Re-Examining the Social Status of Musicians in Contemporary African Society

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Introduction
In the African society music is an integral part of culture. While the practitioners are endowed with great potentials, the society has shades of biases towards them. This paper re-examines the social status of musicians. With bibliographical evidences it looks at genres of existing music and their practitioners.

“A village without music or that neglects community drumming is dead”. This African proverb is indicative of the role and status of music in Africa. Music holds a revered place in Africa hence it is used in the life cycle events that range from birth to death. Even in contemporary Africa, music still remains omnipresent. For every event, there exists a body of songs, socially controlled against misuse or in content and context. Discourses on Music, musical genres and indeed the use of musical instruments will be incomplete if there is no focus on the makers of the genres involved in the art. From this perspective, this segment focuses on the genres of music in Africa and the types of musicians so as to be able to examine their present status.

Musical genres and their practitioners in Africa
Musical genres cannot be effectively discussed without one dovetailing into another. Edet (1965) categorises music into three: indigenous (ethnic), or folk music, western –influenced inter (ethnic) music and western music. Akin Euba (1970) on his own categorises musical practices in Africa into five different groups: traditional, neo-traditional, westernised pop music, western pop music and western conservatory music. Later, Euba (1977) re-categorised these typologies into two broad categories; traditional and new music. His new music covers music in the theatre and music in the night club. In her own submission, Omibiyi (1979) delineates five distinct typologies covering traditional, neo-traditional, church, popular and African art or contemplative music. In her later work, she reduced the typologies to four; traditional, religious, popular and African art. However, for the purpose of this study, four distinct musical genres- typologies will be discussed under the following headings.

(a) African Traditional Music
(b) African Popular Music
(c). African Art Music
(d). Church Music in Africa.

African Traditional Music
This musical genre has been defined as that which was practised in Africa before the advent of European administration in some regions in Africa. These practices survived the impact of all forms of European influence up to the era of independence (Nketia 1975 and Agordoh 1994). Although in every African society there are individualised and community owned ensembles, there are also paucity of information on the practitioners of the various musical types. The reason for this paucity is ascribed to the fact that musical types are more often spoken of than the musicians who, perhaps, are not so fairly ranked in the hierarchy of ‘who is who’ in their communities. However, within contemporary Nigeria, there are personalities such as Dan Maraya Jos from Plateau State, Akunwafor Ezigbo Ebiligbo, Morocco Maduka and Njaba, from Anambra State, Johnson Ajah, Okpan Eribo and Omokomoko of Delta State, Umuoabo Igerase, Atinle Obetoh-Aka Amojo-Ameniyyeye of Edo State, Nigeria. All these musicians dwell so much on the traditional music of their various areas which in most cases were passed orally to them as they grew up in their communities. The bulk of the repertoire of this genre survived the onslaught of the colonial masters. Other important avenues that showcase this genre are traditional institutions. Most of the subjects or themes used in the traditional music are prevalent issues in the communities. History from ages which transmit from generation to generations, folklores, ethos and norms of the societies form the bulk of the repertoire of this genre. The musicians therefore, are usually indigenes in their communities. The ethnic affiliations lacquered with passion are strong criteria for the practitioners. In as much as the societies cannot do...
without the services of these musicians, ironically they are still of low social status in the society. This class of musicians suffered this social denigration more at the arrival of the Europeans in the soil of Africa. This was the period when the Europeans came with theories of musical evolutions that gave credibility only to western art and products. Presently, one of the strong media of preservation of this genre is in the court of kings. Due to the observance of rites and rituals that are still prevalent in the communities, these musicians still find the palace or palace related avenues as a medium for their practice.

**African Popular Music**

Onyeji (2002) says that popular music evolved from a Latin word *populare* meaning ‘of the people’ or ‘pleasing to and suited to the understanding of ordinary people’. He observes further that pop music encompasses several styles and it is readily comprehensible by a large proportion of the population; its appreciation does not require knowledge of western-conventional musical theory or technique. African popular music is one of Africa's urban art forms, an umbrella genre with other strands like Rock, Disco, Blues, Reggae Blues, Reggae, Calypso, Highlife, Rap music, Gospel music, Soweto blues and Makossa.

