

Esa Music and the Struggle for Relevance in the 21st Century

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Abstract: Esa music is originally a chant/song music genre that was used exclusively in the worship of Sango the god of thunder and lightening and the masquerade spirit in Yoruba land. Esa vocalization makes use of free speech rhythms. It mostly comprise of linear unit with poetic line running into another to complete a poetic statement. The songs are used mainly to link the fragments of the chants creating a unilined interlocking structure between the songs and the instrumental accompaniment. The dwindling patronage in Esa practice has driven the practitioners into a struggle for relevance in the 21st century. This has enlarged the scope of its performance beyond its local setting into a genre in Christian worship. The adoption requires a variation in practice as well as modification of the text of the chant/songs to suit its present audience. Seven artistes were interviewed and the extent of their struggle documented accordingly. The study examines Esa music practitioners and their contributions to Yoruba musical value and reconstruction.

Key words: Worship, rhythms, interlocking structure, practitioners, scope, Abraka

INTRODUCTION

Rapid economic, growth and social well-being constitute the development imperative of developing countries of the world and indeed, remain the moral goal of the international community. This involves the attainment of the sufficient levels of economic development order allow for a progressive improvement in the material standard of living of the populace. Effective practice of the arts requires a challenge to integrate the skills, abilities, gifts and talents of the practitioners of the traditional classics for the promotion of the creative musical genres in Nigeria. This is done in order to promote and uphold core professional values in consonance with the demands for sustainable growth in music practice and the creative discipline in the humanities. Healthy competition among artistes encourages and stimulates positive interaction and constructive reconstruction of the artistes creative ability. This often lead to the formulating of objective principles that serve as basic foundation upon which artistic development in music can be groomed.

The vital inputs and contribution of traditional artistes and their struggle towards the progress and development of Nigerian music in the 21st century and the value it has added to the rating of traditional musical classics is the focus of this study. The study examines the biography of six Esa artistes and their individual assessment of the genre.

ESA MUSICAL FORM

Esa is a chant in recitative form closer in form to song than speech. It is a chant-song form with structural sound patterns and constructive communication. Esa genre is text-based with symbolic use of words and allusion varying from place to place. It is monophonic in concept and the subject is centred on praise and adoration. It makes use of rhythmic variance devices and the musical form is call and response.

Esa is an Egungun masquerade chant/song in Yoruba land. The songs act as function of termination from one episode of the chant to another. It is a chant/musical crafting that is influenced by the ideological ethics of the Egungun chant members. According to Olajubu (1978) the audience of an Esa musical performance is usually a large one in fact, it is the Yoruba oral poetry/song performance that draws the largest and most varied audience.

Euba (2008) describes Esa music as an oral art that is transmitted through the medium of performance in sound. He explains further that the medium of performance is different from that of ordinary speech in that the latent musical elements are projected to the foreground in poetical speech.

Nketia (2009) observes that most of what goes as poetry among many African peoples constitutes the vocal aspect of their music. This shows that the nature of Yoruba music creates or provides an avenue to the appreciation of Yoruba oral poetry.

ENTREPRENEURER DEVICES OF ESA PRACTITIONERS

Variety is the spice of modern presentation of traditional classics. Thus, a skilful Esa musician is versatile in areas of rhythmic variation, modification of style and improvisation on a musical idea. Nzewi (2003)'s argument on creativity in African music circles round the four stations of creative logic. He believes that the journey into artistic creativity is an infinite process that starts at the fertile plane of creativity philosophy along which germinates creative intention which inform the negotiation of creative rationalization manifested at the terminus station of creative fulfilment at which a fresh journey in creative re-performance of the same material is initiated.

The emphasis of Nzewi on creative rationalization is quite relevant to the struggle of Esa practitioners for recognition because it requires some ratio of intelligence on the part of the artiste. The manipulation of his/her skills depends on the musical ability and performances devices.

