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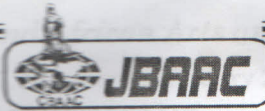
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Articles for submission should be sent to the Editor, JBAAC National Theatre, Iganmu, P. M. B. 12794, Lagos, Nigeria. Email: cbaac77@yahoo.com Website: <http://www.cbaac.com> <http://www.cbaac.gov.ng> Phone: 234 01-774 44 89; 470 56 67

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LANGUAGE, FOLKLORE AND SOCIETY

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FOLKLORE, PERFORMANCE AND CULTURE

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Application of Functionalist Perspectives in Religion to Sociological Issues in Contemporary Nigerian Popular Music

by

SHOLA ADEOLA *

Abstract

The interaction between music and social dynamics defines itself in multiple perspectives which include rapport between musical traditions and such other cultural elements as education, politics, value systems and behavioural patterns, historical development and religion. Music, being a very important aspect of the Nigerian culture, has sociological implications. While music can be examined through the society, the society within which music is performed can also be studied through its music. Music is a product of the behaviour of human groups, whether formal or informal. Because music is humanly organized sound, there ought to be a relationship between the patterns of human organizations and the patterns of sounds produced as a result of human interaction.

This paper, adopting the contextual hermeneutical approach, relies on the functionalist perspective to the study of religion to look at contemporary Nigerian popular music. This is with a view to identifying sociological issues in the composition, performance and practice of contemporary popular music in Nigeria and the impact on the Nigerian society.

The paper reveals that music, being a social product, is highly functional and has in it attendant sociological issues as reflected in the themes of the songs, performance, practice and general impact on the society. Issues of religion, ethnicity, social control, cohesion, mass mobilization, revolt, gender, moral decadence and identity have thus been identified as sociological themes that are generated by the contemporary Nigerian popular music.

* Performing Arts Department, University of Ilorin, Ilorin.

Introduction

SOCIOLOGY has often been seen, not without reason, as a somewhat perverse sort of enterprise, apparently generating problems where none exist, and persistently enquiring into matters which, to most sensible people, seem perfectly straightforward. The sociologist who applies the theoretical perspective of the discipline to music must expect, therefore, that the effort will be met with a degree of suspicion.²

Music is part of the Nigerian society life; it can be heard all around; bought in various recorded forms; individuals in the society also make music at various levels. Music is heard on the radio, television and in films. Musical performances are embarked upon by musicians, both professionals and amateurs. In short, music is all around us and forms a major element of the people's culture. The dominance of music as part of the people's culture and the attraction and attachment of the society to it at various levels is strong enough to arouse a sociological curiosity. The interaction between music and social dynamics defines itself in multiple perspectives, which include rapport between musical traditions and such other cultural elements as education, political evolution, value systems and behavioural patterns, historical development and religious phenomena.³

Sociological issues in relation to music can be raised focusing on the structure of music, function of music, people who play the music and those who listen to it; that is, classification of music based on religion or social status of those who play and listen to what kind of music. Adopting the contextual hermeneutical approach, the focus of this paper is to use Emile Durkheim's functionalist perspective to the study of religion to look at contemporary Nigerian popular music with a view to identifying sociological issues in the composition, performance and practice of contemporary popular music in Nigeria, with particular reference to issues of religion, ethnicity, social control, cohesion, mass mobilization, globalization, gender, moral degeneration and identity.

Theoretical Framework

Music is a product of the behaviour of human groups, whether formal or informal. This product (music) has capacity to generate patterns of behaviour in the society as evident in the relationship between the content of music and

the patterns of human organizations and human interaction. The sound may be the object, but man is the subject and the key to understanding music in the relationship existing between subject and object, the activating principle of organization.⁴ Music and musical practice thus constitute and generate sociological issues.

Application of Functionalist Perspective

Popular music is that brand of music that generally enjoys the favour of being acceptable to the people among which it is made. The acceptability can be within a given cultural or geographical location or can transcend cultural boundaries, thereby extending beyond its immediate locality.⁵ Different genres of music have at various times been made popular in Nigeria, especially since the invention of the electronic media which has made the production and dissemination of sound possible.

Contemporary popular music is the modern commercially successful music available to the public through major commercial record companies⁶. Gronow observes that in West Africa, the first commercial recording of music occurred in the 1920s.⁷ Examples of such music in Nigeria today include *juju*, *Afro-juju*, *highlife*, *higher life*, *fuji*, *reggae*, *apala*, *waka*, *gospel*, and so on. Some of these musical forms, which at their early stages were traditional, have been improved upon and made relevant to the contemporary musical scene. Contemporary Nigerian popular music is defined here as that brand of music that is modern in style and performance and enjoys the favour of acceptability by the people in Nigeriatraceable to a not-too-distant past and commercially transmissible through the electronic media.

