

Nigerian Popular Music: Social Mediation Amid Musicality

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Abstract: Music is a fundamental feature of the African society. One of its indispensable values is its entertainment function. Music has also been used overtime to engender positive social changes in the society. Using this popular medium, traditional African musicians and poets have used their composing ingenuity not only to please their audience but also to lampoon, satirize, moralize, preach and call for individual and collective changes or conformity to established social, religious, or cultural norms, as the circumstances dictate. In Nigeria's recent past, the late Fela Anikulapo- Kuti, Sunny Okosun, Ebenezer Obey, and Osita Osadebe are examples of musicians who used their music to comment on the challenges of life in Nigeria and elsewhere. They also gained popularity from the entertainment value of their various kinds of music. However, commercialisation brought about by the realities of the socio-political and economic conditions of life seems to have made the music of emerging Nigerian musicians lose social relevance. This article studies via document analysis the thematic trends in some of the songs of Asa, a popular Nigerian musician who has received wide acclaim across the world. This paper concludes that social relevance and commercial success are two states which can be achieved simultaneously by emerging Nigerian musicians without apprehension, especially in a world which rates commercial success as a parameter for popularity.

I. INTRODUCTION

Art forms are manifestations of the artist's introspections. They are creative forms which reflect the interpretations of personal, social, political or economic realities of the artist's world or perceptions of it. The socio-economic and political realities of the African existence and indeed that of the entire world have necessitated the artist to go beyond using his/her art as a means of entertainment only. The role accorded the artist in traditional Africa has been one which Bamidele (14) describes as "striding between the image of the sustainer of the community and its institutions and the prophet or seer". Contemporary artist's now view their roles as that of advocates of change; socio-political and economic. Writers, musicians, painters, sculptors among others who are conscious of their roles to the society, use their art forms as mediums to call for the much needed change in their societies. Perhaps this is why Soyinka in the prefatory notes to *Opera Wonyosi* defines his perception of the role of art as exposing "the decadent, rotten underbelly of a society that has lost its direction" (xi). Kgositsile (155) quoting Feinberg stresses that "the revolutionary poet, concretizes the dreams of people for a better life, the liberation movement fight to make these dreams a reality".

Music as an art form has also become a crucial tool to get across to a large number of people. For African musicians, their commitment to engendering change and exposing the ills of the society has been explored to a significant extent, at least by some of the older generation of musicians and a few younger generation ones. The generation of South Africa's Miriam Makeba, Ermelo "Lucky" Dube, Lengane Ngeyetha and the legendary Fela Anikulapo Kuti of Nigeria among others, have exposed challenges of cultural imperialism, human right violations, military occupation and its attendant dictatorial rulership, corruption, and economic imbalances among many others in their music. While various genres of music co-exist in Africa, the entertainment, instructive and educative roles it plays cannot be overemphasized.

Overview Of Popular Music In Nigeria

Popular music refers to music which has wide appeal. Although popular music is sometimes called pop music, the two terms are not interchangeable. While popular music could be referred to as music of all ages that appeals to wide spread tastes, pop music usually refers to a specific musical genre. Popular music in Nigeria reflects the infusion of a number of traditional music forms and instruments which perhaps engenders its wide spread acceptance.

The earliest styles of Nigerian popular music according to "Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia" were 'palm-wine music' and 'highlife' and these two genres influenced the development of a popular music tradition especially in the emergence of popular Yoruba music forms such as juju and apala.

Ideologies of some musicians have found expression in these popular forms which endeared them and their music to the masses of a country which had seen turbulence and violence as a result of forced unification of diverse cultures to a single of modern nation state.

Notable Nigerian musicians whose music clamoured against socio-political and economic imbalances include the late Fela Anikulapo Kuti, Orlando Owoh, Dan Maraya Jos, Osita Osadebey, Lagbaja, Asa and a host of others. These musicians express their desire for better standards of living for the teeming masses. Fela Anikulapo Kuti is famous for his anti-governmental stance which he reveals in a series of musical hits, earning the ire of the government. He tackled

such diverse issues as poverty, traffic hold ups, military brutality, endemic hunger and skin-bleaching. Despite being jailed and brutalized, Fela Anikulapo Kuti continued to criticize the government in his songs. With such eclectic titles as “Teacher don’t Teach me Nonsense”, “Zombie”, “African Woman”, “Colomental”, “Trouble Sleep, Yanga go Wake am” “Yellow Fever”, “Don’t Worry About My Yansh” and so on, the lyrics of the legendary musician lives on, testimony to the role he played with his music in the socio-political life of the people.

In later years, number of social conscious music form and lyrics emerged in the Nigerian scene. Prominent of which was Reggae music. The likes of Ras Kimono, Majek Fashek African China and Daddy Showkey, Baba Fryo, Daddy U-Turn among others blazed music scene with their personalized genre of music and lyrics having social contents.

