CULTURE AND COMMUNICATION: MUSIC, SONG AND DANCE AS MEDIUUMS OF COMMUNICATION IN AFRICA*

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Introduction

In traditional African societies, song and dance are used as an avenue for praise, blame, for social criticism and commentary and for inciting people besides their use for entertainment and for marking different occasions through the life cycle.

Traditional music, song, and dance were in the past closely integrated with social life – with the pattern of social organization, with religious behavior, economic activities and with political organization. Music and dance were very functional in the sense that they accompanied many activities of the daily life of the people. Although the recent forces of acculturation have had some impact on the traditional music, song, and dance practices in many parts of Africa, many of the performing arts traditions which have continued to be closely identified with traditional institutions, ceremonies, rituals and others, have survived the impact and still exist, mostly in the rural areas. The many raiding and war songs of the people which are not heard these days because of social changes, have

now become a feature of political rallies. These songs are sung by contemporary dance groups which praise politicians and other important personalities in song and dance.

Besides the traditional music and dance types, there are contemporary idioms of music, song, and dance – Christian church hymns, songs and dances (performed during church services and anniversaries), school part-songs, and popular dance music and songs played or performed in the night clubs and elsewhere. Some of these new idioms are hybrid types – a fusion of traditional African and Euro-American music and dance elements. Others are purely Western. These contemporary idioms of music, song and dance are used also as effective modes of communication or as means for putting across issues or problems and needs of the society to government officials and other members of the community.

Song: Traditional and contemporary music (and dance) lay stress on the use of vocal resources. Although pure instrumental music is performed, it is the exception rather than the rule, for the peoples prefer to sing. Song and dance provide at once the most ready and most convenient means of group participation and an avenue for verbal expression. Song provides a means of recording tradition, of expressing community sentiments, of praising or criticising, and a way of expressing personal thoughts and feelings, as mentioned above.

Some topical songs – songs of comment on aspects of daily life – for example, are concerned with direct social control, in other words admonition, ridicule or more direct action are made through song to effect actual change in behaviour of erring members of society. Such songs may be directed toward a wide variety of social ills, among them sex offences and theft.

The Luo, as well as other ethnic groups in Africa, have topical songs which are a reflection of the concerns of the culture of which they are a part. While they contribute to the correction of those aspects of behaviour to which they call attention, putting them in the public eye, their major function seems to be one of comment on various aspects of everyday life. At the same time such songs exhibit a keen eye for scandal and gossip.

Huwage song, for example, is said to be one of the most effective forms of punishment the Luo use in the process of education – a means by which individuals or a group of a clan are induced or compelled to conform to the traditional conduct as represented by their traditional heroes or mores of the people. If a child or a grown-up married person steals food or money, a man beats his mother or father, or a married man or woman enters his or her parents’ sleeping room; young girls and boys will, at times, expose the theft or the occurrence through the community through huwage songs which psychologically humiliates the person. This may prevent a grown-up man or woman from getting a mate or it may cause divorce.

Huwage songs may be sung in the fields when cultivating or looking after cattle, when going to get water from the river, when going to look for firewood in the bush, when playing outside the homestead, or at public performances. Such songs may also be sung in the evening when most people are at home. They are sung and passed from one home to another, telling people of what has taken place.

One such song is as follows:

"O huwage, wege, wege, ee wege, o huwe!
Omolo Otieno otimo tim mikwero
Omolo Otieno njewo gweng'......"

("O huwage wege wege ee wege O huwe!
Omolo Otieno has committed a taboo.
Omolo Otieno has committed an offensive act
In our locality......")

Singing can be satirical among the Samburu people of Kenya. There are songs which subtly condemn liars, adulterers, thieves. There are also songs that give the opportunity for a variety of emotional expressions – the release of otherwise unexpressible thoughts and ideas; songs which give opportunity to “let off steam” and, this helps to resolve social conflicts. One of the major functions of Samburu music, song and dance is therefore, the enforcement of conformity to social norms. Songs of protest also call attention to propriety and impropriety.

Other African societies also have satirical songs and songs which lament lost traditional values or draw attention to individual grievances. The wide variety of songs which are performed all over Africa include game songs, harvest, digging and general work songs, love songs, boasting songs, songs of advice, praise songs, funeral dirges, song-interludes in stories, and lullabies, the texts of which may create a tool or weapon for organisation, action and development. Rituals with song and dance are performed in times of stress such as prolonged drought, illness, any recurring disaster, and certain disorders, or for treatment of certain diseases.

There are birth and cradle songs, both to calm and to drive away evil spirits such as those which attend the birth of twins. The texts of these songs have the ‘power’ to calm, treat and drive away evil spirits or demons
possessing ‘sick’ people. There are again children’s play-songs, songs for
initiation ceremonies when the younger members of the society are
specifically instructed in proper behaviour, the customs and history of the
society through music, song, and dance. Marriage songs (especially those
sung by the bride’s female supporters, praising her and, at times, rudely
criticising the bridegroom abound in Kenya and elsewhere.

There are insult songs, songs which sly-dig at the pompous, songs
which condemn those who neglect their duties and songs which criticise
injustices in the society. Special songs are sung to indicate the importance
of having children.

Among the Iteso of Kenya, men who go to the kitchen or visit the
cooking place to see what is cooking on fire are mocked at in song at public
performances.

The following example is a case in point:

"Omaune l'ebala akan taa – Omaune's hand is shining with fat
Ebalu amot kaberu chu-kul – He must have dipped it in a woman's
cooking fat.

