

THE ESSENCE OF INTRODUCING RHYTHM TO THE AFRICAN CHILD THROUGH FOLK MUSIC: A PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH

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Abstract

Introducing an African child early into active involvement in the musical activities of his/her community right from the cradle places him/her in a better stead to have all round development both physically, spiritually, psychologically, mentally and socially and also in a better position to imbibe the rhythmic features of the African culture. An African child learns from infant to appreciate, acquire and improvise own miniature instruments with which to reproduce rhythmic patterns similar to that of one's culture. In recent time, this early musical exposure seems to be eluding the African child owing to desperate quest for greener pastures in urban areas and pursuit of modernization; parents hardly had time for their children and this becomes a big problem. This paper makes a critical appraisal of the inherent potentials accruable from introducing a child early to the musical art education of his/her culture through folk music with the aim of injecting the African rhythm into a range of his/her creative pursuits. The paper adopts basically bibliography and historical methods and is anchored on the social learning theory which is concerned with the idea that individuals learn behaviour by observation, imitation and participation. The paper concludes by recommending that children should be guided through participation in their indigenous music from childhood to enable them discover and harness their musical potentials with the aim of appreciating the rhythmic features of their own culture.

Keywords: Rhythm, folk music, African child, learning, creativity

Introduction

Culture is the totality of a particular people's way of life and identity which includes their tradition, behaviour, costumes, religion, language, art, science, music etc. It is an indicator and parameter for ethnic and social differences and demarcation. Africa's native culture by circumstances of Western civilization seems to be disintegrating and disappearing, causing a great concern. It is also being threatened today by globalization and technology which have created a melting pot and potpourri of world cultures that creates expansion in development. Some of these cultures are dangerously facing extinction with Western civilization (Okonkwo, 2009). The educational system presently in Nigeria seem to be lacking in the areas of moral upbringing of the children, rhythmic skills of which Igbo people are known for and generally in the traditional musical arts education which cuts across the facets of all traditional educational objectives and hence follows the Igbo child from the womb to the tomb. This type of education is indigenous and takes place outside the formal classroom; it is given and received from one's immediate environment. Parents, siblings, extended family members and peers constitute the teaching crew. According to Emeka (2004) 'Traditional education (or education in the traditional society) is then the system or process of cultural transmission from one generation to another generation' (p.218). Okafor, (2005) puts it clearer that 'what the child sees or hears at this time forms the foundation of his/her education later in life' (p. 55).

Traditional music plays a great role in character moulding. It is the type of music associated with the people in their community settings and the expression of their culture and values. The society provides avenues for musical expression through festivals, ceremonies, rites, rituals, works, recreation, etc. (Okafor and Okafor, 2009) and it is transmitted orally from generation to generation. Ude (2009) emphatically states:

Nigerian traditional music is music associated with the people of Nigeria in their ethnic settings. This music reflects the inner characteristics of our culture, beliefs, philosophies about life and living, etc. Our traditional music, if fully explored, is a school of its own. Within it are configurations of learned behaviour and results of behaviour whose component elements are shared and transmitted by the members of a particular society (p. 3-4).

Music is an integral part of Igbo culture and it plays a very significant role in every aspect of Igbo traditional life ranging from birth to death. At various developmental stages of an Igbo child, he/she is introduced to various rhythmic experiences until the child begins to acquire these experiences by himself/herself through observation and participation. Rhythmic skills in Igbo culture 'are not only acquired but they also mature through observation, participation, limitation and with frequent practices and uses' (Nnamani, 2004:97).

The Primacy of Music Rhythm in Igbo Culture

Rhythm had been at the heart of conceptions of race, culture and identity. There is a connectedness between the world of any group of people and their rhythm. It is the most important signifier of difference between African and European culture; and a very significant creative expression and virtually the most profound aspect of music making in Africa. Rhythm can be found in the people's dance, music, arts, literature and poetry. Rhythm is arguably the most important part of music. It is what drives the music, keeps it going, and keeps musicians playing together like musicians. Without rhythm there is no music [<http://soundcalledmusic.com>]. The Igbo culture has a deep connection to rhythm. Rhythm is everywhere, not just in music. Walking, running, speech, ocean water, and all sorts of things we do. One's first experience with rhythm was the rhythm of the mother's heartbeat [<http://www.studybass.com>]. African traditional music is characterised by its aesthetic and high rhythmic expressions. Just as European music is noted by its variety of forms and rich harmonies, African music is marked by the richness of its rhythms. In the opinion of Meyers (1983) rhythmic complexity is the hallmark of African music which goes to explain why Africans are, so to say, addicted to their music and some times go into extemporization at its performance. All the traditional music activities have varieties of rhythm as well as a genuine reflection of human feeling and situations. When words are spoken ordinarily, hearers merely capture the meaning, but when the same words are put into some rhythmic melody as songs, it serves as leverage for understanding and internalising the meaning.

