

YORÙBÁ CULTURE AS AN IDENTITY IN HIGHLIFE MUSIC



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Abstract

Yorùbá culture is unique and significant in values, virtues, custom, and traditions among others. Yoruba is a tribe with different ethnic groups who predominantly occupy the South-western part of Nigeria. This paper looks basically into the culture and beliefs of the Yorùbá people as an identity in Highlife music genre, using the "Cultural Identity Theory", as theoretical framework; and perusing the scholarly approaches of authors in different Journal articles and books on Highlife music and some recorded Highlife tracks, It finds out that the various practitioners of Yorùbá variant of Highlife genre do not only entertain, they also foster, promote and advocate the norms, culture and tradition of the people. Yorùbá culture is rich in its virtues and values. This work then concludes that the culture of the South-western Nigerians can be rescued from possible extinction due to the overwhelming foreign influences that are evidenced in the society. Also, it can be better preserved for posterity through the use of music, such as Highlife for the sustainability of its future.

Keywords: Yorùbá people; Yorùbá culture, South westerners; Cultural milieu; Tradition

Introduction

Popular music is a universal phenomenon; its articulation in specific cultures reflects the social dynamics of that particular social environment as discussed by Omojola, (2006). Highlife musical genre is one of the several genres embedded in Nigerian popular music such as Juju, Fuji, Hiphop, Raggae, Afrobeat among others.

Nigeria's cultural milieu was part of the materials for Highlife music compositions during Nigeria's independence celebrations in the sixties with the instrumentation and performance practices developing in the hands of the emerging Highlife practitioners Alade in Ogunremi(1998), Vidal(2012), Araroba (2018) and Adekola (2018), discussed the various cultural positions of the Yoruba people of the South westerners, in the area of the beauty of language, religion, rites of passage, relationship, living conditions, family life, love, clothing, food, education, advice, rebuke and so on. The cultural positions were exhibited in the album tracks recorded by professional artistes. In view of these, Highlife music has various performers with different identities and cultural dispositions from the sixties.

In the early 1960s, Nigeria Highlife music performers had already moved away from imitating Ghanaian Highlife to rebranding the music genre by composing original melodies that were influenced by Nigerian cultural and traditional music. This led to a barrage of hit records that firmly established Nigerian Highlife as a nationally recognized genre (Emielu, 2013).

The likes of Osita Osadebe / Zeal Onyia's 'Lagos life na so so enjoyment' (1958), E.C. Arinze's 'Nike Nike', Bobby Benson's 'Taxi Driver' (1960) and a host of other recorded elpees contributed to its national esteem. Emielu further stated that Highlife emerged out of similar social circumstance as well as Juju music, but became a nationally recognized genre at least two decades before Juju.

Few of the performers of Yoruba Highlife music were based in both Oyo and Ogun states, whereas Lagos State was actually the seat of Highlife in its early years. It occupies a central place in the history of popular music in Nigeria. Early in its history, Lagos acquired the civilisation and modernisation requirements for becoming the seat of popular music in Nigeria. It was cosmopolitan, a port town and gateway to the hinterland and also had a social life, which was facilitated by the presence of the various types of indigenous and foreign entertainment music (Ogisi, 2008).

Theory of Cultural Identity

Cultural identity can be defined, in its most basic form, as a sense of belonging which includes a shared sense of companionship, beliefs, interests

and basic principles of living. When a person identifies with their culture, they often embrace those traditions that have been passed down through the years. Cultural identity links people to their heritage and can also help them to identify with others who have the same traditions and basic belief systems. According to Myron Lustig (2013),

cultural identities are central to a person's sense of self. That is because cultural identities "are central, dynamic, and multifaceted components of one's self concept.

Bohlman (1988) supported the view that cultural identity insists and that a datum is not completely understood only in terms of itself, but that it functions in accordance with external relationships which is evident in the music, language, dressing, religion, vocation and so on.

Lustig further asserts that Cultural identity refers to a person's sense of belonging to a particular culture or group. This process involves learning about and accepting traditions, heritage, language, religion, ancestry, aesthetics, thinking patterns, and social structures of a culture. Normally, people internalize the beliefs, values, norms, and social practices of their culture and identify themselves with that culture. It is sometimes claimed that a group of people's cultural identity is the foundation or groundwork on which every other aspect of their being is built. It is the cornerstone of what makes them who they are. Embracing one's culture often means practicing a specific religion, wearing a certain type of clothing or something else that represents their culture. It creates an outward, visible means of identifying that group as part of a particular culture or nationality. This theory will be useful in this work to establish the cultural identities in highlife music in terms of the language, religion, instruments, beliefs, aesthetics, dressing, basic principles of living, and so on.

