

MUSIC, FAMILY AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT: EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF VOCABULARY IN SELECTED YORUBA SONGS

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Abstract

Scholarship on conflict management abounds. However little research exist on the housewives' songs of insults. Some families in some cultures of Africa where a man has more than one wife sometimes degenerate to conflicts due to space, place and relationship enstrangement. The theme of these songs ranges from the non-verbal acts, culinary (in)ability and even the sexual life of the cowife or the husband. The study employed ethnography and lyrical analysis to examine songs by house wives in some Yoruba communities in Southwestern Nigeria. We argue that songs could be used to explain family conflict, communicate political dissatisfaction, and explain environmental issues. We also argue that these songs can degenerate to cause conflict, especially in families, which is the core focus of this study.

Introduction

Conflict could be described as a situation or condition of disharmony in an interactional process. Titus (2015) in his study of the music featured in the 'bring back our girls campaign protest', alludes to the role music plays in socio-economic activities in Nigeria. Music was used as a protest tool during the kidnap of the Chibok girls who were kidnapped in the Northern part of Nigeria by Boko Haram religious extremists. Also, another study by Titus (2017) examines the pivotal and centrality of music in 'Occupy Nigeria Protests.' Music was used to convey the people's agitations and dissatisfaction with the government. The protesters can be heard singing at the top of their voices and intermittently

chanting their requests. National issues such as corruption, fuel scarcity, environmental injustice and restitution for land, insecurity, infrastructural deficiencies, incessant strikes in educational sector, and so on, have birthed some of the songs we listen to today. Musicians continue to use music as a channel to bring to fore the situation of the masses. Banks (1984) claims that a situation of conflict is one in which the activity of one is actually or forcibly imposed at unacceptable costs, materials or psychic, upon another. For conflict to occur, Banks puts forward three required factors which are salient to the issue at stake: the status and legitimacy of the parties, the clustering of interested parties, and coincidence of cleavages within a community. These factors determine the extent to which conflict can stretch. Conflict is not limited to any level of interaction. In other words, it can occur at any level of human interaction although it is most obvious when manifested in violent activities.

Furthermore, while examining the universality of music, Ayorinde & Ajose (2022) explored its transformative attributes. They posit that music does not just shape people's ideas, but that listeners are prone to give subjective meanings to the music they listen to. Boyce-Tillman (2015:41) observed that the intercultural relationship between western music and folk materials from other cultures of the world which were borrowed for composition is symbolic as it portrays the need for people of different descent to see the need for peaceful coexistence just like the harmonious melodies from intercultural comusical co positions. Music has continued to play front row roles in conflict situations in many countries. For instance, the music of black South Africans was birthed from the South African apartheid (Gray, 2015), the famous USA civil rights movement had notable that were composed by former slaves (Whitehead, 2015). Abi-Ezzi's (2015) discourse on the award-winning saxophonist and clarinetist Gilad Atsmon shows the use of music to promote peace and to fight against and resist oppression. According to Abi-Ezzi, Atsmon, a Jew, uses his songs to fight for the right and freedom of Palestinians, whom he sees as being oppressed by Jews. Abi-Ezzi concludes that there cannot be peace in the face of oppression, and therefore resistance to oppression through music may lead to peaceful coexistence. Again, Galtung (2015) notes that music has been used as an agent of peace and unity in different places and in different situations.

In Africa and specifically among the Yoruba people, studies have been documented on the relationship of music and peaceful coexistence (Ogunrinade & Oluniyi, 2021; Emielu, 2010). It has been established that some Yoruba vocabularies related to music, peacebuilding and conflict management are still under-researched. Four of such were examined in this paper. Similar to what Olarewaju (2010) did by examining political campaign songs and how they engender violence and conflicts, this study examines vocabularies in Yoruba music in relations to peacebuilding and conflict management. The study argues that this can help stakeholders such as counsellors and spiritual leaders on conflict resolution strategies.

