

**THE AFRICAN MUSICIAN AS A SOCIAL REFORMER: A PERISCOPIC
ASSESSMENT OF ÒRÌSÀ OKO FESTIVAL MUSIC OF ÓKÈMÈSÌ-ÈKÌTÌ.
SOUTH WEST NIGERIA**

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Abstract

This paper is a descriptive account of the reformative function of music in Africa. The article is based on data collected during the performance of Òrìsà Oko festival in Òkèmèsì Èkìtì, Èkìtì State, Nigeria. The paper explains the musical practices employed by the Yorùbá people of South West Nigeria in curtailing social vices and delinquencies that constitute social nuisances. It equally attempts to extend discussions on functions of music in Africa to that of maintaining social cohesion and upholding values. Through descriptive analysis of the song-text, musical practices and other essential musical contents, the paper gives insight into those roles of traditional Yorùbá music that are intended to effect behavioral change. Exploring Ethnomusicological approach, the paper relies on Ethnographic methods to extrapolate the primary data from the selected ensemble. The study concludes that Òrìsà Oko festival music otherwise called Gbègbèkúgbè, holds much promise in the regulation of societal immoralities and crimes and such should be advanced in principles and practice. It suggests that music like Gbègbèkúgbè music, should have a place in today's society that is fraught with ill behaviors.

Keywords: African Music, Ethnomusicology, Delinquencies, Ethnographic, Gbègbèkúgbè

Introduction

Discussions centered on music in cultures have not been emphatic on the theoretical content but on the functionality. One of the earliest approaches to understanding the music of Africans was predicated largely on studying its functions and uses in the cycle of life. In the process of having a grasp of African music, early researchers dissected the music from the perspective of functions and application This is an approach propagated by scholars like Merriam, Blacking, Jones and Nketia. In the views of Blacking (1967:17), "music was examined "essentially as a social activity," and musical structures were explored for their actual and symbolic representation of social hierarchies and relationships in

society". Stone, (2000) says that 'Music in Africa maintains close link to the rest of social and political life (7)

While most discussions of other cultures' music are focused on such elements as aesthetics and theory, those of African music have always centered on functions and usages. Writing on African music, Baines (2016) quoting Ruud E says, Music is a culturally derived phenomenon; it is a way of organizing vibrations, it is coded sound. While vibrations may be universally felt, understanding music implies knowing the codes or manner of representation prevalent in the culture, which also means knowing the culture. (91) Nketia (1966:20) goes so far as to say that the practice of traditional music is not an embellishment of life, but a necessary and indispensable part thereof.

Ọmọjọlà (1999:41) contributes that an understanding of the conception of music among the communities in Africa would have to derive from a combination of factors such as the words used by the people to describe music, the contexts of musical performances, the organized procedures associated with music, the nature of musical expression itself and the meaning intended in a musical performance. In Merriam's (1964: 15) opinion, Music is a human behavior. He goes further to state that "The functions and uses of music are as important as those of any other aspect of culture for understanding the workings of society. Music is interrelated with the rest of culture; it can and does shape, strengthen, and channel social, political, economic, linguistic, religious, and other kinds of behavior. Song texts reveal many things about a society, and music is extremely useful as a means of analysis of structural principles".

In further buttress of his views, Merriam (1964: 220) quoting McAllester states that:

With us a principal function of music seems to be as an aid in inducing attitude. We have songs to evoke moods of tranquility, nostalgia, sentiment, group rapport, religious feeling, party solidarity, and patriotism, to name a few. Thus we sing to put babies to sleep, to make work seem lighter, to make people buy certain kinds of breakfast foods, or to ridicule our enemies.

According to Blacking (ibid) musical structures were explored for their actual and symbolic representation of social hierarchies and relationships in society. Blacking's opinion is supported by Weman (1960) when he states that 'Africa's music, is the mirror of the soul, "an essential part of the African's inmost being; it has the power to liberate, and it is in the music and the dance that the African can best be himself" (20).