Some of the practitioners of the different types of pop music in Africa are Julian Bahula, Louis Mahola, Kippie Maeketsi, Hugh Masekela, Marian Makeba, Joseph Shabalala, Rebecca Malupi, Brenda Fassie, Yvonne Chakachaka all these from South Africa; Zak Sikobe from Kenya; Hassan Erraji from Morocco; Alpha Blondy from Abidjan; Fela Kuti, Enos Lous, Shabba Ugly, Paul Ik. Dairo, Victor Olaiya, Rex Lawson, Victor Uwaifo, King Sunny Ade, Ebenezer Obey, Shina Peters, 2Face Idibia, Dang from Nigeria; Awilo Logomba and Kofi Olomide from Benin; Kofi Ghanaba, E.T. Mensah, King Bruce, Nan Ampadu and John Collins from Ghana. This genre has both young and old members of the society in its practice. In most of the repertoire of these musicians, one sees clearly the legacies of the West and that of Arabs either in instrumentation, scale, or text. These musicians do not only get patronage from the society alone, in recent times, government agencies and political parties get them involved at state functions and political rallies respectively.

**African Art Music**

The term *Art Music* is used for convenience of reference for music designed for the intent of listening or presentation as *Concert* music; music in which expression of feeling is combined with a high level of craftsmanship and a sense of beauty. It is that type of music governed by laid down rules right from the outset. Hence African Art Music refers to works that manifest these attributes but which are rooted in the traditions of Africa (Nketia, 2004). The traditional music remains its bedrock at the emergence of western formal music education. Nketia opines further that its concepts, aesthetic goals and techniques may show variations consistent with the values of its own contexts of creativity. This is why one can safely talk of the varieties of art music by individual composers in different parts of Africa. Some of the composers of this musical genre are T.K.E. Philips, Fela Sowande, Akin Euba, Ayo Bankole, Okechukwu Ndubusi, Laz Ekwueme, Joshua Uzoigwe, Dan Agu, Adam Fiberisima all from Nigeria; Ephraim Amu, R.O. Danso, N.Z. Nayo, J.H.K Nkettia, Gyimah Labi, and Cosmas Mereku, from Ghana; Patrick Zabana Congo of Zaire, Dawn Padmore of Liberia, Jonathan Oshry, Mark Kilian, Christopher Ballantine, Jurgen Bruninger, David Smith of South Africa to mention but a few. The first set of the practitioners of this genre emerged through contact with the colonial masters/missionaries. Contemplative trait is a major feature of this genre. It involves western art music discipline that follows rules both in composition and performance. This genre does not only have concert hall as its stage, its stage is also extended to the church.

**Church Music in Africa**

Music is one of the most highly valued practices in the religious activities of Africans. The presence of missionaries within Africa led to the repudiation of African mores with great rapidity. While in some parts of Africa it was discovered that Western harmonic style was totally at variance with their technique of harmonization because in theirs, melody is freely embellished and intensified by adding voice parts, at will giving impressions of polytones and rhythms, the European hymnody embraced four part harmonic pattern in which the melody had an upper hand. More to this in South Africa, is the tradition of unaccompanied singing as a genre of its own. In the other nations of Africa, Western hymnody was highly accepted with various ethnic groups experimenting with their languages in translating English into local languages, accompanying folk songs in Christian text with
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western instruments and composing indigenous languages based on western harmonies. All over Africa, it remains a known fact that church music is the precursor of their present day African Art music. Examples of such African church musicians are John Knox Bokwe, Reuben T. Caluza and Enoch Sontonga of South Africa; Ikoli Harcouct Whyte, I. A. Bankole, I. O. Kuti, T.K.E Philips, J. J. Kuti, T.Olude of Nigeria to mention but a few. Bulk of the repertoire of this genre has similar traits and characteristics of art music which emerged through the colonial masters and the Christian missionaries. In addition to these songs, there was emergence of indigenous songs popularly known as ‘Native airs’. The songs have this title not because they make use of non-Biblical text, but because the text used are in various indigenous languages.

