

REFLECTIONS ON FOLK SONGS AND THEIR FUNCTIONS: AN OVERVIEW

Okpokwasili, Chinazor Roseline

Email: lottycee36@gmail.com

Department of Music, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Abstract

In the olden days, Igbo people did not derive entertainment from books rather they developed and derived joy from imaginations through oral narratives including traditional (folk) music and dance. Folksongs represents a big part of the African culture. In African society as well as Igboland, folksong is one of the tools used to explain oral traditions and expressions are used to pass on knowledge, cultural and social values and collective memory. In addition, they play a crucial role in the sustenance of culture with the progress of time. In Africa generally, music play an important part in the lives of the people and one of the major characteristics of African music (folksong) is that it has functions. And this paper tends to look at the various functions of folksongs and the need for its continuous existence in the society.

Introduction

Any song that originates among the people of a country or area, passed by oral tradition from one singer or generation to the next, often existing in several versions, and marked generally by simple, modal melody and stanza narrative verse can be termed a folksong. Folksongs are the universal language and thoughts of every community. Because virtually every community documented and registered their imprints in time through simple rendition of songs.

Folksongs are songs verbally passed down from generations to generations. These songs usually carry the cultures and customs of the place they originate from and authorship is not tied to a particular individual most often, but rather belongs to the community. By implication, the cultural values of a society can be transmitted, sustained and consolidated through folksong which are taught to children starting at a very early stage of their development, and as they grow up they live by it. Euba(1986) defines folksong as "the pivotal tool that connects the past to the present by giving a clear opportunity of understanding the past in the present; so as to have a better understanding of the present from the past" (475). The definition according to Euba is instructive as it connects the nexus holding the view that, folksongs are usually historical narratives and also a form of documentation of events or way of life. In similar train, Ofuani (2012), notes that:

"Folksong is composed, learnt, preserved and performed from one generation to another through oral tradition. It reflects the sonic, lingual, norms, folklores, history, proverbs, and traditions of a people with total compliance to their characteristics in terms of tonality, scale, intonation, range, from structure, and instrumental accompaniment." (2012:71)

It is cherished and nurtured by the same communal people as its custodian. Put in another way, it is a composition that has grown with a race or a nation or even a community and whose authorship is enriched in the midst of antiquity, that whose origin is unknown but which can claim community authorship because generations of the race, the community or the nation has grown with it and added to it. It means that folksong is never static; it grows in the performance and re-performance. The performance of most folksongs never passed the stage of rehearsals, yet the community identifies the lines and the sound, this deep understanding also downplay any authorship to a collective memory managed and sustained by and for the community. Folksongs are used in a wide range of contexts- from childbirth, circumcision, lullabies, game, stories, folktales, marriages, deaths, etc. and so are their functions. Therefore, this paper tends to explore most functions of folksongs as it relates to humans.

Folksong as Culture Representative

Folksong serves as a medium for the carriage of many aspects of the local environments- social pilgrimage, mystic wanderings, work, worship and recreation, daily movement habits and patterns of cultural expressions. Folk songs are the songs of our history. They are composed of their native language, folk music and folk musical instruments. They are songs that are influenced by the life style and tradition of a set of people in a given society. Folksongs are closely bound to a culture which integrates, reflects and addresses the customs and practices of the community, and in addition must have been passed down through generations using oral medium. An expressed performance usually composed and transmitted through spoken words. In African societies, folksongs are part of the people's culture. The creation of folksong in indigenous language is because it servers as a means of communicating these cultures. Folk songs are sung during happy times and during sad times. There are folk songs about wars, battles, heroes, love, tragedy, falling in love, disaster, peace, birth, naming ceremony, marriage, death, the new moon etc. However, they all represent a common message that roots to the ancient culture. Different society has different culture, thus different folk songs are found among the people of different cultural background. Each one is unique with their own style, instruments, ways of singing etc which makes it one of a kind and gives the true identity of a particular culture.

Folksong as Language Communicator

According to Halliday, he holds the position that "A language is interpreted as a system of meanings accompanied by forms through which the meanings can be realized," and adds that "...language has evolved to satisfy human needs..." (Cited in Dijik, 1985, pp. 29-58). In an African tradition, songs are deliberately treated as though they were speech utterance. Nketia opines that language has a tendency to follow both intonation contour of speech in melodies and the rhythm of speech in song rhythms. Furthermore, he points out that for the meaning of the text to be preserved, the melodic contour of tonal language lyrics should correspond to the speech tone pattern of language in use. When texts in tone language are sung, the tones normally used in speech are reflected in the melody (p. 184). With this, it is easy for a foreigner to learn a given language of a given

people. In African societies, folksongs form the most integral part of the people's lives. The process of its creation is usually done in the language of the people. This is because it is easy to identify different cultures through language.