African music in the cadre of the topic here have been found to be most effective. People abhor repugnant behavior for the fears of consequences. As Huge (1970:3) puts it:

One can well imagine the forcefulness of the reprimand conveyed to a wrongdoer when he finds his misdeeds sung about by thirty to forty strapping young men before all the people of the village, or the blow to the pride of an overweening petty official who has to grin and bear it while the young men jeer to music at his pretentiousness. What better sanction could be brought to bear upon those who outrage the ethics of the community than to know that the poets will have you pilloried in their next composition? No law of libel would protect you from the condemnation conveyed by those concerted voices of the whole village set to full orchestra and danced in public for all to revel in.

This discourse which is centered on the correctional and reformatory functions of music in Africa has come under different headlines in many academic fora. Coming under the title 'social control functions of music, Udok E & Peter A, (2010: 355) writes:

Social Control Songs for social control are full of gossip, ridicule and scandal. The song texts are conceptualized for the sole purposed regulating social conduct in the society. In Africa, it is possible to convey messages which could not be discussed or communicated in ordinary speech in music. Song texts (lyrics) in *Iban Isong* music are sometimes connected with the situation or incidence that occurs in the society. Sometimes, the kind of text used plays a remarkable role in the authenticity and efficacy of the song. It is not uncommon for the *Iban Isong* musical performers to extemporize and ridicule any deviant behavior during *Iban Isong* musical performance. An instance is the woman (Adiaha Akpan udo) known to have been fallen in love with somebody' husband and was ridiculed in songs instantly...

Merriam (1964: 197) reinforces the submission of Udok and Peter by saying:

This song group is concerned with direct social control, that is, songs are sometimes used, through admonition, ridicule, and in some cases even more direct action, to effect actual change in the behavior of erring members of society. Such songs may be directed toward a wide variety of social ills, among them sex offenses, such as the song in Dahomey heard by Herskovits and "sung against a young woman who had been careless with her favors and had in addition been guilty of theft.

Adjia J. (2019) on his own calls it music to admonish and says it is an important aspect of Nigerian music used in admonishing the people of the community; be it the elite or the commoner...music plays important roles where there is moral breakdown or the appearance of it in the society (323). It is in the process of this social control that music has found a place in the Yorùbá Society and that is what forms the focus of this essay.

The Yorùbá people, predominantly located in South Western states of Nigeria, frown at anti- social behaviors in all forms. Integrity, good conduct and hard work remain the hallmark of the Yorùbá people. The Yorùbá have a saying, *Ìwàlẹ̀wà Ọmọ ènìyàn* translated: Good character is the hallmark of humanity. Yorùbá people's worldview of good conduct is predicated on the philosophy of Ọmọ̀lúàbí. Ọmọ̀lúàbí as a cultural philosophy encapsulates hard work, integrity, diligence and honesty. Elaborating on the Ọmọ̀lúàbí cultural philosophy, Ọlúnládé (2017) writes that the concept of Ọmọ̀lúàbí is the bedrock of ethics in the Yorùbá cultural society. Conformity to these culturally approved standards earns a Yorùbá person the prestigious and noble name Ọmọ̀lúàbí. (806)

The Yorùbá society is strictly guided by rules and laws. Crimes and criminalities are frowned at in Yorùbá land. Stealing, thuggery, unfaithfulness, disloyalty, betrayal, immorality, treachery and treason are categorized as misdemeanors and social vices punishable by established measures. Reprimand could be in form of jailed term for the offender, derision, excommunication, flogging, banishment and others. In the process of executing these punishments, oral literature like poetry, chants, songs, recitatives and spoken verses are constantly employed.

Explaining the concept of law and justice in Yorùbá land Bámgbósé (2017: 839) says:

Sanctions is recognized in the traditional Yorùbá culture. Throughout history, persons who violate societal norms and values were subjected to discipline, sanctions, and punishment... it is machinery for facilitating collective conscience of the development of legal norms and disrupting the social equilibrium.

In specifics, Bámgbósé (2017: 840) identifies singing as a form of punishment adopted by the Yorùbá people in enforcing, laws, instilling discipline and control in the society. "Ridicule, and humiliation are sanctions aimed at bringing a member to sobriety by singing satirical songs directed at the offender or the family".

This practice is not peculiar to the Yorùbá people but general to Africa as a whole. Hugh Traccy (1954:237), while speaking of the African Chopi says: "You can say publicly in songs what you cannot say privately to a man's face, and so this is one of the ways African society takes to maintain a spiritually healthy community".