The Musician in Africa
There is an African proverb which says "if you can talk you can sing and if you can walk you can dance". This view may mislead a non African to conclude that Africa is a continent of musicians given that music is made from cradle to the grave. To this observation, Bebey (1975) informs us that it may be logical to conclude that everyone in black Africa is a musician. He says this is not the case in practice because in Africa, the right to play certain instruments or participate in traditional ceremonies is not open to all but are governed by strict rules and regulations. Supporting the view above, Hindley (1988) says: “apart from itinerant or professional musicians, such as bards or African griots, the playing of musical instruments or the making of music is often reserved to a particular caste or clan”. Bebey (1975) observes that among the griots are special families or castes whose surnames like Keita, Mamadi; Diubate, or Dibate, and Kuyate are indicative of the families' musicality. It has been mentioned elsewhere by Aluede (1997) that in Uromi, Edo State Nigeria, Ayele music is performed for the King by Unuwazi people. To ensure continuity, the children are groomed in the art of their people right from childhood.

Some Church musicians through their Art music training go through apprenticeship and formal training in an academy, conservatory, music school or university. This is also applicable to some popular musicians. Notably amongst these are Fela Anikulapo, Art Alade, both of Nigerian popular music space. Today, African universities have trained concert pianists, composers, performers, popular musicians, celebrated sacred musicians and scholars. These scholars went through music programmes with courses in theory and practice of African and European music, equipping them with the skills and knowledge of diverse musical practices for scholarship and performance in the society. This class of musicians have the accolade of being referred to as musicologists because of the formal trainings they have either from the universities or relevant conservatories.

The Social Status of African Musicians
According to Heasman (1973:10) status refers to “the rank, order or position an individual has in society” to talk of the social status of musicians in Africa is to examine why and how certain categories of musicians in a particular locale are thought of to be such better than others and the result of such peoples tendency to rank each other for not just themselves alone but the society. Social strata are composed of individuals and groups who share certain important characteristics, whether or not they are aware of this (Storer, 1973). Heasman (1973) and Storer (1973) share the views that most societies are stratified into three of lower, middle and higher classes. This mode of stratification also exists in Africa and it is applicable to their musicians.

African Musicians are repositories of the peoples' culture, entertainers and custodians of the peoples' mores (Aluede 2005). It is paradoxical to know that this class of people who perform the onerous tasks of keeping the communities alive are believed to have little recognition. Viewed generally before now, musicians in Africa were regarded as belonging to the lower segment of society. Traditionally, the musicians rarely live on playing of music alone. It was a tragedy born of ignorance that the services rendered by these musicians are not to be paid for appropriately. They are of low esteem even when the society cannot do without them. In Senegambia, the griots are lowly ranked and are generally of the lowest castes in the social hierarchy in the community. Among the Hausa people of Nigeria, apart from the fact that the profession is not lucrative, Musicians are also not respected (Aluede, 1997) Before the observation above, Alagoa (1974) remarked that among the Nembe of South Eastern Nigeria, music is seen as a profession from which one cannot make a living, hence they say the talent of singing is not given together with a talent of making money. In the opinion of Hindley (1982), the status of African Musicians is sometimes humble.
In very recent works on music as a field of study, career and profession (Faseun 2001, Olaniyan 2002 and Onyeji 2002) conclude that the field is seen to be for the “never to do well” and “deviants in the society”. Musicians are simply seen as entertainment tools that are only enjoyed as they perform and despised immediately after performance.

The factors responsible for this view can be summed up in fewer than four headings:
1) The ethical standards of our musicians
2) Wrong perception of the career
3) Government neglect
4) Music Scholars/ music scholarship today

The Ethical Standards of Musicians
Apart from church and Art musicians, the question of sexuality and erotics amongst others is an issue of great concern to the profession. Finn (1991) and Frith (1996) have remarked indecent dressing and questionable lifestyles of some selected Western musicians. In brief, African musicians also share in this attribute. Onyeji (2002) observes that the pop musician has an exceedingly low social image as a result of his loose and often irresponsible life style. The reason for this position is contingent on the fact that these musicians are mainly secondary school drop outs with little or no self respect. They have wives and children in large numbers. Even the Gospel musicians are not better either; some of them were secular popular musicians before switching to Gospel in the light of better patronage from the growing Christendom and the consequent economic convenience. Apart from sexual promiscuity, drug addiction is also a major factor responsible for their near worthless status. While talking about certain musicians in South Africa, Copland (1986:190) remarked that “the untimely deaths of Nxuumalo and Mackay Davashe in the early 1970’s were probably hastened by their weakness for alcohol, a common problem among Jazz musicians”. It should be mentioned, however, that today, there are university graduates as popular musicians. The era of having dropouts as popular musicians is fast fading away. In spite of the university degrees these musicians have, their repertoire and behaviour still fall short of the traditional African societal norms, values and ethos.

