

The Manifestation of Nigerian

National Identity through Music

Oluyemi Olaniyan

Introduction

National identity could be defined as unique characteristics by which a person is recognized, as well as being in relationship with the cultural ideals of his/her nation. Such cultural ideals form the basis for people's sense of belonging. The state of being the same in nature and of holding similar beliefs binds people of the same country or state together. Although people of the same nation could be of diverse ethnic groups, certain factors, such as their beliefs and their religious and socio-economic practices, are strong binding forces. Nketia stated that Africa as a continent is not as culturally homogeneous as has generally been assumed.¹ Nigeria, a nation with over 280 languages, could hardly be said to be completely homogeneous. Nevertheless, there are factors within Nigeria's diverse cultural heritage that bind all Nigerians together, as people sharing a common identity. Music is one of the aspects of Nigerian cultural heritage through which people's national identity can manifest itself.

The Act of fostering National Identity in a Multi Ethnic/Tribal Society like Nigeria

When one evaluates the multi-ethnic nature of Nigerians, it could be felt that fostering a sense of national identity may not be an easy task. Normally, no problem will arise if the spirit of ethnic identity could be extended to that of national identity as a means to foster love and unity among the people. The envisaged task has been made easy through a considerable number of social events such as sports and games. Nigerian national identity could also be expressed through people's works of art and in craft such as cloth weaving, dyeing, painting, sculpture, pottery and hair plaiting. Among the prevailing creative arts, music, with its several dimensions, stands out prominently as an art form through which national identity can be expressed. Music encompasses dimensions such as music itself, language proper, dance, drama and visual arts. In this write-up the three categories of music examined are traditional, art and popular. Each of these genres has been found to be dynamic as each evolves with time.

The Expression of National Identity through Traditional Music

In viewing the possibility of expressing national identity through traditional music, one would have to assess the extent to which Nigerian traditional musical practices, and the instrumental resources used, show similarities. Concerning the cultivation of music in Africa, Nketia states that:

North Africa is inhabited by societies whose languages and cultures are very closely related to those of the Arab world of the Middle East, while the southern portion is dominated by settler populations from Europe.²

It should be noted that the situation has now changed in the southernmost part of the area being referred to by Nketia, namely the termination of the apartheid policy of racial segregation practised by the previous white minority regime. Based on Nketia's premise, the areas in Africa that cannot be said to have indigenous African musical cultures are North Africa, northern Sudan, parts of the Maghreb, and the East African littoral. The music of these areas belongs to the oriental family of modal music. Having pointed out this fact, it will be right to state that the rest of Africa consists of societies that have musical cultures which have their roots in the soil of Africa. Apart from this, the musical cultures, according to Nketia, form a network of distinct yet related traditions which overlap in certain aspects of style, practice or usage and share common features of internal patterns, basic procedure and contextual similarities.³

Nigeria, as a country in West Africa, consists of societies whose musical cultures are mainly of African origin. This notwithstanding, there are the influences of acculturation and enculturation which give room for instrumental borrowing and the sharing of musical ideas. In fulfillment of the spirit of national identity, Nigerian traditional musicians have been creating music that stands out as Nigerian in nature. Music in this realm reveals aspects of Nigerian cultural heritage as far as vocal style, instrumental organization, performance procedure, contextual implication and general functional value. Structure is bound to be a reflection of the societal concept. An aspect such as the language-delivery style of Nigerian folk songs is indicative of the people's way of life. In a comparative examination regarding folk-songs, texts and folk tales, Lomax states that; "A comparison of the studies carried out to the present analysis of folk song texts suggests that folk song texts yield information about norms more readily than folk tales."⁴

The focus here is on the folk song, not the folk tale. Lomax's opinion, which is supported by many scholars, is that folk song texts serve as culture indicators. In spite of the cultural diversities among the people of Nigeria, there are elements that bind them together as members of the same society. In assessing the varieties in our music, one could also observe the point of unification. Musical instruments might differ in structure; yet all categories of instruments are available within each geographical zone, with a few areas having some elements of uniqueness regarding instrumental resources. Nigerian vocal music likewise shares common features. The people's dances and costuming are unique to Nigeria. All of these factors enable one to identify the people as members of the same cultural entity. It is in recognition of this fact that the first national signature tune was played on the *Iyaalu dundun* (*dundun* being mother/master drum) for radio broadcast. This is a relative representation of the signature tune;



