

Articulating Good Governance and Performing Change in Nigeria: An Appraisal of Emerging Trend in Tiv Political Songs

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Abstract

This paper explores creative arts and communication as value products of social change in societies which can be employed in a variety of ways. The paper firstly examines Nigerian songs performances of the late 1970's-mid 1980's and confirms their focus with discernable lyrics that targeted the dissemination of specific messages that would make for a better society. A further examination of a recent and emerging trend in popular political songs performance especially in Tivland reveals that their renditions either extol or lambast political office seekers. As a result of the fact that the songs usually represent the thoughts of the people towards those political office seekers, they (songs) most often shape opinions and predict the outcome of elections. This paper focuses on some select songs by three artistes namely; "*Idyu Ka Inya I Teen Ga*" (Legislation is not land sales) by Stuffy, "*Ugba Nyor Shor Chenji*" (Ugba entered and the game changed) by Terkura Ikyumbur and "*Ortom Gudugudu*" (Ortom, heavy followership) by Faaga, during the 2011 and 2015 general elections in Benue State, Nigeria and finds that in Africa song performance asks questions that border on socio-political sensibilities in order to set the standards in defining for political leaders, a focused sense of direction in a democratic Africa. The paper holds that the emerging trend in Tiv political folk songs is not only a highly dependable way of performing change and predicting elections but also an articulation on new meanings and solutions to the socio-political challenges of the 21st century Africa.

Introduction

Every art form emanates from the cultural artistry of the people. No art, no matter its form and content, is independent of the people's culture. "...it is important to know that artistic productions are not created in void" (Gbilekaa, 239). This is because the arts of a people are culturally defined to be of a particular function or responsibility. This naturally debunks the idea of 'art for art sake'. Any art form must have a purposeful bearing with its society of origin, for it doesn't exist in vacuum and its society tends to exert unbridled influence on it. This explains why the form and content of any art is particular and peculiar of a people whose societal issues normally constitute the central thematic thrust.

The functions of artistic expressions in the society are various and of no mean relevance. These functions are however defined by some variables such the nature and form of the art, the intent of the artist, the socio-political milieu as well as the trending issues of the society. Suffice it to say that these variables serve to precipitate the relevance, functionality, and topicality of any art form. It goes without been said that any artistic work that is void of socio-political relevance

in the society is as good as no art. This suffices why every artist strives to be topical, trendy, and responsive to societal issues.

Given the above premise, the Nigerian folk songs in particular and music in general cannot afford to be exceptions. The folk songs or oral poetry as some scholars prefer to call it, tend to be highly responsive to and defined by trending societal issues. The social relevance and topicality of the folk songs cannot be overemphasized. It is however necessary to reiterate that folk songs strive to reform, transform, and inform the society as necessitated by the situation at hand. Touring this path, Doki asserts:

As an art of expression, music is most often time appreciated by a larger segment of the society, perceived as a creative means of attack on policy makers and adjudged obscene by moralists depending on the content, context, quality, and style of presentation. (1)

The Nigerian folk songs are usually laden with messages, information and education on the social and political issues of the community. Central themes in most of Nigerian folk songs hover around politics, social relationships, morals, war, marriage, history, etc. No matter the thematic thrust, one thing is evident about folk songs; they have defined social relevance and responsibility that cannot be ignored.

Trends in Nigerian Folk Songs

As earlier canvassed, the Nigerian folk songs are meaningfully inherent with functions and responsiveness. Their tendency to appeal to a larger part of the society has earned it relevance and recognition in the society. Government institutions, individuals, and corporate bodies have recognized the relevance and power of folk songs. Perhaps, this informs government's decision to employ folk songs in propagating some its policies. According to Kur and Iwokwagh:

When the Murtala/Obasanjo military regime launched the Operation Feed the Nation (OFN) programme, Tiv oral poets such as Tondo Kumbur, Agugu Igbakumbur and Iyoughul Ute were engaged by the government to teach the Tiv people through their songs (dance and music), the proper use and application of fertilizer on their farms for high productivity (104).

