

ADVOCATING MUSIC AS A TOOL FOR PRESERVATION OF LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

The ethos, norms, and values of each culture of the world are embedded in the language which is predominantly used by the people for communication. Some of the languages today, especially in Africa are fast becoming endangered. This is because the language of the colonial masters has taken over the indigenous languages in most African countries. Consequently, such language (indigenous) remains on the path of extinction while the 'masters' languages are given good recognition and generally accepted for use. Considering the fact that the world is now a global village, no culture should be left unrecognized on the world map. Music, which is a widely accepted means of expression, can therefore shoulder such language(s) to get a wider coverage and acceptability in the global world. This paper therefore, examines the role music plays in language and how music can be used as a tool for its propagation and preservation.

INTRODUCTION

Culture is a unique phenomenon that reveals the identity of a group of people. The people of the same culture are known to have certain things in common which includes belief, language, music, costumes among others. However, language and music are the major features in culture. They are fundamental because they are used as means of communication or interaction among the people, and also as basic elements of communal identity. For instance, people who cannot communicate or interact with one another definitely cannot live together. The union that exists among the people depends on the level of their communication. Language can either be in verbal or sign communication.

Verbal communication is the composition or arrangement of letters to form words, words to form sentences, and the appropriate use of sentences to make good communication. In the use of language, the appropriate choice of words and sentences is also very important. The

people living in the same community over ages learn their language appropriately and also train their young ones to do the same. Some of these languages are known globally while some are known only in their localities, especially communities that have oral tradition as major form of record keeping. On the other hand, music is a universal phenomenon just like language. It exists only in terms of social interaction and it is a learned behaviour. It involves the behaviour of learned individuals and groups of individuals (Merriam, 1964).

Music is a part of culture that is given high profile especially among the Africans. Its uses are enormous, though it strictly depends on the societies. Music is used as a means of transfer of values of a community from one generation to the other. Its uses are not only seen as social interaction but as means of documentation of communal values. It involves all other areas of interaction in the communities such as religion, recreational and rites, among others. However, music remains the application of sounds that reflect the values of the society where it is established in order to stimulate the emotion of its audience to a reaction (Yekini-Ajenifuja, 2004).

Arguably, language is a major factor in music. It is incorporated into music to properly touch the emotion of the people. Although sound (instrumental) could also perform the same function but music with language (vocal) is more unique and fundamental to the people in terms of communication than music without words or text. This affirmation does not mean that instrumental music does not have its place in societies. There is instrumental music that communicates as well. If people can communicate and understand themselves in the local languages, there seems to be more confidence in the relationship that exists among such people in the global market. In this era where foreign civilization is introduced to Africa by the colonial masters to the extent that English language has become a major tool of instruction and communication, and the indigenous ones become inferior, music can be used as a tool to resurrect these languages. The presence of the Europeans in Nigeria is still felt till date that most learned citizens are euro-literate cultured in European values traditions and concepts to the extent that the medium of communication in their households is the language of the 'masters'. The Europeans have therefore succeeded in moving Africans away from Afro-literacy to Euro-literacy. This has eaten so deep into the fabrics of the society that, most of the citizens have in one way or the other become Eurocentric in their behaviours. The entertainment industry in Nigeria is not absolved of this, as most of the artistes in this industry imbibe all sorts of foreign styles in their arts hook, line and sinker. However, interestingly enough, there are some popular musicians who are now making use of the indigenous languages in their music. The hip-hop musicians in Nigeria for instance, are incorporating these languages that some of the vocabularies are now generic in the continent.

The dearth of indigenous languages in Nigerian society can also be traced to the introduction of the present 'modern' educational system and approach of the missionaries and the colonial masters. For instance, Fafunwa (1991) records that prior to 1925, the British government had no clearly defined policy on education on its African colonies. The best they could do that time reflected in the first statement made by the British Privy Council's Committee on Education in 1847 when it vaguely referred to the need for 'securing better condition of life and development of the African as a peasant on the land'.

The British government supported the mission schools who were the main proprietors, and the approach was western in everything. The school boys were encouraged and ‘brainwashed’ to see themselves as Europeans and therefore did everything in English ways, and considered the indigenous practices not only inferior, but satanic, barbaric, and idolatrous. The school boys were also used as choirboys in the church. They were introduced to English songs; hymns, anthems, for a very long time. This really ate deep like cancer into the pupils that everything about them must be English. The missionaries were also seen as super humans who did not belong to the *Homo sapiens* specie.

