

TRADITION AND TALENT IN ARTISTIC CREATIVITY: A STUDY OF SELECTED IGBO FOLK ARTISTS

Alex C. Asigbo, Ph.D

&

Tochukwu Okeke J.

Theatre Arts Department

Faculty of Arts

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Abstract

From the beginning of time, the idea of culture as a common identifying criterion for human homogeneity has always been there. Culture presupposes that certain basics of human existence are commonly shared and maintained by people in certain geographical locations. This in turn implies that people sharing these cultural icons or practices are free to re-order them in new ways to suit specific purposes. The statements above are apposite starting points for a discourse on the symbiotic relationship between Tradition and Talent and how each feeds upon and enriches the other. T.S. Eliot's seminal work on the interface between Tradition and Talent especially as it concerns English poetry will equally provide insights into the relationship between Tradition and Talent in artistic creation. As is obvious, even from the Bible, there is nothing new under the sun and what has been is what will be. This presupposes that most times, when we refer to people as being exceptionally creative, we are simply saying that such people have mastered the art of borrowing from the common pool and turning such borrowed item into something unique to themselves. This work will therefore examine the symbiosis between Tradition and Talent as well as how a focused union of the two engenders creativity. Our inferences will mainly be drawn from the works of select Igbo Folk artists.

Introduction

All art is collaboration; and there is little doubt that in the happy ages of literature, striking and beautiful phrases were ready to the story-teller's or the playwright's hand, as the rich cloaks and dresses of his time. It is probable that when the Elizabethan dramatist took his ink-horn and sat down to his work he used many phrases that he had just heard, as he sat at dinner, from his mother, or his children. John Millington Synge (Preface to *Playboy of the Western World*)

From the beginning of time, the idea of culture as a common identifying criterion for human homogeneity has always been there. Culture presupposes a uniformity of certain basics of human existence as well as commonly shared symbols and icons of communication by people in certain geographical locations. John Millington Synge's statements above will serve as an apposite starting point for a discourse on the symbiotic relationship between Tradition and Talent and how each feeds upon and enriches the other. T. S. Eliot's seminal work on the interface between Tradition and Talent especially as it concerns English poetry will equally provide insights into the relationship between Tradition and Talent in artistic creation.

According to Synge, all writers and artists are creative borrowers who deep their ink into their respective cultural wells for inspiration. In turn, the artist repackages such borrowed materials in ways that may be regarded as unique to the artist in question and represents to his immediate environment. On the same vein, T. S. Eliot is of the opinion that tradition should not be seen as the fossilized past but in the sense of something possessing a historical dimension;

something dynamic and something which lives and grows. In his words;

... the historical sense invokes a perception not only of the pastness of the past but also of its presence. The historical sense compels a writer to write not merely with his own generation in his bone but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and with it, the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. (1917, Npg).

Eliot is thus in a sense saying that nothing in the symbols or verbal combinations which a poet or artists uses, is personal to him because from all intents and purposes, the artist must have borrowed them from tradition. Attention should thus not be paid to the artist but to the work of art. The sublime artist is therefore that person that aids a deeper understanding of tradition while de-emphasizing self by seeing himself only as a medium and not a creator.

As is obvious, even from the Bible, there is nothing new under the sun and what has been is what will be. This presupposes that most times, when we refer to people as being exceptionally creative, we are simply saying that such people have mastered the art of borrowing from the common pool and turning such borrowed items into something unique to themselves. Since societies stabilized and formalized through evolving traditions, it is only fair to assume that tradition is the *raison d'être* of a people's existence hence even when we say that someone is talented, we are inadvertently measuring such a person's talents against some traditionally accepted standards.