In her own writings Ofusun (2012: 111) documents that:

The Efutu of Winneba in Ghana incidentally sings Opanyingyengyan (the hopeless elder) a topical song that satirizes the rapist. These songs are sung round the town during festival periods to remind those perpetrators of evil doings to have a change of life for a better life. Lullabies are also used to cast insinuations to embarrass certain people for varied reasons. For example, fathers who shed their responsibilities always face with such lullabies from their wives and the wives also using same songs to cast insinuations at each other.

Ofusun (ibid) goes further with the example of Urhobo people of the Southern part of Nigeria. According to him:

the Urhobo women will gather themselves and sing through the streets of the town to criticize evil doers and sadists who take delight in inflicting cruelty on others and the society in general. They in the end of the march past sing to the house of their target, strip themselves naked so as to register their anger in a way of criticizing such people's activities.

This study therefore undertakes a musicological analysis of the music traditions of the Yoruba people of South Western Nigeria using Òkèmèsí Èkìtì as a micro-representation. The study is done with the view to bringing socio functions of music in Africa forth for further academic discourse and preserve them against endangerment. The study adopts a musicological perspective, enriched by oral and documentary data, to explore how the selected festival music is conceived and delivered for the purpose of social control in the aforementioned town.

Though the primary data for this study is taken from Òkèmèsí Èkìtì, which is a town in the Eastern part of the Yorùbá State in Nigeria, the study is in pursuit of a general discussion of African music and Yorùbá music in particular. The reason for choosing Òkèmèsí Èkìtì, is to narrow the scope of the work to a small enclave of Yorùbá land which in the researcher's opinion is adequate in the representation of a whole. The ambition here is to use this small town to discuss more general – international, conceptual and generative – aspects of functionality of African music. Òkèmèsí Èkìtì, though a less cosmopolitan Yorùbá town shares several attributes with the Òyó-Yorùbá. The Òyó-Yorùbá are arguably considered as the

mainstream Yorùbá people (Akínyemí 2001). The data for this research was collated using oral interviews and observation methods.

The aim of this study is to prolong discussions on this particular function of Africa music which seems to be of much relevance to the present day realities but are dwindling in practice. The paper intends to analyze the song text used in the discharge of this particular function of African music as it relates to the expected outcome of changed behavior. The paper will scrutinize the musical content of the ensemble involved to determining the organization and socio-political relevance to the topic of discourse.

The study hinges on two theories. The safety valves functions theory by Devereux (1961) and the Aesthetics Functionalism Theory. In his book, 'Arts and Mythology' co-published with LaBarre W, Devereux states that all arts exist because they meet a social need not gratified by other cultural activities. This is what he calls the safety valve function which he situates in the theory of psychologist, Sigmund Freud and applies to all the arts.

According to him:

In addition to viewing art as a harmless safety valve, society and the artist alike consider the artistic utterance as unreputable in regard to form, but reputable as to content...In brief, art can function as a social safety valve precisely because, like wit, it is a compromise and is, moreover reputable as to intent and content. It permits the artist to say – and the consumer to hear (or to see) – the forbidden, provided only that: (1) The utterance is formulated in a manner which a given society chooses to call "art," (2) The actual content of the utterance is officially defined as subordinate to its form, and (3) The utterance is understood to be reputable. . . . (368-369).

This theory of Safety valve function is supported in this paper with the aesthetics functionalism theory. The aesthetics functionalism theory states that the meaning on an art work is found within the art work itself. The meaning of music here being discussed is rooted in the role music plays in the life of those who make it. The functionalists attribute the meaning and value of a work of art to its relationship with the activities of the society. As a work of art, the value of the Yorùbá people is judged by the functions that music performs in the Yorùbá society

Findings

Like the other cultures in Africa, the Yorùbá people have a belief system that sees music as essential in the promotion of community wellbeing. The Yorùbá employ music to teach morals, inculcate discipline into the children, and propagate healthy habits amongst the populace etc. An example is this song used to teach good conduct;

Ki ni n f'ole se

Ki ni o fo le se la ye ti mo wa ki ni n fo le se la ye ti mo wa

3
la ye ti mo a ka ka kin ja le ka ka kin ja le ma ku ku de ru ki ni n fo le se la ye ti mo wa

Fig 1: A staff notation of the song 'Kíni n' f'olè se by the researcher, 2021

Song Text

Kíni n'f'olè se

Láyé tí mo wá.