The determination to improve on a musical genre depends on the artistes within the culture who take responsibility for its quality and property. Esa music makers provide understanding and also explanation for intelligent and meaningful actions in some aspects of praise that are associated with God in performance.

THE MUSICAL INTEGRATION IN ESA

The voice and the drums are usually integrated in the new Esa chanting performance; this is to reveal the nature of relationship in music. This kind of action, reflect a good working link between chanting and drumming. The lines of the chant form the religious and social identity that shows the vitality of musical expression. The Esa chanting evokes astonishing rhythmic sensibility. It is the songs that sustain the chants and subsequently forms a kind of interaction in the performance.

The degree of fusion in the voice production of Esa is heightened by the restrictive standard of intensive training that every Esa artiste undergoes before graduation. The integration between the voice and instrumental accompaniment is hierarchical. The voice of the chant is more dominant or plays a principal role while the drum accompaniment plays supportive or subordinate role. The value acquired by this integration creates harmonious interaction in Esa performance.

Esa music in the church is not just a matter of content and context but of attitudes and understanding of the role it now plays. Esa artistes even in the church perform as

culturally equipped artistes that deserve as much respect and recognition as Esa artistes in the traditional settings. This calls for open attitude of the audience in order to secure its relevance as a form of cultural identity in the church. The diversified usage of Esa is considered as a curiosity for the knowledge of indigenous music in Christian liturgy.

The culture of Esa presentation assumes individual processes thus the choice of the genres must be oriented toward seeking the significance of its usage. The value set by the old Esa genre is equally good and the comparison of both genres reveals that musical value needs to be related to determine its qualities, acceptance, variance and possibilities. Esa traditional music can be seen as a creation or construction influenced by historical and ideological ethics of the hunters. Nevertheless, its departure from this setting has resulted into fusion of religion and cultural processes.

SEQUENTIAL CHANTING PATTERN

In chanting, rotational pattern dominates the performance this is called antiphony. This form of performance represents a core musical practise between two individual voices. The musical dialogue occurs in chanting in order to allow the most versatile performer to express additional facts to complement the presentation of the previous chanter. The characteristics of the language and the components of the musical elements embedded in the chants are also revealed by this practice. Esa performance is done in turns by at least two artistes. The difference between the chanting pattern of the two artistes increases as they manifest their skills. The two artistes chant one after the other accompanied by percussive instruments, mainly drums yet the style does not express isolation or loneliness rather it expresses exclusive dominance of language and drumming skills. There is internalized social interaction in Esa performance which also represents dominance. It becomes necessary to hear the support of the back-up singers the moment the chanter raises a song after which the chant continues to flow.

In Yoruba traditional chanting procedures two forms are recognized, the responsorial and antiphonal forms in which the chanter chants the lines of his works and then introduce a song, singing only the solo/call while the audience answers by singing the response only. The words of the song that form the call vary continuously while the responses are simple and repetitive. The chanter on his part imparts information, both verbally and musically and the chorus confirms and conforms to whatever the chanter says. The antiphonal relation is

therefore, fundamentally unequal, an inequality which can further be enhanced by silences between call and response.

Turn taking either between chanters or between a chanter and the audience requires exceptional language and musical skills. This is because this interactive relationship demands versatility and exciting text and melo-rhythmic flow of the songs, on the part of the chanter for the relationship to work effectively.

ESA MUSICAL PRACTITIONERS AND THE STRUGGLE FOR RELEVANCE

The 21st century is faced with many challenges such as financial social, mental and political crisis, this has made the desire to succeed at all cost in whatsoever one does become the survival of the fittest. Esa musician dreaded the predictions of the genre as it dwindles into extinction as a result of low patronage. The fear of becoming irrelevant led to the struggle for the revival and transformation of the genre from its original setting to a more financially rewarding one.

