

## THE IMPERIALIST ORIGIN OF BIAS TOWARDS THE INTEGRITY OF TRADITIONAL MUSIC IN AFRICA

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### **Abstract**

After many years of colonial emancipation, the greater percentage of Africans is yet to realize and defend their identities. Worse still, some African intellectuals whose psyches have been leached, whitewashed or dominated by imperial ideologies have failed to see reasons why traditional practices should be or exist. This negative impression is evident in their sharp/bold rejection and denial of anything cultural in every ramification – traditional music inclusive. This ugly phenomenon infringes on the efforts of concerned historians, ethnographers indigenous philosophers, technologists, musicologist and so on who saw western experimentation on the rich cultural values of our societies as rape of invaluable treasure. This paper seeks to defend the integrity of our traditional music by unraveling some of its immense benefits to societies at large and to debunk the negative concept already formed about our traditional music. This consequently culminates in the relegation of our musical art to the back seat and its practitioners infected with an inferiority complex.

### **Introduction**

Most of the countries of Africa (Nigeria for example) wriggled out of colonialism in the sixties. From the earliest time, Africa has remained the originator of civilization; this was demonstrated in her intellectual prowess in such areas as writing (hieroglyphics), agriculture (irrigation), Arts and sculpture (pyramid), and so on. It is so disheartening that the same Africa (which Nigeria is part and parcel of), the once renowned citadel of civilization is regarded with ignominy, as sub-human and people without history and tradition. Ironically, those things that constitute African achievements and initiatives are looted, repackaged and branded European and later brought back to them. Nigeria is one of the countries in Africa that experienced the hardest hit of cultural abrasion. Nwana (2004:175) says, “during the process of establishing colonial rule in Nigeria, . . . cultural values and policies unacceptable to the British were subdued”. That was the genesis of bias and lack of confidence in our traditional practices. The potency of our cultural values started degenerating as people were fast embracing western cultures and ideologies. These extended to traditional musical practices which early missionaries termed inferior, noisy, barbaric, irrational and devilish. Even local musical instruments were not found good enough to be used in churches. With such insipid and unpopular branding, Ike (2009:53) laments in utmost disgust,

I thanked the early missionaries who brought us the gospel of Jesus Christ but I always regret that in their bid to spread that gospel they never cared to study our religion and cultural values to know which of them could even help in understanding and appreciating the gospel more deeply.

People were indoctrinated into believing that what they have been practicing was idolatry and satanic worshiping. This act, not only dehumanized Africa and Nigeria in particular but raped them of their cultural heritage and identity.

### **Cultural enslavement vis-à-vis imperial savagery**

Africa is wrecked culturally, psychologically, economically, socially, politically and otherwise. Chukwokolo (2009:29) expresses that, “Africa under colonial bondage, involving socio-political domination, slavery, and economic exploitation, racial and cultural devastation . . . destroyed the philosophical and religious (musical inclusive) base of Africa and foisted European system as alternative”. People were made to drop whatever that was traditional and imbibe western culture without reservation or what Ike (2009:92) calls, “use my sense and not your own”. It is therefore sickening to think that the sole outcome of imperialism in Africa is civilization. The situation is quite contrary to what average Africa understands as civilization, growth and development. Civilization does not mean devastation, exploitation and intimidation rather it refers to the state of transformation and the awakening of people’s consciousness about things around them. According to Okafor (2004:27) civilization has certain characteristics or recognizable signs:

- i. Presence of a high level agriculture or food production
- ii. Development of institutions ...
- iii. Development of managerial skills ...
- iv. Professional/trading and business class working within a highly organized system...
- v. Full time professional, freed from menial tasks who then develop science and the arts.