Other musical innovations in Nigeria have witnessed emergence of western influenced music genres such as hip hop. Afro Hip hop in Nigeria dates back to the late eighties and early nineties with groups and solo artists such as Junior & Pretty, Daniel 'Danny' Wilson, Remedies, Eddy Remedy & Tony Tetuila. In the late 90s and the early years of the new millennium, groups like the duo of Peter & Paul Okoye (P-Square), Modenine, Terry tha Rapman, Weird M.C, Jazzman Olofin, Baba Dee, The Mo' Hits crew, and 9ice, Lord of Ajasa,, became part of mainstream Nigerian hip hop music scene.

However, Obafemi’s position that “entertainment and instruction come as ultimate goals in drama and other creative products” (1) is questioned by the themes of a significant number of popular music of contemporary times. Although Onyeji (25) stresses that the popular musician is an entertainer, the ideological undertones of these art forms cannot be underemphasized. Emielu (489) posits that as ideologies are reflected in the values, beliefs and ideas, embedded in songs and other forms of art, “the predominance of any musical style... is a product of the time”. Musical products of “the times” have seen the emergence of an ideology of moral latitude which resulted in some of these productions to be banned from being played in public places. An analysis of some of the lyrics reveal extra-sensuous thoughts while promoting principles that could be questioned such as drinking, partying, womanizing and indulging in vices. These themes have popularized these songs especially among the youths.

The duo of singers, Zule Zoo released a controversial song in 2005 titled “Kerewa”. This song portrayed lewd and suggestive themes which many found offensive but was highly accepted by the youths. Other Nigerian songs that have been banned by the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) include Femi Kuti's “Bang Bang Bang”, Idrees Abdulkareem's “Jaga Jaga”, Konga's “Baby Konga”, Tuface's ‘Enter the Place’ video and Dbanj's “Suddenly”. The controversial and hilarious hit song (and the video), “Ekaette”, by Maye Hunta (Olumayowa Adekunle Odejimi) was also

banned by the NBC five months after its release. Citing claims of “graphic description of sexual scenes and expression not presented with fact and discretion”. Radio and television stations were therefore requested ‘to immediately stop further broadcast of this musical and air only a broadcast version (if any)...”

Despite these series of bans placed on some popular music from being played in public places, others yet are receiving national and international acclaim and awards. In December, 2011, foremost international news company, CNN International released a list of ten top African music stars. Nigerian singer, Asa led the list with the Nigerian-German singer and songwriter, Nneka and pop singer 2face Idibia coming third and fourth respectively. The top ten list was compiled based on fame, fan base, number of international concerts and universality of theme.

This paper posit that while popular music is meant to entertain, ideologies and themes put up in the lyrics should also reflect the socio-political and economic realities of the times.

Background to Asa's Music

Bukola Elemide now better known as Asa is renowned for her music which fuses pop, rhythm and blues, soul and reggae. Much of her music portrays metaphors for an ignorant and indifferent society which if unchecked could lead to wide scale destruction which would be impossible to ignore by everyone. Other songs reveal her commitment to hope, peace and an insightful perspective on love and spirituality.

Her debut album which is self-titled and released in 2007 reveals Asa’s vision of not just an egalitarian Nigeria, but a deep rooted desire for world peace and love. This album is a platform which portrays her perception of her world. In an on-line interview, Asa says of her music; “I want my music to touch people as an African, I want to show the world that something beautiful and positive can come out of the black continent and inspire young people all over the world”.

Thematic Analysis of Selected Songs of Asa

“Fire on The Mountain”

Asa’s first single track, “Fire on The Mountain” is a metaphor for the indifference the society is showing towards the gross human right violations, senseless wars and man’s uncensored desire for wealth at the expense of world peace. She calls for peace in a world characterized by political wars and economic crisis, hunger and mercenary activities which are all detrimental to the masses. For this, she repeats the refrain;

There is fire on the mountain
And nobody seems to be on the run
Oh there is fire on the mountain top
And no one is’ah running.
 (“Fire on The Mountain”, 2007)

Asa equally questions the death of innocent children while the men go about seeking a living through fighting and killing. She explores universal issues of violence, high infant mortality rates and the continued mining of conflict minerals which have and are causing immeasurable sufferings and even death to millions of innocent people around the world.

As a committed artist, Asa tries to identify causes for the growing indifference to world peace and the emphasis on individual salvation and economic gain;

Tell me who's responsible
For what we teach our children
Is it the internet?
Or the stars on television
Why o why o...
("Fire on The Mountain", 2007)

The loss of the innocence of youth characterized by sixteen year old Lucy buttresses Asa's position that popular culture needs to be censored to mitigate the wide range of negative effects.

