

## POPULAR MUSIC CULTURE AND URBAN EXPERIENCES IN NIGERIA

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### Abstract

*In Nigeria, there are different kinds of music and they range from Classical, Church, Traditional/Folk, Marshal to Popular music. Each of these musical types/genres has its own characteristics or conditions under which it thrives. Popular music as the name implies is the music of the masses but with greatest appeal to the youths and most common in urban centres. It propagates a culture which explores the material and symbolic essence of urban experiences. The environmental constitution of urban centres embodied in physical location, space, infrastructure and other sonic effects favour a kind of expression located within the domain of popular music genre. Popular musicians being aware of these factors work towards the production of music that perfectly represent or accommodate the nature and purpose of urban set up/lives. This paper explicates the conditions that necessitate, enhance and or fertilize this breed of genre. It also casts a cursory look at the various hybrids of pop music which sprouted up as a result of modification, transformation and inter-cultural relationship /transfer. Imperatively this genre as a matter of fact, poses some effects on the lives of people; all these are given attention in this discourse.*

### Introduction

Music is a multifaceted art that is strictly dependent upon the traditions of its performance, the mode of performance and the features it portrays determine the type of genre, or the name the music goes with. Popular music exhibits a peculiar culture or characteristics that distinguish it from the host of other music types. Many writers have described it as the music of the masses which greatest appeal lies within the domain of youths and youth at heart. In fact, its span in urban

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centers is without prejudice, principally as result of popular culture it propagates. Onyeji (2002; 24) presents “pop music” as “a genre of music, encompassing several styles, that is readily comprehensible to a large proportions of the population; its appreciation requires little or no knowledge of musical theory or technique”. In essence, pop music allows free or open performance and audience participation, in most cases the masses determine the type of music or texts used by the pop musicians, since their music are meant to be appreciated and patronized by these audience. In other words pop music is strictly guided by audience taste and choice. “There acceptance or rejection of any music determines its popularity or failure” (Onyeji 2002: 27)

The case of the popular especially in the Nigerian or African terrain has generated some concern. If popular music is the music of the masses one may be tempted to call mass culture and it places it in the mold of western somewhat homogeneous culture. They use the Marxist dominant ideology paradigm which tends to see popular music as site of dominance between the record industry and the general public (Evans, 1988). Popular music is that which is produced by the uneducated and mainly for commercial reason that is dictated by the record industry. In this wise popular music may not as popular as the tastes of the public are dictated few capitalists whose ideology has been appropriated as that of the people. Nevertheless some scholars have tried to explain what is popular in popular culture in Africa. Ogude/Nyairo (2007:7) posits that popular culture which of course includes music is “that part of African creativity which is not elite, unofficial and urban” this definition places it also in the area of the masses because it seems that the masses are the non-elite. Englert (2008) tries to explain what is meant by the non elite as to situate popular music in its domain. Does it have to do with the educational level of the creators, since mass could be termed crass. The question has been asked if it is the generation gap because it has been observe that the young are those who are the creators and consumers of popular culture.( De Boeck & Honwana, 2005.) another assumption is the economic and consumerism which has been heightened with the emergence of modern technology like television, the computer and the internet which makes the production and distribution of popular culture fast and easy.

The above assumptions notwithstanding popular culture has been given its own coloration by Karin Barber (1987). After doing an exposition on what several writers had said about the subject she distinguishes between traditional, and popular and says that

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Popular arts can be taken to mean a large class of new unofficial art forms which are syncretic concerned with social change and associated with the masses. The centres of activity are the cities, in their pivotal position between the rural hinterland on the one hand and the metropolitan countries on the other.

This definition places it as a pure urban phenomenon and not national as it is a mixture of the existing and the new. This view is underscored by Waterman when he says the Juju music Ebenezer Obey and Sunny Ade shows the effect of acculturation and modernization, this is an apt example of the syncretic nature of popular music.

The urban influence of popular music also makes it reactionary and to some extent anti-people, because to talk of the urban is direct the music to a mix of people that is not homogeneous but diverse hence the hybrid nature of popular music. The people as seen in some cases are the locals and owners of a pure culture and cultural forms. This may have provided the reasons for traditional art forms being termed popular because of the nature and all inclusiveness of the native audience. However the real popular addresses a heterogeneous audience which may be domiciled in one place or afar.

Apart from audience influence on the choice, span and blossom of popular music, environmental dispositions play a very important role in the sense that, the musicians exploit the advantage of the dense population of urban centers to maximize their production, sales and consequently enhance their economic status. Popular music cultivates, enjoys as well as espouses a culture that makes it invulnerable to extinction. It keeps pace with the themes and currents of the moment and that makes it relevant to every age and season.

