

THE RHYTHMIC SENSIBILITY OF AFRICAN FOLKSONGS: THE CASE OF LULLABIES IN IGBO CULTURE

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Abstract

The greatest attribute of African music lies in its rhythmic applications. Through the rhythmic configuration of a particular music, an ethnic identity is established. That is to say, apart from language, rhythm is another factor that situates or gives bearing to a given culture. It is through the rhythm that one would be able to distinguish Zulu music from Caribbean, Igbo music from Yoruba, or War music from Ritual and so on. The sensibility of a rhythm depends largely on the usages, functions and values which it is meant to address. In African culture, the more complex a rhythm is, the more vigorous its performance but that does not imply increase in the value people attach to such music. African music is basically appreciated in both content and context. A ritual music that utilizes few musical instruments and thus produces less complex rhythm may provoke greater aesthetic appeal in society than age-grade ensemble with many instruments meant for entertainment. This paper critically looked at the rhythmic applications as it applies to lullabies in Igbo culture using few examples for illustration. It also tried to find out the aesthetic values that inform their sensibility which invariably validate their cultural relevance and acceptability among the Igbo. This investigation applied practical experiences, use of interviews and other related resource materials as working tools. It was discovered that the flow and or the application of rhythms is at times shaped by cultural stipulations which are translatable to a given mathematical quantity and which proper coordination brings about the beauty of performance and appreciation.

Keywords: Rhythmic, Sensibility, African, Folksongs, Lullabies, Igbo, Culture.

Introduction

Rhythmic sensibility addresses issues based on the application and utilization of musical pulses generated as a result of or in the process of singing, clapping, playing of instruments, stamping of feet on the ground and so on to achieve a cohesive sonic expression. Lullabies as we know are songs sung when a child has not yet attained the age of reasoning. At this period, the mother and the nursemaids utilize this medium as the most effective way of meeting the child's need, or rather, a means of soothing / lulling a restive or crying baby. The most interesting aspect of these lullabies which is the concern of this paper is the application and synchronization of melody and rhythm which are demonstrated or achieved by the stamping of feet on the ground or by tapping slightly on the child's body. It is the synergy between the melody and the consequent rhythmic emphasis or force inherent in lullabies that produce good effect on the child. Although the child at this age may be regarded as a passive listener / companion, yet 'his' responsiveness to actions required, either to keep quiet, sleep or to stop crying underscores the importance and the seemingly therapeutic effect of this genre on children. In other words what constitutes the aesthetic appreciation of lullabies in Igbo culture may include the synchronism between the melody and the consequent flow of the rhythm which invariably creates a meaningful situation that is, making the child to respond positively to a given stimulus, such as tapping, beating or stamping. The Igbo culture area whose folksong is the focal point of this discussion does not imply or present a homogenous stratum of inhabitants but an area with some measure of disparities among different smaller units. It is one out of the twelve culture areas that make up African Continent. Oehrie and Emeka (2003:38) see Africa "as comprising twelve culture areas or geographical territories within which inhabitants share most of the elements of culture such as related languages and similar ecological conditions, economic, social, ideological, and systems, though the separate groups may not necessarily belong to the same breeding population". Therefore, it may not be strange to observe some differences or variants among some factions within the ethnic group.

Concept of Rhythm:

The *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, (2005:1413) defines rhythm as "a regular repeated pattern of sounds or movements". Extending it further, *The New International Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language*, (2010:1082) describes rhythm as, "movement characterized by regular measured or harmonious recurrence of stress, beat, sound, accent, or motion". One may

also add that rhythm refers to the inward or outward expression of musical pulses, or can be seen as internal or external representation of pulses as conceived in the presenter's sub consciousness. This is because rhythm can be physically demonstrated as sound through clapping of hands, beating of instruments, tapping or stamping of feet. It can as well be internally applied such as in singing where a singer observes or is timed to a given meter. However, it has been said earlier that different culture areas are identified by different types of rhythms, yet the fact that African societies share some degree of oneness/ commonality or what may be termed unity in diversity cannot be compromised. Chernoff, (1979:40) admits that, "If the rhythmic systems used by different African peoples are not the same, they at least have in common the fact that they are complex". It is the rhythm that forms the basic contrast between African and Western music. Chernoff reports A.M. Jones as saying that 'rhythm is to Africa what harmony is to the European, and that it is in the complex interweaving of contrasting rhythmic patterns that he finds his greatest aesthetic satisfaction'. While discussing the aesthetics and social action in African musical idiom, in his book, *African Rhythm and African Sensibility*, (1979: 40) He also avers that,

Just as the African integration of music with its social context establishes a basic sociological perspective in the face of the diversity of cultures and musical situations, so does the notion of rhythm form the basis for discussing, on a musical level, the general characteristics of the various African traditions which are otherwise so distinct in terms of instruments, tonal organization, and vocal styles.

