

Research

A CONCEPTUAL APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF SONG AND MUSIC IN BENIN SOCIETY

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Abstract. This study attempts to provide a theoretical framework for the appreciation of music among the Benin, a strategic ethnic group in Nigeria. It investigates how concepts such as folk and popular song, music, noise, speech and sound find their relevant expression and place in the socio-cultural, economic, moral and even psychological setting of the Benin world. Finally, it is discovered that a conceptual approach is crucial, not only to the situation of the Benin oral literary values within a Western ideological context, but also in the facilitation of an objective evaluation of critical aspects of the life of people.

Keywords: concept, song, music, Benin

Introduction

This paper seeks to investigate concepts such as folk and popular song, music, noise, speech and sound and their relevance or place in the socio-cultural, economic, moral and even psychological setting of the Benin world.

Such a conceptual approach is pertinent, not only because it affords an opportunity for the situation of the Benin values within a global context (Western ideological framework inclusive), but also for the reason that such a method facilitates an objective evaluation of certain aspects of the life of a people. For if culture is, as Akpabot (1986) puts it “a way of thinking, feeling and believing in any given society,” resulting in a behavioural pattern which gives that society a distinctive identity, then one remarkable scheme of finding out about the culture of a people is to examine how they conceptualise their music. The argument of Wissler (1917) in respect of the cultural potentials of music is appropriate for our present study. According to him “music is a stable trait and therefore provides a useful basis for determining the diffusion of other cultural traits” Merriam (1964) posits that: [M]usic is a product of man and has structure but its structure cannot have an existence of its own divorced from the behaviour which produces it. In order to understand why a music structure exist as it does, we must also understand how and why the behaviour which produces it as it is, and how and why the concept which underlie that behaviour are ordered in such a way as to produce the particularly desired form of organised sound.

Fundamentally because of their different environments, more than any other reason that may be advanced, the African and the European conceive of music in different ways. Tracey (1960) for instance, believes that the word ‘music’ in Africa means ‘vocal participation, the physical manipulation of instruments and the rhythmic or dance movement associated with music’. In order to get at the true involvement of music in an African society, we need, as Akpabot (1986) also advised, to study closely the role of music in religion, government and the various secret and ceremonial societies which regulate the lives of the people, not forgetting the individual and collective role of musical instruments.

The Benin society

While this paper does not undertake a re-assessment of Benin society and culture since this is neither a historical nor sociological study, it is however important to undertake a summary of the socio-cultural milieu from which Benin song and music emerge. This is because, any approach to the songs of Benin people that fails to recognise the dynamic nature of the society in focus, is likely to miss its significance.

Any formal discourse on any aspect of the people and their language must begin with a clarification of the terms “Edo” “Benin” and “Bini,” especially as they have come to be associated with a number of distinct interpretations. The oral traditional account, as diligently documented by Egnarevba (1954) in his famous book, *The Origin of Benin*, traces the origin of the use of the term “Edo” as the indigenous name for Benin City to Oba Ewuare (1440 - 1473).



King Oba Ewuare the Great

According to one version of the account (Egharevba, 1954):

“Edo was a slave to the then Ohieta
He saved Ewuare from a sudden death when
He was about to be arrested by the chiefs.
Therefore in order to immortalize the name of the
His deified friend, Edo for the good service he
Rendered him, Ewuare changed the name of the
City to “Edo” according to his friend’s name...”

If this account is true, it would appear that the extension of the name to refer also to the language of the inhabitants of the city, and indeed the Benin Kingdom was a natural development. One of the earlier names for the territory before this change to Edo was Idu, a term which remains in names such as Idubo, Idumwonyi etc.

The other names also currently associated with the city and language of its inhabitants, namely “benin” and “bini” have an origin which in some-what obscure. Again according to traditional account (Egharevba, 1956): [F]rom the time of ogiso igodo (obagodo) to Ere, the country was called “igodomogodo”, from the time of ogiso Ere to Evian, it was called “Ile” Oranmiyan called it “Ile-ibinu” oba Ewedo (i.e, 1255 -1280) change it to Ubini (Benin).