Yorùbá Ethnic Group, Yorùbá Language and Yorùbá Proverbs

Yorùbá ethnic group is one of the three major groups in Nigeria and they are mostly domiciled in the Southwestern part of the country. However, they can be found in different states in Nigeria and other parts of the world too (Usman & Falola, 2019; Ojo, 2008). The language they speak is Yorùbá with different dialectal forms which is named after the group. Yorùbá language is a tonal language. In the language, there are expressions like idioms (àkànlò èdè) and proverbs (òwe). Idioms and proverbs are drawn from the experiences and happenings of the Yorùbá society (Opoola & Faniran, 2020; Apter 1991, Waterman 1994). Yorùbá idioms are paraphrases that are sometimes used to make sayings sound less offensive. Therefore, as the society that uses them yields to generational changes, the idiomatic expressions become more dynamic, accommodating more expressions. Proverbs are choice-phrases or sentences drawn from the wisdom in the culture, traditions, experiences, and worldview of a society. Africans and particularly the Yorùbás, believe that because proverbs are extensions of their belief and practices, Bernard (2015) posits that "they [proverbs] are also ethical sayings with elements of complete reality" (p. 48) that are used to make conversations easier, concise and culturally relevant. This is in line with Adegboyega (2017) who explains that "... proverbs are believed to be 'conversational condiment' used to flavour speech taking into consideration its cultural and moral impact." (p. 23). That is why Yorùbá proverbs are referred to as the "horses of speech" because they make it easier to communicate with people who are rooted in the knowledge of the culture from which a particular proverb is drawn.

Yorùbá Vocabularies, Peacebuilding and Conflict Management

Vocabularies are intentionally and strategically used for various purposes among the Yorùbás. One of such purposes is peacebuilding. To the Yorùbá, the need for peace and peacebuilding cannot be overemphasized. They believe that without harmony, there is bound to be a breakdown of law and order in the society and once this is left unchecked, anarchy will be inevitable. Thus, the constant clamor for peace and peacebuilding. Peace according to Goodman and Hulme (1999), is "not purely about an absence of physical violence but is intimately connected to the analysis and practice of social and economic development." (p. 13). In tandem with this viewpoint, one can agree that for a society to develop, there is a need for peace. In the same vein, we cannot be oblivious of the fact that once in a while, there is always a breakdown in communication which often leads to conflict. In the Yorùbá worldview, there are binary complementarities (Ilesanmi 1989) which opine that there is an opposing side to everything. For example, day complements night, male complements female, conflict complements peace, and so on. There are some Yorùbá proverbs that back the idea of binary complementarities like (*tibi tire la dá ilé ayé*) "good and evil exist in this world" and (*èniyàn kò lè gba ire kó má gba ibi oṣojo kan*) "one cannot enjoy continuous goodness without experiencing tribulations." These expressions reinstate the belief of the Yorùbá that there are good and evil in this world and experiencing the negative allows people to appreciate the positive. Even though it is generally conceived that conflict is negative, it is a normal part of human social interaction which contributes to development and social stability that is why the Yorùbá will say (*sṣe mí n bi oṣojo ni oṣojo ni oṣojo re*) "friendship lasts when parties do not hold grudges but ask for explanation when they feel offended". This expression is a proof

that conflict, when approached the right way, leads to better relationship and peacebuilding. Whereas, holding grudges for a long time without asking for an explanation can lead to violent conflict which is always chaotic. Therefore, where there is peace, there will be conflict so that we can build, preserve and appreciate peace.

When there is conflict, there is a need for conflict management and peacebuilding in order to avoid total chaos. Among the Yorùbá, there is a proverb that corroborates this, that (*àdúrà kí a máà te ni a má ní gbà, bí a bá wá te, àdúrà kí a máà kú ni ó kù*) "we pray to not be ridiculed, but when one falls into ridicule, one prays that it does not lead to death". This proverb clearly states that one cannot completely determine how situations will turn out but one can manage bad situations and stop it from escalating into worse. In the Yorùbá society, the issue of conflict management is communal therefore, everybody is expected to play a part in ensuring it. But in conflict management, the place of experience that comes with adulthood, is not overlooked. That is why the Yorùbá will say (*ohun tí àgbà rí ní orí ìjókò, o mo de kò lè rí i bí ó bá gun orí ìròkò*) "what an elderly sees from a sitting position may not be visible to a child even after climbing an ìròkò tree", which simply means that experience comes with age. An inexperienced youngster may likely jump into conclusion and create more chaos than an elderly who can judge a situation better by applying the wisdom that was acquired through experience. Therefore, elders are trusted to handle conflict management and thus this proverb, (*àgbà kii wà lo jà kí orí o mo tuntun wo*) "an elder cannot be in the market and allow the head of the newborn to bend." Allowing the "head of a newborn to bend" means the elders have slacked in their duties as leaders in the society. This is because it is commonplace in Yorùbá society to find newborns carefully strapped to their back of mothers for warmth and safekeeping. However, within the first three (3) months of a baby's life, the neck needs constant support because the neck-bone is not fully developed so, when the mother is unaware that the neck of the baby strapped to her back is bent, it is the duty of an on-looking elder to make sure the neck is straightened. It is the same way with conflict or violent conflict, elders are saddled with the responsibility of making sure that conflict does not escalate.