Functionalists often describe society as an organism with a life of its own, above and beyond the sum of its parts. French sociologists, Auguste Comte and Emile Durkheim, and American Talcott Parsons, assume functionalist approaches to their studies. Functionalism in the social sciences view the society as a system made up of interrelated parts, all interacting on the basis of a common value system or consensus about basic values and common goals. Every social custom and institution is seen as having a function in ensuring that the society works efficiently.

Emile Durkheim, with particular reference to religion, believes that all religions have social rather than supernatural origin; hence, all religions can

be explained sociologically.⁸ This has direct bearing when applied directly to the origin and development of contemporary popular music in Nigeria. Music is essentially a product of the society, whether examined as entertainment or strict religious music. Music displays man's ability to create and re-create in response to the happenings in the society. Music in Africa is functional. One of the chief characteristics of African music is its association with social and ritual ceremonies.⁹

Durkheim also says that all social institutions – including religion, and this will also include music – contribute to the harmony and stability of society. Having common rituals, he notes, drew people together by forcing them to engage in the same activities at the same time. Other submissions by Durkheim, which can be applied to contemporary Nigerian popular music, are the provision of a standard belief and a set of symbols.¹⁰ Functionalist theorists have identified several other functions of religion which are clearly evident as some of the functions of contemporary popular music. These include cohesion and social control.

Sociological Issues in Contemporary Nigerian Gospel Music

Sociological issues or themes that can be raised in contemporary Nigerian popular music from the functionalist perspectives represented by Emile Durkheim and others include the following:

Religion

Religion, as a sociological issue in contemporary Nigerian popular music, is evident in the use of religious themes by the musicians; and their identification with and affiliation to, religion and the performance of some musical types regarded as religious. It is a common feature to hear contemporary popular musicians use religious themes in the composition of songs that are intended for entertainment. Religious themes are evident in the use of sacred texts, especially from the Holy Bible and the Holy Quran; invocation of the name of God or the holy prophets and the use of tunes and songs associated with religious groups. The religious themes reflect the religious affiliation of the musician in most cases; there are instances in which religious themes of the religion to which the musician does not belong can be employed for audience appeal. Musicians like Yinka Ayefele¹¹ and Ebenezer Obey¹² are noted for the use of Christian hymnody in their

compositions. For example, Yinka Ayefele, in one of his recordings, started with the first stanza of a Christian hymn thus:

Translation

<i>Wa eyin olope wa</i>	Come, ye thankful people come,
<i>Gbe orin ikore ga</i>	Raise the song of harvest home
<i>Ire gbogbo ti wole</i>	All is safely gathered in
<i>K'otutu oye to de</i>	Ere the winter storms begin
<i>Olorun eleda wa</i>	God, our maker, doth provide
<i>Lo ti pese f'aini wa</i>	For our wants to be supplied
<i>Wa k'a re 'le Olorun</i>	Come to God's own temple come
<i>Gbe orin ikore ga</i>	Raise the song of harvest home ¹³¹⁴

It is also a common thing to find popular musicians who are Muslims starting their performance with Quranic recitations like:

Translation

<i>Bismillahi al-Rahmani</i>	In the name of God, the beneficent,
<i>Rahimi,</i>	the merciful,
<i>Makama Aliya</i>	In high position
<i>Warafa'a Nau</i>	We exalt him
<i>Makana Aliya</i>	In high position.

The employment of religious themes by some of the popular musicians has become a mark of identity and gives uniqueness to their music. Some musical types are regarded as either having some religious influence in their origin or having come to be associated with adherents of some religious faiths. Popular musical genres like *dadakuada*, *senwele*, *fuji*, *balu*, *waka*, are known to be performed by Muslims except in recent times when Christian began to have their own versions of the music types such as "Senwele Jesu," "Gospel Fuji," "Gospel Waka," and others. Rachel Olubukola Akinade, popularly called "Senwele Jesu," is known for her style of presenting gospel songs using the popular "waka" style. Other artistes in this category of cross-religious currents in music are Dekunle Fuji who has "fuji" as an acronym to his name because he sings gospel fuji. The Midnight Crew and Infinity bands also employed the use of fuji in their albums.

