

# THE IMPACTS OF SLAVERY AND COLONIALISM ON AFRICAN TRADITIONAL MUSIC AND DANCE PERFORMANCES

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## **Abstract**

*The fact that slavery and colonialism are two inhuman policies that plagued the African people's culture with indelible and irreparable consequences is not a debatable issue. While reparations are being demanded by African nationalists from the Western European and United States of America, with focus on labour, man power and socio-technological developments, it is pertinent to highlight and reiterate some aspect of social-cultural damages that the obnoxious policies made on Africa. This paper, specifically, is a pointer to the evil effects of slavery and colonialism on African music and dance in Nigeria and in the diaspora. Thus, much more than financial and social-technological reparation, this paper suggests ways of social-cultural amelioration for the bastardised African music and dance culture caused by slavery and colonialism.*

## **Introduction**

Slavery, in a simple language, is an institution where people live subserviently in honour of a privileged man. Encarta Suite Dictionary defines slavery as “a state or condition of (a person) being held in involuntary and mandatory servitude as the property of somebody else”. In most cases people who cannot survive on their own are sold into slavery. Slave trade which is the medium through which slaves are sold and bought as property is nefarious.

Colonialism, on the other hand is the forceful use of knowledge and tools to subject people under the governance of an outside government. It is “a policy in which a country rules other nations and develops trade for its own benefits” according to Encarta Suite. Thus, colonialism can be seen as “civilized slavery” in disguise. Slavery and colonialism are two human policies that plagued the African continent for nearly 500 years and almost ruined her cultural heritage. At the abolition of slave trade, colonialism took over and continued slavery in a more intelligent and disguised form.

The impact that slavery and colonialism have on Africans living in Africa and those in the diaspora cannot be over emphasized. Apart from the depopulation of African communities as over 10million Africans were forcefully carried away, many African artifacts, culture, language, music and dance were taken away and destroyed. Of course, we wish to state that Africans were not the first to be taken forcefully into slavery and singing one's songs in slavery is not new. The Jews had been slaves in Egypt after the death of Joseph. Later, the Jews were forcefully carried into Babylon's slavery during the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah (read Exodus chapter 1 verses 1-14; 3:7 and 2kings chapters 24 and 25). Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had sung Zion's songs while in captivity as slaves in Babylon. Psalm 137:1 4 records thus:

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down,  
yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. We  
hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst  
thereof; For there they that carried us away  
captive required of us a **song**; and they that  
wasted us required of us mirth, saying, **Sing** us  
one of the **songs** of Zion. How shall we **sing** the

LORD'S **song** in a **strange land (slavery land)?** (King James Version of the Holy Bible, Psalm 137:1 4)

This paper views what music and dance were in African traditional society, what they are presently after the era of slavery and colonisation and also what they are in the diaspora.

### **African Concept of Music and Dance**

Kwabena Nketia, (1982) states thus:

The importance an African attached to music and dance does not lie only in the scope, it provides for the release of emotion stimulated by music. Both music and dance can be used as a social and artistic medium of communication. Thus it can convey thought or matter of personal or social importance through the choice of movement, postures and facial expressions.

He further affirms that:

Through the music and dance, individuals and social groups can show their reaction and attitudes and hostility and friendship held by others towards them. They offer respect to their superiors or appreciation to well-wishers and benefactors. They can react to the presence of rivals, affirm their status to servants and others or express their beliefs through the choice of appropriate music and dance vocabulary and symbolic gestures.

I believe that these statements of Nketia summarise what music and dance are to Africans, and in Africa. Music and Dance form an integral part of the people's culture, thus their

performances are best done and enjoyed within the context of the culture where such arts are practised otherwise many concept of the music and dance could be misinterpreted and misunderstood. The African's concept of music is not limited to entertainment. Hence the saying, "Art for art's sake" is not relevant to the African. This is because, every African music made has its human developmental significance according to Kofoworola and Ikibe (2013, p.17). In the same vein, Mereni (2014, pp.6, 18) comments that "African musics are concretizations of thoughts manifesting in musical sound action" ...which is the original "classical music taken to Western Europe and America from Egypt in Africa".

Similarly to the African, dance is not just a way of giving one's physical expression to music that is being played. Whatever movement African dancers make signify something meaningful and there is a good interrelationship between music, dance and drama in African societies. In fact Nketia (1982) commented that "although there is purely contemplative music which is not designed for dance or drama, the cultivation of music that is integrated with dance or music that stimulates affective motor response is much more prevalent in Africa".