The above highlights the relevance and functionality of folk songs in the Nigerian society even before now. It is however worthy of note that they have been deviation or variation in trend since independence. The relevance and thematic focus of the folk songs/music have been continually shifting grounds. Issues and trends that are projected in the songs of recent are in contrasting variance with what was obtainable in the good days of old. For instance, the prevailing issues in folk songs of the 1960s are not the same with folk songs of the 2000s. During the colonial era, Nigerian folk songs and popular music was channeled towards advocacy for independence, highlighting the evils of the colonial government. These songs were very popular in dance dramas of Hubert Ogunde in which he persistently attacked the colonialists, gingering up the nationalists who stood and fought for independence. Other oral poets too were in this league. This trend continued until the quest for independence was actualized.

During the 1960s, the trend in Nigerian folk songs was woven round the turmoil that engulfed the First Republic, especially the bloody civil war. Several oral poets and popular musicians captured the travails of this era. Before Civil War, regional politics and ethnocentrism dominated the folk songs area, with many oral poets advancing the cause of their ethnic groups and regions. Perhaps, it is not far from the truth to assert that these ethnocentric trends culminated into the later bloodbath of Civil War. The Civil War saw some oral poets on the side of the government while other sympathized with the separatists.

The post Civil War era also saw a variation in the general trend of Nigerian folk songs. Ethnocentrism was replaced with themes of reconciliation, unity, and brotherliness. The government's 3R programme greatly influenced folk songs and popular music at that time.

Nigerian songs of the late 1970 – mid 1980 were specifically channeled towards making Nigeria a better society. These songs were quite meaningful, had clear focus, discernable lyrics, and were inherent with specific messages meant to reform and transform Nigeria. Legends like Fela Anikulapo Kuti, Sunny Okosun, and Prince Nico Mbarga carved niches for themselves in this era:

Pointing out the phenomenon of the protest singers who sharply criticized existing situation of the country through their lyrics during military dictatorship, one would not forget a genius like Femi Anikulapo Kuti, popularly known as Fela Kuti, a Nigerian musician whose talent was overshadowed by a cloud of inevitable confrontation ranging from countless raids, assaults and arrests followed, culminating in a relentless assault by the army in 1977 when he (Fela) took a critical stance against the propagandist showpiece of the government (170).

It is understood that corruption became widespread; abuse of human rights by the military, unstable government and polity, and dictatorship were all rife. Thus, the singers of this era were out to condemn these menaces to a halt and better the lot of Nigeria and Nigerians. Songs of this era had purposeful bearing with pressing societal issues.

In spite of the meaningful and purposeful nature of Nigerian songs, it is however sad to note that they have been a drastic deviation from this trend, especially in the 21st century Nigerian music. The songs are so incoherent, without focus and meaningful lyrics. The music is simply a senseless and meaningless clanging of cymbals. The major theme on the card of this trend is eroticism, nudity, and sexuality. The musicians are not armed with any focus or message; the target is just a display of erotic acts, naked bodies, and how sexy a lady or man is. Almost every Nigerian musician of this generation is guilty of this. The trend of sex and eroticism has been thrown upon the Nigerian society as a result of globalization in which ideals of popular music are implanted in the psyche of the Nigerian singers. The emergence of digitalized composition of music also account for this senseless and meaningless display of nudity.

In recent times, a new trend has emerged in Nigerian popular songs. Nigerian songs are gradually making an inroad into Nigerian politics. They are becoming a phenomenal force on the political scene especially in Tivland. "Musicians who sing political songs in Tivland burnish the image of their sponsors, while criticizing their opponent's weakness" (Gbilekaa,

34). In this wise, these renditions either extol or lambast political office seekers. The songs advance reasons why a particular office seeker is worthy of it or not. The use of folk songs in politics, especially during electioneering campaigns, is not new on Nigerian political arena. Gbilekaa asserts that:

In the late seventies and early eighties, the same pattern continued as the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) and the Nigerian People's Party (NPP) used music and dance to canvass for votes. In fact, it is on record that when the former Vice President Chief Alex Ekwueme came to Katsina-Ala town in Tivland to campaign, no speech was made as such. Members of his party simply indulged in dancing the then famous NPN DISCO '83 version. Of course, the NPP also had their own (sic) version of DISCO '83 which parodied the NPN attempt (242).