What is language?

According to Webster Dictionary (1998) “language is viewed abstractly as a system of forms and conventions used for communication in a community”. Primarily, language could be the use of words, their pronunciation, and the methods of combining them to make meaning to the community where it is established. Language could also be in form of signs (arts) or symbols adopted by communities, and professionals for easy communication. In some world cultures, language and music are used as means of documentation and also as a means of expressing their values. In doing that, language becomes a major symbol of their communication. That is why Akpabot (1986) says ‘African music borrows much from vocal music which in turn is tied to speech melody and speech rhythm’. Speech melody and speech rhythm are inter-related. Language or its speech rhythm then becomes a major factor of consideration in music composition in Africa.

Every community has its language and such language could be peculiar to it or relative to other close communities. For instance, the Yorùbá, southwestern Nigeria has a general Yoruba language that is common to all, but each sub-ethnic group still has its own variety, which are derivatives of the central one. There are languages that have gained international recognition and uses, for example, English, Spanish, French, German, Russian, Chinese, Arabic, and Portuguese. Some have also gained regional identity such as Hausa language which is widely spoken in Northern Nigeria and in some other parts in Africa. The Yoruba language is also widely spoken in Western Nigeria and in some other parts in Africa, Cuba, and Brazil. But, there are some languages that are not known outside their domain, but through music such languages have become generic. Through contemporary music, some vocabularies have become generic among societies outside the original speakers’ environment. For instance, the word ‘*Igwe*’ emanated from the Igbo of the southeastern Nigeria, and today the whole of Southern and Eastern African communities have adopted this vocabulary. It is music and other similar arts that have brought this into the limelight.

What is music?

Music is a common phenomenon in every culture. Vidal (2002) identifies that “Music is a play with sound, a paragon of the experience and activities of man; a reflection of those experiences and activities as well as a model to both”. Music has proved to be a major fact in the life of man. It constitutes a means by which man expresses his emotions, feelings and sentiments. Furthermore, man has also used it to nurture his growth, and transfer his

intuitions and values. In Africa where music is functional, every activity and ceremonies go together with music. However, this made music to be an indispensable art in the culture. Music could be in form of vocal, instrumental or both. The choice depends on its purpose or uses. In Africa, instrumental music borrows much from vocal music (Akpabot, 1986). However, vocal music is more in use and more meaningful because of its verbal way of communication. In the right perspective, the concept of music in Africa is that of total art. It goes beyond the western concept of singing, or playing of instruments. The concept of music in Africa incorporates other sister arts; dance, costume, mime, movement, poetry, hairdo, drama, and other arts that are imperatives to the artistic sensibilities of the community.

Relationship between Language and Music

Language and music are inseparable arts that cohabit in a way that three domains of man-cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains of both performers and audience become active and functional. Agawu (2003) submits:

Language and music occupy different levels in the hierarchy of modeling system. As the primary means of communication in the society, language is higher because it has conceptual priority over music. On the other hand, music, because it remains indispensable, and because it includes and at the same time transcends language's more pragmatic function, often lead us into realms that are experientially higher than language (p. 2).

These two arts are interwoven. Language is used mostly in music to express its meaning and that is why Scruton (1999) sees music as instrument of 'Language and Emotions'. Music is divided into two; vocal and instrumental. Vocal music extensively depends on language for its composition and usage. Language is fundamental in vocal music and is also unique in its presentations. Scruton (1999: 78) adds that: "It is language which provides us with an articulate picture of the world and which permits us to think abstractly, so emancipating our thought from present experience and present desire."

The local language adopted in music helps in the understanding of music to a large extent. Music appeals to the soul through sound but language drives home the emotional thought sound carries. Language and music have adopted almost the same form of structure. But mostly music borrows much from language. In the traditional African society music is expected to give information through either instrument or vocal means. Language takes a very important place in dispersing of information than instrumental means. For any information to be passed across; language is very inevitable but instrumental music even though it also passes information, its use as a language medium requires a matured mind to understand its meaning. It needs a mature mind that is already friendly with that medium. The use of language in music depends on the poetic nature of a particular community and that is what contributes to the different music of different communities.

In most cases, language is set to music and on the other hand music is also set to language. However, the rules or structure of language and music must be adhered to strictly. The poet must possess the power of imagination and expression through which he expresses praise, protest, evoking the ancestral gods, making suggestions for common good, moral advices,

imparting knowledge, and other dictates of the society. This area of values impacts more when it is set to musical forms. The retentive factor of the value is music or else it becomes a mere talk and can easily fade away or forgotten. It is more imperative in the traditional African society where oral tradition existed as a major form of documentation.