The origin of *fuji* can be traced back to "*were*," a popular Moslem festival music.¹⁵ A very large percentage of performers of the popular forms of music like highlife and *juju* are Christians by religious affiliation and this can also be traced to the western influence on the music. This is evident not only in

the use of western musical instruments but also in the content of the music in terms of the style, structure and scales employed. The response of the patrons of the various categories of popular music is also influenced by the presence of religious themes or lack of it in the music being performed. A good example is the ease with which Christian adherents will relate to and accept the music of Yinka Ayefele who is a *juju* musician to the point of singing his songs in the churches. A visit to a number of churches in Nigeria, both mainline and Pentecostal, reveals that during praise sessions, Yinka Ayefele's style of rendition of particular songs and instrumentation are responded to with great excitement. Gospel musicians during performances at functions like wedding reception, funeral, and house warming, do not only sing using Yinka Ayefele's style but actually sing his songs for audience appeal. There are also designated contemporary musical forms that clearly depict religion through and through.

In Nigeria today, gospel music has evolved as a brand or branch of contemporary popular music. Matthew Ojo traced the evolution of Nigerian gospel music to the early twentieth century in Lagos during which many musical activities and indigenous choir masters emerged in many churches.¹⁶ The song text of gospel music has a bearing with the Christian Bible and it seeks to propagate the Christian religion. Islamic religious songs are also becoming more and more popular in Nigeria. The music teaches morals and Islamic tenets to the hearers. The commercial value of religious music also accounts for the performance by many musicians or inclusion of religious flavours into secular forms. It must be observed that even the gospel musicians who claim that their sole aim of performance is to propagate the gospel are fast becoming more and more business-inclined. Hence, attention is paid more to what will make their music sell. This is evident in the employment of various styles that will appeal to people.

Ethnicity

Music in Africa is ethnic-bound.¹⁷ Each group performs and identifies with music as a reflection of its ethnicity. Ethnic groups are cultural, not natural groups. Ethnicity itself is a socially used cultural symbol.¹⁸ It is common to have a preponderance of some musical types in some communities because of the ethnic group that dominates it. For example, *fuji* and *juju* music is popular among the Yoruba-speaking people of Nigeria. Highlife music is

popular both in the eastern part of the country and the south-west. In the case of highlife music, there are variants to appeal to the Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba respectively. Ethnicity is reflected in the languages used in the performance of contemporary popular music in Nigeria.

This is, however, not to say that ethnic groups that are resident outside their places of origin do not participate in or appreciate music outside their culture. For example, the Igbo living in Lagos appreciate the music of musicians like Shina Peters, Sunny Ade, Ebenezer Obey and others just the way a Yoruba man in the North will appreciate the music of Dan Maraya Jos or the Hausa man in the East will appreciate the music of Oliver de Coque.

The three dominant tribes in Nigeria, namely Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo are clearly represented in the popular music scene. Names like Oliver de Coque, King Sunny Ade and Dan Maraya Jos come as representative of Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa popular musicians respectively. The performance of these musicians clearly reveals their ethnic affiliations. This is seen not only in the language but also the costumes worn by the musicians. The musical instruments used can also be a pointer to ethnic identity. This, however, does not limit their appeal; rather, it serves as a mark of identity of each musician's performance style and practice.

Social Control

Contemporary popular music is a tool for regulating the life of the society. Matthew Ojo, in his discussion of Gospel music, submits that music in Africa is used continually to articulate and outline the values and yearnings of the peoples.¹⁹ According to Chernoff:

Music is essential to life in Africa because Africans use music to mediate their involvement within a community.... As a style of human conduct, music characterizes a sensibility with which Africans relate to the world and commit themselves to its affairs.²⁰

Philosophies guiding human existence in the society are reflected in themes of songs in contemporary popular music. It is a common thing to hear themes on morals, godliness, love, patriotism, chastity, and so on, in the compositions of popular musicians. The gospel musicians, apart from singing the praise of God, also preach to the society through their songs. Gospel musicians like

Niyi Adedokun are known for singing songs that are satiric or critical of the socio-economic situation in the Nigerian society.

Cohesion

In keeping with Durkheim's position, most sociologists agree that religion contributes to social cohesion and does so in several ways. As an illustration, they contend that, by participating in religious activities, people are drawn into groups, thus reducing the isolation that they might suffer and also increasing the social solidarity of the group.²² Popular music, like religion, also plays this role of social cohesion. Reiterating this point, Coplan notes:

*Popular music.... provides a multiplicity of meanings, accommodation and a range of manipulation, interpretation and choice, and supplies a measure of solidarity in an environment characterized by social insecurity, dislocation and differentiation.*²³