African people dance with all parts of the body polymetric and polyrhythmic body movements. Nketia gives an example of some of these gestures that "when a dancer points the right hand or both hands skyward in an Akan dance, he is saying *I look to God*. This kind of gesture is also common to the Isoko people of Delta state of Nigeria.

Africans make use of music and dance at funerals to express sorrow or grief or to pay tribute to the dead. For instance, Saleh (1990) writing on Glu-kyu (death dance) of the Mada people of Nassarawa state noted that "Glu-kyu literally

means dance of death". This physical expression of the sorrowful effect of death can be viewed as pivoted on three intricately intertwined levels: the sociological level which satisfies the societal requirements for the event as a mechanism for social cohesion; the cosmological level which signifies the ritualistic practices of the people as an expression of their anxiety, philosophy; and the theatrical level which reveals the people's aesthetic and artistic value.

There are various musical and dance formations in Africa many of which are for specific ceremonies or initiation, Frantz Fanon [1961, p.64] writing about the Yoruba people, notes that "the Yorubas are said to be the best choreographers in Africa..." They have the *Ekú Iyawo* dance, *ibeji* dance, *Wosho'ku* dance etc. Fanon further draws a distinction between European and African dances that the major difference is the sense and meaning of the dance. "In all African arts, the meaning flows plainly from the sign used to express it: no gesture in the dance stands by itself, everyone is a symbol".

Dancing in Africa also takes cognisance of the costume used by the dancers just as the song texts, and musical instruments have important roles to play. For instance the costume portrays what the dance is about. Similarly, the beauty in aesthetics is shown in the dance. For instance, Sango dancers are always costumed in red attire portraying the warlike and volatile nature of Sango while Olokun dances are always in white, signifying purity. Likewise the dance styles also show the occasion for which they are performed. For instance, vigorous dances are not used at funerals, social dances for entertainment at wedding or marriage ceremonies are in smart movements with teachings on matrimonial themes e.g. the *atilogwu* dance among the Igbo people in Eastern Nigerian. The age of the dancers is also to be reckoned with. In

Yorubaland *Gbandikan* music is danced to by the youths since it is a very vigorous dance while *Woro*, *Ijiofaji*, is a soft dance for the elders. *Ego* is another typical music and dance for elders and chiefs who should not exert much energy before realising their steps and movements. Moreover there are different musical typologies and dance styles for different gods. For instance *Eguamala* dance in Aboh, Delta state is basically for the river goddess with its rituals. Sango worshippers in Yorubaland dance to *bata*-music; vigorously portraying the characteristic features of Sango while Osun worshippers dance softly showing her femininity.

### **Negative Impact of Colonialism on African Music and Dance**

The mere fact that colonialism is a kind of slavery is enough to support the negative consequences the nefarious policy has on the socio cultural setting of Africa. Many areas that colonialism affected in the culture of Nigeria are in the language, dress style, religion and the psychological inferiority complex many people have developed when anything on their tradition or culture is mentioned.

Fanon [1956] wrote “colonialism has often strengthened or established its domination by organising the petrification of the country distance”. This statement of Fanon shows how much the colonialist worked to take away the ability to think or feel or act in the defence of Africa cultural heritage. The colonialist did everything to disregard and relegate African culture to the background. Everything that was African was seen to be heathenish and should therefore be stopped because it was contrary to the Christian faith that was the official religion. Thus African musical instrument were never to be seen in church premises. Moonlight plays and dances

accompanied with African music were stopped because the colonialists were disturbed, in fact it was forbidden to dance to any African music or watch any African performance. Moreover many custodians of the dance genres, on accepting the colonial masters white collar jobs or becoming Christians felt they had climbed too high on the social ladder that they could no longer stoop low to practice their traditional music and dances not to talk of teaching other people how to play the musical instruments and dance patterns. The result is that most of the musical instruments and dances according to Solomon Ikibe (2011, p.124) got extinct. It becomes worse when some African music and dances need some rituals to be performed and participants initiated before they could be taught and learnt. In the case of the custodian changing his religion to Christianity or having a white collar job, the rituals would no longer be performed or taught to impact knowledge of the music and dance to the oncoming generation.

Furthermore, where some of these music and dances were allowed at all, they were taken out of cultural contexts, thereby losing their natural taste either by costume to fit into modern audience or adulteration of dance steps and inclusion of foreign musical instruments to impress the audience or with a feeling to out-do other groups at dancing contexts. Harper [1967] rightly noted that:

There are essential differences in the audience performer relationship in a traditional or ethnic and in modern theatrical context. If an ethnic dance is moved into a theatrical setting it is usually required to perform a different function and will necessarily change the demands of the new situation.