Music and songs are part of the daily lives of the Yorùbás and they have songs for every occasion. According to Beier (1956:23), in a typical Yorùbá setting, "everyday life is also accompanied by a great deal of impromptu singing, a kind of musical thinking in which the singer puts everything to a tune, which happens to pass through his head." Which means songs are used as a medium of expressing deep emotions be it happiness or sadness. They are also used to express the peace of mind or conflict towards another person. Therefore, one of the ways through which the Yorùbá detect that conflict is looming is through songs and a common Yorùbá proverb confirms it, that (*Orin ní sáájú o te*) "songs herald hostility." In ancient times, hostile situations such as war, is announced through songs. These songs are used to mentally prepare and rouse the warriors for war and songs are also sometimes used to instill fear into the opponent (Agu 1991). One can say that wars are fought and won with the aid of appropriate music. The Yorùbás try to avoid confrontations as much as possible but despite this, protest songs still exist for a reason. They exist as a pointer to the fact that friction will always occur in a society

made up of different people and the need for conflict resolution will consistently be at the front burner. Regarding this, Ogunrinade & Oluniyi (2021) opined that:

There cannot be the need for the pursuit of something that is readily available either at hand or within range. The social status of the Nigerian communities is of a great concern especially now that there are a lot of inter-societal hullabalos and unfriendly engagements. This is obvious when we look at the Nigerian society today with the level of crime and conflicts disparaging every nook and cranny of the country. In the very recent past (18th and early 19th centuries), the Yorùbá people could boast of a better community, in terms of peace and conflict stability. The story, however, is now a different one compared with the situation on-going today. Many factors may be responsible. In the period earlier mentioned, traditional music was of great help. This is owing to the fact that the people are constantly in contact with the bulk of traditional repertoire as available. The lyrics thus do the magic (pp 227-228).

Most of the songs and vocabularies used in this article are basically related to family relations and conflicts. Polygamy is traditionally practiced among the Yoruba people and where you see a monogamous family, you are likely to find many extended family members living together. The song selected are sung when there is conflict in the family and this can come up any time of the day since most of the traditional families work basically as agriculturalist and hunters.

Bóyá Oṣṣlórún á sṣe é,

Bóyá Oṣṣlórún á sṣe é,

Bóyá Oṣṣlórún á sṣe é,

Enìkan á soṣṣroṣṣ tó jeṣṣnu baba eṣṣ loṣṣ.

Bóyá Oṣṣlórún á sṣe é.

May God make it possible,

May God make it possible,

For someone here to vituperate

May God make it possible.

The above song excerpt starts out with the singer praying to God to allow someone or anyone within their vicinity to lambaste him so that he can retaliate. This is a clear indication that the singer is asking for trouble. The Yorùbá see it as the height of disrespect to talk smack about other people's parents which is what the singer did in the third line of the song just to really work the nerves of his opponent into conflict. This kind of song is always nipped in the bud by elders that are present before it ends in full-blown conflict. One of the intelocutors who grew up in a polygamous home mentioned that it was common to hear songs like this from the children of the other wives. And when he tries to defend his father's dignity by retaliating, the blame is laid on him. The song is a taunting song used to instigate fighting.

Meaning-making is subjective in Yoruba households. A particular song may likely have different meanings during a conflict as opposed to how it will be perceived when there is no altercation. For example, a person who is referred to as a tortoise may lay claim to the positive attributes of the tortoise in Yorùbá folktales, such as, clever and playful. But in a situation where conflict is brewing, only the negative attributes such as indolence, thievery, and sluggishness comes to mind. This is to say that conflict changes the meaning of words and a Yorùbá proverb captures this clearly; "Ìjà ló dé tí orin di òwe,

ijó làá jó sorin tí ò bá sí ìjà" (conflict gives a different meaning to songs, when there is no conflict, songs are usually danced to). As earlier discussed, songs are infused into daily activities of the Yorùbá so, most times, the Yorùbá show displeasures through songs as the case may be. The use of songs to show displeasure is not restricted to gender, it is practiced by both male and female. A man who is peeved at his wife may choose to sing Orlando Owoh's "Ìyàwó Oṣṣeṣe" to air his anger"

Má pa mi o!

Má pa mi o!

Ìyàwó oṣṣeṣe

Má pa mi o!

Ìyàwò àsikò

Ìrìn gbéregbère to mí rìn yí,

Kò má te mi lo rùn o é.

Do not kill me with your troubles

Beautiful wife

Do not kill me with your troubles

The wife about town

Your incessant outings,

Are unbecoming.

