

MUSIC AS A MEANS OF COMMUNICATION IN NIGERIAN DRAMA

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Abstract

What constitutes modern drama in Nigerian theatre today is a synthesis of several art forms ranging from music to dance, mime, mask, acting, make-up, costume and spectacle. Consequently, the process of staging a play presents issues on formal as well as thematic levels in terms of what goes into the production, in order to achieve the right appeal on the audio, visual and aesthetic sensibilities of the relevant audience. This paper explores the use of music as a viable option and means of communication in an otherwise predominantly “dry”, dialogue-based drama of the Nigerian literary genre. In addition to available scanty literary review, data for this paper is heavily reliant on participant, non-participant observation, buttressed by the experience of this author as member of a local audience and as a practicing dramatist with music credentials. The findings confirm that whereas earlier practices in Nigeria are known to have functioned in the Western style where a play could be performed without the help of music, contemporary practices have imbibed elements of traditional idioms and practices that portray their African/Nigerian identity. It therefore concludes that music is a viable tool as a means of communication in any drama that seeks identity with the roots of the Nigerian audience.

Introduction

Characteristically, although there are a range of modes and media of representation interacting in a single drama performance, our focus here is on the role and use of music in its various ramifications. This is particularly to underscore the dramaturgical importance of music as the other primary means of communication in African/Nigerian culture, besides verbal dialogue for which drama is essentially known.

A casual survey of Nigerian contemporary play texts portrays the following, which form the hypothesis for this research.

1. Some play texts do not mention or indicate any form of music but are nevertheless produced with music.
2. Some playwrights suggest where music should be used but do not specify the type of music.
3. Some playwrights go a step further to specify the type of music where indicated but they are not documented for ease of allocation and application.

4. Some playwrights compose and provide song texts in the documented play texts.
5. A negligible few provide scores for the music prescribed.

Contemporary Practice

Play texts of literary drama is usually dialogue based and produced as such as inherited from western practice from where it derives and hence deemed to be dry to the African sensibilities. The term, “dry”, aesthetically refers to the style that utilises speech as the only means of communication. Such plays result in excessive dialogue without the exploitation of other available non-verbal modes that could otherwise have been useful either as tools for the attainment of dramatic intention, as effect for the creation of conducive mood, as bridge between passages or merely as entertainment to minimise the boring influence of protracted speeches.

In the literary tradition, practitioners, strain to disseminate all dramatic intentions through the available colonial *Lingua Franca* – English and French, which for obvious reasons are inadequate as sole media of expression, communication and interpretation within the African traditional setting. In view of such predicaments, the average literary play text merely provides a scenario for performance of these Nigerian based plays. Often, they are without adequate provision or direction for other crucial aspects of the production that would otherwise assist the director in achieving the playwright’s intention in a well-articulated spectacle that in addition appeals to the audience.

This critical but typical African contemporary audience from all indications expects modern drama for the Nigerian stage to communicate in familiar idioms. Rather than “dry” drama, this means drama that is not limited to speech. It means drama that is rather inter-laced with music in one or more of its varying forms, as song, drumming, surrogate instrumentation, instrumental accompaniment, background music, sound effect and dance. This in effect creates some familiarity and identity with the traditional total theatre concept that they are already used to in the real-life drama of everyday living.

This is not expecting too much from an art whose nature is to pretend to be real life. From research it is notably based on such applications that popular drama along the West African Coast became the most vital, dynamic and widely supported theatre form in Nigeria and Ghana. Presumably, this is because of their clearest link with tradition through its emphasis on action, supported with song and dance. To support this notion is the fact that up till this moment in Ghana, the National Theatre in Accra “spills over” whenever the concert parties of “Nkomode” and the like are billed to perform (Mokwunyei, “Artistic Values...” 278). It is probably the same reasons why the local audience in Nigerian is willing to pay substantial amounts as gate fees to watch live comedy shows in preference to live literary drama productions.

Similarly, in Nigeria, it is on record that the Hubert Ogunde and other travelling theatres of the popular tradition sold out at every performance and on time. On the contrary, a lot of convincing and coaxing is required to attract a sizable audience for the literary style plays which always start showing behind schedule, in a bid to garner a sizable audience to reasonably populate the near empty hall at scheduled time. This is the common scenario whether at the Drama Studio at Legon, the Akin Deko Main

Auditorium in Ugbowo Campus or the Theatre Hall at Ekehuan Road Campus of the University of Benin, Benin-City, for the same reason.