This is the Ni - ge-rian Broad - ca-sting Ser-vice

This signature tune was used for many years. Even though the text was in English, it served the purpose of affirming national identity, as it was played on one of the most widespread Nigerian musical instruments - the talking drum - and also used a Nigerian vocal style. More recently, a combination of Nigerian musical instruments was adopted when playing a signature tune to usher in the national news, both on television and radio. All of these are aimed at the expression of Nigerian national identity through traditional music. Furthermore, individuals and groups demonstrate their musical ingenuity in order to express a sense of national identity. Solo performers such as Denge, Kokoro (the blind minstrel) and Dan Maraya Jos have all, at one time or another, performed in and outside the country. Other traditional musicians such as the *dundun* and *bata* music groups, *mpokiti*, *Etilogwu* and *egedege* music and dance groups, and several other traditional music groups across northern and southern Nigeria have all expressed a sense of national identity through their music. Festac '77, despite all the criticism it drew from various quarters, was not without achievement regarding the fostering of a national identity.

The Manifestation of Nigerian National Identity through Art Music

The beginnings of art music can be traced back to about the second half of the nineteenth century. It has been observed that the early Christian missionaries banned the performance of all forms of African music as it was believed that such types of music were not spiritually uplifting, according to Christian standards. Converts were not allowed to sing folk songs or play any indigenous, musical instruments. This attitude inevitably influenced the early educated Christians.

The pioneers of academically trained musicians were A.C. Coker and T.K.E. Phillips, and later Fela Sowande. These pioneers got themselves brain-washed by colonial masters' attitudes towards African music. Anything traditional was linked to paganism. These attitudes suppressed African cultural identity while promoting Western European, cultural tastes. These attitudes eventually led to a sort of awareness when the spirit of nationalism and patriotism developed in the hearts and minds of Nigerians. At this time, cultural integration became inevitable. But it became imperative that Nigerians did not allow their own cultural identity to be swept under the carpet. As Adegbite observed: "When a country integrates cultural traits from abroad, it is usual for such a country to keep its Cultural identity".⁵

Consequently, the efforts of Nigerian art musicians in fusing the nation's cultural identity with a foreign variant was revealed. This practice started with church missionaries indoctrinating privileged Nigerians into the performance of Western music including church hymns for worship. Thereafter English texts were translated into Yoruba, and later into other Nigerian indigenous languages. Such texts were sung to Western tunes, resulting in a distortion of the native language, as in the case of Yoruba. Olaniyan observed that this practice resulted in a complete distortion of Yoruba tonal language.⁶ It is very important to note that that fault was not taken seriously until people started becoming more aware of their cultural identity. Furthermore, Olaniyan states that the spirit of cultural nationalism spread to music art.⁷

Composers of native airs, a category of Nigerian contemporary music art, are: Revd. J.J. Ransome Kuti whose contribution of sacred songs are recorded in the appendix to the Yoruba Hymn Book; A.T. Ola

Olude whose compositions are put together in a book titled *Mayo-kan*, Bola Fadeyi's compositions appear in a book titled *Orin Iyin*; Lufadeju composed songs put together in the book *Imole Okan*; B.G. Oriere's songs appear in *Oniruuru orin fun Igba ati Akoko*; Oluyemi Olaniyan's songs are collected in *Orin Ijosin*; Dayo Dedeke's book titled *Ma Gbagbe Ile* and Ajibola's book *Orin Yoruba* respectively contain both sacred and secular compositions that are widely used. Ola-Olu Omideyi wrote songs as necessitated by occasions, but these have not been compiled in book form. In the eastern part of the country, the book titled *Abu Ekele Na Otuto* written by Harcourt Whyte, stands out as an important contribution in the arena of art music.

