

AFRICAN FOLK SONGS AS TRADITIONAL INSTRUMENTS FOR EDUCATION AND ENTERTAINMENT

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Abstract

The study of African songs have moved beyond dispassionate inquiry and the antiquated perspective that considered it a subject fit only for speculation by idle minds. With the present development in the area of African renaissance, acknowledging and claiming the African cultural heritage, the occasion has arisen to once again study African traditional songs to see their contributions towards the development of education in Africa. The burden of this work is to study African traditional songs, its dimensions or types and its contribution, particularly, to the area of African traditional education. To achieve this, the phenomenological and hermeneutic methods of inquiry were employed. This research discovered that African traditional songs, handed down from one generation to another orally, permeates every facet of African life, and thus occupies a fundamental place in the African traditional educational heritage.

Keywords: African, songs, education, traditional, societies, hermeneutics, value, educative.

Introduction

Education as an activity that goes on in every society has its aims and methods determined by the nature of society in which it operates. In traditional African societies, where knowledge was orally transmitted from one generation to another, the methods employed would certainly be different. It is, therefore, not surprising that proverbs, stories, songs, myths, symbols, etc., were employed for the accumulation, preservation, organization and transmission of knowledge and experience from one generation to another. Through the use of these vessels and methods of knowledge, the natured and

nurtured elements of individuals were developed to make them fit into society. In this way, people were socialized and made full-fledged members of the traditional society. They were employed, under the guidance and control of selected social agencies- parents, sacred specialists, kings, elders etc., to intentionally foster among its members its norms, values, purposes and organizations. This is meant to guide the members of society in the right and proper direction so as to enable them to achieve their goals, needs and aspirations.

This research focuses on African folk songs. And by African folk songs, the definition of the International Folk Music Council (cited in Scholes 1970) is adopted, as:

... the music that has been submitted to the process of oral transmission. It is the product of evolution and it is dependent on the circumstances of continuity, variation and selection... It can also be applied to music that is originated with an individual composer and has subsequently been absorbed into the unwritten, living tradition of a community. (p. 366).

In relation to culture and history, the Igbo folk songs are closely related to the Igbo culture and history. It serves as a storehouse for culture and history and also a medium for transmitting that culture and history. With this understanding, questions concerning the educative value of Igbo songs begin to emerge. Thus, this piece investigates the educative value of African traditional folk songs.

Theoretical Framework

The Inculturation theory is used to underpin this study. As a concept, it was first introduced into the academic community by Cardinal Sin of Manila at the Synod on Catechesis held in Rome in 1977, with focus on the need for an inculturation of Catholicism in a variety of forms. Generally, emerged as a theory in a bid to make the Christian religion, coached in Western culture at home in Africa through dialogue. Shorter (1988), Metuh (1993, 1996a and 1996b) and Walligo (1991 and 1996) had maintained that communication between human cultures can only take place effectively through dialogue and participation, through listening and through readiness to learn. Kurgat (2009) avers that it is only through interdependence in corporation, and congruence that conversions can successfully take place. There is an emerging consensus that culture is a developing process in which there is and there must be a continuous dialogue between faith and culture.

This is still very important as Schreiter (1991) observes that much of the continent of Africa still staggers under the burden of neo-Colonialism and continued economic subordination to the powerful cultures of Europe, Asia and North America. This theory is relevant in this study because we are dealing with developing an African educational methodology that would be in tandem with the African spirit. Its emphasis on dialogue, participation, through listening and through readiness to learn are very important principles for the development of an African system of education that allows for the interaction between education and culture.

Types of African Songs

The major characteristic of African folk songs is that they have functions.

Thus, Nnamani (2014) associates African songs with activities such as work, games, dances, wars, religious ceremonies, etc. No one in Africa sings without a purpose. It is therefore, not surprising that the different types of African songs differ with the differing of the activity or event that it accompanies. These include:

1. Entertainment songs

These songs are sung to entertain people who have come together for a celebration. They are usually praise songs to give accolade to the brave, like warriors, hunters, chiefs, kings etc.

2. War songs

These are sung before going into war to boost the morale of the warriors. These songs are so powerful that they can turn a weakling into a warrior; they can drive the mind into doing things that until hitherto it could not conceive of doing. This can also be sung before a wrestler goes into the open floor for a contest with his opponent. He is called all kinds of great names to boost his morale.