The Igbo who are located at the Southeast part of Nigeria are very musical considering the wide variety of their musical instruments and the complexity of their musical rhythm. Igbo people are no strangers to the rhythm of music. Music, its organization and movement are at home in Igbo land. Music serves as a mode of conveying culture, values, experience and as a means of transmitting knowledge, wisdom, feelings and attitude orally in Igbo community. Agu (1990), Okafor (2005) & Ekpo (2008) offered great insights in the musical learning in Igbo culture. In their views the first impression of the child reflects from the mother; after that comes that of the nurse, the sisters, the brothers, the father and other close members of the family. African child's training in the traditional rhythm equally takes its root from the mother's womb when she carries the child about attending to her daily shores and indulging in other community commitments. Every rhythmic movement made by the mother at this period is felt by the baby in her womb. In Igbo culture the mother trains the child to become aware of rhythm and movement by rocking him to music, by singing to him in nonsense syllables imitative of drum rhythms. Every Igbo child has access to rhythmic training in musical arts education from childhood through active participation and group organizations. The identity of Igbo music lies in its complex rhythms and polyrhythm and this is revealed in the instruments of different types, shapes, timbres and sizes they use to produce different rhythms (Umezina, 2009). This tradition enhances rhythmic sense development and expertise. The acquisition of rhythmic skills by the child depends on some factors. Consistency in practice and enabling environment provide great advantages. Agu (2011) posits that, 'a child who comes from a music family is more exposed to facilities and formal educators in instrumental or vocal music' (p. 10).

The Home as the Child's First School of Rhythmic Acquisition

Home imbues great influence in the training of the child since it is the child's first world. The training of the child starts from infancy. The mother is the child's first teacher being intimately linked to the child at this early stage of development giving that what ever comfort the child requires at this stage comes from the mother. Due to this closeness to the mother, the child imbibes the mother's way of life; language, gestures and expressions etc. Fafunwa (1974) states that, 'the mother is sensitive to everything that happens to the child and ministers to all his needs' (p. 18). Agu (1990) upholding the above view points out that:

A pregnant mother, who participates in a limited number of musical activities, is believed to be introducing the baby in the womb to rhythmical movements. When the baby is born, it gradually becomes acquainted with musical sound through lullabies sung to lull it to sleep and the mother's continuous musical involvement with the baby strapped firmly to her back (p. 50).

As the child continues to grow, the attention shifts to other members of the family like the baby sitter, father, siblings and other members of the family. Okafor (2005) infers that, 'the child's first lessons in music are thus given by his mother before father, siblings, peers and other people in the environment' (p. 55). Music occupies the entire day's activity of an African child from dusk to dawn. African traditional society unveils a reflection of her beliefs, feelings, values, norms, culture as well as their inner thought through their music. Early in time Agu (1990) states that, 'in African societies, all aspects of life, ranging from birth to death are believed to be integrated with music making' (p. 49). This goes to reassure the belief that the musical training in Igbo culture passes through infancy to adolescence and on to the initiation school. It is worthy of note that babies including some young children do not actually understand the meaning of the text of the songs they hear but what they enjoy are the rhythmic flow of the music and that is what keeps their musical taste alive until they begin to understand the meaning of the texts of the songs at much later age.

The songs have meanings and direction and serve as means of transmitting their cultural values and identity from one generation to the next. These songs are characterised by the fascination of their high rhythmic and aesthetic expressions for which African music is known for; and as the child indulges in these music, he imbibes the rhythmic culture of his people. Indulging in rhythmic activities at home by the other elderly members of the community not only help the children to manipulate different rhythmic patterns in order to improve their learning ability but also enables them to learn to follow rhythms and create their own indulging in such activities like clapping, tapping, dancing, or playing instruments. The child's rhythmic capabilities or involvements in the future can be predicted based on his rhythmic involvement as a child. Bebey (1978) argues that, 'talent has nothing to do with age, for the rhythms that these tiny tads hammer out on their makeshift instruments are a potent of their capabilities in later life' (p. 6). Aninwene (2006) affirms that 'music education in the traditional society begins by observation; imitation and graduate from peer group performance to full participation with adult' (p. 71).

