

THE PHILOSOPHY OF AFRICAN MUSIC AS ORAL LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

The nature, quality and structure of African Music are such that create, propagate and define elaborate potentials which reflect cultural experiences in the day to day activities of man. Obviously, the philosophy of African Music can neither be fully explicated nor better conceived or appreciated outside its functional and utilitarian point of view. The primary issue therefore, centres on the effective implementation, utilization and or application of virtues that give African Musical arts its desired concept and cultural meaning. In essence, the purpose of this paper is to critically examine African Music as Oral Literature and to discuss those aspects of literature that the music propagates, which validates as well as give credence to both cultural and conceptual relevance and applicability that engender its philosophical import.

INTRODUCTION: African Identity

A good number of music scholars, educators, ethnographers and researchers have raised a lot of debate concerning the homogeneity, the uniqueness or the commonness of Africa as a people or race yet the more people try to submit to a common opinion the more the issue of diversity arises. Being confronted or challenged with this problem of common identity, Agawu (2003) questions whether the matter of historic origin is enough to establish an African identity or to consider how people wish to be identified. Talking on the heterogeneous nature of Africa caused by external influences and encroachment on the border areas, Nketia (1974) affirms that the continent of Africa is not culturally homogenous in the sense that those in the north are influenced by the Arab world of the Middle East while those in the south are dominated by settlers from Europe. He also identifies over seven hundred distinct languages spoken by different societies that make up the so-called Africa. In that regard, the issue of common identity for Africa becomes a problematic discourse.

In trying to reduce or narrow down the ambiguity, the vastness and the divergence strata of Africa and its cultural disposition, Oehrie and Emeka (2003) recognize Africa which comprises “twelve culture areas or geographical territories within which inhabitants share most of the elements of culture such as related languages and similar ecological conditions, economic, social ideological and social system” (p. 40). Culture area according to Onwuejiogwu in Oehrie and Emeka is “a geographical territory occupied by people whose

cultures exhibit a significant degree of dissimilarity with the culture of others” (p. 40). In that direction, Oehrie and Emeka emphasize that the way of culture in traditional African societies had been and really still is “Unity in Diversity” (p. 40). It is probably this distinct group whose inhabitants share most of the elements of culture that Nzewi (2003) refers to as “indigenous Africa” (p. 14). This paper argues that, it is based on those aspects of unity, common features and attributes, styles, practices and usages that the philosophy of African music finds its consummation.

Definition of African Music

In the words of Agawu (2003) “the apparently simple statement that African music is music made by Africans is not so simple after all” (p. 1), considering the effect the polarity of cultures (as a result of external influences) has on the homogeneity of Africa as a people. In such instance then, one is constrained to regard any particular music as African music. Nevertheless, Nketia, (1974) eschewed this predicament by excluding all those external influences and border encroachments and considers Africa with common or related traditions. In that direction he said:

When we turn to the rest of Africa, we find African societies whose musical cultures not only have their historical root on the soil of Africa, but which also form a network of distinct yet related traditions which overlap in certain aspects of style, practice, or usage, and share common features of internal pattern, basic procedure, and contextual similarities... distinct from those of the West or the Orient in their areas of emphasis. (p. 4)

Anchored on the above submission, one can now make bold to assert that, African music is traditionally oriented music in content, context and concept which are located within the frontiers of African cultural milieu. In which case, any traditional music that has not totally lost its indigenous flavour can be definitely considered adequate to portray the philosophical import of African music. African music has special features that distinguish it from the music of other world cultures. The melodies are short and easily committed to memory. Above all, it engenders oral tradition. In his discussion on the characteristics of African songs, Agu, (1999) states that “the main characteristics are found in their scale and tonal organization, pitch and melodic range, vocal techniques, shifting tonality, correlation between speech and melodic contour, harmonic principles and styles” ... (p. 33). He also identifies the structural forms of African songs to include; solos, call and response, call and refrain, solo and chorused refrain, and mixed structural forms (p. 15). Therefore the practical demonstration or application of these features in traditional musical practices defines the concept or nature of African music. Apart from vocal form, the nature of African music is also evident in the use of musical instruments. They are culturally controlled in both function and performance. In the constitution of instrumental ensemble certain criteria are followed both in the choice of instruments and the role the instrument is meant to perform. Agu (2000) posits that, “this exercise is not a random one... the functions and utility of the music performed by the group determine the size and composition of the instruments to be used” (p. 80). He further stresses that:

Psychological implications are also considered while making choice of instruments. For instance, a group whose activities are often secret is expected to have a

psychological hold on the public during performance; such a group therefore makes use of instruments, which are believed to achieve the required psychological hold on the audience. (p.80)

In the same direction, Akpabot (1986) opines that, “any definition of African instrumental music must take into consideration two chief points (a) factors which influence the instrumentation and (b) the general characteristics of the various ensembles” (p. 9). He went on to say that the African performer, who is also a composer has an extraordinary feeling for colour which he brings to bear upon his instrumentation (in the sense that) the worship of an ancestral god is for him a very serious affair; and therefore, the music for such ceremonies rarely uses any musical instruments that would give impression of carefreeness. Usually only the drums are used to invoke the spirit of the gods, although there are a few instances where the gong is introduced into the ensemble. It is safe to conclude that the gayer the mood of the music the more the preponderance of percussive instruments other than drums. The more serious and traditional the music the more definite and exact the orchestration. (p. 9)

All these submissions above tend to establish the fact that instrumentation in African context dwells much on the nature and function of the ensemble, and therefore becomes a problematic issue when we begin to see African instrumentation from Western perspective in terms of standardization in tuning, melodic, rhythmic and harmonic principles and developmental devices. In Africa, instrumental melodies and rhythms are not independent; they are most often guided by the established structure or pattern of vocal melodies which are strictly tonal. Harmonies can be observed when different instruments interlock in a contrapuntal manner, whereby each instrument struggles for attention/audience. Developmental devices do not occur as in classical allegro form,

Rather, a whole performance or composition is a process growing out of a single germ. In the course of this process, extemporization sets in and what starts out as a probing melodic or rhythmic fragment announced by a cantor or the leader of an instrumental ensemble on his instrument; is picked up by members of the ensemble who shift this melody or rhythm from one voice part to another until all the instruments have been heard in one form or another. Next follows a section where the opening motif is repeated many times in varied forms usually by means of embellishment. (Akpabot, 1986: 11)

African music in its broadest sense is all embracing and collaborative. Most often the outcome of complex rhythmic actions of various instruments is observed in a dramatic and artistic response of the body in form of dance. Nketia (1974) is of the opinion that “music that is frequently integrated with dance is bound to emphasize and develop those features that can be articulated in bodily movement or to relate its form and content to the structural and dramatic requirement of the dance” (p. 106). He further states that:

the importance attached to the dance does not lie only in the scope it provides for the release of emotion stimulated by music (but) can also be used as a social and artistic medium of communication, (which) can convey thoughts or matters of

personal or social importance through the choice of movements, postures and facial expressions. (p 107)

Therefore, when one discusses African music, one is confronted with a tripartite dimension of musical expressions which are designed or combined to give a holistic approach to the proper understanding of the nature and content of African music.

Philosophy of African Music:

Philosophy as a concept has defied a single definition. Many definitions abound as there are number of definers but “whichever way it is viewed circles around wisdom, knowledge, ideas and behaviour of man and his environment” (Ibekwe, 2010: 37a). Going by such view, it implies that African music obviously has some set goals which guide its performance and which invariably hinges on man’s ability to harness and explore such potentials for better result. The philosophy of African music can better be appreciated if viewed from its functional perspectives as can be seen below.