The above serves to establish the importance of folk songs in Nigerian politics right from time. In most cases, these songs tend to form opinion and predict the outcome of elections. This is because these songs in most instances represent the thoughts and impressions of the populace in the candidature of a particular politician. This new trend in the Nigerian popular songs has become so popular with almost every Nigerian society. For the purpose of this discourse however, the focus is on the Tiv society.

Tiv Popular Songs/Music: An Overview

The Tiv people are majorly found in Benue State, North Central of Nigeria. They are also in other states like Taraba, Nasarawa, and some others. The Tiv people are abundantly blessed with an arsenal of rich cultural heritage. This heritage is generously inherent with cultural artistry which ranges from an endless list of dances, puppetry, dance drama, folk songs/music, storytelling, etc. Talking about Tiv Cultural artistry, Iorapuu avers that it refers to:

...the creative art forms of Tiv people. The arts have been part and parcel of the functionality of life and it is a function of the Tiv world view...Among the Tiv like in most cultures, the arts are the most recognizable form of creativity...The Tiv people have quite rich cornucopia of culture (12).

Although the Tiv nation is laden with a variety of cultural artistry of immense wealth and aesthetics, the focus here is on folk or popular songs. The Tiv society is popular with a wealthy oral tradition which involves storytelling and folk songs. The folk songs in Tivland have different types and varieties. These varieties are necessarily defined by the central thematic thrust or the societal issues they (songs) have chosen to harp on. It should be noted that no matter its variety, folk songs are of immense value in Tivland as they serve different important purposes.

According to Gbilekaa:

In Tivland, there are various types of songs, which are characterized into seven main groups based on functional and content criteria, namely, *Genyi* dirges, *Biamegh* moral songs, *Ange* abusive songs,

Girinya war songs, *Iyor-gbeer* elegiac songs, *Akperangu* political songs, and *Swange*, a modern panegyric (34).

As evident above, every aspect of the Tiv society is covered by a particular form of popular song. This underscores the importance and functionality of folk songs in Tivland. In *Genyi* dirges for instance, the oral poet laments the demise of a loved one a relative, a friend, a benefactor or an associate. In *Genyi* songs, the poet/singer extols the virtues of the deceased, how helpful he or she was, how untimely the death is, and how frustrated he/she is with the demise. Several oral poets in Tivland can be found at one point or the other engaging in *Genyi* dirges. The likes of Pevkyaa Zegi, Oliver Ayeh, and host of others have at some point in their careers composed *Genyi* songs.

The Biamegh moral songs, like the name suggests, are primarily meant to put the society, especially the youth, on the right track of moral reckoning. The songs chide immorality, while advocating for high moral standards. Examples of *Biamegh* songs are abound. The bridal song ‘*Wa yol sha kwagh u u ve*’ is a perfect example. In this song, the new bride is advised to be of good moral bearing, focusing on the husband only without derailing to promiscuity. Further outlining the efficacy of these moral songs, Gbilekaa avers that:

The effectiveness in critiquing society’s ills, sometimes, lead to societal transformation as evidenced by Kor Shirsha Agure’s songs against high bride price, which pushed the Tiv traditional council to drastically reduce bride price in Tiv land (198).

The *Ange* abusive songs tend to be offensive and confrontational. They are meant for getting it even with an opponent or perceived enemy by insulting him/her through the medium of the song. *Girinya* war songs on the other hand are meant to ginger up the spirit of warriors who are laying down their lives for the community. The songs used in the *Girinya* war dance too come under this category. The popular ‘*Myam chiegh mo uke hide*’ and ‘*Shima yam ngi awambe awambe*’ are all good examples of *Girinya* war songs.

Iyol-gbeer elegies are a variety of *Genyi* dirges. They are songs mourning a departed person. The *Akerangu* political songs are employed to pass commentaries on political issues in the society. These songs condemn a person or idea, or take side with a particular person, interest group, idea or policies. “Political songs employ allusions and metaphors that have mass appeal” (Gbilekaa, 198). Obadiah Okor is not wanting in this aspect. Abaa has this of him:

Our poet-philosopher’s concern is for total change of attitude of the Tivman, the Nigerian and the African for a better society... Our artist’s views on party-politics will surely bring a salutary situation to Nigerian political scene, if adapted and effectively put into use (200).