### **Conditions That Favour Popular Music Genre**

Each music genre has its peculiarities or characteristics under which it thrives. For popular music, a lot of features enhance or contribute to its longevity. One of such factors could be associated with audience location and infrastructural set up of urban cities. Urban cities are known to be strategically positioned in such a way that a greater percentage of human enterprises take place in such places. All these activities in the urban draw people from the rural areas into these cities thereby leaving the rural areas with much reduced population. This movement includes musicians and audience alike. It also follows that development appears

to be more concentrated in urban than in rural areas. These developments include infrastructures in terms of concert halls, theaters, recording studios/materials and modern electronic equipment. According to Onyeji (2002: 26)

Pop musicians have always been very quick to exploit the possibilities of electronic equipment which include different types of guitars, synthesizers, drums and rhythm composers; computers (in recent times), amplifiers, sound effect generators, sound modifiers .... Non-electronic instrument such as trumpet with and without mutes, saxophones, acoustic guitars, jazz drum sets, trombone, flutes, clarinets, violins and different percussive instruments.

Urban centers create markets which make all these equipment mentioned above easily accessible to the pop musicians. Even in the areas of non sonic materials that enhance pop music presentation, Onyeji (2002: 20) highlights “different lighting facilities which give colour and mood to pop music performances, costumes, smoke effect, ribbons, fireworks, balloons of different colours” According to him, these embellish pop music presentations, as well as add a note or emphasis on the theme of music. These also make popular music easily acceptable to the public especially the youths.

Another cultural attribute of pop music that enhances its span is its commercial oriented nature. Pop music is not a mere entertainment art. The society places much value on social status specifically on the economic power of individuals, as a result many people plunge into music, and want to make it by all means whether they have the talent or not. These untalented musicians at times try to model after most of the big names in the pop music circle just in a bid to produce albums for sale. This quick chase for money often boils down to boot legging or piracy. Pop music CDS, DVD, cassettes and videos constitute the greatest market in music industry as both genuine and un-genuine productions flood the market. Also music is viewed as a must have product in every home for that, people see it as the quickest and easiest way of making money, since there is a ready market to sell their products. The nature of its production which make it accessible to many since it utilized the common symbols of communicating with a mass audience. Brigit Engbert (2008) echoing Theodor Adorno says that “popular music is simplistic, repetitive, and boring, and that it remains this way because

commercial forces manipulate it in order to placate and manipulate the masses who passively respond to it”.

Popular music is ever relevant due to the centrality of its contents on current issues. It keeps track with every trend in the life of people in other wards it draws from societal events and experiences such as politics, economic boom or melt down, austerity, good or bad leadership, social vices such as bribery, corruption, kidnapping, war, insecurity, religious racketeering, racism and so on. Other sources could be associated with people’s quest for freedom in time of oppression, injustice and suppression. At times it becomes praises of known personalities. In this praise issue, Ozoemene Nwa Nsugbe, a well known folk musician says in his interview with Asigbo (2009) that he praises people just because of the money that is involved. For him praise singing is a matter of contract. Many pop musicians are guilty of praising people on the spur of moment just in a bid to get money. Therefore as events evolve in societies, pop musicians get or become equipped with themes or materials to work with.

Among other things that favour the growth of popular music, the type of audience makes a lot of contribution. The audience of popular music constitutes mainly of youths and youth at heart. This group makes up the greater percentage of societal population. And because of their large number, it implies that their demand for popular music will as well be on the high side. An artist/composer is encouraged when his product is demanded and this normally results in more production. Therefore high demand for popular music promotes/increases its span.

Another serious factor which must never be overlooked is the language of the genre. Popular music can be rendered in any type of language within audience disposal. It is normally rendered in vernacular, pidgin and English, or a mixture of vernacular and pidgin, English and vernacular and so on. The audience is normally at home with the language of popular music as a result they are not restrained or rather confronted with any language barrier/complexity. What is most essential in the use of language is the ability of the hearers to understand the message it carries along. Therefore the ultimate aim of any pop musician is to communicate meaningfully to his target audience via the choice of language deemed fit for the work. Look at this excerpt from 2 Face Idibia’s “Nothing dey happen” as recorded by Oikelome (2010: 149)

My guy Na your eye you go sharpen

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Because he likes say he don dey happen,  
No shaken notin dey happen,  
Nobody won kpai, but dem won go heaven ...