Artistes in Yoruba musical tradition acquire performance competence through observation, musical involvement/participation in situations of interactive music making. These are the very sites from which the artistes acquire musico-artistic skill, aesthetic ideas and beliefs by participating in the social-musical activities. Isola Opo, one of the best Christian Esa artistes observes that social-musical interactions take place early in a child's life. He comments that his musical competence and skills and the ability to recognize and express musical thoughts were aided by his father's musical competence and consciousness. He expresses how prolific his father was in chanting and verbalized drumming. He notes here that one of the fundamental aspects of musical competence is communicative competence.

According to him, he sometimes makes some musical and chanting utterances that beat his imagination. He says that would not have been possible if he had not been adequately exposed to indigenous manner of participation in musical performances from childhood. He comments that by attending musical occasions, a child imbibes from his parent the skills of music making, value drumming, judgement and gestural responses that echo one's performance appraisal by the audience and spontaneous musical compositions that are suitable for mood regulation. They also acquire social competence through this timely exposure.

Bisi Adununbarin Keji argues that musical skills entail more than mastery of a musical structure which enables one to make patterned sounds. To her, musical

skills involve the understanding of sound patterns which are used in social-musical settings. She believes that even though there are conventional ways of making music, an artiste must strive to create his/her own identity by using sound patterns in unique ways. What makes an artiste unique according to her is the ability to transfer the experience he/she has acquired from his/her involvement in adult groups into tangible musical substance that often gives rise to new innovations in musical creativity.

She also observes that what make an artiste to stand out are the gifts of a good voice quality and a good vocal production of words with appropriate dictions. An artiste must strive to creatively interpret music in context, constructing sound qualities and patterns to suit the audience and the occasion. This is the distinguishing factor in musicianship. She argues further that an artiste can only achieve status through his/her powers to choose or select musical materials, gestures and words, etc., to demonstrate his/her originality in creating an aura based on his/her imaginations and cognitive world.

This is a world that is redolent with meanings associated with the society's physical settings and community history. She explains that a traditional musician in Yoruba land is a selfless artiste who finds great delight in the training of young artistes; giving them the proficiency that is required to make them relevant in the future. He/she does not only teach them music but also teaches them how to make music relevant to the continuity of community and spiritual or religious values. Bisi Adununbarin Keji is a product of two chanting traditions: Esa and Ijala. Her father taught her Esa while her grandmother taught her Ijala. According to her, Esa is the actualisation and the transmission of life's threatening warfare situations of valiant hunters. She was taught the hunters chronological songs, dirges, verbal instrumentation and hunters ceremonial music. She explains that the training approaches to the aspects of specialization mentioned above vary according to the musical requirements for expertise. These can all be classified under traditional method of musicianship that may be termed indigenous apprenticeship system.

Ogunmola Ogundeji whose praise names are Akanni Oke and Omo Oloye Apakuta, meaning the son of the chief of those who crack stones argues that the versatility for musical practice requires the following: He argues that spontaneous creation of music on the spot of performance is necessary in a chant/music genre if an Esa artiste lacks this quality, he will never be able to satisfy his audience.

Performance-composition: He argues that Esa is the vehicle of his performance and the song that sustains the

long chant is the fuel. An artiste may be able to create good chants but if he/she lacks the ability to compose good songs, his/her chants may be uninteresting.

Skilled improvisation: He comments that he can sing a song in four or five different ways using various rhythmic patterns to create various versions each time the song is performed. He says his passionate ways of rendering songs has made him relevant and has given him some social status as an Esa artiste.

The use of drums: Ogunmola does not play any musical instruments. Nevertheless, he dictates the drum patterns that he desires as accompaniment in all his performances. He understands the concept of African drumming so well that he verbalizes all his melo-rhythmic lines without limitation. Though he believes very much in his master drummer he however, suggests some basic melo-rhythm that would enrich his accompaniment.

Emphasis on call and response and instrumental techniques in performance: Ogunmola believes that the chanter and his drummers should inter-change the call and response roles between the leading voice and the instruments in musical performances. Though he has seen situations where the chanter would want to play the call role mainly to him it is not ideal. The synthesis between the chanter and his drummers create an ideal musical spectacle that stimulates audience positive support.