Historical function: Every community within Africa or beyond has it as a duty to record, protect and preserve her history. African music carries information needed about the life and events of a community. It traces the past, consolidates the present and forecasts the future. In that regard, Nzewi, (2003) says:

In traditional African cultures, songs, poetry and archaic musical arts theatre could be repositories of historical records. Costumes, instruments and other production properties could carry historical texts. Some musical arts genre may be conceived specifically to relate and update historical accounts, such are the griots (Bebey 1969) – vocal artistes that specialize as repositories of historical records in the Sene-Gambia region of Western Africa – and the praise singers in some South African cultures. (p. 18)

In a similar instance, African musicians being aware of their musical expectations employ historical facts as the main ingredients in choosing their texts during composition. Musicians capture every eventful period and make full use of the relevant texts – both spoken and written information in their composition. Such eventful phenomena include – Independence Day anniversary, outbreak of influenza or epidemic, war, hunger, flood or fire incidence, death and other related events that need to be remembered, so that whenever the music is played, it refreshes the memories of the old and informs or equips the minds of the young. The philosophy of African music does not stop at the historical function; it extends to cultural, social, religious, and educational dimensions.

Culturally, the philosophy of African music in its capacity to preserve, conserve, propagate and consolidate culture is indispensable. One of the surest ways to portray the culture of a society in African tradition is through music. The use of song texts, costumes, body movements, and designs on musical instruments identify a particular culture. Even body designs and adornments of performers make culture statements or act as a pointer to the owners of such tradition. Music is so knitted in culture that for one to fully understand the context of a given musical performance, one has to primarily understand the culture of the people that owns the music. Nettl in Onyeji (2008) opined that, “a music cannot be properly

understood and appreciated without some knowledge of its social and cultural context” (p. 124). He further states that, “what determines the nature and character of the music of a particular society is something – we may not know what, but something in the character of the culture” (p. 124). Suffice it to say that the performance of African music implies the full exposition of the culture of African people. No wonder Akpabot in Ibekwe, (2008) advocates that, “one way of knowing about the culture of a people is to examine how they conceptualize their music” (p. 37). In other words, music interprets the culture in such a way that a society is never complete without it.

The social function of African music validates its communal nature and purpose. Traditionally, performance in Africa favours communal participation or group activities. According to Ibekwe, (2010b) “group performances often evoke societal appeal more than individual expression due to the close association or interaction existing between the performers and the audience” (p. 197). In essence, performance or music making in African context fosters socialization in dual capacities. Firstly are the performers who enjoy a common bond of oneness and communality within the group, and secondly, the audience who share the same communal fraternity through direct or indirect participation. In her discussion on the importance of social development among children, Ibekwe (2009) infers that during musical activities, individuals “are trained to associate, accommodate, and relate with one another in a most friendly way. Individual differences are tolerated, and harmonious co-existence is ensured” (p. 56). She goes further to assert that, “music as a social activity provides supporting material for public interaction... enhances greater chances of adaptability and situational adjustment in one’s life experiences” (p. 56). Therefore, the idea behind music making in African culture cannot be adequately perceived if removed from its social context. It is believed that music offers the greatest avenue for socialization and “a person without solid social foundation lacks sound and complete life development” (Ibekwe, 2009: 56). This goes on to support Oguguo’s opinion in Ibekwe (2009) that: “the power and strength of music lie in its potentiality and capacity to address the entire personality structure of man.” (p. 56)

Religion is another practice which any African man does not take for granted and that informs the type of bond or affiliation between religion and music making among Africans. They strongly believe in ability of music to transform and transcend beyond the celestial borders and link the supernatural powers in a kind of spiritual communion. The type of affinity that exists between Man and Supernatural Beings is well articulated in the type of music ordained for the worship of gods and goddesses. Music making in Africa takes into cognizance the religious inclination of the people as such the content of music in most cases portrays articles of faith, words of invocation, oblation, libation and incantation. There is hardly any religious celebration that goes without music or which music does not constitute the central or rallying point of such event. Even in cult practices, initiations and festivals, the position of music is not compromised.

