

AMOJO AMEN-NIYEYE: A STUDY IN ESAN MINSTRELS

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Abstract

This study investigates the life and times of Atine Obetoh (Amojo Amen-Niyeye). It examines the musical creativity of this personage. This research benefits from a vast aggregate of inputs from Amojo's siblings and his first son, Lucky Obetoh. We also harvested some remaining members of the group for their opinions on certain issues raised in this article. These were done basically through historical and analytical methods - interviews, focussed group discussions, review of audio clips and of related literature. From this study, one could vividly see that Amojo remains an enigmatic giant in Esan minstrelsy whose creative ingenuity is yet unsurpassed.

Keywords: Amojo Amen-Niyeye, Esan Minstrelsy, Genre, Technique, Style, Esanland

Introduction

In taking up a task of this kind, many thoughts flooded the inquisitive minds of the researchers. Some of these thoughts form the initial impetus for the study and others, the challenges concomitant with this study. Globally, we find that most history of Western music books is adorned with the contributions of Palestrina, Handel, Bach, Vivaldi, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, to mention a few. Their scholarship has even climaxed into a specific composer study. For example Maynard (1977) examined the life and times of Ludwig Van Beethoven. In Nigeria, we are also not resting on our oars, for example Omojola (1995) examined the contributions of A.C. Coker, Fela Sowande, Ikoli Harcourt Whyte, Sam Akpabot, Ayo Bankole, Akin Euba, L.E.N. Ekwueme, Meki Nzewi, Okechukwu Ndubuisi, Adam Fiberesima and Joshua Uzoigwe while Moloye Bateye studied Olufela Sowande, Joshua Uzoigwe studied Akin Euba and Abayomi Bello studied Dayo Oyedun.

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A critical assessment of the persons studied by these researchers reveals that they are purely art music practitioners. Surprisingly though, traditional musical exponents have received scanty scholarly attention. But for Egogo Alagiebo of Benin done by Mike Ighile, Umobuarie, the Afan exponent done by Abraham Umuabuarie, etc., it would have been said in concrete terms that nothing has currently been done. This study is an addition to the corpus on traditional musicians in Nigeria. Aluede (2009) opined that:

It does not take a long gaze at the Nigerian musical scene to know that traditional music which was a loud voice that characterized day to day community life is not just under threat but almost overrun by forces within and outside the nation's territorial frontiers.

It is only when these traditional metiers are studied and documented that traditional classical music of our people would be known. It is in this connection that Danielou (1971:5) remarked thus, when the public ceases to participate in artistic creation, it loses interest in it, since the art no longer forms a part of the public's emotional life. The cult of the star performer replaces the appreciation of the work of art, the listeners judge according to modish criteria and ... the manufactured product served up to them, but which always remains foreign to them for they know nothing about the techniques of its invention.

Background to the Study

The bane of the dearth of data on traditional African musicianship and musicians is primarily that of under documentation. This under documentation stems perhaps from the fact that what begins as an experiment which was not thought of as ideal enough for documentation suddenly blossoms into an enormous oeuvre which then becomes worthy of proper investigation. For instance, while studying Beethoven, Maynard (1977) observed that: great men are understandably ambivalent about the prospect of their posthumous biographies; some have attempted to dissuade potential biographers or even to prevent them from obtaining data of an intimate nature, arguing that their creative achievement should be evaluated without regard to its biographical sources.

Consequently, this paper will be silent on Amajo's numbers of wives and children so as to press to the core issues of relevance. His matrimonial life and family would have probably led us to some conclusions but chances are that they may not particularly be relevant

to his musicianship. From the beginning, this study was beset with multiplicity of variables which almost stalled its investigative process and some of them were that:

- a) the family members needed to know why the study;
- b) if the study will bring forth money to them;
- c) if not, why are the researchers engaged in an unprofitable venture?;
- d) based on points ii & iii, suspicion developed as they felt that researchers were not telling them the truth; and
- e) Awo primary school, Uromi was burnt in 1985 and all the records predating the date of that inferno were all lost.

