

THE AFRICAN COMPOSER AS A SOCIAL CRITIC

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Abstract

Criticism is an assessment of value for the maintenance of standards. It sorts out, defines, educates, and says one's mind on what has to be the ideal. People criticize in order to restore order. Verbal and non-verbal languages are tools commonly used for criticizing wrong doings mostly in African communities. Sometimes music is basically used as a corrective measure to restore order. The musician and composer write his/her music on general or specific purposes. Where such organized compositions are lacking, folk songs are used spontaneously aiming at correcting certain disorders in the community. Texts of songs are used proverbially to correct, educate, and inform the public on what has happened. This paper seeks to examine the extent to which the African composer uses his music for social criticism.

Introduction Criticism

Criticism as defined by Okafor (2004) is an age long tradition which is used as a corrective measure. Hornby (2000:277) sees it as "the art of expressing disapproval of something and opinions about their faults or bad qualities". Criticism in this direction helps to sort out, educate, and to say one's mind on what has to be the ideal and also to assess the values meant to maintain standards. A proverb in Akan says 'dea otwa sa nnim nakyi' which means that the one who cuts the path does not know the back is rough. For us to be able to correct ourselves there should be a constructive criticism that will help us to assess our activities so as to enable us work towards improvement or progress. This brings into perspective the saying: who bells the cat and inquires whose duty it is to point out what is to be the ideal; everyone should strive for a better future. Criticism, therefore looks at things in a more serious and profound manner for the betterment and well being of society.

Why Criticism?

The question may be viewed from different perspectives to mean one and the same thing. In an attempt to answer this question, we can say that people criticize in order to restore order. Secondly, people criticize to correct certain social ills or vices. Common tools used directly or indirectly to criticize are seen as verbal and non-verbal languages and music. Out of the tools mentioned above, music is the immediate that helps human beings to have a rethink of their activities. Galbraith in Amafe (2005:2) says: "to win the competition for public attention, criticism must be exaggerated, dramatized and loudly and repeatedly asserted". Such exaggerations and dramatizations will help whoever is going wrong to have a rethink of his or her activities.

Music Criticism

Music criticism is the avenue through which musicians use music to censure current issues in society. Melody, harmony, rhythm, instrumentation as well as lyrics are beautifully blended to make the music interesting so as to draw people's attention. It may also be said to be essential to the growth of music practice composition. Music theory and music history according to Egonwa (2007:47) is a medium for thinking, talking and looking at events for fruitful considerations. According to Amafe (2005), criticism:

Serves as a vital tool for looking into government policies and decisions, and like a two edged sword, it has the power to cause negative and positive responses among people. Music criticism educates the masses on activities of government and people who occupy certain positions in society and also cause awareness through any medium" (Amafe, 2005:10).

Who is a Critic?

A critic is the one who censures others for what he/she thinks or feels is contrary to societal norms. Critics express their opinions freely about good and bad qualities of things including behaviours. Critics criticize to put things the way they should be. This is of course why the Baroque operatic enthusiasts created room in the course of opera performances for the claue who are accomplished critics. Whose forthright criticisms added taste and colour to their performances.

Types of Critics

Two categories of critics have been identified by Apthorp (1972). The first according to him is the one who writes his/her views about people's activities in the society. The other type is the one who writes or says what he/she knows he/she has authority over, or what he/she has in-depth knowledge of. In the view of the present writer, critics are those who criticize others for what they think or feel is not right. Their criticisms will therefore help to put things in the manner which is acceptable to society.

Critics are useful members of the society because; their presence helps to maintain order. They play the watchdog role in the society. They become social forces who have no specific offices and ranks. Their opinion is considered if society becomes interested in what they say.

Three types of critics have also been identified by Udechukwu (1976) in Egonwa (2007) as art critics, journalist critics and professional critics. Art critics include music critics who tend to evaluate other musical works relating to their practice or profession while journalist critics and professional critics according to Udechukwu "do not have any specialist preparation for what they criticize. The music critic according to Langer (1948:4) uses music "to reveal the nature of feelings, with a detail and truth that language cannot approach".

