

AN EXAMINATION OF THE CHARACTERISTICS OF ESAN TRADITIONAL MUSIC OF EDO STATE, NIGERIA.

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria is made up of autochthonous groups with diverse musical cultures. In this essay, the researcher observes that over generalization associated with the characteristics of African music in general and Nigerian music in particular can no longer hold sway because each ethnic group has its peculiar musical attributes. In this connection, he gives an in depth examination of Esan music, of Nigeria by highlighting what he sees to be unique in the musical performances of this people.

INTRODUCTION

It is a common knowledge that traditional African music is that musical genre that was associated with the Africans in the pre-colonial era, which has survived all the forces of acculturation in the colonial era to date. Music in Africa has been talked of as being very functional because no event passed by in African societies without profuse music making.

African music has its own unique attributes or characteristics. Such attributes have been observed by Nketia (1974), Bebey (1975), Southern (1983) and Agordoh (1994). Given that these music scholars have dealt with some issues which relate to musical features of African music, why a re-examination? Music of the African continent is too varied to allow for straight generalizations. This is so because Africa is highly autochthonous and three times more than the size of America. They also speak over 700 different languages. In spite of urbanization, Christianity and their associated industrial developments, over half of the continent's communities still hold religiously their mores.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH LOCALE

Esan province is in Edo state which is one of the thirty-six states in present day Nigeria. It is situated in the south-southern part of the country. The state is perhaps christened Edo because Edo is a major ethnic group within it and Benin City is the state capital. To Okpoko et al (1993) while Benin serves as a territorial label e.g. Benin City, Benin Kingdom, Benin Empire or Benin Division, both Benin and Edo serve as linguistic and ethnic labels for the inhabitants of the Benin territory. It is used as a designation for a group historically related in language and dialects spoken within and around Benin. The

term Esan is applied to people and language spoken in a particular locale, which has five local government areas in Edo Central senatorial district of Edo state. It is bounded on the north by Owan - east and west, on the west by Orhionmwon Local Government Area, on the southeast by Ika, Oshimili and Aniocha Local Government Areas and on the East by the River Niger. Studies on Esan origin have relied extensively on oral traditions and intelligence reports. Today, the origin of Esan is a subject of scholarly investigation by cultural historians, cultural anthropologists, traditionalists and linguists. They all support the Benin connection of Esan.

However, the thrust of study is a critical examination of the musical characteristics of Esan songs which here after will simply be referred to as Esan nationality under the following broad headings stated and discussed below.

THE ORAL NATURE OF ESAN MUSIC

Kamien (1988:591) observes that “Non western music is most often transmitted orally from parent to child or from teacher to student. Compositions and performance techniques are learned by rote and imitation” Esan in Nigeria as a non-western race is within the described purview. While this view is partially correct, it must be said that between then and now aggressive scholarship in music has begun in this area and two tertiary institutions offering music now serve the people’s needs in the realm of music documentation. Beyond the observations above, the playing of musical instruments or the performance of music in traditional settings is often an exclusive reserve of a caste or clan. The performance of Ayele royal music at the court of the Onojie of Uromi, Edo State by unuwazi clan is an example of such. To ensure musical continuity in this culture, lineages and clans are charged with the responsibilities of recounting the monarchs’ and towns’ genealogy in songs, supply entertainment music during major festivals and sing praises of gods and ancestors during traditional religious rites. Parents teach their children the oral traditions of their people by rote.

MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

There appears to be an agreed consensus by scholars of music on four basic categories of musical instruments and they are: Chordophones, Aerophones, Membranophones and Idiophones. The instruments of Esan music cut across the four

classifications stated above with over dependence on the families of Membranophones and Idiophones.

A major characteristic worth mentioning of Esan music is the use of human body in the accompaniment of songs. This is achieved with the sounding of their bodies, such as chest drumming, cheek slapping, feet stamping in dance, hands clapping as well as the slapping of various parts of the body including thighs.

THE STATUS OF MUSIC IN ESAN NIGERIA

Traditional music in Esan is by no means an independent art; it is highly interwoven with drama, dance, poetry, history and oral literature with oral tradition also forming a part. Observing these phenomena, Kamien (1988) talks of Merriam as having reported that among the Basongye of Zaire, the funeral of an important person is announced by a professional musician who also clowns to cheer up the people at the funeral, allowing them to vent emotion; he observes further that.

African music is closely associated with dancing, both arts are basic to many ceremonies, rituals and celebrations. While moving, a dancer often sings or plays rattles or rather idiophones that are held or tied to the body (Kamien 1988:595).

The quotation above is supportive of the evidence available in Esan. A look at the musical genres in this culture area reveals that Udje – a processional funeral dance of the Esan are closely associated with music and drama. Ikoghe, which is the music performed for infidels in Esan is drama Knitted. During this cleansing exercise, women are seen with phallic symbols of male organs trying to violate the infidel. This is a kind of musical drama meant to admonish married women against flirtatious tendencies. Music in Esan is not a solo art but connects other art forms; hence music in Africa is often regarded as an eclectic art.