The philosophy of African music is all embracing; it takes into consideration all the existential needs of man. Taking a stance from educational point of view, its role in the education of the masses is enormous. It provides avenue through which societal values are learnt. Folksongs and folktales remain the vehicle or transporting media. They instruct,

advise, admonish, encourage, criticize, and in fact address the overall personality construct of man. Little wonder then, why children engage or are exposed to them quite early in life, so that by the time they become adults they have attained a formidable mental reasoning to face possible environmental challenges or manipulations. At this point, a discussion on folksongs and folktales becomes imperative.

Folksong:

Folksong is the spontaneous and traditional music of a people, race, region or nation handed down aurally from generation to generation. It is more directly associated with tradition, religious and political systems. Since folk music is preserved by tradition, the original composer is often unknown. And since it is a spontaneous creation, folk music naturally reflects the musical idiom of its people. (Agu, 1989: 115)

The above definition has unraveled what folksong stands for in African traditional society. In some cases, folksongs and folktales go together. They operate in a sort of symbiotic association, whereby the folktale gives the message; the folksong adds variation in form of songs. In other words, folktale is as important as folksong in African tradition. Given the fact that both terms are congruently applied, there still exists some measure of disparities; as a result, it becomes necessary to briefly look at the definition of folktale. According to Ogbalu, (2011),

Folktales by their nature as well as their definitions are regarded as fictitious, fabulous, mythical, totally removed from real life situation and event. In their appreciation in actual life performance, one discovers that folktales exhibit some elements of truth that somehow translate them into realism and true life situation. (p. 55)

Similarly, Ibekwe (2010) observes that “although animals such as tortoise, ant, grasshopper, lion and many others are usually personified as human beings during storytelling and folktale sessions, the images they create do not in any way reduce or affect the messages they are meant to give” (p. 394). She also maintains that no matter how “fictitious, fabulous and mythical (folktales appear) they (still) possess the potency, the charm and the transforming power that affect the life of the listener.” (Ibekwe, 2012: 346)

From the above definitions folksongs and folktales are age long tradition that impact on the life of the practitioners. Nevertheless, there are some folktales that are self consummated without the intervallic punctuations of folksongs and vice versa. The most outstanding feature or attribute which folksongs and folktales share in common is oral tradition, and that is the main reason why there are always variations and inconsistency in presentation and performance among different communities, but in whichever way they are performed their primary functions revolve around entertainment, socialization, morality and self realization.

Oral Literature

In the words of Akporobaro, (2012)

Oral literature or folk literature refers to the heritage of imaginative verbal creations, stories folk-beliefs and songs of pre-literate societies which have been evolved and passed on through the spoken word from one generation to another. (Or)... songs, stories, beliefs and legends which have artistic merit and cultural values and which form the cultural traditions of a people and are usually handed down from one generation to another. (pp. 33-34)

Oral literature according to him has basic forms which include, “folktales, ballads and songs, epic narratives, myths and legends, songs, riddles, proverbs, recitations and chants, orations, festival dramas and ritual performance.” (34) He goes on to say that,

These forms constitute in a real and significant sense, the literary tradition and of indigenous African societies. They are the manifestations of traditional creative imagination, beliefs, and perceptions of social reality. They are modes which construct and deconstruct the social-cultural milieu of the people. These are the verbal, auditory manifestations of man’s creative impulse- expressing his innate creative sensibility. (pp. 34-35)

From the above expressions, it could be seen that folksongs and folktales are located within the confines of oral literature. It could also be deduced that oral literature is a compendium of cultural values which can as well be expressed in any of the forms listed above. Folksongs and folktales as aspects of oral literature equally have the ability to integrate other elements of the forms in their mode of expressions. It is the functional and utilitarian imports of these genres that inform the philosophy of African music.