These variables impinged probably with the story of Amojò Amen-niyeye. A great musical personage and an innovator of no mean status whose musical ingenuity is the subject matter of this paper. To keep readers within focus, selected questions are raised. It is thought that in providing the answers, the tendencies in this paper will be easily grasped. Where is Esan and who are they? Who is Amojò? How did he train? Why Amojò? What contributions did he make to the evolution of a new music?

The Esan People

The term Esan is used in reference to a landmass, its people and language spoken by them. Esanland is located in the Edo Central Senatorial District of Edo State. The present day Esan occupies five local government areas: Esan South - East, Esan North - East, Esan Central, Esan West and Igbeken. Although their origin is not clearly understood, it may partly be traceable to the exodus from Benin Kingdom. All Esan towns share common cultural affinity. They practice patrilineal inheritance with every first son being the principal inheritor of both the father's and mother's legacies. Esan is essentially also a gerontocratic society where there is so much respect for elders and their views (Okoduwa, 2006).

Esan Minstrelsy

In this segment, we will define minstrelsy and examine cursorily, minstrelsy in Esan. In Esan, minstrelsy is Umalemon- this is the art of storytelling to the accompaniment of traditional musical instruments. Put simply, a minstrel is a travelling entertainer who would sing and recite poetry often to his or her own musical accompaniment. In Esan of the old, every quarter in the village had a minstrel. These minstrels either played the Agidigbo (thumb piano), the Afanlan (a-seven stringed instrument stretched over a resonator) or Okede (the drums). These

minstrels were respected entertainers who sang about the history, philosophy, politics, religion and the ills and vices of certain individuals within the society where they perform. They dotted moon lit nights and traditional ceremonies with their presence. From personal observation, this practice is almost extinct. However, while solo minstrelsy declined, it was replaced by group minstrelsy - a new movement. Although the records of group minstrels are few, Umobuare Ugberaese and Atine Obetoh (Amojo Amen- niyeye) stand out. In the opinion of Abraham Umobuarie (2010), it was in 1922, at the age of ten, Chief Umobuarie Ugberaese learned to play Afan (also called Afalan), and an instrument he made famous for professional storytelling and entertainment. Thereafter, he transformed it to a celebrated art which has become a rallying point amongst the people of Esan. However, our primary concern is the life and times of Atine Obetoh. According to Monday Asuka, Amojo was a younger contemporary of Umobuare Ugberaese. Exactly when he started public performance is obscure but he started recording his works first on the gramophone disc in 1968 (personal communication with Monday Asuka, November 14, 2015).

Functions of Minstrelsy in Esan

Minstrels are primarily culture carriers; they are the community's watch, the eyes of the people and repositories of the people's mores. Music is a bond which binds people of all ages. In the opinion of Cole (1993), many people are trained to love different styles of music from birth. Each time they hear a piece of music, they are reminded of extraneous things besides music, their parents, homeland, even favourite foods. Music is the nexus which binds many human activities together. Music one way or another, becomes meaningful by entering the realm of social life. Once there, it moves among people and communities, sometimes locally, sometime globally. The processes by which music moves from one person to another, from one generation to another, from one community to another, and potentially throughout the whole world, are processes of music transmission (Bakan, 2012). Music cannot be this vital and its makers- the musicians or minstrels inconsequential. They are the conduits through which there is musico/cultural transmission.

Atine Obetoh: His Family Background and Boyhood

Atine Obetoh - Amojo was born to Obetoh Okpeaifo, a farmer from Idumu Iyase-Uromi. His mother, Omoduwa Obetoh, a petty trader, master storyteller and famer hailed from Idumu-Igun, Amedokhian-Uromi. He was number four child in a family of five. Exactly when he

was born is not clearly known. But judging from the account of his elder sister and that of his first son, he may have been born around late 1930s. This conclusion is arrived at when they said he was about sixty years old when he died in 1999.