Láyé tí mo wá.

Kàkàkí n jalè

Ma kúkú d'èrú

Translation

What shall I do with stealing

In this life that I have come

In this life that I have come

For me to steal

I rather opt to being a slave

This song which is usually taught from the cradle says much about the Yorùbá people's perception of stealing as a social misbehavior. To show their utter intolerance to stealing, the Yorùbá people would rather be enslaved, than steal and lose their honour. It is not uncommon to see women, men and children besiege an offender's house in Yorùbá land to sing in derision of his act. In most cases, when an offender is caught, he or she is excommunicated from the community. In such case, a banished offender is sung out of the town by women and children. Songs in this realm can be abusive, combative, derogatory and immoral, depending on the nature and circumstances of the offence(s).

An example of Yorùbá common song sung when a thief is apprehended is;

O ju ole re

The image shows a musical score for the song 'O ju ole re'. It consists of two staves. The top staff is in 2/4 time and features a call-and-response structure. The 'Call' part is a triplet of notes: a quarter note G4, an eighth note A4, and an eighth note B4. The 'Response' part consists of a quarter note C5, a quarter rest, and a quarter note D5. This sequence is repeated three times. The bottom staff is also in 2/4 time and provides a rhythmic accompaniment. It starts with a whole rest, followed by a sequence of notes: a quarter note G4, an eighth note A4, an eighth note B4, a quarter rest, a quarter note C5, an eighth note D5, and an eighth note E5. This sequence is repeated three times.

Fig 2: A staff notation of the song 'Ojúolèrè' by the researcher, 2021

Song Text:

Translation in English

Call: Ojúolèré

Behold a thief

Response: O lè

A thief

The form of the song is responsorial and it has no restrictions. It can be sung by both women and men, old and young. The call and response can be between boys and girls, women and men or whoever is present at the scene. The context of performance is usually at the point when the culprit, in this case, the thief, is apprehended. They sing along the streets while escorting the culprit out of town or parading the thief where the gravity of the offence is mild and does not warrant excommunication. The purpose here is to subject the thief to disgrace and opprobrium.

Vidal (2012) states in support of this position that:

Just as kings, individuals, town, corporate groups, social institutions and events are praised and romantically glorified, so also are they derided, satirized and condemned at festivals if the prevailing social conditions at the events of the festivals demand such. On such occasions, no one is spared from the pangs of bitterness and derision, for the festival provides members of the society with an avenue to undertake uninhibited self-expression through music. (284)

Òkèmèsí Èkìtì is an agrarian town whose people are predominantly farmers. The people farm not for sustenance but commercial levels thereby making agro products the mainstay of the economy of the over 100,000 inhabitants. Like their

other Yorùbá counterparts, Òkèmèsí Èkìtì people are very rich in cultural practices. They share same Yorùbá belief in Olódùmarè as the Supreme Being to whom the other deities in the pantheon are subordinate. Genealogically, the people are traditional religion worshipers and believe in diffused monotheism—a belief in a Supreme God that is approached through several gods as intermediaries. (Adédèjì 2008: 65). The people of Òkèmèsí Èkìtì worship deities like Ògún, Sàngò, Ọya, Ọbàtálá and many others. They also have various cultural festivals which are either spirit or social inclined. Some of these traditional festivals are, Egúngún, Orò, Erinlè, Ọsẹ, Pàràkà, Ọrìsà Oko (which forms the basis of this paper). However, like their other Yorùbá counterparts, the advent of European missionaries and adventurers in Yorùbá and have shaped the beliefs and practices of these people. The town is now dominated by Christians and Muslims while traditional practices have taken the background –a development which has affected, regressively though, their traditional practices

Ọrìsà Oko festival, literally implies farm deity. The festival is intended to celebrate new harvest season, when the people come around to appreciate the gods for good harvest or appease the gods in case of a bad experience in the course of the years. However, the important place of yam as a principal farm produce by the Yorùbá people has taken prominence. Therefore, Ọrìsà Oko festival is stereotyped to the celebration of new yam festival.