Collins’ (2006) account is not radically different from that recorded by Egharevba (1960). According to him a thousand years ago the kingdom was known as igodomogodo (town of towns) a name that survived for 300 years or so. Its name ile ibin - The land of vexation was bequeathed by the first of its Obas, Oranmiyan. Later it was amended to Ubini and translated into Benin.

All the same, if the Oba Ewedo’s name for the city “Ubini” is the origin of “Benin” and “Bini” then it would not be out of place to argue that

their use the city and the language predates that of “Edo” in which case the latter was intended to have replaced them.

Thus, there is an obvious sense in which the three names can be used side by side though with some degree of specialisation in their respective references. “Benin” systematically came to be used strictly as a territorial label as in the expression: Benin city, Benin kingdom, Benin empire, and Benin division while the other two names “Bini” and Edo have become predominantly linguistic and ethnic labels referring in scope to the language and people of the same Benin kingdom. However, Edo has continued to serve as the indigenous name for the city.

While there seems to be agreement on the factor of “Benin” as a territorial tag, the issue of the place and nature of “Bini” remains a controversial one. The Oba of Benin stressed that the early chronicles never referred to the people as “Bini” what obtained, according to the monarch was that the empire was known the earliest historians as Benin City, Benin Kingdom and Benin Empire. The inhabitants, the citizens are known as “Edo”. Of course, to the actual indigenous citizens both the territory and the people are known as Edo, thus “Irie Edo” (I am going to Benin) or “Ovbie Edo” (Benin person). “Bini” according to the Oba, crept in through wrong pronunciation and therefore wrong spelling by non-Edo indigenes.

The Edo language is today spoken throughout most of the territory conterminous with the Benin Division of the former Mid-Western State of Nigeria and which has now been demarcated into the Oredo, Ovia and Orhionmwon Local Government Areas. The same area constituted the permanent core of the pre-colonial Benin Kingdom and empire and its inhabitants have always referred to themselves as Ivbi – Edo.

However, it is important to note the further ambiguity introduced into the reference of the term “Edo” as a linguistic label when linguistic decided to use it as the designed for the group of historically related languages and dia-

lects spoken in various communities within and around the former Benin Kingdom. These languages and dialects include the Edo language proper of the Benin Division, the Ishan group of dialects: the language and dialect now spoken in the present Owan Etsako and Akoko-Edo Local Government Areas, Urhobo and Isoko and their related dialects.

Although N.W. Thomas referred to the speakers of these languages and dialects as the “Edo – speaking peoples” in his famous ethnographic report of 1910, this seemed not to have settled the controversy. Westermann & Bryan (1952) for instance created their own kind of ambiguity by referring to the group as the “BINI Language group” and to the single language as BINI. They however noted that the name Edo is used by some writers (e.g., Thomas) to cover all the languages of the group.

However, the ultimate solution to the nomenclatural problem may be found in the proposal by Ben Elugbe (1989) entitled “Edoid.” The obviously positive implication of Elugbe’s contribution is that it frees the term “Edo” for use in reference to the single language and the people.

It is important to add, at this point, that the Edo language as a tonal one. And this being so, the characteristic inflection of tone affects the meaning of utterances which are given the same graphic representation. Many Benin singers make ample use of tonal variations in their songs. Egogo Alagebo is a striking example of the lot. The estimated area of the territory of Benin is about 10,372 km² while the 1952 and 1963 population figures for the Divisions are given as 292 081 and 429 907 respectively. At mid 1986 the estimated population was given as two millions (1991 population census, Norborg, 1992).

The Benin society possesses a rich oral and written literature. While the former is well known by the people, the latter is developing rapidly. The Benin oral literature is by definition dependent on the performer who formulates it in words on specific occasions. It can be said to be a tradition which

nourishes its pride and is transmitted from generation to generation. The literature is portrayed in their masquerades; stories and folklore. Proverbs, riddles, satirical jests, poems of indirection and moon-light rhymes also play important roles in the literary life of the Benin people.

Two types of communicative events as appropriate for story telling are recognised by the people. These are the ‘Ibota and Okpovbie.’ The Ibota literally means ‘the prolongation of the evening.’ It is a sort of relaxation in the evening by the family or a group of people, a mixture of adult and the young ones, male and female. They listen to the stories and event that have happened in Edo Kingdom or events embodying planning for the development of the community. In Ibota story telling events, one person could upon among the family group to tell a story he knows while others listen attentively. The head of the family presides over tales told in Ibota.