This is why *The Holy Bible* maintains in the book of "Ecclesiastics" that "What will be done is what has been done, and there is nothing new under the sun". Indeed, this is why it is said that "literature neither copies nature nor holds a mirror up to it but rather, it echoes other works of literature". Indeed, "a work of art is not true imitation of the real world, yet it reflects life in a transparent and focused manner" (Bhalla parr. 1). In music therefore, as in all creative activities, the musician or artist does not create in a vacuum. Citing Idamoyibo, Eunice Ibekwe (198) observes that "creative individuals cannot create in a vacuum, for they necessarily require a social environment in which they find self-realization". It follows therefore, that every artist's work must have a cultural base and, as such, a tradition upon which he creates. Adegbite (950) notes that;

it is not always that the performer has to create something new. For every African has a heritage of individual musical items that are passed from generation to generation and to which new ones are added by each succeeding generation of musicians.

This presupposes that African, nay Igbo, folk artists borrow extensively from tradition. In fact, it can be said that they recreate the past. The past here meaning the rich folk traditions of the Igbo people. Agatha Onwuekwe (988) seems to agree with this view when she opines that "some traditional forms of music have remained connected to their original places and cultures..." To this, one of the popular Igbo folk artists of blessed memory, Nelly Uchendu, has been described as "a talented modernizer of traditional Igbo folk music" (Beadle parr. 1).

What this simply means is that Igbo folk artists use their individual talents to improve, recreate and transmit Igbo cultures and traditions. Thus, it has been observed that these folk musicians have the ability “to create new things and improve on old ones” and that it is this that makes them “relevant in the society and also ensures continuity” (Ibekwe 207). The implication of this statement is that creativity is not a linear endeavor but may be said to develop at a cyclical pace hence works of art, whether plastic, written or performing, grow by feeding upon each other. Indeed, when we refer to someone as a folk artist, we are in a manner of speaking saying that such a person has mastered the art of using communal idioms in communicating with the people through his works; that such a person draws his/her inspiration from the folk ways of the people and that a symbiosis exists between such an artist and his immediate environment.

It is because of this that Chukwuemeka Mbanugo (189) noted that these folk artists, which he refers to as minstrels seldom compose nor create original works of their own, as it were, rather “they simply sang, played and danced to songs composed by others; sometimes altering and adapting them for their particular purposes”.

This paper will attempt to interrogate the symbiotic relationship between individual talent and traditions in the works of select folk musicians like Gentlemen Mike Ejeagha, Emeka Morocco Maduka and Onyeka Onwenu.

TRADITION AND TALENT IN IGBO FOLK ARTISTS

Deepti Bhalla in his discourse on “Tradition and Individual Talent” (parr.2) states that “art emanates from the complex personality of the artist through his personal and social experiences”. This complex personality presupposes talent.

Talent, in its simplest definition, can be said to be the innate creative potential endowed on an individual by the supreme creator, God. Every individual therefore, has this natural endowment however, it is the degree to which each individual exercises his creative potentials that makes that person stand out and is known as addressed as an artist.

Artist here could range from fine and applied artists, theatre artists and musicians. Indeed, all performers and public entertainers come under the generic name, artists. Since our discourse is focused on performing musicians, artists here will refer to those in that category.

A performer (musician) is a product of a particular society and that society has a culture and traditions by which it is known. In fact, the traditions and culture of a society is the identity by which that society is known. Therefore, a folk artist, as the term folk connotes, is expected to produce works that have their origins from a particular environment. Thus it has been observed that “their creativity follows very strictly those established lines of tradition” (Adegbite 49).

The Igbos are known for transmitting their culture and tradition through oral literature and one of the formidable ways of doing this is through folk tales. These are fictional stories elders tell children at dusk either in the comfort of their homes or at village squares during moonlight plays at dusk. These stories carry a lot of moral lessons and are deeply rooted in the traditions of the people. The young therefore, learn from the adults through this medium. Thus, when Mike Ejeagha, a famed Igbo folk artist, began his art, it was well received because his music was a rendition of these folk tales with instrumentations.

Gentleman Mike Ejeagha, which is his stage name, has virtually turned every Igbo folk tale into music. This is a clear

case of superimposing one individual talent on an existing tradition of a people. As a performing artist, he has re-created an existing tradition and has created a unique genre of music out of a popular tradition of the Igbo people. This he was able to achieve because 'performance is a creative activity and the performer must therefore, have a god knowledge of the resources and procedures of his musical culture and skill to apply them, especially in situation which he is expected to extemporize' (Adegbite 50).