Henri Tajfel established a theory in 1979 that threw light on the concept called social identity. He explained it to be the part of an individual that reflects the kind of group in which that person belongs and their livelihood and attitude will be as that group.

Cultural identity is a part of a person's self conception, self perception and a feeling of belonging to a group. It is related to nationality, ethnicity, religion,

social class, generation, locality or any kind of social group that has its own distinct culture. In this way, cultural identity is not only the characteristics of the individuals but also culturally identical group of people that are sharing the same cultural backgrounds (Holliday, 2010). According to him, Cultural identity can be defined, in its most basic form, as a sense of belonging which includes a shared sense of companionship, beliefs, interests and basic principles of living. When a group of people identifies with their culture, they often embrace those traditions that have been passed down through the years. Cultural identity serves as links to other people of the same heritage, and can also help them to identify with others who have the same traditions and basic belief systems.

The structure of Highlife music as a genre in terms of its form, style, instrumentation and even its performance; it is evident that they are foreign to the existing musical genres in Nigeria. However, along the line, various elements of the Nigerian cultural ways of doing things were introduced to it, considering its language, instruments and instrumentation. Different Nigerian languages were used by the various artistes within each variant. The Yoruba variant was well explored with the different musical and non-musical opportunities that are available to them in their various compositions. In the Yoruba variant of Highlife music, the use of 'Talking Drum' and even the entire 'Dundun Ensemble' (as used by Roy Chicago), Agogo and other traditional instruments were prominent to support the groove, without losing out on the concept and taste of the Highlife music itself. Also, Crossdale Juba sings with Ikale language depicting one of the several ethnic variants.

Culture in Yorubaland

The Yoruba culture varies within the different ethnic groups that exist in the Southwest, their customs, traditions, and religions are complex and multifaceted. They differ from one part of Yoruba Land to the other (Adediran, 1984). He (Adediran) also affirmed that there is a common unity among all of them which is actually due to the myth and belief that they are all descendants of Oduduwa, and that Ile-Ife was their spiritual or ancestral home.

The Yoruba religions believe in some gods which are the deities that are worshiped, such as the *Ogun, Sango, Oya, Obatala, Esu, Yemoja, Ela, Oluorogbo, Oranmiyan, Osun, Osara*, and so on. All these are also reflected, at one time or the other, in the compositions of the Highlife musicians of the South-western Nigeria. The cultures of the Yoruba people are also evident, among several others, in their Virtues; Values; Customs; and Hospitality.

Virtues

The word ‘Virtue’ means a quality that is good or admirable or such quality that is morally good. Also, it is the quality of doing what is good and right. This (Virtue) can be in different ways in terms prudence, justice, fortitude, temperance and so on.

The Yoruba people of the Southwest not only desire but also believe in quality things within their customs and practices, such that are good and are admirable in the various day to day activities, experiences and livelihood. Few of such are discussed below:

(i) ‘Orin to dara’ – Good Song

The Yoruba people are polite, social and proverbially hospitable (Johnson, 1921). Whenever there is a function in the family, the service of a musician is always employed for entertainment, in which sometimes, the interest will be required as regards who to sing and what to sing. Some musicians make use of vulgar language in their various bands in which the culture of the Yoruba people does not really support. Highlife music fits in when it comes to simple, vulgar-free and good compositions, coupled with well arranged instrumentation from both the western and African ends.

(ii) ‘Aso to dara’ – Good Cloth

With views from the works of Highlife musicians like Adeolu Akinsanya who released an album track titled ‘Shampoo’, Orlando Julius sang on ‘Topless’, Roy Chicago also released ‘Onile gogoro’. They either appreciate good dressings or refute indecent dressings and make-up. It is a part of the Yoruba culture to appear decently in one’s workplace, place of worship/religious centre, ceremonies, festivals, and so on. The Yoruba also believes that ‘*ile laa wo, ka to s’omo l’oruko*’ which means even before a child is named, part of the things to be considered is the household,

everything that needs to be considered shall be looked into. ‘*A kii r’omo Oba, ka ma ri dansaki Oba lara re*’ this means that when you see the King’s child (the Prince or Princess), you must definitely see the beauty of the King via his dressing and make-up. Decent dressings speak a lot about a person’s character and lineage.

(iii) ‘Omo to dara’ – Good child



‘Bi mo bimo ti o beru agba, ko le bami gbe ‘le’

If I have a child that does not respect elders, he cannot live with me’.

(Album released by Adeolu Akinsanya in 1983)

Few of the elements of a good child in Yoruba land are to be respectful, obedient, loyal, faithful, honest, and hardworking among several others. These are the virtues that are found in the cultures of the Yoruba people. A child that is respectful and obedient is the pride of his or her parent in the society as released in one of the tracks recorded by Adeolu Akinsanya to emphasize the place of respect in the culture of the Yoruba people.