In order to convince and coax its audience, the University of Benin Theatre Arts Department devised a special strategy termed “jungle publicity” for attracting audience to watch their literary style plays. This so called “jungle publicity” originated from the Theatre Management class in the 80s under the tutelage of Muyiwa Awodiya. Jungle publicity entailed mounting of mini carnivals with the aid of posters, banners and public address systems. The process is accomplished through singing, drumming and dancing either to songs from the play if any, or otherwise to improvised incidental music on a mobile float/road show but in the traditional style of the local culture.

This apparently cumbersome methodology designed to avert the lack of patronage managed to generate the expected interest in people who associated the singing, drumming and dancing promotion with what they were to see on stage. Whether or not it always turned out as expected vis-à-vis the audience reaction evaluation after the theatre experience is however a matter for another discussion. Suffice it to say that, once they have been successfully attracted to the venue and the play began, the aim of the publicity was considered accomplished.

Having practiced this as member of faculty, I often wondered why despite its fascination we would resort to this energy sapping strategy. I wondered if it would be more rewarding to divert such resources to the development of a style of production that would attract the audience to watch the play for its own sake, on its own merit. How about the idea of identifying with the audience and giving them what they want? At least this way, the effort and emphasis would be on the play as the final creative product rather than the “packaging”.

However, for research purposes and for the benefit of determining or formulating directorial approaches, the positive result of the Benin experiment, should not be ignored. It remains a proof of the fact that audience expectation is based on contextualised concepts and traditional identity awareness that continually shape their perception. As such, music in traditional African societies is practiced as part of communal life, as evidenced in various facets of everyday life. Whether a woman is pounding wet or dry corn or rocking a child to sleep, a prisoner is cutting grass with his machete; a group of mourners are parading in sorrow, some music come handy in communicating and interpreting the associated prevailing moods and intentions. In the same vein, occasions and ceremonies such as the birth of a child, coronation of a king, initiation, death and religious worship are situations that call for music making. In scenes involving spirit medium-ship for instance, a given deity can be called from “*Jangare*” by the playing of his personal theme melody as is the case in real life situation of *Bori* spirit-medium-ship (Horn 181-202).

Such traditional concepts constitute factors that shape the theatre awareness and expectations of the average local audience. Such must also be reflected in Nigerian contemporary drama to make the events realistic and believable enough to sustain the interest of the sensitive audience. That is if drama is to serve its purpose as a mirror of society through which the African audience can see themselves, understandably in a realm where issues are contextualised only for certain dramatic intentions. It therefore

follows and makes sense to say that certain enactments should naturally go with the sort of music that complement them as evidenced by real-life situations as already mentioned.

Music as Communication in Nigerian Drama

Whereas the playwright's primary means of expression is speech, which leaves the dramatist entirely dependent on dialogue and stage directions to convey his concept, in the African situation when traditional music is performed, other means of communication and expression are added. These are inevitable since music within which related cultural factors and practices such as singing, drumming and dance are integrated to constitute the other means of communication in the culture.

About three decades ago, Meki Nzewi thought he would be unpopular to opine that drama not incorporated with music and dance was alien to the un-alienated Nigerian of any ethnic background. On the contrary from all contemporary indications, many literary dramatists and stage critics would agree with him to the effect that stage presentations not structured and sequenced with music and dance or stylised movements is alien to the inherent sensibilities of the Nigerian theatre audience (Nzewi 114). The assertion is understandably so because communications in African tradition, which may be verbal or nonverbal, are transmitted through three basic modes: speech, music and dance.

Music as Speech Surrogate

Perhaps it is better to deal with the speech surrogate phenomenon here, to enable us to appreciate how instruments in the surrogate category can share in functions attributable to the main vocal mode of speech from which they derive. In various cultures of Nigeria, there are melodic musical instruments ascribed with human attributes. For instance, is the *Akpele* in *Aniocha Igbo* culture of Delta State, the *Oja* of the Eastern *Igbo* culture, the *Goje* of the *Hausa* culture and the *Dundun* talking drum of the *Yoruba* culture. This class of musical instruments imitate the human spoken voice in their respective cultures. The sounds they produce are recognizable as a form of codified speech that is decipherable by the local audience as well as those who understand the codes of its language culture.