In his creativity therefore, Mike Ejeagha has made Igbo folk tales popular music and has named his style of music '*Akukuo n'Egwu*' which literally means 'story in songs'. The popular genre moonlight story, which form is usually responsorial antiphonal has found a modern form in Ejeagha's "*Akuko n'egwu*". As it is, not only is Ejeagha's brand danceable, it equally retains all the moral condiments that folktales are known for. Thus, from *The Chairman*, *Onye ori Utaba*, *Obiakor*, *Omekagu* and so on, one notices this strong interplay between tradition and individual talent and how they grow and feed upon each other. Our contention here is that, folk artists who naturally draw from the common pool are truly creative since they have succeeded in rendering in a unique way, that which is commonly held. This calls to mind, the works of the classical Greek playwrights who re-create from the people's common history or from the writings of Homer.

Emeka Morocco Maduka is another popular musician of the Igbo folk tradition. He began his musical career as a minstrel with local wooden rattles, maracas and 'udu' and was and is still known as '*Eze Egwu Ekpili*' meaning 'King of Ekpili Music' (ekpili is wooden rattles). This is because, traditionally, Igbo folk songs are accomplished with the '*ekpili*'. Emeka Morocco is another example of a creative interplay of

individual talent and tradition. Like Mike Ejeagha, he has little formal education and took to music as a result of what he termed "a knack and a gift from God (talent) for music" (Mbanugo 191). Morocco takes his themes from tradition. The stories that accompany his music are full of moral lessons. A typical example is the album "*Mgboye na Dominic*" which tells the story of an unfaithful wife and her husband.

In recent times, as a result of that innate talent and creativity, Morocco has expanded his music to become, not just '*egwu ekpili*' but highlife. This is in line with his attempt to meet up with modernization and current trends in music at least, as it concerns instrumentation. Mbanugo (196) reports that "in pursuit of modernism and movement with changing musical trends, Morocco now has an enlarged group of instrumentalists...one keyboardist, one guitar bassist, one rhythm guitarist, one player each on konga, igba, ekwe, ichaka and ogidi..."

With this expansion and his music gaining wide acceptability even beyond the shores of Igbo land, Morocco has become more of a traditional crusader on morals. For instance, his album, '*Jonjoloko*' (gallop) is a clear sermon on the vicissitudes of life. Emeka Morocco has therefore, used the elements of tradition to fully harness his creative talent proving that individual talent and tradition can work in synergy in creativity.

Another musician under study here is Onyeka Onwenu. This female has stood out among Igbo female musicians because of her rare blend of native airs into highlife. Onwenu is a singer but she has succeeded in imposing her individual talent on traditional folk tunes. In fact, most of her songs are not actually her original creations rather she has superimposed her creative ingenuity on popular traditional songs making

them dance hall music. For instance, the track 'Iyogogo' is ordinarily a popular song among teenagers usually sang during moonlight plays and other youthful activities, but with the recording of the song by Onwenu with the blend of Igbo and English Language, it became an instant hit. Again, her song 'You and I will live as one' is a popular traditional song that tells the story of true love between lovers, but after its recording it became so popular that it was a sound track for the home video "Conspiracy"

Conclusion

From the foregoing it is obvious that Igbo folk artists have been greatly influenced by tradition and they in turn have made tremendous impact on the society having recreated some existing stories and songs and turned them into popular music. Creativity, we maintain goes beyond source to form and content. Art and literature grow at a cyclical pace and feed upon each other in the process. This re-enforces Bamidele's contention that every adaptation is an original in its own individual and authentic right. Tradition and Talent are therefore, when all is said and done, symbiotic as each nourishes and enriches the other. For the Igbo, Artists (Talents) have always been looked upon to provide the much needed fillip upon which robust traditions are built even as artists in turn, borrow from the same tradition.

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