This festival is an annual festival that is celebrated between the months of June and July when it is presumed farmers are done with the year's harvest. This is a period the farmers make a return from their various farm settlements to the urban centres where they live. Since it is pre-planting season, when weather is favorable, they spend the time in recreation, sporting, festivities and socialization. It is also a time to worship their deities, venerate ancestors and propitiate the favours of other terrestrial powers. Therefore, this period is a time for musical activities to thrive. Meanwhile it is also a time to give account of whatever transpired in the course of the season in their farm settlements, narrate their experiences and document their various encounters and expeditions.

These are done in the form of storytelling, dance drama, poetry and other forms of oral literature. It is the belief of the people that Ọrìsà Oko is a god that has been assisting the town to have bountiful harvests annually, regardless the drought and, or any unfavorable conditions. According the Chief Àjàyí Fákóredé who served as an informant to the researcher, in an oral interview with the researcher, the secrets behind this remain sacred and mysterious. 'As long as the people keep

to the dos and don'ts of *Ọ̀rìsà Oko*, the harvest expectations are naturally met' (Oral Interview, 2020).

The compères of the festival are *Ọ̀ba Ojóko'*, *Ọ̀ba Ságunrín* and *Yéyè Làsé*. Through divination and other oracular consultations, a date for the commemoration of the festival is fixed. The first musical activity signaling the celebration is the beating of the *Ọ̀rìsà* gong at dawn to signify the commencement. There are three (3) drums for the festival, the *Ugbìn*, *Jàànpèrè* and *Rebeje*. Others musical instrument are gongs which serve as the time liner.

In the course of the farming years, the *Olọ̀rìsà* cult keep records of transgressions, criminalities, misdemeanors and social vices committed by the people in the community. They do this discretely with the aid of specialized spies and undercover agents. These spies take record of transgressions in the community regardless of the social or economic status of the offender. In the night of the festival finale, *Ọ̀rìsà* drums are rolled out to abuse/deride the identified culprits. They, often times move to the house of the criminal to sing and ridicule him or her. The *Ọ̀lọ̀rìsà* never spare any criminal in the town, no matter his or her social status. While the ensemble serves as the mirror of the community, the *Olọ̀rìsà* enjoy the protection of the entire society. They have the license to execute their musical arts without interference from anybody.

According to Chief *Ajayi-Fákóredé*, the musical experience in *Ọ̀rìsà Oko* festival was primarily designed to expose evil doers in the community. In recent time, he said, the *Igeriòrìsà* (the cult as being referred to) has added some socially relevant issues to the celebrations in compliance with the directives of the gods. Now, he said, critical issues of interest to the community take prominence in their rendition. He cited the last celebration as an example when lack of state sponsored infrastructure in the town was emphasized and re-echoed continuously by the performers throughout the night. This, according to him was done this to hearing of the nobles, particularly the politicians present at the night parade.

Ọ̀rìsà Oko festival music is characterized by lots of innuendoes, metaphors, proverbs, anecdotes, poetry, all of which are expressed through songs, dance and drama. Apart from instrumentation and singing, the festival involves speech songs. The music which is generally called *Gbegberekúgbe* derives the name from the drum text. The rhythm line is generated from two high pitched drums. One of the drums takes the low tone while the other interjects with the high note forming an interlocking rhythmic pattern which when verbalized gives the *Gbegberekúgbe*.

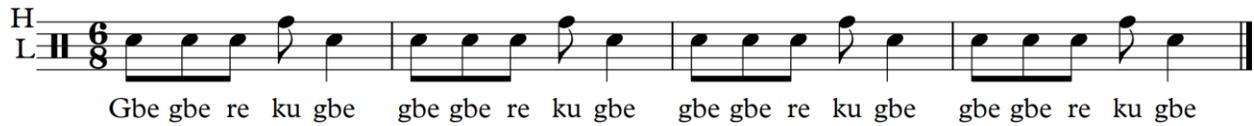


Fig 3: A staff notation of the rhythm line of Gbegberekúgbe Source;the Researcher, 2021

The actual performance starts with a parade around the town shortly after the preliminary rituals are completed. This heralds the nightlong activities which keep every resident of the community awake since they are apprehensive of the trend the performance may take. It is reported that some offenders who fear their cases might be visited are known to leave the town to avoid the embarrassments.

