

Popular Music Studies: Contesting the Extremes of 'Otherness'

By:

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Abstract

Operationally, the notion of 'Otherness' refers to the negative implications of Western-oriented art music scholars' opinions that are associated with the tendency to suppress the multiformity of knowledge types in popular music as strange, odd, dissimilar, trivial, and lowbrow. This negation amounts to segregation and isolation for mere pedantic excuses which, eventually, stultifies the intrinsic function of the arts as a humanizer of the society. This study, by contesting the extremes of the politics of the 'Other' argues the rationale for isolating the aesthetic (art music) and segregating against the more multi-cultural utilitarian (popular music) angles to music studies. The argument is based on facts gleaned from general literature in music studies accessible in Nigeria.

Introduction

The imperialistic point of view upholding the dichotomy of the in-group and the out-group is the basis for formulating the construct of the Other. This Otherness, according to Staszak (2008),

is due less to the difference of the Other than to the point of view and discourse of the person who perceives the Other as such. Opposing Us, the Self, and Them, the Other, is to choose a criterion that allows humanity to be divided into two groups: one that embodies the norm and whose identity is valued and another that is defined by its fault, devalued and susceptible to discrimination. Only dominant groups (such as Westerners in the time of colonization) are in a position to impose their categories in the matter.

Otherness, at its extreme manifestation in music studies, suppresses the multiformity of knowledge types in popular music as the lowbrow 'Other' while deifying the Western-oriented art music as the highbrow 'One' (Tagg, 2011). This dichotomy of One and Other has generated varying opinions that are discernible in the works of many African music scholars.

Okafor (2005) has worried about 'the general snobbish attitude of the music academia' (p. 204) towards popular music studies, Emeka (2006) has complained about the repulsion of popular music studies by curriculum planners, and Onyeji (2002) has reported the academia's derogatory opinion that 'a popular air is that which echoes in empty heads' (p. 24). But it is

Agawu(2003:118) who paints the picture succinctly in *Resisting Pop Music* where he asked, "Why is the most widely heard music on the continent not also the most written about, the most taught in our institutions, the most valued?" To substantiate his claim, Agawu goes further to report:

As recently as the early 1990s, the Department of Music in the School of Performing Arts at the University of Ghana at Legon still lacked staff trained to teach the varieties of African popular music. When the intention to appoint a lecturer in that area was announced, a number of people vehemently opposed the idea, arguing that an expert in popular music belonged not in a music department but in the department of sociology or African studies— in short, some place other than the music department. The music department was reserved for those who could talk of crotchets and quavers, sonata and rondo forms, diatonic and chromatic harmony (p. 120).

When the foregoing is scrutinized against the backdrop of bi-musicality and/or multi-culturality, it becomes clear that the so-called 'Other' regarding popular music is the only musical phenomenon that truly reflects and dramatizes the economic, political, and ideological contradictions of the society. This is evident in the definition of popular music as the totality of those musics with diverse styles that have developed from artistic manipulations and fusions of musical activities of distant cultures, times, and practices. Popular music borrows from folk, classical/art, and even musical interpretations of non-musical events like politics, humanities, and science (Frith, 2001; Onwuegbuna, 2006).

Problems of Popular Music Studies

No greater problem confronts academic pursuit of popular music than the problem of **primal fundamentalism** on the part of African music scholars. Primal fundamentalism is a conservative mental construct that upholds the first developed principle/practice (often handed down) as the best, ever the best, and therefore sacrosanct— a pristine approach to value judgment. This problem exists in two streams— one is **primitive musical ethnocentrism**, while the other is **Western classical élitism**. What, here, is regarded as primitive musical ethnocentrism is the practice whereby, in Barber's (1997) findings, "ethnomusicologists deplored the *contamination* of authentic indigenous traditional sounds by the infusion of Western rhythms, melodies, and technologies" (p.1). Supporting the foregoing view, Graham (1988) argues that "ethnomusicologists are in the main much more comfortable with tradition than innovation, and are often biased against music with any overt Western influence" (p. 10). Agawu (2003) therefore concludes, "Ethnomusicologists are in part to blame for the relative neglect of popular music" (p. 118). Decrypting the reason for this primitive musical ethnocentrism, he explains that "academic protocol and a long-standing fascination with ethnographies of old music had rendered popular music avoidable for anyone attempting a survey" (p. 117).

The problem of Western classical elitism is in the mental frame that the Western classical music studies are the mark of authentic academic musicianship. Agawu (2003) deplors these prejudices against our cultures instilled by colonial education (p. 118). He goes further to say:

In the case of music, some schooled Africans 'lucky' enough to be exposed to Handel, Bach, Mozart, or Beethoven stuck with them; very few listened with interest to contemporary African art music. And while popular music such as *highlife* served an important social function as dance music, its incorporation into the curriculum was slow to emerge (p. 120).