The Composer

The composer according to Copland is the one who gives himself/herself out to the people. He says:

Every artist's work is of course an expression of himself, but none so direct as that of the creative musician. He gives us, without relation to exterior 'events', the quintessential part of himself that part which embodies the fullest and deepest expression of himself as a man and of his experience as a fellow being (Copland 1957:15)

The African composer who is also a musician belongs to an environment which Okafor (2005) classifies as primary (traditional) and developing (modern) societies. These societies, he says set imageries (pictorial languages in the minds of readers), oral literature, norms, behaviour patterns and ethics as standards to govern their members. Any form of deviation from these standards is unacceptable to members of the society. The composer who is a member of these two societies and given to criticism, takes advantage of faulty issues and writes his/her music to be performed at prescribed places and before an expected audience who in turn interpret the music the way they feel. Sometimes the music is out n record, albums, cassettes and compact discs for public consumption. The African composer's activity is made up of four elements and they are:

The composer's creative process,
The music resulting from his/her talent and efforts,
The performer(s) and
The listener (s) or audience who evaluates and judges the final product

The Composer's Role in Society

The African composer has multiple roles or functions to perform. The first role is that he/she is a member of the African community that gives him/her equal rights in terms of decision making. He/she has the right to his/her own opinion but shares assets and liabilities with members of the society. He/she is equally governed by the rules of the society. Secondly, he/she is the musician who provides music for varied purposes. He/she uses his/her music proverbially, philosophically and creatively to converse or communicate his/her intentions to the people Those who are endowed with the gift of understanding language in whatever form it is cast, will always get the message the music is conveying

A skillful African composer uses his/her melodies and text 'like the clay in the hands of an excellent potter' to translate himself/herself into an informed critic, entertainer, moralist, sensitizer, conscientizer" (Opata, 2005:132). Like Achebe, according to Ogede in Opata (2005) who uses self conscious desire to produce African literature, making use of language controlled to express his desire for cultural liberation, the composer uses his/her music on self conscious desires to also produce African music which will use melody, harmony, rhythm,

texture and text, among others, to express his/her desire for cultural liberation. This can be said of composers like the late South African Maria Makeba, Fela Anikulakpo-Kuti and Majek Fashek of Nigeria, Nana Kwame Ampadu, and Comfort Amanor of Ghana among others, who use their music to cast aspersions on, and criticize certain social vices.

The African Composers, Their Music and Communication

Music has been variously described as a “tool for social unity” and as a universal phenomenon makes use of sound in time and space (Ofosu, 1989:22). As an aspect of creation, music binds the living and the dead such that the living is able to interact with the dead when the music that appeals to them is played. Music can be said to be the activity that catches and sustains the interest of people in all communities. According to Tanner and O'Briant (1980:30) “music has the qualities that create various sensations and mood in people”.

Communication as stated by Ofosu (2004) is the verbal and non-verbal symbols of exchange of ideas or transaction of information. The information moves from a sender to a receiver with an expected feedback for effective encoding and decoding of messages. The effectiveness of such messages results in changes in behaviour. We may attempt to explain a change in behaviour to mean where a communicator is able to manipulate information to cause a change in an audience or behaviour. Though the audience is the recipient of information, it is motivated by a conviction to accept the information and behave accordingly. Sessions (1970) views the African composer and says he/she communicates firstly as a receiving set and secondly as a sending set where a 'willing ear' is mostly required. We may look at the 'willing ear' to mean the ear that is free of prejudice, the ear that is attentive, the ear that is curious and the ear that is persevering for a critical look at situations. This suggests that, for every type of music to be accepted, members of that society must be motivated and convinced about the message that a particular music conveys. In this instance, cultural behaviours are exhibited to form an opinion which is derived from persuasive and artistic communications. In line with this the late exponent of Urhobo disco, Chief Omokomoko Osupa who used his traditional music to communicate verbal and non-verbal messages aimed at persuading and correcting social ills especially in the traditional African society.