The comparison of music and speech perception leads to the conclusion that speech and music have a rhythmic initiation: music is associated subconsciously with the communicative experiences of the individual, arouses his speech associations. And forms a focus on the perception of music and speech as a single communicative complex with a rhythmic basis (Andreyeva, 2010). Toropova (2014) posited that music as a linguistic phenomenon has at its disposal its own beep codes: intonations characters, signs, language codes, syntax and grammar. Folksong is content in language learning.

Folksong as Anthropology

Anthropologists have been deeply aware of music from the start- both as a site for the exploration of world cultural heritage and as a point of entry for understanding particular human societies from an intimate, local perspective. Generally speaking, linguistic and cultural anthropologists have found ways to integrate music-especially songs- into their everyday human experience throughout the planet. Over the past century or so, social scientists have repeatedly demonstrated that to interpret any one's aspect of behavior, such as language or music, one must look beyond this single feature of social interaction, to consider all of the other modes of communication that occur alongside it, shaping the meaning. Thus, to understand music, one must look far beyond it, to uncover its many hidden layers of meaning, as they are reflected elsewhere in the social interaction of the community. Although music, like culture, is located most fundamentally at the level of individual psychology and emotions, it is its social qualities and capacity to represent the social and cultural self that loom largest in the research agenda of an anthropology of music. These music (folksongs) have an immense connection with socio-cultural life of tribes in the world because they are culturally rooted. Folksongs are a valuable form of oral traditions that enable cultures to emphasis their identities. Folksong is a form of recreation and entertainment in several societies. Both oral and written folksongs include symbolic expressions. They emphasis and reinforce social standards. Folksongs help to promote integration when individuals gather together to achieve a social or cultural objective. It reflects various aspects of life, allowing us to analyze a society's social and cultural reality. Folksong is a product of social and elements; and it is influenced by a society's custom and traditions. Some folk songs are related to specific rituals like marriage, birth, puberty, death and so on. There are other songs related to particular activity like agricultural, or they may be performed at different occasions. So the idea, the word 'folk' has wide range of understanding and connotations-ranging from 'natural' to 'native' to 'traditional' to 'ritual' and in some cases 'from the heart'. The 'outpourings from the heart' of native or traditional people later takes the form of folk song. For folk song is an important means of expressing an individual's emotions and ideas. Folk song tells us how people order their universe and provides an insight into their world view.

Folksong as Festival

In African society, Ndigbo includes music and it plays a major role in both their social and religious activities. For Ndigbo, music is not just a luxury or pastime, it forms part of the process of living itself. According to W.W.C. Echezona (1963), "To every Igbo, life has a melodic and rhythmic orientation, and again, no event happen that is not associated with music. The Ndigbo has an ardent personal feelings for it" (pp. 12 & 14). Ndigbo would appear to be a people perpetually celebrating. In every moon of the 13 moons in the Igbo year, some communities somewhere are celebrating. The aggregate of these festivals and ceremonies held in their appointed sequence is the Igbo year, aro. Thus, the Igbo year is not a simple mathematical unit or measurement of time. Religion is very predominant in determining and instituting festivals in Igboland.

Any Igbo festival or ceremony is essentially a continuity of culture, usually hallowed by tradition and traceable for its origin down to the community's twilight of fable. Traditional festivals are means of paying tribute to ancestors and acknowledging their presence in the midst of the living. In every festival, there are rituals and ceremonies of worship which traditional music plays an important role. Most Igbo festivals are annual, but, there are festivals which occur within interval of two, three or more years. An Igbo festival may have rituals activities which take place within family compounds or shrines but most of its celebrations are public. The public square provides an excellent arena for traditional songs and dances, which characterize the festival or expresses the people's joy and happiness.

In relation to preservation of folksong heritage, Gillan (2004), discusses the role of village festivals in safeguarding the local ritual repertoire. These village festivals serve as a platform for expression, continuation, and preservation of indigenous folksong from one generation to another. Some of these festivals among the Ndigbo includes *Ogugochi* (Imezi owa), *Imo Awka* (Awka), *Onwa-Asaa* (Nibo), *Onwa-Asato* (Nri Kingdom), *Ihejioku* (Imo), *Ikoro* (Ngwa), *Ede Aro* (Abagana), *Igu Aro and Ichu Aro*, etc. These are celebrated in many Igbo communities which traditional songs (Folk song) are predominant among other activities.