IMPROVISATION

Musically speaking, and as conceived in the west, improvisation means the creation of music at the same time as it is performed. This is one subject that has been grossly misinterpreted when discussing African music within which is Esan music. No drummer leaves his house unprepared only to extemporize before a large audience. Improvisation in Africa in general and Esan particular is of a different dimension sharing

this view; kamien (1988:591) asserts that “improvisation is basic to many non western musical cultures. Performers usually base their improvisations on traditional melodic phrases and rhythmic patterns. In some parts of the world, including India and the Middle East, improvisation is a highly disciplined art that requires years of training.” Supporting the view above Hart (1990) submits that Chernoff makes it clear that:

Africans do not improvise, at least not in the way we think of improvisation in the west. Most of the rhythms and songs are traditional allowing very little latitude for individual experimentation. The ideal, here as else where in African culture, is to fit one's own personal rhythms into the flow of the whole. You might call this rhythm sharing. Musically the rhythm of each drum in an ensemble is comparatively simple consisting of endless variation on duple and triple time (Hart, 1990:198).

He comments further that the combination of such rhythm gives the complexity of threes beating against fours. In Esan music, drums of different hues are used in their ensembles. Apart from drums, bells, wooden drums, non-musical instruments are often involved in the performance of music. The combination of these instruments creates a colourful blend of complex rhythms achieved through hemiola, polyrhythmic patterns that signal tension and repose in the music.

VOICES

Musical instruments have been generally christened as artificial sound producing materials they are thus referred because the human voice remains God's creation and a natural source of sound production. In Esan, singing remains a major and popular way of music making and a vast range of tone colours and vocal techniques are employed. Some of them are voice yodeling, singing with a trebling effect achieved by rapid reiteration of a note by means of a quick succession of backward and forward movements (quasi tremolo) at cadencies, singing with full and half nasal delivery, singing effect achieved by sliding into or out of a note – glissando, falsetto singing amongst men at cadencies with the male voice tending to be higher than the females in the ensemble, humming, whistling, singing with locked teeth or open throated. In some ensembles, men also indulge in singing that results sustained tonic in ensembles of mixed voices. This style is found in Asonogun, of Esan people.

Another phenomenon that is also associated with the musical attributes of Esan people is chanting or shouting out words to mark the climax of performances. This is done in every ensemble by the people, it is Sukpiri Sukpiri Alume.

COMPOSITIONAL TECHNIQUES

To talk of the compositional techniques employed by the Esan people in their songs is to talk of the musical condiments that give the Edoid flavours in their music. This can as well be considered as technical devices. (a) In the first case, Edo melodies are of short phrases with instrumental repetition and textual differences. The different textual renditions are occasioned by the arrival of an important guest whose praise may be spontaneously sung, the introduction of proverbs that fit certain actions of people being entertained or to show one's virtuosity. A musician's ability to create new melodies on the spot is highly respected. (b) Apart from being partly characterized by call and response, there are also overlaps of sound caused primarily by a situation where by the leader resumes singing before the chorus has been completed. The effect is such that a part will incessantly blur into the other. However, the use of overlaps in call and response singing is very common in the various ensembles in the area under review and this could be observed in the song below.

Ugba

The musical score for 'Ugba' consists of two systems of two staves each. The first system is labeled 'Voice 1' and 'Voice 2'. Voice 1 begins with the lyrics 'U gba khue ni' and Voice 2 begins with 'To lo mi na mi na to'. The second system continues the melody, with Voice 1 repeating 'U gba khue ni' and Voice 2 repeating 'To lo mi na mi na to'. The notation shows overlapping phrases between the two voices, illustrating the call and response technique.

Akin to the phenomenon above is the (c) Complimentary Duet – put simply, a duet is a musical composition written for and performed by two persons, i.e. voices or instruments. In Esan culture area, their kind of duet is stylistically for males singing the

lower part and females singing the higher one. The males do not sing the entire songs rather they at sing designated phrases and cadences. A critical examination of these duets reveals that their duets end in intervals of major 3rd, minor 3rd, 4ths and 6ths. (d) Recitatives: An exciting singing style among this people is the performance of songs through singing – speaking voice. This style is common during ritual and traditional worship ceremonies. Some times, the recitations are accompanied with just the bell.

THE MUSICAL TEXTURE OF ESAN SONGS

Simply put, texture in music refers to the internal pattern, structure or design of a particular song. To southern (1983) a piece of music is monophonic, homophonic, or polyphonic. There are overwhelming evidences that Nigerian songs are not only in homophones and monophones but also polyphonic – Akpabot (1986) is primarily of this view. A critical appreciation of Esan songs shows that while very many of their songs are rendered monophonically and homophonically, polyphony is less sparingly used. Although strict harmonic progression is not obeyed in their songs, sometimes cadential harmonies are occasionally observed as in the cases of the songs below.