African Composers as Social Critics

The person who is able to put sounds together in an artistic and scientific way to enable him/her achieve the effects he/she wants to achieve in melody, harmony, counterpoint, form, and instrumentation Scholes (1975:219) says is a composer. We can also talk of the composer and musician as the one who is inspired or learns through apprenticeship or by intuition creates and organizes his/her melodies, harmonies and rhythms for the effects he/she wants for the benefit of singers and listeners as well. The effect that grips singers and listeners of certain songs according to Onyeji (1997:9) “is as a result of divine inspirations from beyond”. In analyzing a set of South African Freedom Songs, he observed that these songs are serving as channels to destroy and crush

falsehood and inhuman acts. He also observed that one only comes in contact with the truth, the invisible and the living through singing the songs with heart and mind. Apart from getting inspired Mcquire (1986) says that:

... you know everything originates from one's thought (Uche madu). In his heart (na ime obi). As we have gathered here today to make music, we experiment with new ideas which may have been motivated by certain past social events or happenings. In other words, if we have (been motivated) in a way that is frowned upon by our society, we would compose a song that portrays that person's character or the event in which the situation occurred (Mcquire, 1986:39).

Types of Songs Used for Criticism

The Urhobo children's musical organization known as agaba songs are mainly songs of insult which are used during occasions such as festivals and Christmas. These celebrations are used to remind perpetrators of evil of their past activities (Ofosu, 1989). In their performance they mention names of persons like Angela and places like Ufuoma quarters where certain bad behaviours were exhibited. The Efutu of Winneba in Ghana incidentally sings Opanyin gyengyan (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.

Apart from these children's songs, 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.

Traditionally, composers use their music as a cautionary measure to restrict certain people from embarking on any act of violence. For instance, in the early days of communal clashes the Fanti used the Fanti warrior song Oburumankoma (an ancestral appellation) to ginger or mobilize themselves to action anytime they felt their territorial frontier was threatened. In the song they equate themselves with the might of the elephant and that beside the elephant there is no other power.

Oburumankoma

The musical score for 'Oburumankoma' consists of two systems of two staves each. The first system features a vocal line with lyrics: 'O-bu-ru-man-ko-ma, O-bu-ru-man-ko-ma, O-bu-ru-man-ko-ma, O-bu-ru-mni-ko-ntae' and a piano accompaniment line with lyrics: '(O-bu-ru-man-ko-ntae'. The second system features a vocal line with lyrics: 'O-bu-ru-man-ko-ma O-da-pa-gya-ye, O-so-mo e, O-so-ma-kyi-nyia-bou' and a piano accompaniment line.

The song Oburumankoma an ancestral appellation used to compel the greatness and might of the gods of the land to that of the elephant and that there is no animal as powerful as and greater than the elephant.

Although certain incidental songs portray sycophancy on the part of the composers, they also try to redirect the attention of those in power to have a rethink of their activities. Take for instance political jingles sometimes composed anonymously and used during political campaigns, with the aim of extolling the virtues of various candidates which in spite of all cheerfulness, bring violent clashes in the country. These songs in their bid to popularize, incite some kind of anger among members of the society who hold contrary view. The following are a few of such incidental songs.

(a) Nkabom Aban

The musical score for 'Nkabom Aban' consists of two systems of two staves each. The first system features a vocal line with lyrics: 'N-ka-bom a - ban e----- ye pe u - ka - bom a - ban e-----' and a piano accompaniment line. The second system features a vocal line with lyrics: '--- n - ka - bom yen, n - ka - bom a - ban Gha - nao-----' and a piano accompaniment line.

The above song was composed and directed by J. T. Essuman of Ghana and solicited support for the then proposed 'Union Government' by Acheampong's military regime in Ghana.