On the contrary, all these mentioned above are not the type of development and civilization the imperialists intended for Africa. Even education which supposed to have received the highest attention was the one that suffered the greatest set back. Asiegbu (2009) was very indignant when he was assessing the rate of educational growth/development during the colonial era. Taking a stance from Nigerian experience he poignantly states that, “between 1924-1925, the colonial government devoted 1.8% of its total expenditure to education” (Asiegbu, 2009:12) what an inconsequential percentage? The figure was just a caricature of what a laudable project as education should represent. Tutorial was centred on the mastery of three Rs, (Reading, Writing and Arithmetic) that was considered enough to enable the recipients occupy subsidiary positions and do menial jobs as deemed fit for them. If education which should be given adequate attention was negated with such askance, one wonders what sort of curriculum or what the content of curriculum would look like. Obviously, cultural and creative arts suffered the greatest hitch. There was no place in the curriculum specifically meant for the teaching and learning of traditional music. It was discriminated against and was seen as being related to Satan. Keyboard instruments such as organ, melodeon, harmonium and others took precedence over the traditional musical instruments. Marching songs, choral or congregational singing, western theories and rudiments took over traditional rhymes, folk songs (in call and response pattern) folktales, stories and open air theatre which make meaning to people. They made music appear too abstract and estranged instead of what people live with. Okafor (2005:209) makes it implicitly clear, that, “through song texts, a person learned the moral codes of his land, its chronology and history, and guided principles and ethics of his land” therefore, introducing or teaching a learner what was totally removed from his natural environment might not yield expected result. It is true that westerners brought education, but their intention was not to develop Africa, it was to enable them accomplish their mission, which among other things, include-trading, evangelization, slavery, bartering, and colonization.

## The Consequences of Imperialism on Traditional Music in Nigeria

There is no gain saying the fact that the westerners impacted heavily on the traditional music of our country – Nigeria, but the worst and the most dreadful fact is the image which Nigerians themselves paint of the art. This horrible situation can be substantiated with the zeal at which most Nigerians yearn, struggle and scout for anything foreign, including music. From personal experiences and judging from information gathered from cassettes and record (CD) dealers, music with foreign background sells considerably high in Nigeria unlike what it would be if the reverse was the case. That is, if Nigerian traditional music were to be sold abroad. Taking what happened in the 2010 FIFA world cup that was held in South Africa as an example, It was sad to note that *Vuvuzela* instrument which is of South African origin was banned by almost eight English clubs (for reason best known to them) after its usage in the world cup fiesta. (CNN Sport News/Report, July, 2010). This crazy rush for alien tradition is borne out of faulty orientation, foisted on Africans/Nigerians by the so called Europeans, because Africans are made to believe that Europeans are more superior. The proof of this assertion was captured in Asiegbu (2009:56) thus,

There is the competition to out do one another in imitating the European. This inferior Africa aspires to be like the European in terms of language, the African language is a sign of inferiority. But one is a ‘bean-to’ once one speaks one of the languages of the erstwhile colonizers. In admiration of the European, the African suffers identity crisis.

This negative impression that Africa/ Nigeria is an inferior race and that most of her traditional practices are barbaric and devilish remains a stigma and a very big problem to the development and growth of our traditional music. If Nigerians do not patronize and promote their musical art, how will it grow? Unfortunately, there is high patronage and demand for foreign musical instruments such as keyboards and others from the families of string (viola/violin) Brass (Trumpet, horn) woodwind (saxophones, clarinet) and the rest of them for the formation of various band groups, without a corresponding increase in the demand for our local musical instruments. It is too devastating to hear or believe that most students of music do not know the names of their indigenous musical instruments before entering University, how then will they appreciate using it like other foreign instruments which they are more conversant with. The problem emanated from poor orientation and misconception by the preceding generations who failed to defend the integrity of our musical tradition before the so called and uninformed westerners.