Snging in two parts at the tail end of a song

O - mon - re - ki - na - do o - mon

o - mon

Snging in two parts at the tail end of the song

A men no bhi ye gbe o do a - men - amen do

do a - men - amen do

MUSIC AS A COMMUNICATION TOOL IN EDO

It is not novel that Africans have a system of communicating over a long distance using drums and other wind musical instruments. In Africa, evidences abound of the use of talking drums, slit drums, Elephant tusks and xylophones to carry messages over a considerable distance as accurately as the voice would do and even longer latitudes than the human voice can go. Talking about Nigeria even in the late 60s, Hindley (1982:22) posits, "The talking drum has been used during the Nigerian civil war to signal the arrival of relief supplies." The Esan language in Nigeria is very tonal. The presence of talking drums facilitates the accurate sending and receiving of messages. Apart from this tonal attributes, message sending via bells is also a common practice because specific rhythms and playing techniques done on the bell is able to convey specific messages such as (a) death of a kinsman (b) death of a toddler (c) An emergency meeting (d) birth of new baby (e) important announcement from the reigning monarch, etc. (Chernoff, 1979, Hindley 1982 and Erebo 1998).

One may wonder how the messages stated above can be carefully sent without being misconstrued. Misconstruction cannot occur because different castes, occupations and statuses go with their socially approved musical instruments. The death of an herbalist can never be announced by the monarch's ancestral instrument nor can the birth of an heir to a monarch be announced by a town crier's bell. To date, musical instruments are still in use in sending messages in this area.

MUSIC AS THERAPEUTIC AGENT

Whether music can heal is no longer in dispute, Mume (1973), Hindley (1982), Lateef (1987), McClellan (1988), Kamien (1988), Hart (1990) and Omibiyi (1998) provide instances of the use of music of in the healing of disordered patients in Africa. While Lateef talks of the therapeutic use of music in Northern Nigeria, Mume and Omibiyi provide evidence of such in the Southern part of Nigeria.

It is a common practice among different religious cults in Edo to use music for healing purposes. This people believe that physical sickness is caused by multiple etiological variables, which could be physical, mystical or supernatural. To them, disease origin may not always be physiological but also psychosomatic. And so just as the Holy Bible records how King Saul's mental problem was cured by David's harp, troubled

patients are during the course of special musical performances moved to confess what are of great botheration to them there-by gaining freedom from the weight of their problems. Some times they are specifically asked to confess their sins after which they are pronounced healed. Some of such societies in Edo are Olokun and Iyayi, to mention just a few.

Akin to the situation mentioned above is the attribute of profuse dance rhythm possession of Edo songs. No one hears the rhythms of this people without the urge to move the body in consonance with the dictates of the drums and other instruments in the ensemble. Among this people, it has been discovered that dancing to their hot but complicated rhythms makes one to be fully exercised and in doing this excess fats and its related general debilities are attenuated.

PERFORMANCE PRACTICE IN ESAN MUSIC

Within Africa, musical performances are occasioned by not one uniform factor hence the need to address that of Esan. It is today an academic debate whether music and dance can be inter- changeably used. Although this issue cannot be fully accommodated in this work having previously mentioned that Esan music possesses dance rhythms, it should be said that over 95% of their music are dance knitted. Music in Esan is solely not for entertainment purposes. They also have ritual music.

Chernoff (1979), talks of basic procedure of blood libation, wine libation and/or both in African musical performances. African music has been talked of as an impure art form in the sense that it has roots in other fields and sub-fields. Similarly, Esan songs are didactic, political, historical, and satirical, for ritual healing, for leading campaigns and propaganda, for entertainment, for praise, etc. These areas mentioned fall into the fields of Education, political science, historical studies and medicine. Above all the costume dancers wear in Esan ensembles are products of the creative energies of fine and applied artists. Thus, it is often said that Esan music is a collective art. In this community, there is also a distinctive intercourse between songs for healing, worship and parody. The song below aptly provides an example.

Ihimelefo

3 I hi me le fo do ha khue mi pa si tor - o o ya ma ma noo

7 'se ha bhuo no hien o ya ma ma no

Text In Esan

I hime le fo

'do ha khue mi pasitor

Oya mamananoo

'se ha bhuo no hien

Oya mamananoo

Translation

After healing them

They have gone to thank pastor

this is absurd

God will judge this case

This is absurd

CONCLUSION

A glance at the present nature and qualities of treatises in comparative studies in African music reveals that there has been some meaningful progress. The progress stems from researches either done by many foreigners and few Africans. And today, the observations of foreigners such as Blacking, Jones, Chernoff, Hart and Kubik, to mention but a few, have been relied on for too long. In the view of this researcher, Africa is too large to allow for generalizations in terms of musical practices and attributes and above all since musical culture is as dynamic as culture itself, positions held of Africa decades ago may not necessarily be in this global age; hence this paper examined within no fewer than ten basic captions the characteristics of Esan music in Edo state of Nigeria.

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