So little Lucy turns sixteen,
And like the movie she's been seeing
She has a lover in her daddy
She can't tell nobody...
'till she makes the evening news
("Fire on The Mountain", 2007)

Lyrics calling for immediate change in the existing individualistic lifestyle of the world's population is the remedy Asa proffers before irreparable damage is wreaked;

One day the river will overflow
And there'll be nowhere for us to go
And we will run, run...
Wishing we had put out the fire...
("Fire on The Mountain", 2007)

"Jailer"

"Jailer" is yet another song in which Asa portrays the metaphor of slavery and oppression of all forms in the world. Economic and political slavery and real prison oppressions are portrayed as negative developments from which no one, not even the slave masters or the oppressors are immune. Policy makers according to the song, eventually feel both the perceived positive and the negative effects of policies made. This position, Asa makes subtly using the proverb of stones and market places and recommending a more humane approach to making decisions that will affect people around;

You see, if you walking in the market place
Don't throw stones
Even if you do you just might hit
One of your own
Life is not about your policies all the time
So you better rearrange your philosophies
And be good to your fellow man jailer
("Jailer" 2007)

The real jail set up also receives comments as Asa emphasizes that just like the prisoners who wear uniforms, the prison officials equally wear uniforms and are also confined within the prison wall just like the prisoners. In this song Asa employs biblical allusion. The repetitions of the lines; "Let he who is without sin/ Be the first to cast the stone" acknowledges that slavery and oppression are social realities caused by all members of the society and only the collective effort and determination of the people is the panacea to erode the system. Her position is to call the attention of the Nigerian government and indeed world government to the awareness that their actions, inactions and decisions are capable of confining the world population into suffering and poverty.

"360c"

Asa in this song criticizes the wanton waste of lives, livelihoods, peace, and development in the world. This song calls for peace, unity, an inward looking effort by the people it also calls for unity irrespective of colour. Mostly, her songs cut across the boundaries of race, religion and economic status. Her songs are aimed at calling for a change from the general environment of oppressor and the oppressed, a call for economic stability, religious tolerance and issues germane to world peace. As such, she emphasizes the need for change to stop the waste occurring around us. The urge to change, Asa maintains is in all man who care enough see and listen to happenings around him.

You don't have to climb the highest mountain
For all you are looking for is within you
Open your eyes of your mind your ears and mouth
As I sing my song
... many a day they waste away
But nevertheless its never late
("360c" 2007)

Other songs in her debut album such as "Bibanke", "Eye Adaba" and "So Beautiful" reveal Asa's sensitivity to other issues of life and existence such as love, motherhood, trust and heartache. She bridges the language gap of singing in English by adding her indigenous Yoruba language in some of her compositions. This coupled with her zest for live performances has ensured that her songs enjoy a wider listenership drive.

Solution Proffered

Conscientizing the people through the arts has continued to gain prominence among artists; writers, poets, songwriters, musicians and so on who are conscious of events around them. Challenged by the myriad of controversies, oppressive tendencies and uncommitted leadership across the African continent, socially conscious musicians especially try to awaken their societies to the need for a change in attitude and orientation through their songs. They have continued to show relentless commitment to engendering societies where people live in peace without economic stratification. This has

not restricted their productions from being entertaining enough for them to enjoy commercial relevance and acclaim.

With the influx of foreign cultures and values which have eroded time honoured conservative Africa, the intrusion of alien cultures has put the cultural, moral and social growth of the Nigerian and indeed the African youth at risk. Youths of these days now find it difficult functioning as members of communities that pride itself on morality, decency, justice and rational thoughts and behaviors.

Agents of socialization such as television, the internet, the radio and the digital satellite networks have brought the entire world in such close proximity that social tenets have cross fertilized producing ways of life so different that sociologists and other culture researchers need to constantly research the changes discovered in the societies.

For these reasons, Asa and her songs and other musicians should be conscious of the contents of their songs as they are social commentaries and agents of socialization for the younger generation.

II. CONCLUSION

This paper has looked at the social relevance of contemporary Nigerian music and the thematic content of the songs. With emphasis on the songs of Asa, (Bukola Elemide), the paper asserted that concern for humanity is a role which the artist has always played. The analysis of the Asa's songs shows that issues of peace, hunger, suffering, war and child molestation are global problems challenging the continued survival of the world's population. The paper concludes that, with the international clamour on the need to engender world peace, the artist in Nigeria should be committed to the cause and not place total emphasis on commercial success at the expense of fulfilling time honoured roles of sustaining the continued egalitarian and peaceful existence of their society. From the top chart listing Asa and her songs enjoy, it is incontestable that social relevance of themes in the lyrics of Nigerian songs does not deny the artist and his/her producer(s) recognition or box office returns.

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