The Okpovbie essentially entails the playing of drums throughout the night without sleeping. The Okpovbie story teller in Edo is a professional man who tells stories with efforts to entertain people till daybreak. This kind of story telling is quite different from Ibota because the Okpovbie stories are of a more serious events, and longer than Ibota stories. Generally speaking however, the most common stories are trickster stories about the tortoise (Equi) and his dubious ways.

Most of the stories teach moral lessons and this didactic quality of the tales makes them serve as means of improving the morals of the people. They also carry out psychological functions. People with mental, emotional and psychological problems have their tension released and their spirits lifted up, the moment they listen to these tales.

Quite an appreciable number of stories have songs (ihuan) in them, and during the course of narrating these tales, tales, the performer (or narrator or story teller) sings a song while the audience joins him by repeating the choruses. It is not unusual for both the performer and the audience to clap their

hands and dance as they sing. This dramatic action sharply illuminates the function of these takes as means of entertainment. In order to sustain the interest of the audience and make his tale credible, the story teller use histrionics and other forms of dramatization.

The roles played by proverbs (itan) and riddles (irro) in the literary and cultural life of Edo people can hardly been over stressed. In fact they form the basis of many traditional expressions in the Benin society. Proverbs can be described as popular sayings or, as Uyilawa Usuanlele puts it “an indomitable expression or quotations embodying some form of truth and wisdom used in a speech to support or summarize some point.”¹⁾ And although some scholars attribute shortness or conciseness or brevity to the quality of proverbs, this does not obtain at all times. Proverbs are very crucial to rituals, marriage and burial ceremonies, court, schools conversations and other social functions.

Proverbs carry out emotional and moral functions. While some are used for encouragement as in “Uhunmwun ekpen wi ye o ha” which means that the elephant’s head never gets lost in the forest, some others are used for advice as in “Ikhiavbo etan se ne Oyaen” which means that the melon never grows more than the one who cultivates it. This is a counsel given to the young to be of good behaviour. Some proverbs can be seen as protest ones. They probe and at times, question actions. A striking example is T’ime ma gbe Ovbie E bo (Did I kill the European?). This proverbial saying is used to refer to situation in which undeserved extreme punishment.¹⁾

Other proverbs are used in prayer to ward off evil as in ‘Atete wi i ye igbo which means that the traditional tray never gets lost in a feast and “Ebee ake awe ye Uhunmwun erhan” which that mishap never befalls a bird which is on top of a tree. These expressions are also frequently in ritual performance by those seeking protection from the divinities against their adversaries.

Riddles (Iro) usually come up during evening relaxation. The questioner begins by posing : Gbi iro to the audience which responds by saying ‘‘Alo.’’

Question: Gbi Iro

Answer: Alo

Questions: He digs, yet he has no tools or hands.

Answer: Urine.

Some riddles express contrast or relationship between two different objects and ideas. At times similar objects are brought together in order to describe their differences. For instance:

Question: two sisters locked up in a room weeping, one edible, the other not.

Answer: though we eat sugarcane, we do not the weed.

Riddles, like puzzles, are very important in the literary and cultural life of the people. They put it test the scope of the knowledge of the people, thereby making the community aware of various aspects of life.

The art and creativity of the masquerade (ekpo) are demonstrated in the dramatic movements and songs of the performer(s) and the audience. The masquerade comes normally out in the dry season from their farm which is known as ‘‘ugbe ekpo.’’ This place is where all preparations for the public performance are made. Women are not allowed to enter the farm. And the telling, the performance comes up in the night. It should be stressed that while Benin popular songs have not completely lost grip of the past, they are very much concerned with the present reality of Benin society.

A conceptual approach to Benin song and music

Alan P Merriam (1964) gives music an anthropological and social interpretation, an exercise which indirectly promotes the submission of Mair (1965) that culture has to do essentially with “the common possession of a body of people who share the same traditions in social terms.” He says: [M]usic exists only in term of social interaction and it is learned behaviour...it involves the behaviour of learned individuals and group of individuals.