His Musical/ Educational upbringing

In trying to do a retrospective investigation, chances are that, researchers may have some challenges. This is probably the case with this work on Atine Obetoh also known as Amojo na 'mhen niyeye no mie 'de. This means Amojo the gradually drizzling rain which takes over the whole day in captivity. Put in performance context, it means as small as the ensemble may be, when it starts performances, everyone is held hostage and enveloped in the performance, thus, the desire to go elsewhere is often abbreviated. Amojo's musical craftsmanship did not just emerge from the blues, his mother; Onoduwa Obetoh was a master storyteller - a skill Amojo improved upon tremendously. At a tender age, he had started showing interest in storytelling as a pupil in Awo Primary School, Uromi. While in primary three, he made himself a single string chordophone - (Eghonghon deba Eghonghon¹)

It was this instrument which he used to accompany himself while singing and telling stories. In primary five, his musical skill had advanced; he on his own made a guitar. At this point he started entertaining his school during end of year ceremonies and prize-giving days. Many years after leaving the primary school, he formed a group with which he toured many parts of Nigeria. As a stickler for finesse, he organized rehearsals two times weekly. To show that he cared so much about accuracy, during his rehearsals, he had a mantra: "rather than spoil my songs, go and destroy my entire crops in my farm". As a traditional musician of high repute, he toured round all the nooks and crannies of Nigeria. This was made possible by the different Esan sons' and daughters' associations and Esan progressive unions in various Nigerian cities. Chief Obhafuoso of Idoia, Chief John Obiyan of Enu - the producer of Enu battery then in Lagos, Chief Francis Ijewere - a one-time director of domestic operations in Central Bank of Nigeria, Lagos, Chief Ajimenlen Iluobe who was then the director of Iluobe Oil Ltd and Chief Ekata of Iyue Uromi.

¹ This is one stringed musical instrument. It is made of a stick pierced into small can which serves as a resonator. The string is fastened to the tin and the stick which is bent over the tin in a bowl-like form.

His Singing styles and Musical Instruments

Ab initio, Amojo was a man full of innovation. He introduced quasi-hocketing using different vocal textures personally or among the ensemble members. Nketia posited that the hocket-technique,

(Is) the technique whereby the constituent notes of a tune, a rhythm or a tone pattern, or the constituent notes of supporting ground-accompaniments are played at the exactly appropriate points in the time by those particular instruments that include them within their compass, or by those particular instruments that provide the required contrasts (1962:44).

As part of the singing technique in Amojo's ensemble, a melody is often sung by two or more persons using different tone qualities. In this, he brought in variety in tone colour. Besides this singing style is

Voice 1

E de lo re na re gbo lge la men o ye

Voice 2

O ye

E de lo re na re gbo lge la

E de lo re

men o ye

O ye

e de lo re

the art of chanting a proverb within a melodic framework. This is a form of recitative. In quest of novelty, he fused proverbs into melodic lines and performed them in musical presentations. An example of this is Ede lore.

EDELORE

Text in Esan	English Translation
Ede lore	The day is cool
Na re gbo 'kpe la men	when big animals can be killed
Oye Ede lore	Oh, the day is cool
Ede lore	The day is cool
Na re gbo 'kpe la men	when big animals can be killed
Oye Ede lore	Oh the day is cool

Call and response

According to Agu (1999),

A large number of African songs are categorized under call and response patterns. In this genre, the soloist, who is the leader of a group, intones the song and sings a phrase referred to as the call, while the chorus or choir responds with another short phrase or musical sentence which differ in text and melody from the call.

An examination of Amajo's songs also reveals that this technique was profusely used in his fourteen albums. The musical instruments which were in use in his ensemble were the voice, guitar, bell and gourd rattle.