(b) Ibori

The musical score for 'Ibori' consists of three staves. The first staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (Bb) and a 4/4 time signature. The melody is written on a single line. The lyrics 'I - bo - ri, you are our - man.' are written below the first staff. The second staff continues the melody with the lyrics 'you are our - man, I - bo - ri'. The third staff continues the melody with the lyrics 'you are our - choice a - gain.' The notes are primarily quarter and eighth notes, with some rests.

This song was also used to solicit support for Ibori in the 2003 gubernatorial campaign in Delta State of Nigeria.

Folk tunes (mostly anonymous) that deal with matters of current issues (Ofosu 1989), are rendered during story telling sessions to criticize certain actions the actors both man and animal take in the story so that listeners of such stories will not imitate them as good things.

Melodically African composers observe the rules governing composition in writing their songs so as to make meaning. Composers like Ephraim Amu, N. Z. Nayo, A. Adu-Safo, S. Godfrey Boateng, Entsua Mensah, Onwona Safo, Kofi Amisah, J. S. Maison, A. A. Cobina, all of blessed memory, J. H. K. Nketia, Attah Annan-Mensah, J. Yankey, Joseph Ofori Ofosu, J. K. Obbeng and J. S. Ofosu all of Ghana, Fela Sowande and Fela Anikulakpo-Kuti of blessed memory, Akin Euba, Emurobome Idolor, Christian Onyeji, Bode Omojola, among others in Nigeria are the few composers whose works have been indirectly used to criticize ill behaviours. Some of their works include:

1. *Ɔkora staban* (the wings of the egret), *Tete n'Ɔbi ka* (the past has something to tell) and *Aboyamakerere* (the Chameleon) by Ephraim Amu
2. *Yebi* (do something), *Obi renya wo aye* (someone wishes to be you) and *Ode Iwe?* (are you annoyed?) by Joseph Ofori Ofosu

Obi Renya Wo Aye

The musical score for 'Obi Renya Wo Aye' consists of two staves. The first staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (Bb) and a 4/4 time signature. The melody is written on a single line. The lyrics 'O - bi ren ya wo a - ye ma wa - nin - si naa wo' are written below the first staff. The second staff continues the melody with the lyrics 'naa wo te yia - ra O - bi ren ya wo a - ye'. The notes are primarily quarter and eighth notes, with some rests.

The song says someone wishes he were you. Be contempt with what you Have. In whatever condition you see yourself, someone wishes he were you.

3. Okankabi a onni bi (the helpless millipede) by Onwona Safo

4. Nigeria Otoro Ose Owan by Emurobome Idolor

Nigeria Otoro Ose Owan

Ni - ge - ri - a, Ni - ge - ri - a, Ni - ge - ri - a
u. Ni - ge - ri - a. O - to - ro - o - se - o - wan, ra - ha - ru -
ku; i - ra - re - o - to - ro - ro - ro zhu - na - na i - ja - h'e - ro
i - to - ro - o - se - o - wan, Ni - ge - ri - a

Idolor (2008) translates the above song as:

Nigeria, our fatherland, our heritage
We have no other land than this
Let us jointly build our fatherland Nigeria.

Professional musical ability is either hereditary or by interest. Most of these professional musicians create music at the spur of the moment. They include Oriki praise singers of Yoruba kings, and horn players among the Delta Igbo of Nigeria, the Griot and Gewels of Senegambia who are known to be itinerant or roaming musicians who sustain themselves with the music they perform, the Kwadwomfo? found at the courts of Asante kings and Ndwomkr group of Ghana, the Dukpe cooperative musicians of the Fon of Dahomey (Republic of Benin); the Basongye professional musicians of Uganda and the Hausa professional musicians in West Africa use their music to praise and sometimes sing to criticize kings and the affluent whose activities are not well defined in the society.