As if giving credence to Merriam’s view and at the same time making a case for musical values and their changing social conditions, Nketia (1974) observes that: [A] knowledge of...music in its social context is a prerequisite both for understanding the contemporary musical scene in Africa and for gaining some insight into the musical experience as it relates to the African in his personal and social life.

Musical concept is important because they determine how music is appreciated and evaluated in a particular society. Knowledge of musical concepts, it should be stressed, is not synonymous with verbalisation and actualisation. That the Benin people have not been emphasising “sophisticated” analysis of music (i.e. the musical examination in scale and feet), does not mean that they are ignorant of such concepts as melody, tempo, pitch and rhythm. There are indeed terms in the Bini language which are technical in the sense of being almost exclusively concerned with music and the people. This restrictive or rather non-universal element of music should be put in its proper course of its ability in settling some pronounced misapprehensions. Akin Euba’s observation is worthy of note. According to him: [I]n (traditional) society there is no language of music universe among the people of Nigeria. In other words, each tribe has a musical language of its own which is often exclusive to it and there is little musical communication on an intertribal basis. This situation may be due partly to a conservative approach to music and partly to the use of music to satisfy the social requirements of the tribe. It may also account

for the multiplicity of traditional idioms of music of speech language- and of musical instruments found in the country.

In order to fully acknowledge the Benin popular song, it is necessary to have an idea of how the people embrace or receive this particular genre of their oral literature, what they appreciate as the beauty of song, what constitutes a good musical production, what is expected from a composer and so on. But before addressing Benin musical concepts, it is essential to give attention, by way of distinction, to 'folk' and popular song.

In his prefatory essay to folklore Dundes (1962) attempts to simplify the issue of folk for the introductory student. Folk according to him can refer to "any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor." Although this definitive observation can be seen and taken as an oversimplification of the delicate concepts of folk and folklore, and which as characteristic of a particular group are quite illuminating. The distinction, in Western music between folksong, popular song and art song in terms of training, performance and other technical expectations is worth noting. As explicitly presented in *Encyclopedia Britannica*:²⁾ [F]olk songs are not intended for trained virtuoso performer. Mostly they are sung unaccompanied or with simple accompaniments i.e. guitar. They are usually learned by ear and are infrequently written down. They are susceptible to change. Composer of most folk-songs are unknown, forgotten...Art songs are intended for performance by professionals, or at least carefully taught singers. The notes are written down by known composers...Popular songs stand midway between folk and art songs with regard to technical difficulties, sophistication and resistance to change.

Perhaps more total and embracing of the striking approaches to the conceptual elements in focus is that given by George List (1972). He sees the term 'folk music' as on "often loosely applied to cover all traditional or aurally transmitted music, music that is passed on by ear and performed by memory rather than by written or printed musical score." He then goes ahead

to highlight some remarkable features of folk music- the performer is not aware of its origin and the melody exists in various forms. “Popular music” to him may not be transmitted by the musical scene. It so often varied in performance and at times is improvisatory in nature... [it] is generally an ephemeral commercial product intended for mass consumption rather than a tradition known and practised in a restricted area or by a subculture. George Herzog (1972) in the same light states that “folk song comprises the poetry and music of a group whose literature is perpetuated not by writing and print, but through oral tradition”

The approaches of Dundes, List and Herzog stress the communality of the “folk” and their dependence on the spoken word as opposed to writing. Because the society in focus (the Benin social set up), is largely pre-literate, the element of writing and oral tradition as distinguishing characteristics of popular and folk songs respectively, is not too relevant. And since the rural and urban exist on a mutual and relational basis, the distinction of folk as rurally oriented and popular as tending more towards urbanity, is not convincing. What is however striking is the place and identity of the composer. In the case of the folksong, neither the composer nor the time of origin of the song is known. With this reasoning therefore, folksongs in Benin would be said to include lullabies. On the other hand popular songs are compositions whose composers are known, in the villages and in the urban centres. A thematic distinction can also be made. “The folk songs are preoccupied with issues that can best be termed ”traditional.” As Nketia (1964) puts it: folk songs are “perpetuated largely by oral and integrated with a living, surviving or historical pattern of community life. Popular songs, on the other hand, accommodate modern ideas, modern politics and the modern overview. Some strokes of English and other languages are woven round the songs.