Some basic forms of Oral Literature and their musical relevance in African culture

Folktale, which has been discussed above as having a very strong tie with folksong is one of the outstanding forms of oral literature. Folktale is so integral to life that its performance is generally characterized by comic, humorous or even pathetic and emotional situations. The punctuation of tales with songs creates varieties and sustains interest. Whether the characters in the tale are removed from the realities of everyday experiences or natural factors, it does not fail to achieve its didactic role, which illuminates love, kindness, or retributive justice towards animosity, jealousy, envy and wickedness. The relationship between folktale and song is intensified by interaction between the narrator and the audience. In folktales, songs bring or promote the enjoyment of the story and make it more exciting. Akporobaro (2012) infers that, “the songs in folktale constitute what are called the musical interludes” (p. 117). According to him, most musical interludes in the folktales have two basic functions which include:

(a) They provide a context for the revelation of information about the identity, or experience in the form that is highly poetic and hence emotionally moving to the audience.

(b) Because the songs are often in a call and response form, they enhance the dramatic quality of the story. This is so in the sense that the story becomes a kind of lively performance inter- involving audience and narrator in a

participatory performance and quasi dramatic act of hand clapping, body movement and singing and at times dancing. (p.117)

Obviously, the importance of songs in folktale can never be over emphasized. A good narrator utilizes the medium to achieve better result or a desired goal. Recitatives and Chants are most conspicuous during devotion, worship or performance of rituals. The diviner may engage in a long chant or incantation which he believes has some magical powers to conjure the super naturals. In the same vein, Akporobaro (2012) adds that, “the character’s wish may be to procure a cure for an illness, to overcome an enemy, and to achieve success in some endeavour.” (p. 60)

Ballard is another form of oral poetry or song which normally centres on events of local interest. It can be chanted in a free rhythmic pattern to give room for full narrative expression. Akporobaro (2012) says that, “Ballads are normally sung in the form of chanted folktales, musical interludes or narratives” (p. 57). He goes further to say that, “these forms of oral poetry are occasional artistic forms, being bound up and shaped by the matrix of social cultural occasions- birth, marriage, installation of chiefs, burial and festivals, rituals....” (p. 57)

In African culture, other forms or aspects of oral literature such as myths and legends, proverbs, epic narratives, and so on can be integrated into praise poetry which Akporobaro (2012) described as “a form of poetry that is specifically designed for the eulogistic portrayal of the virtues of a given subject which may be a king, a chief, a war leader, an animal or plant” (p. 56). Nketia (1974) in his own view described them as historical songs. According to him, “The cultivation of historical songs usually finds its highest expression at the court of chiefs and princes. Here chronicles of kings and genealogical references that link the present generation of royalty to their ancestors helps to strengthen the position of those in authority or to legitimize their claim to power.” (p. 197)

He further said that “such songs are also intended to exhort the king, to encourage him to emulate his predecessors, and may also be intended as praise songs” (p. 197). It is therefore a common practice in African tradition for a performance to serve many purposes depending on the performers’ intention and the situation available.

Conclusion

This paper has tried to discuss the philosophy of African music as oral literature under various conceptual frameworks. Africa is a heterogeneous society but yet shares a common cultural attributes or what Oerhie and Emeka (2003) call “unity in diversity” (p. 40). African music is so knitted to life or nature that no average African man can deny its expressive power. In that respect, Babey in Umezinwa (2012) says,

The more one listens to native music the more one is conscious of its vital power. It touches the chords of man’s inmost being and stirs his primal instincts. It demands the performer’s whole attention and so sways the individual as almost to divide asunder for the being, mind and body. It is intensely passionate, and no

great effort of the imagination is required to realize that such music could only have originated with the son of Cain. (67-78)

The philosophy of African music as oral literature provided a base or framework under which a clearer view of the people's thought system is conceptually understood or perceived. It could also imply that full conceptualization of the form; functions and communicative abilities of this traditional mode of expression/genre give credence or relevance to cultural applicability of African music.

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