The following song also criticises a man who is never satisfied with
the meals his wife serves him.

"Epo mara keke Omaune lo,
Eguri man keguri Omaune lo,
Ekori mara kekori Eurama lo,
Enyemi mara kanyemi Eurame lo!

(I cook, Omaune is not satisfied,
I dish, he is not happy,
He eats and he is never contended,
Eh! what kind of man is this?)

Praise songs are also many and varied. Spontaneous singing and
dancing arise sometimes when people meet at informal gatherings or at
organised beer parties to drink the locally brewed beer. People
drinking may use music, song, and dance as a means of praise. A Luo
nyatilli player, a Lujia or Gusii obokano lyre player, on such occasion, may
sing of generous and hospitable men. He may sing in praise of himself,
and a local chief who has initiated development projects, such as the
establishment of a posho (ground maize) mill and a school in the

1 Omaune is the nickname for “a man who looks into cooking pots”. At times,
proper names of such greedy men are used in the song-text.
Dance

Even though some African dance movements are performed for the joy of dancing and have no significance or purpose beyond entertaining the spectators, some gestures suggest an explicit stylization of work and they also make comments on some activities of the people. The gestures of the arms and of the hands at dance performances frequently serve as a means of detailed communication; some are made for symbolic reasons.

In Kenya, the dances of the women and girls of the Boran, Gabbar, Rendille and other pastoral societies are remarkable for their grace, fluidity and sustained quality of the arm and body movement. Aspects of the beauty of their cattle, including the shape of the horns, the colour and hide-making and other characteristics of their bulls and cows are attributed in the songs and dances.

When, for example, Boran women are singing songs about their cattle, two or three women lead-singers or dancers stand inside a semi-circular formation made up of other singers and dancers. As the lead-singers take turn in singing songs extolling their bulls and cows, they dance and move their arms into a formalised horn-shape to indicate the horns of the bulls and how gracefully they walk.

The work movements involved in the daily routine of farming form the basis for many of the stylised movements in Tiv dances in Nigeria. These movements also take the form of explicit mimicry in the Kwasa dance of the Tiv (Harper, 1966).

Instrumental Music

Some instrumental musics have verbal basis. Horns with variable tones, like the Gusii egetureri, and that of Kasighau or Saghala nderero, are played to convey messages to the people when danger threatens the community.

To the Akan of Ghana and the Yoruba of Nigeria 'the drum can and does speak'. Words, phrases and sentences may be transformed into drum sounds which are then re-interpreted in verbal terms by the listener. This is particularly true with the Akan Atumpan and the Yoruba Ifa/u talking drums which are used to send messages. As observed by J.H. Nketia (1963:32), "the association of drum sounds with texts finds its greatest expression in the speech mode of drumming... In the speech mode of drumming, texts are used solely for their communicative value."

Below is an example of a fragmentary text played as Kete (Akatapa) drum music of the Akan courts (Nketia, ibid: 40).

"Sresre bi di – (To beg here and there for something to eat
Nye akorommo Is not stealing).

Similar to what has been observed by Carrington (1949) among the Lokele of Zaire who beat the drum to announce births, deaths and marriages, the Lobi of northwestern Ghana also play xylophone (gyiil) tunes to announce deaths. Those who can decipher the message in the tune would know if the dead is an adult male or a female child.

Melodic musical instruments, such as flutes, lyres, lutes, harps, which can be played to reflect or imitate the tonal inflections of speech, entertain, inform and educate people with their tunes during music and dance performances all over Africa.

Conclusion

The foregoing is a short review of the use of music, song, and dance as tools for communication in African societies. Music, song and dance reach much wider audience and, if used positively or effectively, they can effect changes that may provide better living standards for the people. They can also be used to create a better and a just society free from robbery, cheating, nepotism, and other social vices. Topical songs which reflect concerns of the society, particularly those concerned with development, for instance, need to be composed and performed more often at social gatherings, at church functions, on the radio and television, and elsewhere. They may contribute to the correction of those negative aspects of behaviour to which the songs call attention. Such songs should
include songs of advice, corrective songs, songs for jeering or humiliating thieves, drunkards, songs of social consciousness and others. More new Christian church songs which offer solace to the congregation and others alike need to be composed to educate, inform and entertain.

Song-texts have always been important sources of historical material. As a development tool, historians need to pay more attention to historical songs when attempting to rewrite or reconstruct the past (history) of the people. The exploits of the successive age-sets of communities, for example, tend to be rembered and sung by older men and women. All sorts of events, both local and general ones – from wars, cattle raids, victories, and defeats to migrations, droughts, and epidemics – are recorded in songs as having occurred in the time of a particular age-set.

The same emphasis and interest placed on active and communal participation in traditional and contemporary music, song, and dance in the rural and urban areas should be directed towards community commitment in providing social services like schools, clinic/health centres, pit latrines and many others. Attempts by women dance groups in Nairobi and elsewhere in Kenya to build houses for renting, rear poultry, start knitting and sewing business to earn some money for the groups should be emulated.

The new idioms of popular and art music, dance, action and school part-songs and games as well as other recreational activities (from Europe, America, Asia, Kenya and other parts of Africa) that have come to stay in our countries in Africa, should be accepted as ‘good’ additions to the indigenous ones. They should not be considered as substitutes; they are to be used as encouragement to creativity to foster the growth of our music, song, and dance, as well as other performing and expressive arts as living arts.

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