The relationship between speech and song is such that the boundary separating one from the other is hardly definable for as Elder long noted: "...So much is there in common between speech and music behaviour that it is permissible to regard singing as a kind of language, having regard to the use of tones and to the semantic physiological apparatus employed" (29). Therefore, in a drama presentation, music and dialogue can flow into one another with seamless ease as in the case of music drama. This can be achieved through singing or use of a surrogate instrument as verbal or poetic expression.

Music as Verbal Expression

As an avenue of verbal expression music in general, song (in particular) could be used in contemporary practices either to portray the thoughts of actors or for the enrichment and continuation of dialogue.

Music as Poetic Expression

As an avenue of poetic expression, music makes it possible for artistes and playwrights to maximise their talent in a form which would otherwise be too confrontational in spoken dialogue. Therefore, song as noted by Oscar Brockett formalises speech even more than does verse (46).

Music as Commentary and Criticism

Music in all its traditional ramifications as song, instrumental accompaniment and dance are very useful, for creating social commentary and criticism. They may be said to be more effective, more artistic and more indelible, yet appear less destructive than direct verbal utterance as earlier noted. In the case of derision, indirect but vividly understood commentary, criticism and information could be communicated through well worded melodious songs or delivered through specialised speech surrogate instruments or alternatively through suggestive motifs and communicative gestures in dance. When a dancer points his/her right hand or both hands skyward, her or she is indicating that god is his/her witness or benefactor. In other words, s/he is in effect using the “dance vocabulary” to say, “I look to God” or “I thank God”.

Music as Reflection of Mood

Appropriate music at the right moment would elicit appropriate reaction among performers as well as between performers and audience. As Nketia documented, attitudes and hostility cooperation and friendship could be expressed through music. According to him, music has also been effective for maintaining emotional ecstasy where warriors must be kept at a pitch of frenzy (Nketia 32).

For far more than just an epilogue, Femi Osofisan ends many of his plays on a musical note. He uses songs in this manner as a mood establishment device to sensitise and at the same time placate the audience. Another reason for this playwright’s use of this device is to cushion the effect and sensitivity of his archetypal provoking endings that simulate the tenuous uncompleted incoherent quality of life itself. As Sandra Richards adduced in her book, *Ancient Songs Set Ablaze*, rather than offer prescriptions, Osofisan structures the conclusions of many of his plays like traditional dilemma tales in which viable options may not be immediately apparent. The assembled community is rather left to arrive at a possible critical interpretation, only through the free-flowing interchange of ideas, outside the fictive realm of art illustrated as follows.

In place of resolutions to issues raised, Femi Osofisan advanced songs such as the theme song of *Twingle Twangle A Twynning Tayle*, asking the audience to make their inferences and draw their own conclusions from the clues presented in the earlier parts of the play. Note the suggestive texts of the songs, which are meant to motivate, instigate or at least solicit audience reaction and interpretation. The entire cast renders the song in unison.

Twingle Twangle **Theme Song**

You who sat and watched our play
Now's the time to have your say

Refrain

Twingle -twangle a twynning tayle
Has no end but what you say
Let your minds unfurl their sail!
Let them sing like a joyous bell!
We took you to *Ereko*
And brought you to *Etido*
Each of these towns, as you see
Represents a philosophy

Refrain

Which is better, which is worse,
That's for you to choose, not us
But we have performed our play
Let us meet another day
O digba o
We'll meet in another tale
O digba o
Till we meet in another tale
[A slow fade on the actors. **End**]

Another such example from Osofisan is from *Midnight Hotel*

Midnight Hotel

Song of a Far Away Land

Chorus

And so my friends, in a faraway land
In a once familiar state
A once familiar time
The people have no peace
The people have no rest
For the robbers have come to power
And the robbers are now in power
The great looters of the public purse
With all their lying and thieving
They dance around in broad daylight

When will the people say it's enough?

(Last part only)

(Spoken in recitative form at the end of the song.)

“We’ll draw up a constitution, they said”

“And put the real rogues in power”

(End of Play)

The words of above songs which would have otherwise been too confrontational in a particular Nigerian regime; too harsh to speak and hence become masked in melodious singing that placate the audience on either side for or against the message presented no matter how true and appropriate.