In the above text, the composer makes use of pidgin and even slang that has gained conventional appeal. 'Kpai' according to Oikelome (2010: 150) "are expressions which do not belong to any language but are being used by common people in the streets to mean 'die'. In other words, popular musicians are not restricted to any particular language.

These few points discussed may not be an exhaustive presentation of conditions favourable for the growth and spread of popular music but just to draw our minds on the possible causes of superfluity of popular music in our society today.

### **Types of Popular Music in Nigeria**

Writing on the types of popular music in Nigeria may somehow look monotonous as many writers have dealt extensively on the subject.

Onyeji, 2002; Okafor, 2005; Onwuegbuna, 2009 among others have critically traced the emergence of popular music in Nigeria to interethnic relations. "Through culture contact orchestrated by migrations, trade, and all other factors of urbanizations, ethnic pop styles of different peoples and regions fused into indigenous hybrids that are categorized as interethnic pop styles". (Onwuegbuna 2009:93) According to Onyeji (2002:28) "it is very difficult to keep track of all the developments in pop music globally. (But) important to note that while some pop music types were developed singly, others emerged through fusion of elements from existing pop music types". Similarly, Okafor (2005:328) asserts.

Some of these are adaptations and derivatives of traditional music (e.g. *apala*, *sakara*, *akuko na egwu* and *dadakuada*) and reflect interactions between local and western musical cultures (e.g. high life and *juju*) . . . also the imported forms such as the souls from the United States, West Indian Reggae and their own derivatives (e.g. Afro-beat, Afro-rock and *Ozzidi*).

In a more concrete terms, popular music as the case with Nigerian contemporary situation has no singular source or origin. Popular music as the name connotes can equally represent a generic term for such music as High life, Disco, Rock and

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Roll, Rock, Blues, Reggae; Rhythm and Blues (R&B) Calypso, Rap and so on. In fact popular music types with their derivatives are too numerous to mention, but to make it as concise as possible, Omibiyi-Obidike in Okonkwo (2010: 127) grouped them into three distinct types:

- The variety that developed as a result of the influence of the West – European lifestyle, for instance, Highlife and *juju*;
- Those that have direct influence from the pop – explosion in various parts of the world which include, Afro-rock, Jazz, Afro-beat, Reggae, Disco, Funk and
- The Islamized Semi – indigenous types such as *Apala*, Sakara, Waka and Fuji

Omibiyi – Obidike and Okafor’s opinions have many things in common. These writers have tried so much in addressing the issue of Nigerian popular music types, but one thing is still quite obvious – ‘Change’. The type of radical change experienced in music industry as a result of advancement in the use of electronic gadgets has accelerated the expansion and the inclusion of more music types into popular genres. Hence the emergence of the type branded *Naija* hip pop. This type of pop music has gained much popularity among the youths in recent time. It does not apply that hip hop has not been existing or has never existed before but the fact is that each period has what makes it unique or different from the other which may be attributed to either the choice of texts, word usages or the style of dance orchestrated by the dynamics of instrumentation, even costuming has its own part to play when it comes to identity formation. The relevance of pop music at any given period is characterized by societal prevalent situations. This is because, the image pop music presents in the forties, fifties, eighties and nineties was by far different from what it is now or what it will be tomorrow.

### **Effects of Popular Music on Musicians and Audience**

Popular music over the years has recorded an overwhelming influence on its exponents and audience alike. Most of the popular musicians have betrayed or rather mortgaged their personal identities to what they call professional identities. It is very common to see a male pop musician on braided hair, dread-

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locks, ear rings, big or oversized goggle and other costly jewelries that make contrasting fashion expressions/remarks on the bearer. A good number of them are associated with illicit behavior which society frowns at, the texts of their music are most times uncivilized and they yield so easily to extravagant and reckless type of life. In discussing the personality of pop musicians, Onyeji (2002: 34) infers that they are

Often associated with hotels, excessive drinking, prostitution, polygamous and unstable family life, night life, radicalism, street gangs, broken homes and relationships, early deaths, late marriage or no marriages at all, drugs, excessive smoking, disrespect to authorities and parents, lack of trust and seriousness . . . enticing vibrant youths and children out of school and more serious professions.

Stressing further on these anti social behavior of pop musicians, Ogisi (2006: 105) reports Merriam as saying that they:

Drink, and smoke hemp to excess, are lazy, do not like to indulge in physical labour and are poor at it, are excellent lovers but poor husbands, and are improvident and foolish in the management of money, furthermore, they quarrel, like to travel, are inordinately fond of eating, and apt to fleece the unwary, particularly strangers.