There has been an acknowledged disagreement on the definition of music and the factor of abstraction. While Willard Rhodes (1977) for instance,

observes that “music exists in abstraction, and is composed of tone that has no symbolic meaning;” scholars of non-Western music are opposed to the definition of music in such abstract, non-relational term. Music, they insist, ought not to be treated as an extra-societal phenomenon. The complex behaviour which leads to music production is of equal relevance as the final sound product. Such behaviours to a large extent condition the acceptance and appreciation of the end product. Merriam (1964) thus warns that: [M]usic cannot be defined as a phenomenon of sound alone, for it involves the behaviour of individuals and group of individuals and its particular organisation demands the social concurrence of people who decide what it can and cannot be.

The Binis have their own musical singing style polished by their culture, language and level of literacy. To them, music is, among others, a function of human effort and order. A person either uses his vocal mechanism to produce music as is singing or his hand as in instrumental music (Norborg, 1992). In any case, to produce meaningful music, there must be a creative blend of form and some kind of organisation or recurring pattern. The fact that music is produced by human beings who impose order on the sound readily presupposes that not every person within a given cultural group can do this with the same degree of skill. This readily introduces us to another vital concept, that of ‘musical talent.’ The Binis are not consistent on how musical skill is acquired. There are some who hold the view that talent is inherited from one’s parents or at least a relative, others believe that talent is acquired by drinking certain medicines and others believe that every person is born with the same aptitude but interest and training determine whether one becomes a musician or not. At the centre of these diverse views is the embracing belief that people are born with equal opportunities of acquiring music talent but one’s family background and his upbringing as well as his determination can make him a better musician than others.

Apart from musical talent, another concept which is crucial in determining music production in a culture is that of the origin of music. Here again Merriam (1964) states that: [a] distinction must be made at the outset between the ultimate source from which music originates and the sources from which the individual draws his specific music material. That is, the ultimate origin of music or of specific kinds of music may be held to be the creation of the gods, for example, while individual songs in the same society may be obtained through borrowing.

In other words, the possibility of borrowing and socio-divine origin brings to light a set of realisable origins of music: the supernatural, the individual or community or through borrowing. In our brief exposition of 'folk' and 'popular' song, we subtly addressed the origin of song among the Binis. Music is held to be as old as man as is shown in the saying "*kobe n' bue agbon te abgon, a ke siwuan*" which literally translation means "since the beginning of man, he has been singing." This clearly implies that music is so old that it is not always possible to know its origin. There is however no doubt whatsoever that the Binis do not believe that music originates from animals, even if in tales animals do believe in divine or supernatural origin of music. Music is seen as the product of human creativity blended with interest and training. The way a people conceive of the origins of their music is important because it determines the functions of their music as well as ideas about ownership. When music is held and taken to be the product of human beings, whether as individuals or as a group, the musicians are more conscious of their creative efforts, of the need to strive after excellence. With respect to Benin popular songs, the composers are not only known, but they themselves are aware of their relative fame in the society. This gives room for keen competition and thus promotes high standards.

Closely tied to the origin of music is the concept of ownership. Whether music is a communal property, individual or group property depends

in the long on how it originated. The music of secret societies³⁾ provides a ready instance of that which is owned by a closed circle of initiates and it is taboo for non- initiates to even try to learn it. Lullabies are common property because their composers are unknown. Popular songs, however, are the property of their composer. But ownership here, it must be stressed, should not be seen in Western copyright terms; for one does not need to apply for permission to sing any song. The composers themselves privately sing and enjoy one another's song but for public performances, they keep strictly to their own repertoire. Singing another composer's song would be a way of acknowledging the superior artistry of such a composer, and the strong but healthy rivalry that exists among composers makes that impossible.

Ownership of music determines to what extent members of the society have access to the composition of its musicians. Communal ownership entails wider appreciation of the music, while a situation of copyright restriction limits the range of usage. Benin people do not tie starkly ownership of music to the composer. No composer would ever contemplate prohibiting the singing of his song even if he could, as this would be selfishness of the type unacceptable to the society. Even in cases where composers have waxed records, their songs continue to be used as if they were not covered by copyright laws – indeed not very many people are aware of the existence of such laws.