Modern technologies have replaced the old system of recreation where children are taught traditional music. Moonlight games are things of the past while cinema, film show, cable net work and television are now the order of the day. Gospel bands spiced with Jazz, Reggae, Blues, and other foreign flavours are on the increase to the detriment of local dance groups, People preferred being known as a keyboardist, Trumpeter, saxophonist, clarinetist, violinist, etc to be associated with any of the local instruments such as *oja*, - notched flute, *ngedegwu* – xylophone, *uba-aka*- thumb piano, *ekwe* – slit wooden drum and so on. When the culture owners are discouraged from mastering what belong to them, how would they appreciate or promote the aesthetic values inherent in the art.

This poor conception of our traditional music results in low enrolment of students who offer music as a course of study in higher institutions. To many Nigerian students/parents, music should not be studied as a professional course or be taken as a means of livelihood rather “it

was considered a precarious business and a path of certain destitution and failure” (Ogisi, 2006:103).

In Nigerian academic circle for instance, Ogisi outlined four categories of disciplines according to how people give preference to them, not on the ground of intellectual competencies but on the perceived prestige that such disciplines confer on the individual. In that regard,

There is the high demand disciplines made up of Medicine, Law, Engineering, etc next are those to which belong Accountancy, Mass Communication, Business Administration, the average discipline of Economics, Education etc and the low rated disciplines to which Music, Theatre Arts, Religion and the arts in general belong. (Ogisi, 2006:107)

People admit this stereotype perception based on preconceived orientation initiated by the westerners. Furthermore, the infiltration of other types of music, viz, Jazz, Pop, Rock’n-roll etc with their estranged demeanours has also endangered the integrity of our traditional music. Most of the time, these musicians provoke the society to be against them through reckless behaviour, such as indecent dressing, over drinking, and all sorts of loose living. Therefore, if music is unfortunately packaged in such a negative mould by its practitioners, people’s perception of it will not be favourable whether it is traditional or continental. All these are as a result of external influences.

### **The Role of Traditional Music in Nigeria**

“Next to the local language, traditional music is the most widely used medium of expression for all manners of occasions and at all times and periods of life” (Okafor 2005:87) The above submission clearly defines the essence of indigenous music in our traditional societies. As there are general and specific occasions/events so are there general and specific music associated with them. In which ever way music is involved, it does not fail to perform its expected functions. Traditional music is classified into “Recreational, Occasional and incidental” (Agu, 2000:82) in accordance with the cultural life of the people. It is the values attached to these cultural expressions that underscore the relevance of music associated with them.

In Igbo of Nigeria and Africa at large, morality, justice and equity are the most vital tenets that homogenize them as one entity. They extol healthy virtues and abhor unhealthy and deviant behaviour. Music is considered a perfect fit or a medium through which messages are communicated concerning good or bad. Also, the fact, that the traditional musicians are part of the whole system they are better equipped to know the fabrics of their societies. Asigbo, (2009:27) infers that, “folklore and folk performances still remain an apposite vehicle for inculcation of morals to a decaying and decadent society. This is because, folk music by its nature relies on symbols drawn from people’s flora and fauna”. Any society that lacks moral potency is invariably found wanting in other spheres of life. For that reason, societies do not joke with it. Parents use folktales/songs to instill discipline into their children. Through this process also oral poetry is regenerated. Historical events and genealogy are recounted by griots and praise singers. All these are meant to transfer the norms and values of society to future generation.

Africans have strong opinion for super natural spirits and Supreme Being. They believe so much in the efficacy of their powers in controlling the affairs of mortals. That is the reason for reverencing them in a most sacred way and music remains the most suitable avenue to communicate and worship these supernatural beings. It performs the dual functions of invoking the spirit and arousing the worshipers' mood. This strong devotion through music was captured by Modum in Idolor (2002:3) "These functional processes, through the use of music explain the strong desire of a traditional society to involve deities in the material, moral and spiritual life of the community".