3. Funeral songs

These songs are sung to pour out grief, pain and sorrow over the death of a loved one. It also tells the great work that the dead has done and how the person in question would be missed by society. It also gives hope to the living that the dead still lives and has not completely departed.

4. Manual labour songs

This relates to the songs for war. Just as war songs boost the morale of warriors, manual labour songs has a way of boosting the moral of workers- especially farmers or weavers etc., to work harder. It energizes the worker and makes the tedious interesting. Women sing these songs while sweeping,

pounding, grinding, cooking, farming and during other domestic duties. Men sing them during hunting, fishing, farming, palm wine tapping, etc. During the slave trade, African slaves used songs to boost the overall happiness of the people they worked with. During times of difficult labour, they would break out into songs to pass the time and to lift their spirits of distraught workers.

5. Religious songs

These are sacred songs with extraordinary powers sung during religious festivals or worship at shrines in supplication and for spiritual upliftment. It is in this regard that Nzewi (1989) opines that worship finds its most respectful and satisfying mode of address in songs. Agu (1990) observes that they are sung in praise of the deity before whose shrine worshippers have come to welcome his or her presence to grant their requests. These songs are sung to glorify the deity and prepare the grounds for the manifestation of its power. During the singing, drums are used, dancing and clapping are allowed. Most times, in shrines where you have mediums, such songs throws them into ecstasy- they become possessed and fall to the ground revealing things that are hidden. Thus, Quarcoopome (1987) avers that:

Singing generates the avenue for expressing certain sentiments or truths, and in the context of rituals they demonstrate the faith of the worshipper from the heart- faith in God, belief in and about divinities, assurance and hope about the present and with reference to the hereafter. (p. 37).

6. Victory songs

These are songs sung for warriors when they have returned from war. It is a welcome song, usually sung when they have won the victory over the enemies of the village. No one sings these songs when warriors have failed in a battle. This can also be sung after a wrestler has won his opponent in a wrestling contest.

7. Consolation Songs

These are songs sung to console a person that misfortune has befallen. Usually it is geared towards giving the person hope; making him or her to understand that all is not lost and that if there is life new opportunities would avail themselves.

From the foregoing, it is observable that African songs permeate every facet of the African life, such that it is difficult to witness a social gathering that is devoid of songs and dances. At a local level, they occupied the place of press, radio and

publication in traditional African societies. Okafor and Emeka (1995) write that: "Music is unquestionably, the most widely practiced of the traditional arts in Nigeria. At anytime of the night or day, somewhere in the land, some music is being made" (p. 105).

Igbo Traditional Musical Instruments

The instruments employed during singing include giant slit wooden drums, flute, metal gong, xylophone, etc.



Flute

Source: Igbo Traditional Music and Musical Instruments (2015)

The OJA (Flute) is a piece of wood designed with a cavity inside, the top has a wide opening to fit the shape of the human lower lip, a small hole on the bottom and two smaller holes closer to the top on exact opposite side. The artist blows the musical sounds through the wide opening, while placing the thumb and the ring fingers simultaneously on the two smallest holes to control the rhythm. The bottom hole which is left alone at all times controls the musical rhythm out flow. It accompanies dances and songs, or played as solo.



Pottery Drum

Source: Igbo Traditional Music and Musical Instruments (2015)

The *UDU* (Pottery-drum) is a sphere shape made of clay, with a hollow inside and a small round open mouth. The primary function of *Udu* is to produce musical bass. The artist accomplishes this by taping the



open mouth with a round and flat object.

Rattle

Source: Igbo Traditional Music and Musical Instruments (2015)

The *Ichaka* is made of gourd or calabash loosely covered with beads. When tapped or shaken it produces a rattling sound to compliment other instruments.



Talking Drum/Cylinder Drum

Source: Igbo Traditional Music and Musical Instruments (2015)

The *IGBA* (Cylinder-drum) is a piece of hollow wood covered at one end with animal hide held down tight with fasteners. The artist carries it over his shoulder with the help of a shoulder strap. The artist produces the sound by beating on the animal hide with his fingers or combination of one set of fingers and a special stick.