The place of the musician is very central to this topic. And his role as the originator of music cannot be overemphasised. Nketia (1964) says: [an] understanding of the role, functions, and personal life of the musician may contribute to our understanding of his music with respect to what it means both to him and to those who enjoy it with him.

While the musician may not necessary need to possess special qualities, he certainly requires a good voice, a retentive memory, ability to create on the spur of the moment and a certain flair for histories. Such abilities could be developed and advanced through constant practice. However, musical as-

sociation that perform social dance and music for their own enjoyment or for the entertainment of others are common among the Benin people. They are often hired to display at festivals. Most musical associations specialise in one type of dance and music which they perform regardless of the occasion.

There is a strong sense in which members of a musical association can be classified as professional musicians. They are organised into group, they received financial reward for their services, and they have received at least some formal training. In most cases, instructions can be given by elders, relatives or by other local musicians (Nketia, 1975). Often leaders of musical associations serve as instructors who try to improve their groups by having rehearsals regularly. Generally, the reputation of a musical association can be attributed largely to the leader's skill as a musician, teacher and organizer. Members of such group are not usually full time musicians; although they have other occupations as well, they are normally acknowledged as professional musicians. In this capacity, they are not regarded as having either high or low social rank. Nevertheless individual differences in musical ability are recognised, and a person can enjoy a considerable measure of personal prestige as an expert. Musical associations have probably existed for many centuries among the Edo.

It is well known that Benin kings and chiefs have had musicians connected to their courts since centuries. The court musicians of the Oba of Benin are divided into five groups: the 'Ogbelaka', the 'Igbemagba', the 'Ikpema', the 'Ikepeziken, and the 'Ikpakohen'; each of which is charged with specific responsibilities at the court. They all belong to the Iwebo Palace Association (Egharevba, 1960). The 'Ogbelaka'- the Royal Bards- dance, sing and play various instruments at state rituals such as Igue (the yearly glorification of the head), the coronation and funeral ceremonies for an Oba. They also perform 'Ikiewa' i.e. waking the Oba ceremonially by imitating the crow of a cock. They live in a special quarter in Benin City. The 'Igbemagbe' (i.e., the 'ema-

ba' performers; ema= drum,eba=jingles made of dried aba seed pods) also dance and pay their instruments the emeba clapperies bell, at Igwe and at the funeral ceremonies of an Oba. The 'ikpema' (i.e., 'the players of the drums', singular Okpema) on the other hand, only play different types of drums. Like the 'Ikpe.iziken' (i.e., 'the players of the eziken; singular Okpeziken') who play eziken flutes, the 'Ikpema' are employed on various ceremonial occasions such as the funeral of an Oba and the Oba's procession through Benin City during certain festivals. The 'Ikpakohen' (i.e., the players of the akoyen) singular Okpakohen, finally, who play ivory flutes and horns are also employed on a number of ceremonial occasions, among them the coronation of an Oba Outside these groups stands the 'Okpakha,' i.e., the players of 'Okha' who beat the Okha slit-drum to summon people to some of the state rituals. Court musicians are usually full-time professionals. They are organised into groups, they receive financial rewards for their services, and they receive some formal training. In addition, most of them have no other occupation, but as musicians, their means of living is supplied by the king or chief whose court they are connected.

Conclusion

While the distinctions between folk and popular song among others in the final analysis, may not have comprehensively explored the Benin musical concepts and society, it has undoubtedly succeeded in narrowing down the field of reference and guarding against generalisation. The Benin popular song has its firm foundation in the people's oral tradition and therefore tasks their collective consciousness. The composers too are not unaware of the need for them to come close to the tradition so that their songs would be more easily embraced and appreciated. This explains why the musical concepts held by the society are of importance to the study of songs. It is also necessary to have a recourse to Alan Merriam (1964)'s identification of a number of concepts

such as the distinction between music and noise, musical talent; origin of music, production and ownership of music. It should be stressed that while Benin popular songs have not completely lost grip of the past, they are very much concerned with the present reality of Benin society.

NOTES

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