The Impact of Folk Songs on Rhythmic Training of an Igbo Child

Folk songs refer to the traditional or indigenous songs of a particular community handed down orally from one generation to the next. Agu (1990) defines folk songs as 'the spontaneous and traditional music of the people, race, region or nation handed down orally from generation to generation' (p. 115). According to Microsoft Encarta Premium, folk song is the traditional song that has been passed down orally. Oxford Advanced learners' Dictionary (2006) defines folk song as 'a song in the traditional style of a country or community' (p. 576). In the same vein, Nzewi in Agu (1990) submits that,

Folk music (song) ...in all its elements and application has latent psychological, psychical and spiritualizing essence; it is an ethnic community that portrays group spirit, thought, myths and aspirations. At the same time, it is a bond, the umbilical cord that links the group with the ultra-terrestrial forces whose potencies are made manifest in various awe-inspiring phenomenal and unpredictable ways in their lives (p. 80).

Folk songs are among the folk art forms that promote social cohesion and other forms of activities in every society in Igbo community. It serves as a medium of expression of life and carrier of cultural values since a particular ethnic group is identified through its performances. Personal thoughts as well as feelings are expressed through it. It is functional in the sense that it serves as an accompaniment to other human activities in the society as well as entertainment and aesthetic oriented. It has the potency of capturing the trust of the people in the community and reach people's inner thoughts because of its popularity and cultural values [<http://heapro.oxfordjournals.org>]. People utilize their talent in folk songs not only as a mode of entertainment but as a source conveying information. One of

the basic functions of Igbo folk music is that of moral education which concentrates on the moral obligations of the child to the society. Such obligations are centred on ethical, personal and social values. Moral education is mainly channelled through the medium of folk music because it enhances easy comprehension and assimilation (Agu, 2011:3). Agu further states that:

Folk songs educate the child to respond to rhythmic patterns and movements, develop ensemble habits, unity in diversity and groom his social instincts. It educates the child to understand, appreciate and interpret the language of the drums as well as pattern his body in time and space, and sharpen his reflexes (p. 9).

The rhythm is the most important element in music and very useful in Igbo folk songs. It drives the music forward. It is the gasoline of music. 'Rhythm adds a whole new dimension to music. It creates the uniqueness of each piece and gives each piece its own character <http://ababasoft.com>]. Folk songs have been used to engage the interest of the children with the aims of community education and development; and so to imbibe the rhythmic sense which African music is known for.

The musical training of an Igbo child involves learning and responding to simple rhythms such as clapping, tapping of foot, nodding of head and also the use of simple rhythmic instrument like empty tins, cans or bottles and gradually climax to more complicated rhythms and sounds. The average Igbo child responds to the rhythm of music right from the cradle. According to Nnamani (2004):

The child begins early to acquire some experiences in life through listening to lullabies, cradle songs, other songs of experiences of rhythm activities he acquires as he is on his mother's back, clap rhythms in game songs and other songs. As early as about six months of age, some children start to respond to music, by moving to drumming (p. 97).

Children are acculturated into the rhythmic activities of their community through their folk songs. To a large extent folk songs are utilised in Igbo culture in nurturing the rhythmic sense of the Igbo child as well as in moral upbringing of the child. As the child engages in different musical activities associated with folk tale and its accompanying songs when they gather together in groups for plays and games they get acquainted with the rhythmic flow of the songs. According to Ibekwe (2009) 'Folk songs, folktales and story telling are part of early childhood musical education, which are fashioned to bring out the child's fundamental developmental need in society' (p. 53). At this stage, the child learns through observation, imitation and active participation since the learning process at this level is mainly informal.