The greatest link between mortals and supernatural are located in the use of songs of praise, supplication, confession, admonition, requisition, initiation, proclamation, devotion, incantation and libation, some gods are best worshipped with chanting, signing, dancing or other forms of theatrical demonstrations. Others require only the tinkling and buzzing sound of instruments to appease or conjure them just as 'bat drum' is very significant in the worship of "Sango deity" in Yoruba kingdom (Omibiyi 2005:47).

Status stratification is another practice that gained invaluable ascendancy in the tradition of Igbo people where the celebrants involve in different types of music making. There is that id or inner desire to belong to a class. Once an individual changes from one status to another especially of a clandestine nature he feels his personal repute has soared to a greater height. Some of these practices that demand status transformation include, initiation to secret cult, titled taking, coming of age, girls' puberty rites, marriages and so on. In other traditional practices such as tattooing, teeth filling and scarification – *Igbu-ichi* (for men) or *itu-mbibi* (for women), the role of music is inevitable. It can serve as a therapy in painful situation by diverting the mind from the source of pain. It can also be used to work up the spirit and encourage the participants performing the ritual (Okafor 2005). On the other hand, music is the main source of entertainment in any occasion. For instance, in event of marriage, each ethnic group has its own way of celebrating it. In Igbo of Nigeria, it involves much merry-making, singing and dancing. In Yoruba tradition, *waka* is a confessional music restricted to women. In the words of Taiwo Ogunade (1992:56) "it (*waka*) is a form of music strictly in the women's domain, non-professional, originally rendered as a spontaneous eulogy in traditional Yoruba culture during marriage ceremonies" Outside of Nigerian territory, Morocco to be precise, the maiden who is getting married "is carried on the shoulder of her wedding attendants with singing and shouting to the bridal chamber". (<http://uk.search.yahoo.com/search..?>) In fact every culture of the world underscores the important roles music play in their cultural activities.

In most of the societies, moonlight nights are not held with levity due to heavy activities laden with it. Music is the most exciting practice that makes the period enjoyable. Ogunade (1992:47) discusses the role of music in moonlight as follows:

Moonlight music is usually a story-telling forum, where tales of great warriors, adventures or even epics of the clan or surrounding neighbouring communities are related. Most of the stories are usually morally oriented and are used as mass education materials. On occasion on puberty rites in some communities, it is not uncommon to find mothers or house wives performing music in the moonlight for the sake of communicating with their children using the quiet of the night to get across to them in their confinements such as the rites in the fattening room.

Children appreciate this period the most, as it provides them an opportunity to engage in all kinds of music required for initiation, cult and entertainment purposes. Therefore, as music enlivens moonlight periods, moonlight also reinforces musical activities.

Music is not lacking in title taking activities, coronation and in the courts of kings, Emirs and Obas. Among the Igbos, music such as *Ufie* and *Igbaeze* are the official music meant for title taking, coronation and *ofala* festivals. They are music of honour to only the initiates and are performed on specific occasions. It was also observed by Johnson in Okoye (2006:56) among the Yoruba kings that, “Drummers have to attend the palace everyday within certain hours. . . . He pronounces the presence of any visitor in the palace, the king may be, he can tell by the sound of the drum who has entered the courtyard”. On the same note, Ibekwe (2009:59a) emphasizes that, “for Yoruba and Hausa kings, Obas, Emire, Sarduanas and Alhajis... drum music was their best companion”.

The role of music as culture indicator is so enormous. Music provides the best avenue for identifying an ethnic group; this is because, whatever that constitutes the culture of an ethnic group is exposed in their music. For instance, the use of language, the text of any traditional folk music is normally presented in a local language. Most of the time, the songs are spiced with the proverbs and idioms of the culture owners. People identify Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, Zulu people through their accents and use of mother wits. All these are revealed through the way they sing. In addition some costumes, make-ups and some specific body designs are so peculiar to some cultures. Dancers are in the best position to expose these features while dancing. Even the style of dancing has serious cultural bearing. People in the tropics dance more vigorously than those in the swampy and riverside areas, who make shuffling movements as they dance. So from the style of dancers one can locate the identity of a dancing group.