Participation in music brings a sense of belonging and draws people into groups. Music is a binding force. It brings together by reason of its rhythm and melody people of different cultures, ideologies and diverse inclinations. Popular music in Nigeria has over the years preached national unity. The text of the songs criticizes disunity, division and the oppression of a segment of the nation by another.²⁴ In Nigeria today, there exist associations and groups formed as products of belonging to a musical group. Performing Musicians Association of Nigeria (PMAN) and Gospel Musicians Association of Nigeria (GOMAN)²⁵ are examples of such groups. These associations, with branches across the nation, help to unite the musicians and serve to defend their interests, among other things. The musicians are also able to pursue common goals as it relates to the survival of individuals members and groups. Participation by fellow musicians in each other's recording project, as demonstrated in King Sunny Ade's release "The way forward,"²⁶ is a proof of the function of cohesion that music enhances in the society. The title track features the popular song "Nigeria yi ti gbogbo wa ni" in which other musicians like the late Dr Orlando Owoh, Admiral Dele Abiodun, Charly Boy, Timi Osukoya (Telemi), among others participated. Recordings by Wasiu Alabi Pasuma²⁷ and Wasiu Ayinde²⁸ are other examples of joint releases by musicians. The musician associations have also been able to make representations on the issues of piracy and protection of their works. Issues of discipline and conduct among member-musicians are also being enforced through these associations.

One must, however, point out the fact that, in Nigeria today, the umbrella bodies for the musicians are crisis-ridden as a result of power tussle, craze for superiority, and mismanagement. There is also the issue of rivalry between leading musicians which threatens the peace and solidarity which an umbrella body should give.

The culture of revolt which characterizes the music of some Nigerian popular musicians must also be underscored. Revolt is given expression not only in their music but also in the language employed as well as their attitudes to systems and structures. Late Fela Anikulapo-Kuti with his Afrobeat variety of music was known for his strident criticism of the government which landed him in trouble so many times. Writing about Fela and his music, Christopher Waterman says:

Afro-beat music... was focused in the tradition of bourgeois Revolutionary expression – on a charismatic, hard-headed iconoclast, whose art was inseparable from his life, and whose ambivalent relationship to tradition was publicly negotiated through performance. Fela presented himself as a model for, and not an embodiment of, his audience, the heterogeneous social formation which formed the basis of his celebrity.

Another example of this culture of revolt is the masked man, “Lagbaja,” whose concept of wearing a mask for performance, according to him, is to depict the facelessness, the culture of not having an identity anymore, of the masses. Stating further why he chose the name “Lagbaja,” he says, “I picked that word, because I wanted to depict a concept, a word to communicate the essence of the millions of people, so-called “masses,” the “common man,” the people with no voice, that don’t have a face, just one in a million in our society...”²⁹ A careful analysis of Lagbaja’s song text reveals revolt against an unjust society, insensitive leadership and undisciplined personalities. He tends towards socialism in his defence of the masses.

Mass Mobilization

The employment of popular music in mass mobilization, campaigns and enlightenment programmes is a common thing in Nigeria. Popular music is a public arena for the symbolic negotiation of continuity and change.³⁰ The ‘two million man march’ organized by the late Abacha regime in Nigeria employed popular musicians like Shina Peters and late Sunny Okosuns to mobilize the people. Themes of contemporary music also centre on

government policies and programmes to sensitize the public and enlighten them. A good example is the current HIV/AIDS campaign in the country in which many musicians have sung. Producers of television and radio jingles also adapt the tunes of popular musicians in order to catch people's attention.

Political mobilization is also done through popular music. Musicians compose songs and release albums for politicians as a campaign tool and also for the musicians to secure political favour and make some money. Works by Yinka Ayefele and Tony Tetaila,³¹ in which they praise Lagos politicians like Tinubu and Fashola, are good examples. Contemporary popular music as a tool for mass mobilization has worked because of the capacity of music to capture the attention of the populace, especially the musicians that people love. When an idea or the purpose for mobilization is conveyed through the vehicle of music, the people get familiar with the songs and remember them easily and are therefore mobilized.

Globalization

Globalization is the historical process whereby the world is being turned into a global village with systemic properties. Historically, globalizing forces produce global systems, which were of limited extent spatially, and in which the density of social relations across borders and time varied enormously.³² At the end of the last century, it had become clear that through various media – the burgeoning capacity of electronic communications to compress time and space, changes in technology which are allowing production and culture to be divorced from place, the pervasiveness of global ideologies on subjects such as the environment and human rights, and recent seismic shifts in the world's geopolitical balance – the world is now thoroughly globalized, a single place. What happens in one place routinely affects perceptions, attitudes and behaviour elsewhere.