From the above discussion, it could be seen that Africa though with its ethnic diversity is still disposed to some measure of cultural convergence or meeting point. That each ethnic group exists as a separate entity does not divorce it from the general context of African cultural concept.

Basic Rhythmic Patterns in Africa

The discussion of rhythmic pattern or structure in Africa is perceived in two dimensions. One involves the vocal music rhythm while the other is concerned with the instrumental rhythmic pattern. In vocal music one talks of free rhythm and strict rhythm. In free rhythm, according to Nketia, (1974:168) " there is no feeling of a regular basic pulse, no hand clapping or suggestion of a metronomic background. Movements done on such music are based on the performer's subjective choice of pulse, rather than on a pulse derived from the music itself...characteristic of songs not intended for the dance proper". Songs in this category include praise songs, chants, elegy, dirge, lamentation songs and so on.

On the other hand, strict rhythm is the reverse of the free rhythm. It can be clapped, tapped, or danced to. It utilizes or rather makes a predominant use of duple and triple measures or a combination of both in what is called Hemiola system which normally results in cross-rhythmic structure. The scope of this work is limited to vocal rhythm where lullaby finds its location.

Examples of lullabies in Igbo culture

Few examples of lullabies are used here to illustrate rhythmic applications and usages in Igbo culture.

Song 1: Onye tili nwa n'ebe akwa

*Onye tili nwa n'ebe akwa,
Egbe tili nwa n'ebe akwa,
Wet'uziza, wet'ose*

who beat the child that is crying?
the kite beat the child that is crying
bring *uziza*, bring *ose* (local spices)

*Wet'amangololo'fe
K'umu nnunu racha ya
K'okpo tutu kpogbue ha
Egbe ndo, egbe ndo*

bring all it takes to make a soup
so that the birds would lick it
and that hiccough would kill them
kite please, kite please

Onye tili nwa n'ebe akwa

Anonymous

The musical score is written in a single system with five staves. It begins with a treble clef, a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and a 2/4 time signature. The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes. The lyrics are written below the notes, with some syllables split across lines. The score ends with a double bar line and repeat signs.

O nye ti li n nwa n'e be a kwa e gbe ti li n nwa
n'e be a kwa we t'u zi za we t'o se
we t'a ma n go lo l'o fe k'u mu nu nu
la cha ya k'o kpo tu tu kpo gbuo ya
c gbc n do c gbc ndo

Song 2:

Nwenwe I ma n'enu

little Monkey if you jump up

N'eso m gi

I follow you

Nwenwe I ma n'ana

little Monkey if you jump down

N'eso m gi	I follow you
Nwenwe nye m oyo	little Monkey give me rattle
N'ye m mgbirigba	give me bell
Ka m kpaba nwa n'aka	which I will give my child to hold
Mgbe o ji ebe erubego	for he is about to cry
Nwenwe ndo nwenwe ndo	little Monkey please, little Monkey please.

Nwenwe i ma n'enu

Anonymous

The musical score is written in a single system with three staves. The key signature has one flat (Bb) and the time signature is 2/4. The melody consists of quarter and eighth notes. The lyrics are written below the notes.

1 Nwe nwe i ma n'e nu n'e so m gi

5 nwe nwe i ma n'a na n'e so m gi

9 nwe nwe i nye m'o yo nye m gbi li m gba ka m kpa

13

ba nwa n'a ka mgb'o ji e be lu be go

17

nwe nwe ndo o nwe nwe ndo

Song 3

Egbe na-eri ji n'agu

Anonym

E gbe n'e ri ji n'a gu, e gbe n'e rie de na gu e gbe
na-ta ba cha n kpo e gbe e nu yo o yo o yo o
e gbe e nu yo o yo o yo o

Egbe n'eri ji n'agu

Kite is eating yam in the forest

Egbe n'eri ede n'agu

kite is eating cocoyam in the forest

Egbe n'ata abacha nkpo

kite is chewing dry cassava

Egbe e nu yo-o, yo-o, yo-o

this kite yo-o, yo-o, yo-o

Song 4

Mdebe ji n'uko

I kept yam at the fire place

Nwa mbe richaara m ya

tortoise ate all of them

Mdebe ede uko

I kept cocoyam at the fire place

Nwa mbe richaara m ya

tortoise ate all of them

M churu nwa mbe

I pursued the tortoise

Churu nwa mbe chupa ga ya agu

pursued the tortoise out to a forest

Okuko ocha na-ano n'owele

A white cock at the backyard

Chubiara m ya

pursued it for me

O na- aru okpa tim, tim

It started leaping, leaping

Onye na-achu gi oso

who is pursing you.