Another category of art music through which Nigerian national identity is manifested is the Nigerian national anthem and the composition of various classical forms by the country's academically trained musicians. The composers in question have done much in merging African/Nigerian elements with Western ones in their compositions, all for the purpose of achieving a concept of Nigerian national identity. Fela Sowande is one of the most renowned, academically trained musicians. Initially, he was almost carried away by the brain-washing of pioneers by the Westerners, but he eventually wriggled his way out of that mindset and temptation. At that time, his link with Western music was still strong. Sowande could be described as a cultural nationalist. Concerning Sowande's pioneering effort in art music composition, Bateye states that among the music that feature in Nigerian concert and church music traditions of contemporary times, is that of Fela Sowande. His musical style is still largely the bedrock of the compositional writing of many academically trained, Nigerian composers of the 1990s.⁸

One of Sowande's works that reveals a sense of Nigerian national identity is the Nigerian Folk Symphony, which he was commissioned to compose for Nigeria's Independence Day celebrations on October 1, 1960. The performance of that work has been described as a unique, spectacular event in Nigerian history. One of the themes of this work is a Yoruba melody "Oluwa, ma fi mi se gbagbe" meaning "God, do not forget me".

Many art musicians have demonstrated a sense of Nigerian national identity in their works. Adam Fiberesima's "Jaja of Opobo"; Ayo Bankole's solo songs such as "Iya" and choral works such as "mo fe beji"; Akin Euba's new invention of "African pianism"; Joshua Uzoigwe's "Dance of the Forest"; Sammy Akpabot's "Opu Jaja"; Meki Nzewi's "The Lost Finger"; Okechukwu Ndubuisi's "Vengeance of the Lizards", Laz Ekwueme's choral works; Tunji Vidal's "Danzo Africano" and Yemi Olaniyan's "Awo Dudu" - to mention just a few - are works in which a deep sense of Nigerian national identity has been expressed. Whenever any of these works are performed, either at home or abroad, clear-cut evidence of Nigerian, national identity is always observed and enjoyed by the audience.

The Manifestation of Nigerian National identity through Popular Music

Nigerian popular music has played a remarkable role in promoting a sense of Nigerian identity. Though there are aspects of the work of certain popular artists which may raise some questions on issues of moral conduct and values, the fact remains that popular music has immensely excelled, by primarily promoting a national cultural identity. That is because, as a commercial music genre, it is accessible to people from all walks of life. By contrast, classical art music is notably for a few members of the elite in

society. Many Nigerian popular artistes have expressed Nigerian cultural identity in their music. In their efforts to assimilate foreign influences, they have not lost sight of Nigerian elements, as the basis for their music production. Examples of some Nigerian popular music genres are: highlife, *Juju*, Afro-beat, *apala*, *fuji*, *sakara*, *waka*, *sewele* and gospel. Gospel musicians today make use of instrumental and vocal styles of the other popular genres mentioned. The music of many notable Nigerian popular musicians have been nationally and globally accepted in the world of entertainment music. Popular musicians draw from musical material from different parts of the country in order to present their music as a national idiom rather than “just” ethnic and tribal idiom. By doing this, Nigerian national identity is achieved both in instrumentation and in language delivery style. Occasionally, artistes from different linguistic backgrounds combine to release very impressive albums for public consumption. The fact that such music also delivers useful messages to the public, on day-to-day happenings in society, should not be brushed aside.

King Sunny Ade organized a get-together for many popular music artistes from across the country. The outcome of that meeting was the release of an album titled “The way forward”, SDLC 017. Several Nigerian languages feature in this performance, for an effective delivery of the message, regarding the fostering of unity among Nigerians. Ayinde Wasiu released an album in which he used the *ngedegwu* (xylophone) as part of his instrumentation. Igbo dance style features prominently in the rendition.