Wrong Perception of the Career
In as much as members of the society have some degree of reservations towards musicians, it is becoming more glaring that the industry is one of the lucrative industries in the contemporary African societies. The very poor ethical standard and habits of African musicians have greatly enhanced the public views about them. Olaniyan (2002:44) says that “Many Nigerians believe that any discipline in the performing arts is for the never-do-wells. It is also a common belief that those who chose to be actors or musicians are or may become rascals, drug addicts, drunkards, spend thrifty, womanizers etc.” Although he goes further to conclude that this belief is nothing short of ignorance perhaps because he feels his career is worth defending, Onyeji (2002) opines that presently, only 20% of Pop Stars may be enjoying some fame and comfort from their profession and that about 80% are still hopeless, looking for their bearing. The perception of the public is based on their self presentation. The instruments used in this assessment and how this conclusion was reached are not within the scope of this presentation but Onyeji’s position is to an extent representative of the people’s voice in the twenty-first century.

Educational attainment is a strong determinant of the status of musicians in Africa. Family lineage is also a very potent factor in the enhancement of African musician’s integrity. According to Storer (1973), beyond acquiring esteem through occupation, it could also be inherited. With particular reference to Nigeria, Ames (1965) talked of the Gangan Saraki, the drum of the Emir or a district head. He remarked that the drum is played only for the emir or some high ranking noblemen of the emirate who serve as the district heads. He further observed that being Emir’s musician is honourable as they are always on his entourage. Drumming for the Emir is attached to lineages. Similarly, some Nigerian Art and popular musician have also had to enjoy patronage and high status because of their family antecedents. Examples are Ayo Bankole junior, the son of late Ayo Bankole, an art musician of repute, Paul I.K. Dairo, the son of late I.K. Dairo a high-life star in Nigeria and Femi Kuti, the son of Fela Anikulapo Kuti of Afro beat/high life fame in Nigeria. African musicians are part of the society which has wealth, honour /esteem, education and family linage as yardsticks for judging social status of persons. This appears to be the first standard of measurement. Wealth in Africa goes beyond assets, shares and money one has
to non verbal symbols which would be interpreted in the kinds of cars, clothes, jewellery one uses and the houses he lives in. In Africa, musicians share a parallel fame with footballers. They live in detached buildings, ride comparatively expensive cars and perform in expensive costumes. For example in Nigeria, it is said that Sir, Shina Peters, King Sumy Ade, Ebiye, and Ayefele Adeyinka are among the highest priced performers.

The esteem accorded a person is based on the usefulness of his status to others (Storer, 1973). In Africa today, doctors, teachers, and lawyers to mention a few are all turning to music and acting. This trend is as a result of the honour, and fame which have accrued to the musicians. This sign is noticeable in the public ovation, audience respect and national honorific titles often awarded them, some of such musicians so honoured are sir, Victor Efosa Uwaifo, King Sunny Ade, and Evangelist Ebenezer Obey. Honour or esteem in our contemporary societies today is acquired on the basis of one’s occupation, hence one hears of Merriam Makeba as often referred to as mama Africa, Manu Dibango as father of Makossa.

**Government Neglect**

A striking feature unique in Africa is the obvious neglect of music. It is one of the continent's widest entertainment forms. So much money is invested sponsoring sports and tourism. In Nigeria, victory in any football match could earn the Footballers new streets names, cars or lands, but music is seen as an individual venture. Little do we realise that after great exploits and victory in sports, people to relax and be appropriately entertained. Entertainment is a major arm of tourism. The music of a people in an epoch, turns a reference material in an epoch before or after. This is why in other continents, there are Government supported bodies like International Music Council, International Trumpeters' Guild, International Trombonist Association and International Society for Music Educators, International Council for Traditional Music, etc., not even a research institute is put in place for musicians. To help keep African musicians alive, the various national governments should help to help fight piracy.