Theme and its Treatment in Selected Works of Amajo

Simply put, the theme of a creative work is the central idea which runs through the work. It is the soul or the nexus of the entire presentation which connects the style/technique of rendition, choice of language and the genre. In this segment, we dare to examine some of his albums where the *Omhanta bi Uuki* story featured in great details. *Omhanta bi Uuki* literally means the wise and the foolish. Amajo tells a story of *Omhanta*-the wise one and *Uuki*- the foolish one. *Uuki* was never focused and could not lead a good life instead; he remained with his brother and wife. In the same village was *Odede*, an already advanced lady who was accused of witchcraft tendencies. She was not communicated with in the community. At a point in time, *Uuki's*

brother drove him out of the house but not without exploiting him by using him to farm and harvest his produce into his barn.

Driven without any source of livelihood, Uuki went to live with Odede. In the course of their cohabitation, Odede became pregnant and gave birth to two boys. These children grew rapidly to the joy of the immediate family and the community. One day as Uuki set out in the morning to go to farm, he saw a very beautiful bird, he caught it and extracted two feathers for his children to play with. Before the children could take hold of the feathers, it had turned into money. Unknown to Uuki that it was his guardian angel who sent him great wealth through "the money magic bird", Uuki took the money to Omhanta. Omhanta collected the money and demanded for the bird itself. Uuki being a fool killed the bird and brought it to Omhanta. Omhanta's motive was that since this magic bird could change to money, if he eats the bird, his vomit, phlegm and faeces will be money. On Omhanta's instruction, Uuki killed the bird and brought it to Omhanta. Omhanta's wife prepared the bird, cut it into four pieces and fried it. Surprisingly, Uuki's children came to eat them up before the arrival of their uncle. Shortly after, their excrements turned to money. For days it was so and their condition could not be reverted. Having stored enough money on his own, Omhanta suggested to Uuki to go and kill the children because if the government gets to know of this development, the children will be killed.

Relying on Omhanta's advice, Uuki took the kids into the bush with the strong intention of killing them. He held a very sharp cutlass which he had sharpened perfectly. As they journeyed into the forest the kids began to wail sensing what their father was poised to do to them. As the kids were crying, their father's wailing bass voice was even more intense. At a point, their father snapped and said: "How right and just is it for me to kill my own children, the children I have laboured for all these years?" Rather than behead them, Uuki left them in the forest and came back home.

While wandering in the bush, it was said that a great hunter and medicine man from the familial world saw them and took them in. It was this same hunter who then gave them chewing stick which cured them of passing money as faeces. They lived with the hunter for many years learning hunting, farming and divination. After these years, they were released to go home. It was said that they came home with money, wisdom and divination apparatuses. The story ended on a note that it was out of the two brothers that one became Oba of Benin and the other Obi of Ika.

Proverbs

In the opinion of Mokitimi (1997), Africa is rich in variety of ways, including natural resources, manpower and culture. Within the framework of culture, there is a wide range of heritage including religion, music, dance, art, architecture and oral literature. And in the realm of oral literature we find the immensely rich world of stories, fables, recitations, songs, poetry and proverbs.... They adorn and beautify any language, the way that, as in Nigerian proverb tells, "Children confer glory on a home." This is particularly the case in the oral culture of African peoples, who have cultivated an extremely complicated use of language, audio and oral communication. Ademola (2010) corroborates the view above when she remarked that: African proverbs - whether pithy and sometimes inscrutable words of wisdom, or simple, everyday truisms - have over the ages, been used to warn, to instruct or to admonish...Proverbs enrich a language: they give in-depth meaning to words. So goes the Yoruba speaking people of Nigeria. A person who could intersperse speech with apt proverbs was regarded as someone with great wisdom and culture.

Ademola's view requires some modification. For example, when she said that "a person who could intersperse speech with apt proverbs was regarded as someone with great wisdom and culture" it sounded as if the practice is extinct. Till date in Nigerian societies, persons who intersperse speeches with apt proverbs are respected and seen as not only being eloquent but wise. Amajo's recordings are replete with uncommon yet apt proverbs which he hinged his stories on. He developed the craftsmanship of enplacing proverbs in form of recitatives in his songs and in some other cases; he weaves the proverbs into smooth melodies. While some of such proverbs are below translated, an example of a proverb which is woven into a song has already been discussed under quasi-hocket technique - Edelore.