Slit Drum

Source: Igbo Traditional Music and Musical Instruments (2015)

The *EKWE* (Slit-drum) is a tree trunk, hollowed throughout its length from two rectangular cavities at its ends and a horizontal slit that connects the cavities. The size of the slit-drum depends on its use and significance. Its significance includes use as musical instrument at coronation, cultural events and rituals. The different sounds of the

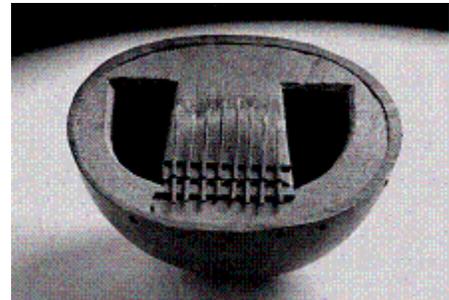
drum summon the citizens at the monarch's palaces, or town squares.



Gong

Source: Igbo Traditional Music and Musical Instruments (2015)

The *OGENE* (Gong) is the most important metal instrument among the Igbo people. They were made originally in bronze but, in modern time, are mainly made of common metal as a bulging surface in elliptical shaped rim, and tapering like a frustum to its handle. It is hit about its



rim by a stick to produce different tunes.

Thumb Piano

Source: Igbo Traditional Music and Musical Instruments (2015)

The *ubo-aka* is a "thumb piano" of the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria. This instrument features a wood-burnt hardwood soundboard (with cut-out handholds) mounted on an incised, woodburnt gourd resonator. Instead of the traditional metal cuffs around each key, a metal chain is stretched across the key.

The Educative Value of African Songs

The strong connection between African songs and education in traditional African societies is based on the fact observed by Onwuekwe (2005 & 2006) that African songs involve the language, customs and values of traditional African societies. Okafor (1998 & 2005) and Nwamara (2015) further observe that African songs are integrated with every facet of traditional life- from birth to death and convey African history and culture. If that be the case, African songs are, therefore, very significant instruments for education and learning, the transmission of history and

knowledge. Because of their educative value, they are usually short and repetitive to enhance remembrance, and also as a reorganizing principle. The brevity and repetitive nature of such songs is necessary that the message may not be lost. Thus, although African songs entertain, they are also media for the transmission of cultural values and knowledge. It was such an important means of communication that during the slave trade, slaves used songs to communicate hidden advice and coded maps with full details on how to escape to Canada, which was then a non-slave state.

African songs carry within its bosom elements of culture, esthetics, linguistics and practicality; it is wholistic in character - the birthright of African children that prepares them for all life phases of the future. Through the tonal inflection of words, children learn how to differentiate the pronunciation of words that may have the same spellings but different meanings. When African songs are sung, idioms and proverbs are taught. Noble ideas are also communicated to the listeners as a way of boosting their commitment towards the good. During such songs, social vices are discouraged and virtue promoted. These songs warn, praise and entertain the listeners. During public functions, sometimes, the songs are sung by masquerades, with the intention of backing that which is taught- cultural values, customs and moral codes with the authority of the ancestors.

Conclusion

The foregoing has studied the fundamental place that African songs occupy in traditional African societies. It has further studied the dimensions of African songs, which reveals that it is an almost indispensable variable in virtually every dimensions of the African traditional life. In our time of cultural renaissance, an attempt to reaffirm the African cultural heritage, this piece argues that African traditional songs were a very huge dimension of the African traditional educational system. It is a method of education that speaks to the African spirit. It recommends that such traditional songs, this time around, inculturated to attend to the spirit of the time should be reintroduced into our educational systems to boost academic performance among the young. This is very crucial as African traditional songs, beautifully synthesizes the elements of entertainment and learning.

However, with the advent of Western education, little or no time has been given to African songs as a means of transmitting knowledge. Thus, Mbiti (1969) rightly observes that "As with proverbs, the collection and study of religious songs is very scanty, and yet this is another rich

area where one expects to find repositories of traditional beliefs, ideas, wisdom and feelings” (p. 87). There is therefore, the need to revive African traditional songs through documentation and recording. There might also be the need to introduce some modern elements where necessary to make it fit into the contemporary times. There is also the need to establish folk music centres and associations; it should be encouraged and incorporated into school curriculums; there should be an official governmental recognition and sponsorship of African folk music. This would help in the preservation of Africa culture and the transmission of the rich historical heritage embodied in them.

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