The *Swange* panegyric songs are composed in praise and celebration of noble and wealthy people. Amase et al posit that “Tiv heroic songs have some nobility because they are performed at occasions that are convened to demonstrate the high status attained by the celebrants. They are praise songs therefore that are very rich in metaphor and exaggeration” (59). These songs are usually rendered during elaborate concerts organized in honour of the celebrants. Amase et al further avers that:

These songs extol the virtues and heroic exploits of the celebrants as well as other prominent Tiv sons and daughters. Heroic poetry preaches virtues like patience, hard work, honesty, brotherhood, sympathy and kindness. The Tiv use this oral art form to foster unity and also enhance development in their society (59).

All these varieties of folk songs in Tivland have varying functions and importance that cannot be wished away. However, this discourse is particularly concerned with the Akerangu political songs and their effects during elections.

Appraisal of Tiv Political Songs: ‘Idyu Ka Inya I Teen ga’, ‘Ugba Nyor Shor Chenji’ and ‘Ortom Gudugudu’ in Perspective.

Music and dance cannot be divorced from the existence of a Tiv man. The two are inseparable and indispensable part and parcel of the Tiv society. There is virtually inherent in every aspect of the Tiv society. This explains why music and dance are present at all occasions, even on farms, during funerals, etc “Indeed, one can euphemistically say that the major activities in Tiv society are predicated on music and dance. Religious and political messages are communicated in music and dance” (Gbilekaa, 240). According to Kur and Iwokwagh:

Music and dance permeate all aspects of Tiv life. No activity or event in Tiv society goes without music and dance. Basically, music and dance in Tiv society serve the entertainment function but beyond that they also serve information, education, socialization, mobilization and social cohesion functions (102).

Given the above, it therefore follows that folk songs or music generally cannot be excused from politics in Tivland. Folk songs have played significant roles in the politics of Tiv nation for quite some time now. According to an internet source:

Tiv song and music have come to play important roles in Benue politics. The legendary composer and entertainer, Akile Bende, told me that it was the late Ugo Iwoo who had advised Senator Sarwuan Tarka to utilize traditional folk songs and music in political mobilization and campaigns and that he obliged. That was in the late fifties. Since then Tiv folk song and music have become an integral part of the political process in the state throwing up various notable composers in the emerging dispensations. (Ortom website)

Political songs are employed for different reasons. They could be for political education, to extol or lambast a candidate, or to comment on a particular policy. Although the focus of this discourse is on the recent upsurge of folk songs in the politics of Tivland, many scholars are of the view that the trend had begun even before independence. According to Gbilekaa:

Beginning from the 1950s, Tiv political culture has found vent in music and dance. By the first turn of the 1960s, when Tiv land was engulfed in political turmoil, the invectives that were traded between the United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC) and the ruling Northern People’s Congress (NPC) were done through music and dance. (240)

In spite of such assertions, the recent thrust of folk songs in politics is overwhelming. The paradigms selected for this discourse have had tremendous influence on the politics and policies of the state. In Stuffy's 'Idyu ka nya I teen ga', the oral poet lambasts a particular political office seeker who is seen to be corrupt and insensitive to the plight of the people. Hon. John Tondo, the politician lambasted in the song, had in his capacity as the Commissioner for Land and Survey, allegedly connived with other corrupt elements and sold of a parcel of land belonging to the community. During the 2015 general elections, when he contested for the Makurdi/Guma Federal Constituency seat in the National Assembly, the poet felt it was only wise he told the masses about the ugly side of the man who is seeking to represent them. Stuffy lambasted him thus:

Idyu ka nya I teen ga
Hyarev mba vaan nya veoo
Idyu ka nya I teen ga
Masev mba vaan inya veoo
Idyu ka nya I teen ga
Tyo Ipusu mba ke' kungur oo
Hide se a nya yase ooo
U ngu or u dedoo ga
Votu wase ka Tarkighir,
Dickson a ooo
Tyo you soo
Or a soo bikon u zenden maden yo
Nan a lu hee a mande
Yemen Abuja jene oo
Dickson u za dyu keng