Further highlights concerning the achievements of some other Nigerian popular music artistes in fostering Nigerian national identity are listed here: Victor Olaiya promoted highlife music beyond national boundaries, into the international realm. He was awarded an honorary doctorate in Music by a Czech university. I.K. Dairo was awarded an M.B.E. by Queen Elizabeth II of England. Celestine Ukuwu, Osita Osadebe, Rex Jim Lawson, Roy Chicago, the composer of “wa-zo-bia”, a song in which three major Nigerian languages are reflected – hence the words “wa” (Yoruba), “zo” (Hausa) and “bia” (Igbo) - all meaning “come”. Adeolu Akinsanya popularized highlife music both at home and abroad. Among other pioneering exponents of Nigerian popular music, who manifested cultural identity in their music, are Ambrose Campbell, the composer of “Ero Ya,”, Bobby Benson, the composer of “Iya mi lo fi mi fun” and “Taxi Driver”, Chris Ajilo, Sonny Okosun, the composer of “My papa’s land”, Eddy Okonta, Zeal Onyia and Victor Uwaifor. Other *juju* exponents of repute are Tunde, the western Nightingale, Dele Abiodun, Orlando Owoh and Ebenezer Obey. In the genre of Afro- beat, Fela Anikulapo Kuti remains the originator and the most reputed exponent whose music represents a remarkable African idiom. The vocal delivery is usually in pidgin English, a Nigerian coined language of the semi-educated masses. Along Fela’s line of music is that of Lagbaja, Femi Kuti and Seun Kuti.

Some exponents of other Nigerian, popular music genres that may be mentioned are Ayinde Barister, Ayinla Kollington, Ayinde Wasiu, Adewale Ayuba and Pasuma Wonder. All of these are reputable exponents of *fuji* music. They have promoted *fuji* as a Nigerian-derived, popular music both at home and abroad. Salawatu Abeni and Iyaladuke are notable exponents of *waka* and *sewele* music respectively, while Haruna Isola and S. Aka are popularly known as *apala* and *sakara* exponents respectively. Musiliu Isola is actively following his father’s profession and honouring the legacy.

Mention should be made of Nigerian gospel music. Evidence has shown that gospel music artistes such as Bola Aare, Toun Soetan and others have promoted gospel music, not only within Nigeria, but also internationally.

Conclusion

Since the existence of Nigeria as a united entity, music has been found to be a very important art form through which a sense of the nation's identity is manifested. In spite of the cultural diversity inherent in the ethnic and tribal grouping within the nation, Nigerians remain united members of the same society, a situation often described as "Unity in Diversity". In assessing the forces behind our bond of unity, music has been found to be one of the most important factors. Generally, Nigerians are highly gifted in all art forms, especially music. Music has thus been used advantageously in promoting a spirit of cultural nationalism. In doing this, a spirit of patriotism is enhanced which at the same time, fosters a sense of belonging. The overall result is the manifestation of a sense of national identity through music.

In achieving the objective set for this write-up, the author has examined three prominent areas of musical creativity. These are, in sequence; traditional, art and popular music. It is evident that music is a very important aspect of the cultural heritage of Nigerians. Furthermore, people are very good at interacting with people from other cultures of the world and assimilating their cultural traits. As a result, other cultural legacies from the West and the East (Arab world) have influenced their musical creativity. Generation after generation of each of the previously mentioned practitioners of music had worked relentlessly to manifest, through music, the spirit of Nigerian national identity. Through this, Nigerian, cultural heritage and innovations based on it go a long way towards promoting the image and the cultural values of the nation. Care should be taken not to portray Nigeria's image and cultural values negatively, whether through music or through other works of art.

Bibliography

1. J.H.K. Nketia, (1974), *The Music of Africa*. Victor Gollancz Ltd. London.
2. Ibid. P.3.
3. Ibid. P.4.
4. A. Lomax, (1968), *Folk Song Style and Culture*. Transaction Books. New Brunswick, New Jersey. P.274.
5. A. Adegbite, (2001), 'The Present State of Development of African Art Music in Nigeria'. In *African Art Music in Nigeria*, (Fela Sowande Memorial), Stirling-Horden Publishers (Nig.) Ltd. Lagos, Ibadan, Benin City, Jattu-Uzairue, Pp. 58-69.
6. O. Olaniyan, (2001), 'A Discourse of Yoruba Lyrics (Otherwise Known as Native Airs) As Contemporary Art Music for Christian Worship'. In *African Art Music in Nigeria* (Fela Sowande Memorial). Op cit. P.59.
7. Ibid.
8. O.O. Bateye, (2001). In *African Art Music in Nigeria* (Fela Sowande Memorial). Ibid. Pp. 117-126.