Peggy Harper had earlier observed that:

Some authentic costumes were regarded as too crude, in that they were made of animal hides or local woven cloth to appear at a centralized [colonialistic] public performance; the authentic dress is usually well designed to display the dance to advantage.

Unfortunately Harper particularly pointed out that:

the Dumas dancers from Bornu detracted from their performance by wearing heavy European gym-shoes which eliminated the subtle foot movements characteristic of that style of dance, and [possibly mistaken ideas from decency] the graceful hip movements which are of the essence of the dance were omitted so that they became rather a dreary progression formation movement reminiscent of the more tired work of the folk dance of Europe.

He finally surmised that “the performance lacked the grace of charm of the dance seen at its best in Bornu. The same dance was skilfully performed by the Dumas dancers of Kaduna who danced in a more original form”. This is a general problem observed in dancers who are invited to stage performance in cities outside their original location.

Peggy Harper pointed out what we lose when dance performance are taken out of their cultural contexts. The Dumas dancers at Bornu host their prize because of the colonial mentality psychological effect of colonialism that the original costume looked crude [to the colonialists] and therefore adopted modern European costumes which made it impossible for them to skilfully perfume the dance.

As colonialism condemned and tended to wipe out African traditional music and dances, European music and dances were being introduced by the colonial masters. Their stooges or wards who attended secondary schools, colleges and universities within and outside the country from the 1930s up to the 1970s were taught Western music and dances while the colonialists abhorred African traditional music and dances. School pupils were being taught how to dance tango, twist, waltz and other modern European dances using Western music. In fact one of the features that a student would show that he has been to the college was his ability to dace waltz or tango which the less-privileged who could not attend a college or university would not dance. With time when parties were organised by the so-called literate or Western educated people, only Western music was played with corresponding waltz or twist or tango dances. The best African music or dance could offer [if allowed] was for the watching entertainment of the audience who laughed and jeered at the dancers while they sipped their beer or champagne.

The climax of the adverse effect of colonialism on African music and dance was when the collegiate started organising 'Disco' parties under the auspices of their Student Unions or associations. Young boys and girls gather to play Western music, dance, drink, smoke, sexually abuse themselves in immorality which has now developed into lesbianism and gay-marriage. They have learnt how to dance all forms of modern Western dances up to the break-dance style in their schools but never had time to dance any African traditional dance patterns. In fact to play or request for an African traditional tune would lead to insult. No wonder, a musician, Bright Chimezie of Okoro Junior fame, sang that he attended a party with young boys and girls and when he

requested for an African music to be played for him, he was ridiculously called “OKORO” meaning “an uncivilized boy”. The African student was made to be proud of Western culture at the expense of his own cultural heritage which he disdained. How I pray that present Nigerian youth would start to appreciate what God has blessed them with and be proud of their cultural heritage. In fact music education and dance performances as advocated by Fela Sowande (1962) and as stated in the National Policy on Education [1981] should be made compulsory up to the junior secondary school level realistically.

### **Impact of Slavery on African Music and Dance Performances in the diaspora**

Through the obnoxious slave trade, many able-bodied men were scattered abroad and after the official end of the carting away of Africans, efforts made to resettle the freed slaves in their fatherland were not completely successful. Because of the failure of the settlement scheme and the desire of some freed slaves to remain in the land of their bondage, many Africans now settled abroad. These form of the bulk Africans in the diaspora. Many of them are settled in Brazil, Cuba, Jamaica, Haiti and other South American countries and the Caribbean Islands.

The Africans carried away into slavery did not totally forget their culture dancing, drumming, singing, folktales, religion etc. Although they lost their homes they did not lose their culture. In the midst of suffering, torture and hard labour imposed on them by their masters, the Africans still found time to recall and practise their cultural music and dances with which they were bred and nurtured. The practice of their singing, drumming and drama annoyed the slave masters so

much that they made everything possible for the slaves to forget their culture but not completely.

Moreover, the interference and mixing up of slaves from different cultural backgrounds, no doubt gave rise to cultural syncretism. John Jann (1961) wrote thus:

The peculiar development of African cultures in North America began with the loss of drums. The protestant, and often puritan, slave owners interfered much more radically with the personal life of their slaves than did their catholic colleagues in the West Indies or in South American. The slaves were allowed no human dignity and their cultural past was ignored; or else it was considered a humane task to educate them into being better human beings and this process was initiated by teaching them to be ashamed of their African heritage.