Translation

Legislation is not land sales
Hyarev people are crying for their land
Legislation is not land sales
Masev people are crying for their land
Legislation is not land sales
The Ipusu people are in the open (unsheltered)
Bring back our land
You are not a good man
Our vote is for Tarkighir.
Oh Dickson,
Your people love you.
If one is so interested in fixing beacons around,
Let him stay home and do it.
On your way to Abuja,
Dickson you will surely go to legislate.

Folk songs don't just predict the outcome of elections; they surely reform and reshape public opinion on certain issues. They sway the opinion and allegiance of the masses to a particular direction. Stuffy's song actually nailed Hon. Tondo. Like he said '*u ngu or u dedoo ga*'; so the people wouldn't send someone who is not good to represent them. At the end of that election, Dickson Tarkighir won the seat as predicted by the poet. This is a classic example of how folk songs are instrumental to the political process in Tivland.

Terkura Ikyumbur's '*Ugba nyor shor chenji*' featured during the 2011 general elections. During that dispensation, the then incumbent governor of Benue State, Dr. Gabriel Suswam, was seeking re-election. Given the seemingly lack of strong opposition candidate, the gubernatorial election had seemed to be a one way race. However, when Prof. Steve Ugbah arrived on the political scene, the game actually changed. Ikyumbur informed the Benue populace that the arrival of Ugbah has changed the game and the only right thing to do was to vote massively for the game changer who will bring succour to the people. Indeed, the people responded positively to this. Ugbah became so popular with them courtesy of this folk song. Even though Suswam eventually 'won' in the election owing to the power of incumbency, what cannot be hastily dismissed is that Ikyumbur's song, not just the arrival of Ugbah, changed the game. The folk song was instrumental to the political process of that dispensation.

If folk songs have ever been so instrumental and strong determinant of political fate in Benue State, then it was the 2015 general elections. The folk songs became the major campaign weapon of both parties. This was because of the general appeal and efficacy of the folk songs. Thaddeus Tsaga's '*Ortom Gudugudu*' was one of the best in Ortom's arsenal of folk songs. In the song, Tsaga advocated for massive followership for Ortom whom he sees as the messiah to get Benue people to the Promised Land. He lambasted the outgoing leadership for bringing hardship, poverty, and misery upon the people. True to Tsaga's words, given the harsh economic conditions created by the ruling party, Ortom massively received overwhelming followership. If some people were oblivious of certain facts; Tsaga's song revealed the true situation of things and following Ortom, the messiah, was no more optional. The massive followership Ortom received is manifest in his eventual victory in the gubernatorial race against a candidate whose party was in power. This demonstrates the strength of folk music to change things and do the impossible in our society given its strong and focused messages. 2015 is indeed a year Benue people will never forget owing to the instrumentality of folk songs in deciding the leadership of the state in the year.

Conclusion

All art forms are culturally defined in the society. Every society creates its artistic expressions for various purposes. They are designed and defined to serve specific functions in the society. That is to say there is no art for art sake. Every art form must fulfill particular responsibilities as assigned to it in the society.

Folk songs are a form of artistic expression that cannot be found wanting in the area of functionality and responsibility. Nigerian folk songs have proven to be very influential in the politics of the country. From the days of Hubert Ogunde through Fela Kuti and a host of others, folk songs have been making impact, leading to reformation and transformation for a better society.

In Tivland, folk songs cannot be divorced from the social, political, and economic lives of the people. Its influence on the politics of the land is tremendous. "...folk singers in Tivland have been acknowledged as a potent tool of information, education, mobilization and entertainment. They provide valuable information on socio-economic and political issues" (Amase et al, 105). In spite of this though, the deviation in popular music from meaningful and purposeful songs is regrettable. The writer submits that folk songs be deployed to others of our lives like the war against corruption, given its track record of success. Similarly, Nigerian popular musicians should strive to return home to issues of the land as any art form without any function in the society is dead and invalid.

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*The Ortom Website