There are two phases to the performance with the initial one commencing with friendly rendition of songs to appreciate the king, chiefs and eminent personalities who are adjudged to have performed well in the town in the year under review. In this section, the singers make jest of these same people in a way, extolling their virtues. The king who is the chief custodian of the people's traditions and the chief administrator of the town is also adulated in this process. The occasion is also used to pass salient messages to the aristocrats. If the Igeriòrisà people have any complaints about the king's conduct and attitude, they use the opportunity to tell him. There were cases in the past where the king was told in speech song to moderate his habit of English speaking while addressing his subjects. They considered it not idealistic for a king to conduct his sittings in a language not comprehensible by the people. They had once told a king to stop frolicking with the young ladies and allow young men access to the maidens. They had also told a king to be mindful of his conduct on the throne because he was considered temperamental. All these were done to correct the king and endear him more to his subjects.

After all the preliminaries, the performers proceed to the houses of the identified offenders slated for ridicule. The form of their musical performance in this case oscillates from songs to speech-songs, recitatives and dance-drama. An example of a song used to deride a thief is scored in the staff below.



Fig 4: A staff notation of the song 'Ó t'oko 'lè dé' Source: The Researcher, 2021

Song Text:

Translation

Ó t'oko 'lè dé

Here he comes from stealing expeditions

Bàm bà bam ba

Behold his big foot prints

Esèlákùrò

In the swamp

Cases focused in this year's (2021) festival include that of an adulterer who was caught sleeping with the wife of his apprentice. His partner in crime, the woman, was also his relative. This is a heinous abomination in Okemesi Ekiti because it is not just a case of adultery but incest and breach of trust, as the woman in question, his co-culprit is the wife of somebody who works under him. Having realized he might be a focus of the yearly festival, the offender (male) left the town shortly before the celebration. His absence did not deter the Igerìòrìsà from discharging their duties. They proceeded to his family house and speech-sang as follows:

Speech-Song

Translation

Ọmọ Arẹnà òkè

Son of upland Chief Arẹnà

Ọ mí bá t'odò sùn

That sleeps with the daughter of lowland Chief Arẹnà

Ọmọ Arẹnà kọ mí

The son of upland Arẹnà

F'okó sú du àbùrò rẹ.

That sleeps with his sister

Sòkí sòkí olókóo dóni dóni

One with a free for all penis.

Another case in focus during this year's celebration was the case of a pedophile.

The man was caught sleeping with his eleven-year-old stepdaughter whom he was said to have deflowered.

Speech –Song

Òbò ìyàwó rèè dèè dùn mọ o

Ọmọ dídó dèè ló tún kùn

A dómo d’óyà

Éèlójútì

Ó ye ke á gbélúgbó

Pèlú ẹranko

Translation

He is dissatisfied with her wife’s vaginal

He has resorted to sleeping with the daughter

He who sleeps with wife and the daughter

A Shameless human being

Fit only for the forest

Cohabiting with animal

Conclusion

Discussions on the functions of music in Africa are inexhaustible. The foregoing has just tried to highlight those functions that are directed to achieving a changed behaviour in the cause of sustaining the society. The paper discusses that category of African music that performs a highly social and cathartic function in a society. The paper also emphasizes art, (music in this respect) as a sociological element whose purpose in African society is to perform social and corrective functions which are beyond the narrow scope of aesthetics. Music is used to regulate conduct, shape human attitude and rejuvenate the society. Laws, although largely unwritten in traditional Africa are enforced by the use of oral literature and music. This study is significant especially when related to the present circumstances in African continent. Application of Music, in today’s Africa, in the form as canvassed by this paper, can lead to a renaissance in the continent. A continent that is adjudged most corrupt with high rate of immoral practices, being ravaged by war, genocide, may gain a lot in these musical practices of the old.

In the recent past the continent of Africa has seen popular musicians of African descent used music for the emancipation of the continent. There were popular musicians like Fẹlá Aníkúlápó Kútì, Sunny Okonsun, Madu Dibango, Lucky Dube among others who fought oppression, rights abuse corruption with music. However, the trend had since nosedived. The Society of Africa stands to benefit from this tradition if all stakeholders can make their musical art as purposeful as possible in the direction of healing the society of increasing ills and vices.

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