Music as a Tool for Preservation of Language

It is not an overstatement to say that language and music are two elements that are jointly used for the same purpose. Music uses language as accompaniment in the dissemination of information to its audience. The integration of music and language does not only influence the mode of performance, but also influences the distinctive characteristics of a singing style and its harmony (Addo; Miya and Potgieter 2013: 236). In other words, this retains the message of the music in the minds (lives) of the audience who are members of the society. In the traditional African society, poetry, proverbs, history, literature, were memorized and recited/performed as the case may be.

The immediate post-colonial experience at the primary school level in Nigeria also made use of the indigenous languages as instructional tools for the pupils. Part of the methodologies then, was the use of songs as instructional materials. This initially helped in preserving the languages of the society. Until, recently when all and sundry considered the ‘masters’ language superior to the indigenous ones. Since an average African child lives in music from cradle, it is paramount that the use of music without doubt, will not only preserve the language, but, in addition shall make it more popular outside its immediate domain. Most of the folklores, tales and educative songs that are transmitted from generations to generations can still be used by the artistes if well handled that it will still appeal to the members of the society. Though, the verbal meaning encapsulated in song texts may only be understood by the community that performs it or owns the language, because the hidden nuances of songs that incorporate proverbs, riddles and references are typical or unique to specific communities Addo et al (2013:238).

The fact remains, however, that values and ethos of the society which are healthier to the survival of the society at large are integrated in these materials. When the indigenous languages are used in popular music, artistic sensibilities become more tenable and attractive in a way that craftsmanship involved becomes more appreciated. Nzewi et al (2001) summarize text in African music as occurring on the following levels: “Song, being the vocal aspects of song; meta-song, being the language of instruments’ visual poetry of dance, being the choreographed metaphor; extra-musical, being the symbolic.” Again, the educational institutions in Nigeria have roles to play in preservation of the indigenous language, especially at the primary school level. For instance, most of the nursery rhymes taught in the primary schools are not only in foreign languages, but also, strange to the culture of the environment. To buttress this, samples below compare the educational benefits the pupils would derive:

Rain, rain go away,
Rain, rain go away,
Come again another day
Little Jerry wants to play.

Òjọ nro, sere ninu ile
Òjọ nro, sere ninu ile
Ma wonu ojo,
Ki aso re ma ba tutu
Ki otutu ma ba mu e

Translation:

It's raining, play indoors
It's raining, play indoors
Stay not in the rain
To avoid wet clothing
To avoid cold/fever

The emphasis from the above is that the first rhyme in English language is mere entertaining, and this is more common of the rhymes that are not indigenous derived. Most rhymes from African environment are not only educative; they are also beneficial in one way or the other to the growth of the child. Rhymes remind and refresh minds of the children of the community about the dos and don'ts of the community. Civic education studies are taught through such rhymes. In the spheres of contemporary music, it is becoming more evident that Nigerian indigenous languages are becoming more popular not only in the country, but outside the country as well. The popular midnight crew song that had fusion of both foreign and indigenous languages is so popular that the hit track in the music is the one that makes use of the indigenous language. Most of the post colonial musicians in Nigeria made use of the indigenous languages in their music, and till date the music remains evergreen, to the extent that the younger musicians are now remixing some of these hit tracks.

Conclusion

It is imperative here to note that one major characteristic of Homo sapiens is that they are both rational and social beings, among other things. This means that they live purposely in an organized socio-political environment, which is arguably induced by the need to attain some common good, pursue common interests, or for the purpose of self-preservation (Fasiku (2008:83). This cannot be achieved however, if there is no cohesion among the members of the society. In the traditional African society the society leans on musical arts performance as one of the tools in achieving this common goal of the community, and this also involves the use of language of the community in transmitting these goals.

The easiest way of record keeping in the traditional society is through music, especially vocal music. One of the means of keeping the norms and values that are healthy to the modern Nigerian society therefore, is to encourage educational institutions, artistes and other art practitioners to make use of the indigenous languages in their works. It is evident that this effort has innate benefits in technological advancement of the developed nations. For instance, Japan and China that are now becoming world leaders in technological advancement did not embrace foreign languages; before the technological advancement of these nations, their arts were not premised on foreign languages.

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