Lyrical content: Ogunmola disagrees with artistes who use the content of the books of psalms and proverbs mainly as chants. He says if a chanter is vast in oral poetry he/she would be able to determine the content of his/her chants and create them.

Interpretive skills for musical quality or effectiveness: He says further that an apprentice might take after the skills and techniques of his/her master as the common saying goes like teacher like pupil. But if a pupil is well tutored, he/she has no reasons not to be effective in his/her own distinctive way of making music. He asserts that his apprenticeship with his master for years made him competent in interpretive musical performance. He is a critic of oral poetry beyond being a poet himself. He has been invited to several places to judge Esa musical festivals/competitions in Oyan, Oyo, Ofa, Iwo and Osogbo. He concludes that an apprentice needs to acquire the interpretive performance skills before seeking freedom from his/her master.

Yemi Alajede, a versatile Esa master drummer observes that Yoruba traditional music has a basic underlying musical philosophy. He also observes that the music is in various types with different styles that functions under different musical situations. One of the musical philosophies is that the ability to make music is from God and that he gives it to whomever he deems fit. He says that he has a younger brother who does not understand the concept of music making however, he understands the concept of woodcarving and drum making. In Yoruba land, creative potential is said to be innate in every person but it may remain dominant in whoever fails to activate it.

Yoruba believe in the ability of Ayan, God drumming (or a legendary drummer). They believe that it was Ayan who handed down artistic-musical drumming traditions to the drummers and that whoever refuses to pay homage to him might lose his drumming skills. Alajede's belief on the philosophy of music agrees with Nzewi's argument that:

Artistic vision unfolds along a four stations of creative logic. The journey into artistic creativity is an infinite process which starts at the fertile plane of creative philosophy along which germinates creative intention which informs the negotiation of creative rationalization manifested at the terminus station of creative fulfilment at which a fresh journey in creative re-performance of the same material is initiated (Nzewi, 2003)

If we understand the writer, his emphasis is on creativity. He argues that though there is a basic creative philosophy in Africa there is also a basic creative intention or motive which in the context of Esa in Christian worship is to praise, worship, adore, appraise, to entertain and to heal. However, the theory of creative rationalization is different from the others. This is because it requires some ratio of intelligence on the part of the artiste. The manipulation of his skills depends on his musical ability and his performance device.

Jide Ayarinde whose praise name is ogindan ree omo olohun orin meaning, this is a lion with a sonorous voice, asserts that no matter how good an artiste may be if he is not encouraged and affirmed by both older and younger artistes of his time, he might lose confidence in him/herself. He says that the creative musical growth of every personality is enhanced by the encouragement of older artistes and the affirmation of one's ability by the younger artistes. He admits that it is natural for some

other artistes to be envious of one's musical abilities and so discredit one or label one as a musically ungroomed artiste. However, the acknowledgement of one another in situations where there are opportunities for everyone to participate and contribute to the advancement of the musical traditions of one's culture will eliminate strife and bring about unity among musicians.

He regrets that many artistes are not willing to develop themselves these days. He says that he was a student of baba Akeem, an expert drummer and he never hesitated to draw from the creative intelligence of his master whenever necessary. He says even though he has gained his freedom and he is now having his own apprentices, he still goes out with baba whenever his services are required. He says he has listened to the performances of many master drummers and he has come to conclude that every master drummer has his own unique ways of dramatizing his skills on the drums. He concludes saying that every artist should strive to cultivate a mastery of music making that will attract little or no criticism at performances.

Adeolu Ogundipe in his views emphasizes that the presentational contents of traditional Yoryuba music in performance is a combination of the artist's creative ability and the integration of the knowledge of the traditional music of his culture. He says whoever is able to apply the principle of musical creation of his culture in his music is a traditional artiste. He says the reality of the traditional elements of music in Esa is indeed an essential formation of presentational content. According to him, the knowledge of oral tradition is an enhancing factor in Esa rendition. To him, the social-historical reality of the themes of whatever chant a poet wants to render must be remembered as well as presented in contexts. If the poet is versatile in oral tradition, his/her countenance will be calm but if otherwise, he/she will always struggle to remember one thing or the other.