In Okafor's (2005) opinion:

The special demands of contemporary popular music received no particular attention, thereby giving rise to the misconception that qualification in music means qualification in Western classical music with a few credit hours of ethnomusicology added for good measure (p. 357).

Blaming the problem on early musicological researchers' evaluation of popular music, Wicke and Mayer (1982) write:

Now although the phenomena discussed in literature on popular music are clearly related to the subject of musicology, the theoretical and empirical scientific activities carried out in this area by same discipline have been few and far between. One might even say that reactions from the discipline of musicology have not only been skeptical but also characterized by an attitude of rejection and negative evaluation (p. 223).

Musicology, the scientific study of music in its widest sense—covering both the natural and the humane sciences of music—was first conceived and practised in ancient Greece as early as 600 BC; and dominated by the writings of such philosophers as Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. But it was not until 1885, when Guido Adler defined the branch of musicology that deals with the regional applications of music-making that ethnomusicology emerged. Adler used the term *Vergleichende Musikwissenschaft* (meaning Comparative Musicology) to refer to the broad programme of musicological comparison of melodies, scales, intervals, styles, and various performance techniques of different cultures of the world with one another. (Thieme, 1966). Ethnomusicology, therefore, goes beyond the study of music within its social context, and extends to the study of music as an aspect of socio-cultural behaviour. It is for this reason that pop music, a phenomenon of socio-cultural production, fits comfortably in the ethnomusicological field.

The Department of Music at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, established in 1960, is regarded as one of the foremost Departments of Music in Black Africa. Within the span of 53 years, a total of 28 institutions offering music at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels can be counted in

Nigeria alone (Onwuegbuna, 2012). Yet, even with what Okafor (2005) calls 'a few credit hours of ethnomusicology added for good measure' (p. 357), only two of these institutions have a clearly defined programme of popular music studies. The depth of the damage that this anomaly is causing can be felt in Agawu's (2003) regrets:

Reflections would have revealed that students possess a large repertoire in memory, that some have internalized 'naively, no doubt but authentically in enabling procedures, and that none would lack insight into the social meanings set in motion by sound and especially words of the popular music they had grown up with. Reflection might have led to the discovery that students are able to speak popular music as a language – complete utterances begun in it, recognize idioms, and evaluate not only the grammatical correctness but also poetic depth of other people's performances (p. 121).

The other problem of popular music studies (and music studies in general) is one encountered by young learners of Music as a subject at the post-primary school level in Nigeria. Students with an inclination towards music are discouraged at this formative stage, where the Cultural and Creative Arts (CCA) of the Nigerian current policy in education is operative. In this arrangement, Music, Drama, and Fine Art are lumped together and one teacher is assigned to teach them. The curriculum implication is that these three subjects which are actually professional fields in their respective rights are to be taught as one subject, by one teacher, within the time duration of one school subject. This situation is responsible for the ever-dwindling number of music candidates at the entrance examinations for admissions into Nigerian higher institutions.

Suggested Solutions to the Problems

From the beginning of the 20th century, the systematic study of the arts has so exploded that popular music has become an interesting subject of scholarly investigation. In the U.S., Canada, and the U.K., amongst others, tertiary institutions offer courses in Popular Music up to the postgraduate levels; some of these institutions include the Stony Brook University of New York, the Berklee College of Music in Boston, the City University, London, the Athabasca University, Canada, the Carl von Ossietzky-University of Oldenburg, Germany, and the Southern Cross University of Lismore, Australia. And in 1981, the International Association for the Study of Popular Music (IASPM) was founded to function as a conduit for global communication among people that work in the field of popular music. The British *Popular Music Journal* is one of the numerous journals that are solely devoted to the publication of issues in popular music (Nardi, 2009; Stahl, 2009; Strachan, 2008). Today, not only do these institutions maintain vibrant departments of Music with highly successful programmes of popular music, many also maintain functional institutes of popular music that are highly competitive and productive. These institutes are comfortably funded by international foundations and agencies of high repute.

In Africa, the KwaZulu-Natal University, at Durban, in South Africa and the University of Ghana, at Legon, in West Africa take the lead in vigorous pursuit of popular music studies. It is because of these developments that a musicologist at the University of Pretoria in South Africa, Bosman (2006) informs that popular music, world musics, and music technology are increasingly playing vital roles in the most recent curricula in Africa and the world at large. In Nigeria, conversely, it is only the Delta State University at Abraka and the ObafemiAwolowo University at Ile-Ife that are known to have some forms of academic programmes that are defined along the lines of systematic studies in popular music. Other institutions in the country have it implied in their courses that emphasize the folk music of Africa and other cultures of the world, as well as the African-American music.