In support to the statement above, an anonymous French reporter quoted by Jann (1961, p.30) says "the slaves were strictly forbidden to practice their music and dance which in Suriname is called water-mama" and in our colonies *'mae d'Agua* (water mother)". If, while in our own soil, the colonial masters could make us to hate our own culture then they would do much more than that when outside our fatherland. All this prove Frantz Fanon right when he stated as quoted by Jann thus "it is a fact the whites consider themselves superior to the blacks" (Jann, 1961; p.234). However, Barrack Obama's two-term victory as president of the United States of America has proved that the whites are not after all, superior to the blacks.

Despite all their frustrations and attempts to stamp African culture out of the lives of the Africans, African art the

hallmark of African culture outwitted them. Howbeit, there are some syncretism because of long contact and interaction with different people who were brought from different background the Yorubas, Ibos, Benin, Hausa etc. A magazine quoted Cuban Ambassador to Nigeria to have said that there are no less than fifty thousand (50,000) *babalawos* (fetish priest/diviners) in Cuba alone! A lot of changes have occurred and new things infused, even into sacred religious music and dances. Pronunciations of names and words generally have changed due to long separation from the root of the people's language. For instance *Orisha* in Yoruba is pronounced *Oricha* by Cubans. The ceremony in honour of *Orisha* is called *guemilere* which is got from Yoruba word *ile-ere* which means "house of images" *ileocha* in Cuba is actually *Ile-orisha* in Yoruba i.e. "house of Orisha" while the priest is called *Babalac* i.e. *Babalawo* in Yoruba and Haitians call this *Papaloo*. Similarly, *Olorun* in Yoruba is *Bondieu* in Cuba; *Echu* in Cuba is actually *Eshu* in Yoruba language.

Various dances that are associated with deities in Yoruba land are still practised by the Africans in Diaspora Cuba, Brazil, Jamaica etc. It has been noted above that there are no less than 50,000 *babalawos* in Cuba alone. Many of these musics and dances have adulterated. For instance Sango, Ogun, Yemoja, Oshun and Obatala are various deities with special ritualistic music and dances by their worshippers. Jann (1962, p.68) confirms this when he said, "There are countless dances as many dances as Orishas (deities) each with its special songs and rhythms". He concluded that:

all these dancers are 'possessed' embodying their particular Orisha (deity) exactly as tradition prescribes. For the control of the feet

does not govern the movement of the feet; it is directed towards the correct embodiment in that movement of the spiritual reality.

Writing of the worshipers of the various gods in Cuba, Jann comments that "Oshun (priestess) used to dance naked, her body shining with honey". This practice of nudism does not happen in Yorubaland. Jann also wrote that 'occasionally Oshun meets with Sango and they perform a fervent dance of love in an unconcealed imitation of carnal lust. But Ortiz corrects this pornographic practice that "In Yoruba tradition, Oshun and Sango never meet. Therefore the Oshun and Sango naked-dance is impossibility in its traditional base while in the diaspora it is possible". Moreover, portraying Oshun priestess to dance naked with Sango priest is nothing but abuse of womanhood which the Africans adore. There are other dances like *Aguyu* dance, *inle* dance, *Oya* dance, *Bebelu* dance, *Aye* dance. In all these, some basic changes and adulteration have been noticed in the style formations, the music which accompany the dances, rituals which precede the performance of such dances are not performed, the costumes and the aesthetic value and nature of the dances have all been bastardized.

#### **Positive impact of Slavery on African Music and Dance**

The negative influence of slavery and colonialism on African music and dance should not becloud us of their positive influences, especially as it concerns music. African music has contributed to different genres of world *music*. Some of such developments are the emergence of different musical typologies that came up from the African slaves in the Caribbean islands and farm settlements. Jazz music, Negro spirituals, Reggae Music, Calypso, Rhumba dance, cha-cha-

cha, just to mention a few are some of such genres that have their origin from Africans who had been in slavery but needed to encourage and entertain themselves. Moreover, the African slaves also learnt how to play some of the western musical instruments such as the piano, drums, cornets, trumpets, trombones and other musical instruments that they got acquainted with. These genres of music have all been made popular and accepted even by the slave masters who had occasionally used them as objects of entertainment.

