle call to order for people in power, especially within the traditional system. Although activist songs in Àpẹ́pẹ́ music do not usually identify the individuals they target, participants noted that community leaders, upon inquiry, can obtain full details about the individuals and the acts that led to the song's composition. In this sense, Àpẹ́pẹ́ supports institutional sustainability as defined in this paper: it reinforces communal labour, holds the custodians of tradition to the standards of their offices, and channels the energy released by the festival towards a shared purpose.

The evidence also raises ethical questions. Participants' claim that the songs do not settle personal scores cannot be fully verified from their own accounts, and the mechanism offers those it criticises no recognised channel through which to reply, explain themselves or be heard. Veiled songs can attach suspicion to innocent people, and a song such as "Ṣó ǹ j'ewurẹ gbèé", which urges banishment, shows that public shaming can escalate towards severe exclusion without any process for establishing guilt. The Anlo-Ewe experience, in which haló song licence escalated into violence (Avorgbedor, 1994), illustrates the risk. Àpẹ́pẹ́'s justice is therefore partial: effective as a deterrent and as a check on leaders, but lacking the procedural safeguards associated with contemporary ideas of a fair hearing.

The male-only constitution of Àpẹ́pẹ́ also bounds its communitas. Participants explained the exclusion of women by the cleansing purpose of Orò rather than as an assertion of male superiority; women play an indispensable role in summoning Orò, and they support performers materially. Participants also regarded satirical song as a tangible means of dealing with tangible misconduct, a role exercised within this male-dominated space. Yet the voices that judge, and the perspectives from which conduct is assessed during Orò, are men's, and the data contain no song that raises issues from a woman's standpoint. The social equality enacted in Àpẹ́pẹ́ is thus an equality among men within a male-dominated space. How women's concerns are, or could be, represented in Rẹ́mọ musical activism remains an open question; the secular adaptations of Àpẹ́pẹ́ performed by schoolchildren of both sexes in formal educational settings (Sofola, 2026) suggest one site where this may change.

Limitations

The study draws on three male song leaders in two towns, all members of the tradition they describe, and on the first author's insider observation. The perspectives of those criticised in songs, of traditional rulers, of women and of state agents such as the police were not captured, so the account of the encounters with authority reflects the singers' point of view. The episodes discussed are few, and the songs analysed were selected for their critical content rather than sampled from the full repertoire. The findings are therefore not statistically generalisable, and their transferability is limited to settings in which comparable customary institutions retain moral authority.

Conclusion

This study set out to explain how an indigenous ensemble can criticise kings and neighbours and still continue to perform. The fieldwork suggests that the answer lies less in the boldness of individual singers than in an institutional arrangement: songs that belong to no one, leaders who emerge by succession, and a ritual institution whose code of non-disclosure turns a song into the voice of the community. Under the canopy of Orò, veiled satire, sung through pentatonic, speech-tone-led melodies and a collective chorus, functions as a grassroots check on power and conduct and supports the communal institutions on which Rẹ́mọ towns depend. The study also shows the limits of that protection. Orò's customary shield deflected an attempted arrest and a threatened prosecution, but it did not prevent collective retaliation, and it rests on recognition by other authorities rather than on law. Its justice is partial, offering no right of reply, and its communitas is bounded by gender.

These findings contribute to scholarship on African musical activism by showing that ritual satire can operate not only as a temporary licence but as a durable, institutionally embedded form of accountability, and by linking the theory of acoustic immunity to performance theory through the aesthetic means by which critique is staged. They also complicate any simple opposition between "traditional" music as heritage and "popular" music as protest.

Three recommendations follow from these findings. First, because the shield depends on mutual recognition, traditional councils, local government and security agencies in Rẹ́mọ communities should develop shared protocols for handling disputes arising from festival songs, so that disagreements are resolved through dialogue rather than through arrests or festival suspensions. Second, because the mechanism lacks a right of reply, Orò custodians and community leaders could provide a customary forum, consistent with Orò protocols, in which persons addressed by songs may respond. Third, because Àpẹ́pẹ́ is transmitted as embodied repertoire, cultural institutions should support its documentation and transmission to younger generations, with the consent of custodians and with respect for the restricted aspects of Orò. Future studies should include the perspectives of women, traditional rulers and those addressed by songs, compare Àpẹ́pẹ́ across Rẹ́mọ and other Yorùbá towns, and examine the parallels between indigenous musical activism and contemporary protest music.

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