Ogundele Adeoyo, a medical doctor who is vast in Esa rendition is of the opinion that musical rendition entails the affective and effective musical communication. The recreational value and re-interpretations of musical conventions take into account what is appropriate for social contexts in music making. To him, music is a poem. It can be interpreted in many ways. The artiste and the audience derive multiple musical meanings from musical presentation depending on their mood at the time of the performance. Being a medical doctor, he understands that for the audience to be able to give appropriate meaning to music they must attain certain requirements that include the following:

- They must develop their perceptual skills which mean that there is need for a critic to take note of every development in a musical situation. He must be able to state specifically what he regards as good or bad music. He must also not be bound by his/her beliefs only in the assessment of a musical performance
- Cognitive understanding: A good listener is expected to device a technical method of processing music. He/she is not expected to be mono-causal in his/her approach. He/she is rather expected to be versatile in his/her understanding of the genre of music, the structure, the song formation, melodic and rhythmic devices and instrumental ensemble, etc.

Ajani Ogun, a notable Esa poet argues that musical creative talent is a gift endowed in the artiste by God. It is the Almighty God that gives the gifts to enable the recipients to render good musical services to mankind. According to him, it does not matter how much a person desires to master music if he/she is not endowed, he/she will never achieve any height musically. Musicians are said to be lazy in time past because people hardly notice the efforts they make in music making. Whoever is a musician must then have music running in his blood and must also be able to receive music from a supernatural source.

Esa traditional music is primarily vocal as it is text based and secondarily instrumental. This does not mean that there are no sections that are purely instrumental in the performance. The drum interludes are meant to provide sustenance for the chants and the song sections. There are many different kinds of vocal production in Yoruba music, raging from gracefully soft to unusually loud and nasalised production to energetic vocalizing. In Esa chanting genre, the voice quality must modulate between speech and voice range. It must be clear and rich in quality. Most of the songs that accompany Esa chanting are uncomplicated and are created within the smallest number of musical factors such as intervals, rhythm and form, etc. On the contrary, Yoruba instrumental music is quite rhythmically technical, complex and vigorous depending on the mood of the drummers.

Esa traditional music is distinct in its character and nature depending on its usage. It may serve as an aspect of worship in the church. It may also serve social functions, artistic functions, psychological functions and ritualistic functions, etc. Esa music plays a significant role in the daily lives of the Yoruba. According to Swooned music has many facets for its aspects include the historical, social structural, functional, physical, psychological cultural, aesthetic, symbolic and others. He

therefore, asserts that music must be studied from all the perspectives above since, no single perspective would seem complete without the others. Traditionally music in the culture of the Yoruba people functions in two different ways, secular and sacred. It functions secularly as in entertainment to celebrate birth, marriage and death. On the other hand, it functions sacredly to celebrate the gods in worship, festivals, rituals and rites.

CONCLUSION

Variety is the spice of modern presentation of traditional classics. Thus, a skilful Esa musician is versatile in areas of rhythmic variation, modification of style and improvisation on a musical idea. Nzewi (2003)'s argument on creativity in African music circles round the four stations of creative logic. He believes that the journey into artistic creativity is an infinite process that starts at the fertile plane of creativity philosophy along which germinates creative intention which inform the negotiation of creative rationalization manifested at the terminus station of creative fulfilment at which a fresh journey in creative re-performance of the same material is initiated.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

- Unemployment problem is similarly compounded by lack of innovation and creativity. The majority who are unable to think philosophically about areas of self employment remain unemployed. Government cannot give employment to all her citizens which makes it paramount for individual to struggle for survival
- The educational system in Nigeria needs to be overhaul in order to accommodate global challenges. The degrees awarded in the humanities should be more valuable and relevant to the societal needs courses that will make one creative should be included in the programme and dogmatic courses should be removed

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