### **Positive Influence of Colonialism on African Music and Dance**

Just as there are negative impact of colonialism on African music and dance, so there are some positive influences. At the verge of colonialism, regimental bands were introduced with western musical instruments such as the accordion, piano, guitar, trumpets, trombones, clarinets and saxophones. Not long after then, Nigerians began to learn how to play the western musical instruments and became very good in them. For instance, the likes of Fattai Rolling Dollars, Zeal Onyia, I.K. Dairo, Victor Olaiya, Victor Uwaifor, Sunny Ade, Ebenezer Obey, Rex Jim Lawson, Osita Osadebey and many others are famous musicians who took advantage of the period to become trained as notable musicians. In the 1940s, Highlife music was introduced as a popular musical genre from the Ghana where it had flourished and now we can talk of Nigerian highlife music according Austin Emielu (2008; 2012). Many other popular traditional music genres developed from highlife music as these genres also use western musical instruments. These new genres are practised side by side other western musical genres; some of them are *juju* music, *Afro-beat*, *Afro-juju*, *fuji* music, *waka* etc.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The adverse effect of slavery and colonialism on African traditional music and dance in Nigeria and the diaspora have been encapsulated in this paper. It was established with various illustrations how the obnoxious slave trade and colonialism bastardized Nigerian revered culture hence there had been calls for reparations. Can there be adequate and commensurate reparation for the bastardized culture and dehumanized people many of whom were killed and decapitated for opposition? No. Some of our original traditional musical genres and dances have gone extinct while others have been bastardized, syncretised and adulterated. Worst still, Africans at home have abandoned their traditional dances for European dances in which they excel.

However, slavery and colonialism for which many of our kinsmen suffered and died turned out to be good testimonies in the aspect of music as different genres of music came out of the syncretic synergy of the African's culture with that of the western world. Blues, Ragtime, Jazz music, chachacha, soul, Rhumba dance, calypso, high-life music, reggae music and dance, Negro spirituals and gospel music have emerged and developed giving Africans in the diaspora and at home musical and dance identity. Exponents of these genres are mostly Africans, some of whom are Louis Armstrong, James Brown, Bessie Smith, Ella Fitzgerald, Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, Billie Holiday and Bobby McFerrin to mention a few of the famous black musicians with African influenced musical background.

The psychological feeling of anything that is African to be inferior and everything European to be the superior still controls the mind and emotions of people. The festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) for all blacks have not helped the



situation completely since the dances are moved out of original cultural contexts and in attempt to satisfying the audience or sponsors of such festivals their originality get lost in alteration, costumes, music, musical instrument, and body movement which in some cases, are wrongly interpreted by the spectators.

Among other recommendations, we hereby state unequivocally that the call for reparation should be rejuvenated. A renewed call for reparation is hereby made for free establishment of African cultural and music centres in all American universities and sponsorship of all blacks to be brought to their roots once yearly. The late MKO Abiola and Ali Mazuri had made several calls for reparation but all to no avail. After the death of Abiola, no one seems to be interested in the reparatory struggles again. The Bible also recorded the fact that when the children of Israel left Egypt after about 400 years of enslavement, adequate reparation was given them by the Egyptians. Similarly, kings Cyrus, Darius and Arterxexes of Babylon made adequate reparations in forms of finances for the Israelites as they had to go back to Jerusalem to rebuild the city. Exodus 12: 35 38 of the Basic Bible English version of the Holy Bible states thus:

And the children of Israel had done as Moses had said; and they got from the Egyptians ornaments of silver and of gold, and clothing: And the Lord had given the people grace in the eyes of the Egyptians so that they gave them whatever was requested. So they took away all their goods from the Egyptians.

Ezra chapters 5, 6, and 8 verses 24 28 give detailed records of the reparations that Cyrus, Darius and Arterxexes, kings of

Babylon, made for the Israelites as they left Babylon to rebuild Jerusalem. Therefore, demand for monetary reparations from the West is not new. Olokor (2014, p.12) reporting on a group from the United States of America “demands for apology from Britain for the evils of colonizing Nigeria”. The fact is that Nigeria and Nigerians need more than mere verbal apologies!

Moreover, a full implementation of the National Policy on Education should be made so that Music is compulsorily taught in all Basic Schools while the students are allowed to freely make their choices at the Senior Secondary level. While effort should be made to sustain and improve on the organisation of these cultural festivals and especially the carnivals organised in the diaspora, the sponsors and organisers should encourage originality and naturalism in the performances. Moreover cultural exchange programmes between African nations and those in the diaspora could help in sustaining and improving the original performance of the dances. Finally the government of African nations should encourage and sponsor researches into African traditional music and dances with a view to recording and presenting them for academic studies and posterity instead of the mere clamour for technological and financial reparation.

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