The song excerpt above opens with the husband asking his beautiful wife not to kill him with her troubles and attitude. In the song, the troubles caused by the wife may not be directed at the husband but to others who feel offended by her nuances. They may choose to continuously report her to the husband (since in Yorùbá culture when others feel affronted by either the husband or the wife, they report to the spouse) and this can be psychologically disturbing for the husband. The husband fears that the reports he is receiving about his wife will eventually be detrimental to his health, which is why he calls out to his wife to abstain from such acts. The song could also mean that the husband is just complaining about the incessant misunderstandings between him and his wife. So, when the wife hears her husband singing this song, she knows there is conflict. However, still referring to her as "beautiful" meant that the conflict is a process towards building a better relationship because a conflict that will end in violent conflict may necessarily start with names-calling rather than terms of endearment. This explanation is in tandem with the experience of Mr Lawani who witnessed severally the rancor between his father and mother. As a thirteen year old boy, he was wise enough to decipher the meaning of the songs his mother sang whenever his father returned from the farm. With his legs gently rocking left and right, Mr Lawani recounted how his mother would sing songs that tells the story of a woman who caught her husband in the arms of another woman and how the man was eventually striped bare of his wealth by his *ale* (mistress).

Kò lè bú mi kórí ó wú

Kò lè bú mi kórí ó wú o è é è You cannot spite me and I will be impressed,

Kò lè bú mi kórí ó wú. You cannot spite me and I will be impressed.

Kò lè bú mi kórí ó wú o è é è You cannot spite me and I will be impressed,

Kò lè bú mi kórí ó wú. You cannot spite me and I will be impressed.

Èyí tó sṣe pump le nu bí ti ke ke , Her mouth resembles a bicycle pump,

Tó sṣe àyà bí tòròmo adiyé, And his chest resembles a chick's breast.

Kò lè bú mi kórí ó wú o. You cannot spite me and I will be impressed

The song above is a song that is common among Yoruba polygamous families. Conflict sometimes come up due to interpersonal relationship and the fact that all the wives

mostly live together with the husband in the same house. Songs are therefore used derogatorily to describe the physical shape of the older or younger wife. In the song, one of the wives sing about the body shape of the other and compares it to a bicycle and a chicken.

Another song about mens abuse of female partner and the songs about such actions is given in song below.

Páńdukú èyàn tí mò ń pońńlé o

Páńdukú èyàn tí mò ń pońńlé o,	A worthless person that I am according respect ,
Páńdukú èyàn tí mò ń pońńlé.	A worthless person that I am according respect.
Páńdukú èyàn tí mò ń pońńlé o,	A worthless person that I am according respect,
Páńdukú èyàn tí mò ń pońńlé.	A worthless person that I am according respect.
O rí mi níleńń yí, O tún filà sńe	He sees me, And he resets his cap,
Kí ni ń ó wa fòkú èyàn sńe?	What will I do with a walking corpse?
Páńdukú èyàn tí mò ń pońńlé.	A worthless person that I am according respect.

The song examines the interaction between husband and wife. The song generally refers to men who abuse women either verbally or psychologically. It is a taboo for woman to beat men in Yoruba land but if a woman decides to express her anger in songs, it is not frowned at. The song talks about the worthlessness of a man that constantly abuses his female partner. These songs were composed as retaliation. Men who abuse their wives are referred to as walking corpses and as worthless individuals. Our engagement with the interlocutors revealed that these songs sometimes degenerate to physical assaults. As Mrs Ajayi (Personal communication) reiterates that "songs of assaults and insults are common among couples in traditional Yoruba setting". These songs sometimes lead unresolvable conflicts and finally, to divorce. Another interlocutor, Mrs Abiodun (Personal communication) asserts that "the songs texts carries weight and even the mode and tone sequencing can be more painful than the texts itself, because the songs are sometimes accompanied by gestures of mockery." This shows that these songs are conflict loaded and not as innocent as their melodies sound. They can generate conflict in families if care is not taken.

Conclusion

In this paper we have shown how musical texts and Yoruba proverbs are used as vocabularies in songs about peace and conflict. This is a signifier of the impact of words in conflict generation and peacebuilding. It is critical to carefully choose our words especially in polygamous families and households where peace is strained. This study also shows that as much as conflict can generate from the words used in a sing, peace can also be achieved by the text of a song. While this study only focuses on the family setting, there are several Yoruba vocabularies found in political/ election songs, religious songs that needs urgent engagement. Our selected songs show that song meanings could bring hostilities and conflict because of there intrinsic meaning and interpretations especially when there are existing misunderstanding among co-wives, spouses, neighbours and also extended families that live together.

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