Text in Esan

English Translation

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|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Oriesi mhen bhe gbe gbe | A good person is an ornament to the entire community. |
| 2. Ono leon se gboe
no bha leon se bho
Alimin ki gboe
Ono leon se bho
no bha leon 'se gboe
Alimin ki gboe | Whoever knows self without knowing others
Ancestors will kill him
whoever knows others without knowing self
Ancestors will kill him |
| 3. Ne sele re gbo no luole,
oki gbo na lu na no bha len. | For a good deed to kill the doer,
It will kill whoever it's done for who has failed to appreciate it. |

- | | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 4. Akpu kpu hon me ni
ai re su wa | You could scrape every flesh from
the head of an elephant
but you can't bring home its skull |
| 5. A la mu hen alo ho,
aki a reole osuole osuole,
aki ze khian,
aki a gbale ekhun ekhun | When eating tapioca initially,
it is taken slice by slice
when you approach the end
you begin to gather them in,
'bulk into the mouth. |
| 6. Ono bha mie mhin
No da awanlan
Aki yo azen no
Ono mie mhin
No bha wanlan
Aki ye Ozuo no | Whoever has not experienced
and is wise
is taken for a wizard
whoever has experienced
and is still unwise
is taken for a fool. |

Amojo's Contributions to Esan Minstrelsy

It is important to examine the creative ingenuity of this personage who ordinarily could have been regarded as semi-literate person in the Western sense. In *Omhanta* and *Uki*, one sees clearly a story of a man destined to be blessed by God. Although they were delayed by human forces at some points, God's divine plans for them were still actualised. In the story we were told that *Uki's* guardian angel was determined to bless him, thus the magic money bird came his way. Even when his 'wise' brother hijacked the whole process and the kids were to be killed to end the story tragically, just by divine intervention, the fool suddenly had compassion on his kids – an unusual attribute of fools. While in what may now be called exile, they learned hunting, farming and divination – great and highly revered professions of their time. The story ends with the kids growing to become great people – *Oba* of Benin and *Obi* of Ika. This whole story fits into an encapsulating title of 'The finger of destiny'

In the area of musical creativity, Amojo charts a very rare course of enplacing a guitar in Esan traditional ensemble and by doing this; he expanded the sonic latitude of Esan traditional music. Today, his songs are being arranged, re-arranged and performed by guitar bands and film producers all over Esan and beyond. While this tendency of falling back to existing songs in creating new ones may be commendable, the danger of disrespect for one's intellectual property & ares at musical creativity in this region. According to Bakan (2012), support and ownership of music are major facts that influence how music lives in communities, cultures, and societies. Some music is regarded as the property of a family lineage (e.g. in India) or an entire

village community (e.g. in Bali). Other music is not regarded as property at all, rather being thought of as an integral facet of communal life that is absorbed into the broader fabric culture. The opinion above is informative. Viewed from whatever perspective, it is considered that music making in contemporary traditional societies, including Esanland needs to respect ownership rights.

Conclusion

In this paper, we examined the boyhood of this great personage, Atine Obetoh (aka Amojo), his musical and educational upbringing, Esan minstrelsy, the musical instruments used in the his ensemble, the thematic treatment in his storyline, singing styles and the use of proverbs in crafting his songs. From this traditional music personality profiling, we discovered that, Amojo was an initiator of a new genre in Esan minstrelsy. He replaced the Afalan – a traditional Esan stringed musical instrument with the modern day guitar. Though dead, he has engendered a legacy of the domiciliation of foreign musical instruments in traditional ensembles. This, in turn, has helped in expanding the sonic space of Esan musicality. Without contradiction, his finger of innovation and contribution to Esan minstrelsy remains a musical spring which contemporary highlife musicians in Esan have continuously fetched from.

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