Music as Introductions, Exits and Bridge

Music is a valuable tool for use as introduction, exit and intermittent bridges in a performance. However, the selection of appropriate music must be carefully considered since the wrong material can ruin an otherwise good production. Choice of music must necessarily be based on the context of the situation of every specific time and slot. A foremost Nigerian pioneer dramatist, Joel Adedeji, in his study of the opening glee in Yoruba drama, illustrated how the Yoruba Masque and Operatic professional theatres used the “Opening Glee” as technique of approach for the purpose of identification of the dramatists’ intention (41). First used by the Lagos Glee Singers to describe its entrance song, the term was later popularised by the likes of Kola Ogunmola and Hubert Ogunde, who used it in the fifties “as a commentary on the action of the play ... or sometimes to tell the story of the play” (Adedeji 49).

On a note of caution, it is pertinent to state, that musical application no “beautiful” or “sweet” at the wrong time would invariably create the wrong mood, thereby eliciting wrong reactions and wrong responses from the audience. For example, in two separate productions of the School of Performing Arts in 1997 Drama Week at the University of Ghana, Legon, this author witnessed Yoruba music erroneously played during a re-enactment of an Ibo event on stage and Igbo music juxtaposed in a Yoruba scene and *vice versa*. While this probably made no difference to the predominantly Ghanaian audience, for those familiar with the two divergent Nigerian cultures within which the plays were set, it was a serious error that detracted from the overall aesthetics of both productions. Upon investigation, it was gathered that the errors were based on ignorance on the part of the directors who assumed that any piece from Nigeria was adequate for any play from that country which is not correct. They, however, accepted this author’s intervention/correction and were both grateful when she provided them with better alternatives as required. That field experience underscores the benefit of working with a musicologist on drama productions, for effective application and use of music.

In contrast to a different situation in Accra, the effect of substitution from another cultural background yielded a rather different result at the National Theatre in the production of Nigerian playwright, Fred Agbeyegebe’s *The King Must Dance Naked*,

originally set in *Itsekiri* land of Southern Nigeria. This specific production was dramatically enriched with an *Akan* royal Durbar, usually accompanied with a display of various *Akan* music and dance displays with associated pageantry. That insertion of locally sourced music and dance by the director (though from, a culture, different from the originally indicated background) in this case did not distract from the play. Rather, the cultural parallel infused portrayed a good enough interpretation of the author's intention to the local as well as foreign audience of Ghana National Theatre as differently interpreted by the director with a locally influenced directorial concept that was also suitable for his audience.

It was a delightful experience enjoyed by both local and foreign audience including this author who had watched the same play as directed by Austin Asagba in Benin-City, Nigeria (the author is from Itsekiri land on which he set the play and Asagba being partly Itsekiri was therefore on familiar terrain which was quite evident in his dramaturgy and use of local music and dance. What becomes evident from this example is the possibility of substitution of artistic materials where applicable, to similar contextual situations where practices characteristic of African societies is commonly shared. In this case, the Chieftaincy institution is a shared West African culture in Nigeria as well as in Ghana.

It would, however, be out of place to allocate materials arbitrarily from one culture to another except for specific directorial intentions as was the case in a production of Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are not to Blame* by a Kenyan Director Sally Mwangola far away in Australia. In this case, while interacting with the Director of the cited production, she admitted experimenting with Kenyan songs she is familiar with to enhance her dramaturgy. Her specific intention was to draw intercontinental parallels among different societies by establishing the existence of continental (African) cultural parallels between Kenyan and Nigeria. In so doing, she however took advantage of the presence of some Nigerians around, whom she consulted to test her concept and ensure that all her choices conveyed the correct signals, without detracting much from the Author's focus. According to her, she realised her intention at the end of the production with the main goal of promoting better understanding among peoples of divergent cultures irrespective of their race, colour or creed.

Such problems dealing with choice of materials and ability to successfully integrate them is not peculiar to foreign directors involved with productions outside familiar cultural contexts but also a problem encountered even by local directors. A local director involved in the production of the same play may encounter similar problems, for, as a dramatist, he or she may not be culturally integrated or aware and as such may not be fully conversant with the requisite contextual materials from the relevant tradition.

This paper concludes that whereas earlier practices in Nigeria were known to have functioned in the western style where a play could be performed without the aid of music, contemporary practices have imbibed elements of traditional idioms and practices that portray their African/Nigerian identity. It therefore affirms that music is a viable tool as a means of communication in any drama that seeks identity with the roots of the Nigerian audience.

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