Recent developments in the Nigerian popular music scene and the world at large show that pop culture has a strong link with globalization tendencies in the Nigerian society. If globalization is considered as a presence “of making global,” “being present worldwide,” “at the world stage” or “global arena,”³³ one can say that Nigerian popular music has been globalized and thus made the Nigerian society entrenched in the world globalization process. Almost all the popular music typologies in Nigeria have transcended the country's shores and are known all over the world. Popular music culture has therefore connected

Nigeria as a nation to other parts of the world and the effect of this is felt not only in the impact on popular music but also in the interest of the world in other aspects of the life of Nigeria as a nation.

Gender

The contemporary Nigerian popular music scene features both male and female musicians. While the secular music scene is dominated more by men than women, gospel music is significantly dominated by women. Matthew Ojo observes that, through improvization of themes and diction, women construct a social space for themselves in which they have been able to achieve self-hood and self-actualization. He notes further that women have been more prominent in gospel music than in any other aspect of public life.³⁴ This is not to say, however, that female musicians are not found in secular music and male musicians in gospel.

Some contemporary popular musical types are regarded as exclusive to either male or female. Examples are *dadakuada*, *baalu* and *senwele* music genres, popular among the Yoruba-speaking people of Ilorin. *Baal*u music, among the Ilorin people, is regarded as the female counterpart of *dadakuada*. *Senwele* music is also performed by women. In the case of music performed by women, men are engaged as drummers while women serve as dancers to male musicians. Gender issue also emanates from the themes of the songs. Themes such as respect for women, achievements of women, respect for men, and submission of women to men, are present in contemporary popular songs.

Women in secular popular music are presented more as sex objects and side attractions in the role they are made to play than in the actual performance of the songs. In popular gospel music, however, they symbolize strength, hope for the oppressed and the ability of women to lead. Gender issue in contemporary popular music is therefore that of a clear distinction between what male or female can do or can be in the context of the African belief in male-female relationship.

Moral Degeneration

A negative tendency of moral degeneration in the society is inherent in the sexual orientation and vulgar dimensions of some musical types, and which the musicians themselves assume in their performance. In Nigerian popular music today, nudity and vulgar utterances have become the order of the day.

An examination of musical types like *fuji*, hip hop and some others reveals that the musicians pass on messages that fall below societal norms thus eroding morality. The mere mention of sex organs and description of sexual acts by *fuji* musicians sends wrong signals, especially to the youths, and this has attendant effects on the society in the use of vulgar language and wrong sex education which are picked up mainly from the musician's audio recordings or video clips.

If our society is to sustain its moral values, these cultures of nudity, vulgar outburstss and wrong sexual orientation being perpetrated by the musicians in an attempt to appeal to the youths must be checked. The power of music on the listener is so great that it cannot be underestimated.

Identity

Contemporary popular music in Nigeria carries with it a national identity which portrays it as music that is indigenous to Nigeria. The various musical genres, through the use of language, costumes, and musical instruments, present the very rich Nigerian cultural and social heritage. Many popular musicians in Nigeria today, as pointed out earlier, make use of the three major Nigerian languages – Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba – in their presentations. Each musician also tries to carve out an identity for himself either in terms of style of performance or song text, the costumes they put on or a particular way of dancing. Some of them are identified by the instruments they play, their hairstyles or the items they hold as symbols of their identity. Lagbaja, a popular musician, is identified by the mask he wears like a Yoruba masquerade. The most striking aspect of Lagbaja's identity is his use of costumes based on the *Egungun* ancestral masquerades, the power of which is bound up with the purposive concealment of the masquerade's face.³⁵ In discussing the identity of gospel musicians in Nigeria, Matthew Ojo writes:

The status of Nigerian Gospel Musicians is really ambivalent. Whereas the critical observer may describe them as musicians, many of them see themselves as otherwise. They called themselves evangelists and Christian ministers.³⁶

Identity is thus a sociological issue both at the level of national identity for the country's music and at the individual level for the musicians and their musical style.

Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion, an attempt has been made to raise sociological issues by the application of the functionalist perspective of religion to contemporary Nigerian popular music. It is my view that music, being a social product, is highly functional and has in it attendant sociological issues as reflected in the themes of the songs, performance practice and general impact on the society. As Peter Martins puts it, "Music is a social product, social resource and social practice." As such it is not autonomous but is created and performed by real people in particular times and places: in doing so they reveal much about themselves and their societies. Martins states further that the time is right to take a fresh look at music and its effects, as today's music resonates with the consequences of cultural globalization and the transformation wrought by the modern electronic media.³⁷ Issues of religion, ethnicity, social control, cohesion, mass mobilization, gender, moral degeneration, and identity have thus been identified as sociological themes that are generated by contemporary Nigerian popular music.³⁸

Footnotes

- 1.
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