Pedagogical Implications of Folk Song Rhythm in Nigerian Educational System

The teacher is a very indispensable factor in the education of the child and so, much centres on him/her. In choosing the methodology of teaching, the interest of the learner must be borne in mind. Employing good methods that will stimulate and invigorate musical activities in the students will go a long way in achieving musical goals and objectives of music education. According to Onyiuke (2006) 'the musical growth of pupils and their motivation to engage in activities in music instructions are significantly influenced by the materials, methodology and strategies that teachers adopt in the classroom' (p. 38). The best methods for improvement of music instruction are those that involve the learners in meaningful musical experiences. Employing folk songs in the educational system of Nigeria in all ramifications promotes cultural understanding and awareness and enhancing the rhythmic nature of African music. Folk song serves a useful purpose in improving the traditional language of the people. It equally enables the students to express themselves without undergoing the rigors of infusing their nature language unto the grammatical structures of foreign languages. This method also provides an avenue for the transmission of values and skills. It is present in all cultures be it primitive or civilised and it is part of the system of cultural dispensation of any identified group. Folk songs can equally be employed as a teaching strategy when the students' interests in a particular learning content begin to wane, a short and interesting folk tale / folksong could revive their enthusiasm instantly. 'Stories make children pay attention to their teachers and parents and so should not be ignored as a coaching tool (Ogunleye, 2004:79).

Some Selected Songs for Rhythmic and Moral Education

Folk music serves dual purposes: for entertainment and education. It bothers on the moral obligation of the child to the family and the society. Basic rhythmic training is purposely channelled through the medium of folk songs to

enhance easy comprehension and assimilation. The songs listed below have moral implications as well as educational implications.

Folksong 1 (call)

Onye enena anya na azu
Onye enena anya na azu
Onye nee anya na azu

Response

Mmanwu anyi na-aga na azu
Mmanwu anyi na-aga na azu
Apia ya ihe

Translation

Let no one look back
 Let no one look back
 Anyone who looks back

Our spirit manifest is moving at the back
 Our spirit manifest is moving at the back
 Will be flogged

Folk song 2

Kpukpumkpu o gene
Kpukpumkpu o gene
Onye na akpo ogene

Response

O gene o genege
O gene o genege
O gene o genege

Folk song 3

Akpankolo
Akpankolo
Udu moo
Udu moo
Onye o malu

Response

kpankolo
kpankolo
ogene
ogene
udu yayayayaya udu yaa

Folk song 4

Kedu onye ga abu oyi m?
 Kedu onye ga abu oyi m?
 Kedu onye ga abu oyi m?
 Onye ga abu oyi m?

Translation

Who will be my friend?
 Who will be my friend?
 Who will be my friend?
 Who will be my friend?

A fugo m oyi m
 A fugo m oyi m
 A fugo m oyi m
 Onye ga abu oyi m

I have seen my friend
 I have seen my friend
 I have seen my friend
 Who will be my friend.

Suggestions

Africans should revert back to their original value system and their traditional education objective since it plays a great role in the upbringing of the child. The education of the child in Igbo culture rotates around music. Musical learning in the Igbo traditional education begins early through informal means. Its folk songs emphasize character formation geared towards instilling moral values; promoting musical as well as rhythmic ability in the child. Therefore this paper suggests the following:

- Though the past cannot be recalled but some level of continuity can be obtained by modifying some of the old performances to fit into the new trend of modern times, to make them appealing thereby making them still relevant.
- The folksongs should be used as instructional materials in the educational system of Nigeria because it is beneficial and rewarding to both the child and the community.
- Parents and elders should endeavour to expose their children to the traditional music of their community from their early formation even after they have been exposed to Western education. They should be given

opportunity to participate in the musical activities of their village in order to get them exposed to the rich rhythmic flow of the music of Africa.

- Applied music should be given priority in the curriculum by allotting time for it in the school time table and through the provision of necessary instruments of African orchestra.
- Schools should organise and sponsor musical concerts annually to encourage students in musical performances and to increase their boldness in practicing African rhythms. Talents can be discovered and developed by so doing.
- Musicologists and researchers should endeavour to collect, notate and document Igbo traditional musical performances so that they do not go into extinction.

Conclusion

The rhythms of the African traditional music are a fundamental phenomenon in the growth and development of an African child since any people's music portrays the totality of their cultural product. This paper has tried to establish that artistic taste is usually formed unconsciously soon after a child is born and through formal school training. It becomes necessary that parents especially mothers because they have greater influence over the children at birth should endeavour to expose their children to their communities' rhythms through their folk music; and at later lives create opportunities for their children to be involved in the music practices of their communities. By so doing an Igbo child will be well groomed in the beliefs, norms and values of his/her community. From the findings of this paper, it can be deduced that early exposure to the rhythms of one's folk music prepares a child for music at a later life. In as much as the fact that this paper is not in any way trying to condemn modernity, it maintains that the positive cultural practices should be given their pride of place in the scheme of things. All that is said in this paper is not expected to be all-inclusive or completely comprehensive but is expected to stimulate further work and research on the need for early exposure of an African child to the rhythms of his/her community's music.

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