All these unholy attitudes portray pop musicians in a negative image and therefore accord them low status in this status driven society. On the other hand, this could indirectly be translatable to the poor rating of music as a befitting course of study in institutions. The youths who are grossly affected by the charms of these social vices enumerated above stand the risk of living unrealistic and unruly lives. Most youths drop out of school, and roam the streets putting on ear phones or carrying guitar or any other type of musical instrument about, but when they are not able to make it music wise, they may end up as gangsters, miscreants or any other type of criminality. Early exposure of youths to these unhealthy patterns of life is too devastating for positive character formation. Most youths also go after every trend of fashion exhibited by these musicians whether it appeals to societal values or not. For instance, most young boys now wear ear rings, sagging trousers, big or extra ordinary eye glasses etc. Girls are not left out in this reckless dressing, theirs is even worst as most of them now go half nude in the name of fashion. Some texts or languages of popular music are not always palatable as they contain uncivilized, vulgar/uncouth and foul

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remarks that are not good for growing children. Consider these texts from Dr. Sid's "Switch - over the moon", verse 2:

Shawty say you (you) really wanna go (go) out to nite,

so mama rock the dance floor

And I say yeah, sure we can go

We can do anything that you want to

Shawty looking fly from head to toe

Dream say she's a Ten, I said she's the koko

I like the way she wine and make her body move

Body so sexy!, I lose control

Baby I can't stop-stop staring at you

When you drop-drop bringing it back to the top-top

I wanna get-off at your bus stop (your bus-stop)

You top notch, body so hot that I must touch

Baby am like that hot stuff (hot stuff)

Girl you know I like the way you dance all over me,

The way you dance all over me dey make me

Kolo-oo he he (2 x) (Aliogo, 2011:5)

Another example from T. Pain's "Let's Get it on"

. . . I can see it in your eyes

You want me behind so you can throw it back

(let's get it on tonight)

I can't even lie, I got a need for your thighs

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Nothing wrong with that

(let's get it on tonight)

Girls is u feeling me

U killing me, u feeling me

U killing me, u feeling me

(let's get it on tonight)

(Aliogo, 2011:33)

There are many other examples that are even more queer and unrefined than these two which pop musicians use at random. The song texts have no moral concept yet youths clamour for them probably, as a result of their erotic or emotional excitement that make the youths crazy about them. At times, the texts of most of this pop music have no message at all to the audience; they are just a cacophony of sound booming out from synthesizers and amplifiers. All these developments are very far from what pop music used to be in the past. Nevertheless, pop music and musicians should not be packaged or viewed only from their negative perspectives. The contributions and positive impacts they make in societies are enormous. Pop music provides the greatest source of entertainment. Some of their messages can educate, enlighten, correct, admonish and keep people abreast of the happenings in the society. It then becomes quite erroneous to totally condemn pop music and its exponents based on the above mentioned flaws.

Just as Hip Hop music has negative influences it has been proved to have positive uses. In the United States several studies have been carried out to see how this genre of pop music can be used to mobilize the hitherto disturbed youth or could be made useful in the society. Dee Williams posits that "Hip Hop culture has been much maligned in the field of education for its disruptive role in the lives of youth. As such, education has ignored a cultural force that has had a major role in the development of youth identity" (2007). His work studied the educational system of the US and recommends the use of Hip Hop as part of teaching aids for the youths despite the negative way it is looked at by traditional educators, he even observed

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To ignore the radicalized aspect of this public dialogue would be irresponsible. Because Hip Hop emerged from the urban centers and because of the race of the participants, it is often thought of as unworthy of study, but with over 300 universities across the nation including its most prestigious (Yale, Princeton, Stanford, Harvard, etc.) offer courses covering Hip Hop and Hip Hop culture, the intellectual foundation is quickly becoming indisputable. (269-270)

Gosa and Hollie also commented that despite the bad boy image of the late Tupac Shakur his music preaches positive messages: "Tupac instead portrays intellectualism as a part of an authentic black male identity". In Nigeria, musicians like African China, Abdulkareem Azeez (*Nigeria Jagaja*) and Sound (*Textbook*). The use of pop music and musician as vehicles for motivating and mobilizing the masses in various national events in the past and present goes to underscore the power and influence of popular music on its audience.

## **Conclusion**

Obviously, one might hastily conclude without reservation that pop music is the fastest growing genre in Nigeria, and the youths have more passion for it than any other genre. Based on this premise, it becomes a very big challenge to the Association of Nigerian Performing Musicians (PMAN), the Nigerian Copyright Commission and even the Academic Musicians to decide what type of music is suitable for public consumption, in terms of texts and word usages, so as to bring sanity in Nigerian music industry.

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