In the midst of the foregoing, some leading Nigerian music scholars and educators, like Agu (2008), Ekwueme (2004), and Onyeji (2002) seem to sound skeptical about the pedagogic possibilities of popular music in the country's academic curricula. However, their counterparts such as Mbanugo (1999), Okafor (2005), Adedeji (2006), and Vidal (2008) are of the firm opinion that the African music curricula would be incomplete and unbalanced without the inclusion of popular music studies to it.

It is not enough to describe problem situations and their negative consequences, although defining a problem is a step towards solving it, while suggesting solutions to it is yet another step further than a mere definition of the problem. Below are some suggested solutions to the problems already described.

1. African music scholars (systematic musicologists, historical musicologists, and ethnomusicologists) who are of the 'analogue' generation should try to 'digitalize' by adopting a positive attitude to change and innovation and availing themselves of the wealth of information on 21st century approach to music studies, which are accessible on the Internet. This will enable them to update and upgrade their knowledge and skills in current music procedures.
2. Since ours is a system where precedence lends credence to recent events, curriculum planners (especially in Nigeria) should review the present curricula, and remodel them after the system that operates in the U.S., Canada, the U.K., South Africa, and also Ghana. The academic music programmes of these nations are carefully designed to accommodate functional bi-musicality and operational multi-culturality in both principle and practice. Certification from any of these systems covers the broad areas of Certificate, Diploma, Undergraduate, and Postgraduate courses; and student specialization in any of the multi-disciplines of music is discovered, encouraged, and guided to fruition from an early stage of learning.

3. Employment of adequate numbers of qualified music teachers in the post-primary schools in Nigeria would be a healthy solution of the current practice, whereby Music, Drama, and Fine Art are tangled in a lethal battle.

Recommendations and Prospects

There is a fine line between suggestions and recommendations. For a meaningful and successful academic exercise in African popular music studies to be undertaken, the opinions of some devotees of this virgin area must be recommended. These opinions are expressed mostly in the form of books and other reference materials in electronic forms. They include: *Popular Music Perspectives* by David Horn and Philip Tagg (Eds.) Amsterdam: Göteborg& Exeter, *Popular Musics of the Non-Western World: An Introductory Review* by Peter Manuel. New York: Oxford University Press, *Africa O-Ye!* by Graeme Ewens. London: Guinness, *Highlife Time* by John Collins. Accra: Anansesem, *Producing Pop* by Keith Negus. London: Arnold, *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock* by Simon Frith. London: Cambridge University Press, *Playing with Identities in Contemporary Music in Africa* by Mai Palmberg and Annemette Kirkegaard (Eds.). Stockholm: Nordiska Afrikanstitutet, *Representing African Music* by Kofi Agawu. New York: Routledge, *Music in Nigerian Society* by Richard C. Okafor. Enugu: New Generation, and *The Instructional Value of African Popular Music* by Ikenna Emmanuel Onwuegbuna. Saarbrücken, Germany: LAP Lambert Academic Publishers.

The prospects for studies in African popular music are quite enormous. Citing the records of ethnographies on African popular music between 1971 and 2001, reported by notable individual scholars including David Coplan, Christopher Waterman, Kazadiwa Makuna, John Collins, Ronnie Graham, Atta Annan Mensah, Christopher Ballantine, Veit Erlmann, John Chernoff, Louise Meintjes, Wolfgang Bender, Tejunmola Olaniyan, and Michael Veal; Agawu (2003:118) insists that 'the collective work of these scholars has helped to counter some of the prejudices against popular music and generate excitement about its interpretative possibilities.' Possibly reacting to the 'implications of the largely untapped competence in popular music possessed by many students' (Agawu, 2003:121), the University of Ghana, against all obstacles, in the 1990s, appointed experts to teach popular music in the Department of Music of the university.

Today, courses in popular music attract more enrolments than any others; and the degree of student engagement with these repertoires 'both practically and theoretically' is unmatched by any other (Agawu, 2003:120-1).

Collins (1996) argues that the flexibility and adaptability of African popular music is what has enabled it to cross all frontiers to become directly or indirectly a major force in international music; while Emeka (2006:9) is of the opinion that 'the strength of popular music lies partly in

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the situation in which every age has its brand, enabling it to interpret and reflect itself in a manner most effective and digestible. From South Africa, Coplan (2002) reports:

More to the point, in post-apartheid South Africa today, one of the industries in which this marriage of Western technology and organization and African social and cultural materials and resources has the greatest potential is popular music' (p. 112).

These prospects explain why the World Bank finds African pop music a healthy and lucrative business ventures to invest in (Kirkegaard, 2002).

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