Popular music composers like Fela Anikulajpo-Kuti, Bobby Benson, Sonny Okosun, Majek FASEK, African China, Osayomore Joseph all of Nigeria; Ampadu, Comfort Amano, C. K. Man, Eddy D nk r among others in Ghana as stated earlier, use their music to preach against social inequality, violence and oppression (Onyeji

2002). “Though musicians do not get to the seat of power” as stated by Okafor (2004:10), they create their music to praise, ridicule and criticize certain people in the society. Their role in the society helps to redirect people’s thinking towards the image those at the seat of power project. These records are released especially when members of the society feel threatened, infested by all forms of poverty, humiliation, insecurity and abandonment through the oppressive rule of their leaders. People tend to like such records because of the messages their texts carry along. Osayomore Joseph’s Akpanigogo is a typical example of such records used to criticize those at the seat of power.

Akpanigogo (Potholes)

The musical score is written in 3/4 time and consists of seven staves of music. The lyrics are written below the notes. The piece includes triplets and various rhythmic patterns. The lyrics are as follows:

E-vbo na na dū gbo mu nō ma
 k̄he ke nō ghi o ga ug be vbe m̄iao wan nu nō fe vbe ya-de ḡhi
 ye ke I sue ko ko ko we m̄ien Agba ni si
 fi - a - n I sue ko ka ko A men fe bic A - men ḡhe - na
 O - su - yu - m̄o - re nō ga vbe ḡhi ab̄ r̄u - na e - h
 O - de - ni - ma ya la eya - k̄bi a - kp̄a - ni - gu - gu - - - -

Akpanigogo in Benin language means potholes. Okonikhere (2006:48) interprets *Akpanigogo* to mean: The state in which we are living is full of human resources, natural resources, and wealth. But, this wealth is in the hands of some prominent persons, with all these riches all our roads are full of water and potholes.

Popular songs like 'Zombi' which became uncomplimentary to the politician, 'Yabees', 'Confusion', 'I no bi thief' by Fela Anikulakpo-Kuti, 'Baba na wa', *Akpanigogo* by Joseph Osayomore of Edo State; Mr. President by China Goro (popularly known as African China); 'Tell them' by Sonny Okosun; 'Margaret Thatcher' by Majek Fashek and a particular line -"Their slogan na like dis, I will do dis and dis, and dis and dis..." in the song 'E Don Do' by Jonathan Dantala Enuritu (Dr. Strech) which was banned by the Federal Government of Nigeria for having a political undertone (Nwanne 2008); According to the artiste,

... I was trying to express the plight of the common masses as well as drawing their attention to all those things. My concern was to get the government thinking about the situation of the country. ... We artistes are like prophets because we try as much as possible to give out messages to the people. But it's unfortunate that instead of addressing the issues raised, they were more interested in stopping my work (Nwanne, 2008:57).

'*Ebi te yie*' (some sit well), 'Fidie wura ba a, na wo be hu' (you shall see when the owner of the trap comes) by Nana Kwame Ampadu; 'Ana asaase da h djan a enni wura?' (so the world is just there without owner?) by Comfort Amanor; and Maria Makeba's numerous freedom fighting song, among others, directly or indirectly attack the 'ruling class' (Onyeji 2002:32) for negligence of duty for what they were elected to power, and some socially disgruntled individuals. The musician and ruling class at this crossroads are set on edge. Fela's "Zombi" for instance was as a result of the brutal killing of his mother during the attack on his 'Kalakuta' shrine on the orders of the military administration of the time.

Conclusion

People who by their position oppress others for self gratification need to be redirected through music. Music used as an aspect of criticism becomes useful as it encourages and educates people. It can also be destructive if it portrays sycophancy and self motives by being used to court favour and gain financial gratification. The African composer therefore must not be treated with levity so that he/she will, if at all he/she composes, be gentle in his/her choice of words, for he/she can be an asset or a liability to society. It is probably because of this that some societies in Africa tolerate but at the same time fear the musician.

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