M DEBE JI N'UKO

Anonymous



M de be ji n'u ko nwa mbe ri cha ra mu ya m



d b'e de n'u ko nwam b'e ri cha ra mu ya m churu nwa mbe churu nwa mbe

12

chu pu ga y'a gu o ku ko o cha na no n'o we le chu ba ra m

17

ya o n'a lu o kpa ti m ti m'o nye na y' o so

”

The Rhythmic Representations of the Songs

songs 1-3

7

And so on

The above songs are in two-four time except the fourth song which is in three-four time; the tapping is done on the first beat of each bar where the strong accent is emphasized, irrespective of the presence of syncopated notes at certain measures. The tapping on the child's body gives a feeling of metronome sense, and this helps to control the speed or movement of the song. The nature of the songs / lullabies do not allow for complex rhythmic presentation which is the basic characteristic of African rhythm. This is because of the nature or the

purpose which the lullaby is meant to accomplish, that is to soothe or lull the child. According to my resource person, Okoye, Theresa (2013-oral interview), “*a na-agwo nsi odo anya anaghi etinye ose*” meaning “if one is preparing medicine meant to cool the eye one does not add pepper”. However, this does not necessarily mean to undermine the creative expectations of African rhythms achieved through multiple cross-rhythmic applications but to give emphasis to serene appeal which the songs intend to achieve or what Nzewi, (2007:52) rightly refers to as “culture rhythm”, according to him, “movement patterns and gestures as well as their dynamics generated by the normal cultural activities affect and determine the peculiar sonic as well as motional dynamics of the culture’s music and dance manifestations” Therefore, rhythmic application in lullabies obeys cultural stipulations in order to suit the child’s “psychical tolerance”. Highlighting on the issue of psychical tolerance, Nzewi (2007:53) generally infers that. “the psychological factor of psychical tolerance regulates for a human group or an individual what constitutes tolerable sound as well as hierarchies of preference in the use and appreciation of music”. He listed the factors that shape psychical tolerance to include;

- Culture suggestion- unconscious acquisition of the normative tastes in sound that is the musical characteristic of a culture, by virtue of growing up as a cognitive member and participant in the culture’s artistic-aesthetic boundaries
- Auto-recommendation- personal psychological disposition
- Peer or associational references and influences
- Informed education that affords rational knowledge of the nature of a musical culture/type/style/product
- Participation and worldview- the psychical tolerance of any modern person could be broadened through effective cross-cultural as well as in-cultural education, contact and cognitive participation
- The factor of a person’s threshold of psychic perception with respect to the sounds that soothe, heal or disturb

The first and last points above give credence to the suitability of rhythmic configurations as conceived in Igbo lullabies. They hinge on cultural definition and contextual applicability respectively. All these are probably responsible for the acceptability of lullabies as children’s choice music in most of the cultures in Africa not only in Igbo. Obviously, it should be noted that the use of complex rhythm might not have been necessary considering the variables and factors that shape the performance of such genres. Some of the constraints include, the age of the recipient and the role the rhythm is meant to perform – to pacify and not to

distract. Therefore rhythm is sparsely applied in lullabies to maximize its efficiency and effectiveness.

Conclusion

A performance is said to be sensible, effective and appreciated when it accomplishes the purpose it is meant to achieve. The beauty of African folksong and Igbo in particular lies in its functional and contextual import. Lullaby as the thrust or subject matter of this discussion is child oriented performance which beauty, values or effectiveness is predicated on its contextual and functional relevance. The Igbo and in fact Africa in general do not lose focus when it comes to the issue of suitability of performance. Lullaby is meant to soothe, calm or pacify, and not to provoke, upset, distract or cause a stir, as a result, the use of non complex rhythm is considered adequate. This paper presented some of the Igbo lullabies and tried to relate their rhythmic sensibility to the synchronization of the rhythm and the melody to effect behavioural change in the recipient. The fact that lullabies are invariably fashioned out accordingly to meet up with the cultural demands of the people makes for their appreciation regardless of the absence of rhythmic complexity. In other words, lack of rhythmic complexity does not totally mean lack of effectiveness in the performance of some Igbo or African genres. Therefore one could be right to say that the importance attached to our traditional musical practices whether lullaby, ritual music, initiation and other forms of folksongs, has to do with the extent to which it conforms to the functional and utilitarian stipulations of a particular culture area, otherwise the performance becomes senseless, irrelevant and unappreciated. This paper suggests that each culture area should try to propagate, maintain and uphold their musical tradition so as to ensure cultural viability.

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