Folksong as Ritual Worship

In African Community, Ndigbo inclusive, music had been central to people's lives. Ndigbo are deeply religious people and religion forms an important aspect of their everyday life. They believe in a supreme Being as well as in other deities and spiritual forces and have respect for their ancestors (*mawu/mmanwu/muo; odo, omaba/omabe*, etc), Igbo religion, therefore, begins with the belief in and worship of *Chukwu* or *Chi-Ukwu* (the Great God); *Chineke* or *Chukwu-Okike* (the creator of all things); *Olisebuluwa* (the force that is carrying and sustaining the universe); *Agbara/Agbala* (the source of fertility), and *Chukwu Abiama*- the creator of everything and not an indigene of any known place. The conceptions of music are to various degrees inseparable from the conceptions of ritual and religion in many cultures, Ndigbo included. In traditional Igbo society, some traditional songs is conceived as a medium for transformation of boundaries between the sacred and the profane, and the natural and supernatural, because of the role that it

fulfils in respect of its rituals. Some traditional songs are remarkably effective facilitators of ritual activities in Igbo culture. Some traditional songs are carriers of the people's customs and traditions. Folksong happens not to be a communion of the living only. It is equally a communion between the living and the dead, manifest in the preference for cryptic potencies of inherited ancient instruments, costumery, symbols and formulae; the reverential deference to traditional modes and rituals, including libation and sacrifice; and in the characterized dance and dramatic representations of ancestral masquerade.

Folksong is also a direct psychical communion between the people and deities/spirits who are characterized and who manifest themselves in some dances and masquerades. It is equally a communion between the people and the mystified phenomena of nature: the thunderstorms, the lightening, tornadoes, the sky, the mother earth, the sun, the moon, and the nature spirits. All these are manifest in the instruments, their performance requirements and implications; in the music types, forms and textures, in the performance rites and languages.

Folksong as Social Commentator

The lyrics of folksongs are culturally informed and aim at serving society through social commentary. Folksongs were harnessed for inculcating the social consciousness among the masses by improvising its content. Folksongs play an effective role in arousing the conscience of the people against some ills in the society and the bad governance by the leaders and also gives chance to voice out their opinions on various issues. The texts of some of these folksongs are pretty striking since it tells the problems of the people and also questions the government and the officials. The use of folksong as an instrument of social and political change to an extent has proven effective. Folksong sometimes serve as a medium to communicate to the leaders of the society about some societal ills which maybe, they neglected and have refused to take positive actions towards them. In Nigerian, musicians like Sonny Okosun, Ebenezer Obey, Lagbaja (the masked musicians), Sunny Oti, late Fela kuti, Onyeka Onwenu, Mike Ejeagha, King Sunny Ade, etc and the new generation musician Falz has in one way or another used their songs not merely criticizing the happenings in the country but also as a guide to people at which course to go. Folksongs are regarded also as a powerful medium through which the oppressed and the people who seek for justice convey their messages and express their disappointment, anguish and general feeling about what is going on in the society. Folksongs can also be used to reinforce social norms and values. They can teach people what is considered acceptable behavior within a culture/ society and can be used to promote unity and cohesion within a community. Folksongs even as they entertain, carry some instructions in which a society or a given people should go.

Folksong as Communicative Tool

Folksong is always characteristic in a given culture, signifying several things in the cultural context. Every society extols its own musical heritage and promotes it for the various cultural roles they play. Folksongs are culturally informed and aids in communicating to the people of its society. Communication according to Pearson and