Music provides its practitioners with means of livelihood. We have in our societies many itinerant musicians, dancers and instrumentalists. These people entertain people at different occasions and get remunerations. Some folk singers are at times commissioned by rich and noble people to sing for them. In some cases they sing jingles for politicians and political parties and get good rewards. Music provides markets for the sale of musical instruments and costumes, and also opens door for intercultural connectivity. In fact, the role of music can never be exhausted, it is all embracing. However, the integrity of our traditional music lies so much in its invaluable attributes which people harness in their daily living.

### **Ways to Revive our Traditional Music**

Having discussed extensively the important roles played by our traditional music in the daily life of man, it becomes pertinent that this art be sustained no matter the level of intimidation or misconception. If we cast our mind in retrospect, we discover that our traditional music is fast disappearing if not hastening into total extinction. We should neither fold our hands nor close our eyes and wait for the ugly consequences to happen. The following avenue should be explored and reinforced if our traditional music were to be salvaged.

Firstly, Education Policy should be reviewed to favour the teaching and learning of music (both traditional and western) in the school curriculum. It is true that National Policy on Education (1981:10) in Nigeria under pre-primary education, section 2, no 10, item e, gears towards “inculcating in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration

of native and the local environment, playing with toys, artistic and musical activities”, yet the whole system needs to be over hauled to give music learning adequate attention.

Secondly, there should be a reorientation exercise, for the heads of schools at lower levels, (that is primary and secondary schools heads) to allow music teachers posted to their schools to teach their subjects (music) instead of compelling them to teach other subjects outside their area of specialization. The concerned teachers on their own part should try as much as possible to resist any type of pressure mounted on them to relinquish their area of specialization for something else.

Music teachers should resist any attempt to allot last periods in the school time table to music, when pupils/students must have become tired. They should insist on a conducive time and environment for learning to take place. Commenting on the poor condition of teaching and learning music in primary and post primary institutions, Ibekwe, (2009:60b) observes,

There is no conducive environment for such training to take place. No teachers and no facilities to stimulate the learner’s creative abilities. The lesson period is more or less a mock type, as it is normally fixed towards dismissal when the learners are almost exhausted.

All these make teaching and learning of music in school unproductive. Teachers should try as much as possible to make their lessons interesting through the use of improvisation or by creating real life situation whereby pupils/students are exposed to practical experiences. He/she may arrange a visit to any local dance group or invite a minstrel or any outstanding instrument player into the class. After which, there should be an interactive forum between the pupils/students and the guest.

Ethnomusicologists on their own part should organize seminars, conferences; write papers and monographs, presenting the positive image of our traditional music with its realizable prospects. Parents should be given re-orientation to disengage or detach their minds from the already patterned misconception about traditional music and music in general.

Again, Ethnomusicologists should from time to time engage on research/field work programme to update facts and make documentations for posterity. They should utilize or rather familiarize themselves in this era of technological advancement with computer and the use of music software. These will enable them, record, store, transcribe and analyse music after collation.

They should help create awareness by advising parents on the need to allow their children participate in their village musical activities more especially during ceremonies and festivals as it will help to broaden their knowledge and mental development Idamoyibo (2003:86) confirms that,

Knowledge gained through music stays in memory for so long; often till life terminates. Not only does it stay through a man’s longevity, nor functions as an aid to memory-recall, but that it provides every needed information in its organization in sequential order when recalled.

## Conclusion

Traditional music is an invaluable treasure that needs not to be toyed with. No amount of western intimidation or black mailing is weighty enough to mortgage the utilitarian and functional import of this highly cherished tradition. Our foreign trained academics should not imbibe western tradition at the detriment of indigenous practices. If our children are given solid cultural foundation the integrity of our traditional music will be ensured also our society will remain a viable one.

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