Today, we hear of Nordic Music Information Centre put in place by Danish, Finnish, Swedish, Iceland Governments with separate Information Centres and Institutes in the various countries. At present, none of such initiatives is in place in Nigeria. No National Orchestra, Chorus or Band, no Nigerian Music Research Institute rather what we only see is Cocoa, Palm Oil, Rubber and lately Film Research Institutes. The submission here is not to condemn the existing institutes, but to hint that music institutes are as necessary as some of these existing ones. Recently, the department of music of the University of Port Harcourt, in Nigeria organized the first ever African Composers Summit that attracted participants from within and outside the country. In as much as this is a commendable effort towards the genre- art music, the germane point remains whether this effort will be sustained. The government of the country and relevant agencies may need to be involved in this type of projects for development and sustainability.

**Music Scholars**

The basic difference between Western Music teaching and African Music teaching is that in the Western world examples of what is taught is immediately found in the society. While in Africa, the concepts taught are not readily found in the society (Nketia 2004).

Although African music educators, musicologists in different areas of specialisation are digging into the various African Societies to bring out by examples researches bordering on musical genres in Africa. These are Africans who have their formal training through western music education system It is the contention of these African musicologists that these musical genres are not too serious to require a scholarly investigation. This wrong view has left contemporary African popular music genre, for example, in the hands of Journalists and Anthropologists with little or no musical training to cursorily investigate.

The views and positions held by this other group of scholars are therefore not pronounced. Very shocking it might sound! the British Professor John Collins has authored a book on E.T. Mensah the Ghanaian Highlife musician and Christopher Waterman on Juju a popular genre in Nigeria. Bode Omojola’s book on popular music in Africa is one of the few books authored by an African who understands holistically the genre. The few booklets on Highlife music in Nigeria are not written by Musicologists. If contemporary band studies have been introduced into the University Music Curricula, the performers of such and their activities should be investigated alongside
their contributions to the musical development of their periods. It also goes beyond research effort to the level of publishing the outcomes for public consumption. It therefore behoves on these music scholars who, though, their pedigrees are usually premised on church music before venturing into music studies to extend their research tentacles into study of popular music.

**The Realities of Our Time**

While the popular musicians are seen as immoral citizens, the art musicians also suffer biases from its citizenry. Not too many parents give approval to the choice of their children and wards to study music at the first instance. Available statistics show that even when most of these parents and guardian are music lovers, they still feel the course is not worthy of being taken as a career. This may be due to the fact that most members of the society are not yet aware that music as a discipline is beyond choral participation especially at the church level, or piano/organ playing. The curriculum of most departments of music in the continent is also another factor that has not exposed their products to various job opportunities after graduation. Most products of these institutions feel the best they can do is either to teach or practice the art in the church, whereas there are several career windows for these graduates. However, it is pertinent to recognize that though at a slow pace, musicians especially the art musicians are being accorded some degree of creativity respect for the art which they are engaged in. National festivals and universities’ programmes now attract the presence of art music practitioners.

**Conclusion**

The major concern of this paper has been to discuss the social status of African musicians. It was observed that African musicians are into Art, Popular, Traditional and Church music practices. In all, the paper concludes that African Musicians enjoy little or no prestige in spite of the functional roles played by their music in the various societies. To put the status of African musicians in the right perspectives, the musicians themselves, the public, music scholars and the government have roles to play. The traditional rulers who are the custodians of the culture need to be involved in the contemporary style of governance, especially as it affects culture which can attract foreigners to the country. The Yoruba kings of the southwest Nigeria for instance, still have the traditional musicians who are officially meant for the palace. These are musicians who recount history from ages through their performances from time to time. (Okunade, 2010).

Government should realise that national development is not contingent on only science and technology alone but also the economic contributions of the arts. Consequently it should categorically institute yearly festivals at continent, national, regional or state levels to regularly promote their musical arts. It should also sponsor, fund and support traditional orchestras, pay royalties to musicians whose works are played on the radios and televisions, establish Music Research Institutes and Sound Archives and organise Musical Competitions at the various levels and tiers of Government. The existing professional musicologists associations need to reconstruct their visions in a way that will enhance growth in the industry to the extent that the town and gown will have a symbiotic relationship.

**REFERENCES**