Nelson (2000), is defined as the process of understanding and sharing meaning. For effective communication, a song must complete the task of a successful communication which includes three to eight components. Firstly, there should be a source which is the communicator, secondly, a message to be conveyed and thirdly, the channel through which the message passes through, fourthly, the presence of a receiver, the fifth one is the response from the receiver to the source, the sixth one is the environment, this has to do with the atmosphere, physical and psychological, where the message is sent and received, the seventh one is the context of the communication interaction involves the setting, scene, the idea, and expectations of the individuals involved. And finally, the interference, this simply means anything that block or change the source's intended meaning of the message (Mclean, 2005). Folksongs exist in the memories and voices of living individuals. They are primarily a means of social communication among those who share common bodies of knowledge, value systems and ideologies. Constituting people's oral traditions, the remembrance and recollection of song in particular contexts also invoke a variety of interconnections with other contexts. They are therefore loaded with meaning precisely because of the interplay of inter textual resonance wherein each seemingly isolated song may in fact be related to others, which often represent competing view points and voices within the given folksong tradition. These strong inter textual connections and interactive relationships between songs of a region are what makes them so effective as forms of communication tools. The fact that folksongs are sung again and again and passed down through generations also indicates the high degree of acceptability of the ideas, moods and messages they contain. Song texts provides access to meanings, values and social issues in various cultural locations. Songs therefore constitute integral part of cultural literature orally transmitted from one generation to another. Quite often indigenous musicians employ local languages in their various dialects to present and communicate to the public the essence of the folksongs and the messages contained in them, the song texts permeates the entire life of the community. The use of traditional folksongs for creating awareness in African societies and as a means of development is not a phenomena.

Folksong as Therapy

Folksong is an expression of cultural heritage. It connects us to the succession of generations experienced by family and tribe. It is part of our cultural DNA and is embedded within us as an ongoing narrative, expressed as a language of melody and poetic imagery. Folksong presents an array of lyrical themes, singing a person through the cycle of life, and these themes are familiar with which a person reflects on. Folksong has the qualities of every meaningful song. Cited in Dileo (1999), Ken Bruscia writes:

Songs are our connections of life. They connect us to our inner world; they bring us closer to others; they keep us company when we are alone. They articulate our beliefs and reaffirm our values. They arouse, they accompany, they release. And as the years pass, our songs bear witness to our lives and give voice to our experiences. They rekindle the past, reflect the present, and project the future. Songs weave tales of our joys and sorrows; they express our dreams and disappointments, our fears and triumphs. (p. 153)

Folksong is an effective modality for healing in both personal and social contexts because it enables a deeper understanding of many song forms and themes. The classic modes, the range of scalar, the melodic materials available in traditional folksongs and the pentatonic forms provides simple yet flexible means of generating new melodies, rich in emotional nuance. The use of folksong as therapeutic method, for Shultis and Gallagher (2015), they opined that "song choice and subsequent discussion can be a very powerful interventions" (p. 445). They explain that the process of identifying a song that matches a mood, communicates the need, or tells a story about one's self, history, or current experience provides a means of expression and communication for the individual involved. A study carried out by Johnson (2014) concerning song choice in therapeutic singing interventions, she explains that "although patient preference is certainly a vital element to consider, an effective song choice involves consideration of a wide range of factors. She mentions temporal flexibility, the ability for a song to maintain its rhythmic integrity when slowed down or sped up, as one such musical factor. As an example of therapeutic logic, singing songs can serve to reinforce speech/language and respiratory goals. One can see that the rich content and form of folksong has the potential to enhance the music therapist's understanding that, to use Johnson's words, "it is perceptive musical choices, implemented with esthetic facilitation of the singing opportunity, that elevate therapeutic singing above the 'sing-along' and into an extremely effective therapeutic techniques" (p. 194). Songs, whether traditional or contemporary, has proven to be effective in achieving therapeutic goals.

Folksong as an Educator

Traditionally, music is a supreme motivator as it is an integral part of education. Music is integral to the African's life-long educational system. Africans use music as much as music controls their life and speech. Learning traditional music (folksong) is therefore life-long and starts quite early in life. Folksongs are important in education because of the historical and cultural experience they carry. In the educational process, music was the main form of moral and aesthetic education of the younger generation, and it is clear that the effectiveness of accelerating education depends on this, because as a child, the family or parents and grandparents, being a child's first teachers, are a key factor in introducing a child to folk art during pre-school. Some folksongs plays the role of transmitting the beliefs, values, traditions, norms and customs of a society to the new members of the society. These folksongs help in building these younger ones in keeping the norms and values of the society in which they will grew up to inherit and abide by. Through some song texts, they learn the moral codes of his land, its chronology and history, and guiding principles and ethics of his land. He also learned about his own language, the things his people lived by, and how the society worked. All these were learned through music that ranged from simple folk tunes to highly specialized ritual music, including chants, incantations and minstrelsy. Whether they are about real people, or a metaphoric hero, folksongs tends to make you want to know more.

Folksong as Entertainment

Entertainment is meant to take away the mind from the tedium of the society or just means of relaxation, to provide holiday and happiness, not often sheer hedonism.

Entertainment is very much recognized value of music in the society. Folksong is an integral part of the African/traditional culture. The man wakes up with it and goes to bed with it, he lives and dies with it. It is part of their daily lives. Among the Igbos, entertainment music and praise songs are quite popular. They sometimes take days off their daily activities and sing to entertainment themselves. These songs tends to set the mind free from problems. It is a true route to escapism. Sometimes these songs are used as an accolade to the brave—the great warriors, hunters, chiefs, wrestlers, labourers, and great achievers. Folksongs are used to entertain people during social gatherings or during festivals in traditional societies. In the modern times however, these songs have been used to extol politicians in times of political campaigns.

Folksong as Culture Preserver

Folksongs represent a big part of the African folklore heritage. Culture is the ideas, customs and social behaviours of a particular society. The collection and preservation of folklore items started exactly through songs. According to the International Council of Folk Music, folk music (song) is "the product of a musical tradition that has been developed through oral transmission" (Pegg, 2001). Thus, folksong should be viewed as a product of traditions transmitted orally. Every folksong has an outstanding artists within the community who contribute to the creation, practice, and preservation of the music across generations. Folksongs are carriers of cultural identities of different communities. Music, especially folksong, participates in almost all human activities, and in human cultural life by its special function and power. Music (folksong) deeply reflects ethnic cultural identity through aesthetics that have been created and maintained in the community for generations. Folksongs serves to protect the identity of each community and has connections to social movements and racial identities (Roy, 2002). Through folksongs, these ideas and customs are kept alive. Folksongs are means of safeguarding our rich cultural heritage. Through folksongs, the ideas, values and cultural knowledge which was experienced and gained by our ancestors are passed down to us. With these, our cultural history, values and customs are preserved from one generation to the next. Folksong serves as a repository for preserving ancient traditions and plays a crucial role in the cultural adjustment and support of national musical culture (Nguyen, 1980). Therefore, folksong holds a significant position within a culture, and according to To (2007), it serves a unique function in the social of each ethnic group, which cannot be replaced by other types of music or modern musical forms. The nature of folksongs is based on the daily collective and personal experiences of the people built into a rich musical repertoire that is created around their feelings such as joy, victories, and defeats among others. The perpetuation of these songs from one generation to another is therefore seen as part of the cultural practices that are indigenous to them. Consequently, a community's folksong is rooted in their historical, socio-cultural, religious and economic background. The position of folksongs in any culture in the world is so symbolic that Haywood (1996) commenting on its significance states that:

Folksongs can be used to convey other non-musical concepts involving human effort and communication hence what seems to be the greatest functional importance of folksongs is not the pragmatic but semantic. (529)

The melodies of folksongs hold significant cultural value within African society. They serve as integral components of important cultural events and express the distinct cultural nuances of the people. Folksongs through their system of melodies, scales, and rhythms found in them the people's culture is vividly represented.

Folksong as an Anchor for Communal Performance

The social function of traditional music (folksong) validates its communal nature and purpose. Traditionally, performance in Africa favours communal participation or group activities. Performance is the live wire of arts. It is the main action that gives life to the dominant memorized music text. 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 bond of oneness and communality within the group, secondly, the audience who share the same communal fraternity through direct or indirect participation. Folksongs significantly reflect the norms, values and beliefs of the community which permit the community at large to participate in the performance of these songs. Folksong practice is therefore structured around community, which is meant to contribute to the survival of the society. The oral tradition which folksongs consist of, is a system that draws on a body of experience that regulate the living pattern of the traditional society. As Nzewi (1987) puts it "no society or system that overlooks its inherent values, norms, tradition or technology has been identified in the comity of nations" (94). It goes a long way to identify folksong as a value-carrying mechanism which in the process of participation in performance of these songs inseminates these values in individuals.

Conclusion

One of the functions of folksong in most traditional societies in Nigeria is to create pleasure and satisfaction during ceremonies as it provides an excellent means of expression and communication with other people. That means that folksongs cannot be abstracted from the cultural context if the audience must derive any significant meaning and satisfaction from them, because folksongs have intimate connection with cultural aspects of human endeavour. As a unique human phenomenon of any society, folksongs are dynamic and alive in the people's way of life.

As a result of the enormous potentials and functions of folksong in this paper, it should be seen as a means and path of reminding our people that folksong play an important role in preserving and transmitting a culture's history, values, and customs and providing entertainment and education to people of all ages. According to Sowende (1967) "it is the livingness in the art that makes it art" (157). Perhaps this explains to a large extent the continual use and practice of folksongs in today's society for it seems that the existence of man is also the existence of the art and if the curator of the art is alive, the art itself is alive.

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