(iv) ‘Aya to dara’- Good wife

Marrying a beautiful wife is also part of the enviable virtues of the Yoruba people which some of the highlife musicians sang about. Roy Chicago released a track titled ‘Maria’, and ‘Rosena’. Victor Olaiya released ‘Omo Pupa’ Orlando Julius sang ‘Ololufe’ and ‘Iyawo asiko’ among many others. All these songs pointed to the fact that the Yorubas love to marry a good wife in terms of beauty and character.

Value

This is to regard somebody or something in a high esteem. It is the worth or importance of something to somebody in a particular setting, be it organisation, home, community or a state. This is evident in the daily activities or practices with one another in the various relationships as discussed below:

(i) Asa Ibile – Native Custom

The place of cultural value among the people of the Southwest is so unique that it teaches or informs the Yoruba people the essence of its cultures and traditions. Though there are different dialects and sub-ethnic variants within the culture, yet they maintain a common value even in diversities. The culture of greetings, salutation, dressing, eating, vocation, bravery among others have been addressed in the various recordings of highlife musicians such as Roy Chicago sang *Onilegogoro* (Head gear), Fela Anikulapo Kuti released *Omuti* (Drunkard) Orlando Julius Ekemode released *Ise owo* (Vocation), Crodale Juba sang on *Ori* (Head) in Ikale language and so on.

(ii) Ìbániwí – Rebuke

Musicians like Adeolu Akinsanya do use confrontational texts and idioms in his track recordings to correct the societal vices. Waterman (1998) discusses Fela Anikulapo Kuti music as a socio-political musician that employs strident lyrics in attacking the excesses of foreign capitalism and Nigerian leaders. Highlife musicians rebukes and instruct individuals, family, community, kings, youth and political officers if they go out of the laid down rules of governance of the land. Fela released a track in his Highlife years titled *Lo wa se se* (Find something to do), Adeolu Akinsanya released *Bolonje ri mi to ro ju* (If the food vendor see me and frowns her face). These record releases were composed to rebuke and correct one thing or the other.

(iii) Igboriyin - Commendation

Though Highlife music of the southwest does not permits the praise singing of an individual or parastatal. However, it appraises the cultures and traditions of the people when it is well exhibited. In addition, thanking God and showing appreciation to the almighty is part of the norms of the Yoruba cultures. Crodale Juba, Adeolu Akinsanya, Fela Anikulapo, Victor Olaiya who were prominent in the early years of highlife music released tracks that appraised the almighty God. The new generation Highlife Musicians like Ibitayo Jeje released 'Love me too much', Chigozie Wisdom's track on *Ese gan ni* (Thank you so much), Paul I.K. Dairo released *mo sori ire* (I am well favoured) all of these and several others are Highlife tracks that showed gratitudes to the almighty God.

(iv) Ikilo – Warning

Highlife music of the Yoruba variant warns and counsels the members of the society against all anti cultural vices, economic imbroglio, political disturbances, and so on. It also serves as a vehicle to inform the society about various strategies and implementation of the government policies to run the administration. Crosdale Juba released *Aye soro, rora se* (The world is dangerous, be careful)

Song Text

It is evident in the various tracks recorded by the various maestros from the fifties to present that Highlife musical texts are mainly to entertain and educate. They do not sing praises of people or institutions. In those days Highlife music was written for reasons from emotions, Love, historical issues, satire, warnings or for moral applications which reflect the culture of the Yoruba people.

Example 1 (Song Text by Orlando Julius Ekemode, titled *Iwo Ololufe mi*, 'Love Song')

Iwo Ololufe dakun o	Oh my lover, please,
Ma ko mi o	Do not divorce me
B'owo ko si l'eni o	If there is no Money today
Ko ma se ba'ra je,	Do not worry
Bope boya igbeyin a da	Sooner or later, it shall be well
L'aye wa o	In our lives
Eni ba yo o,	Anyone that is well fed,
Ko ma yo l'ayaju	Should not overjoy
Eni ko yo o,	If you are not well fed
ko mase ba'ra je	Do not worry
Bo pe boya o, igbeyin a da	Sooner or later, it shall be well
L'aye wa o	In our lives
Bo pe titi o,	Sooner or later,
Omose a di Master	Apprentice will become master
Bo pe titi o,	Sooner or later,
Akololo won a pe Baba	A stammerer will call Father
Eyin aseni bani daro,	All friends that are pretenders
K'e ranti ola	Remember tomorrow
T'eni begi lo ju o,	If you cut down a tree

B'ope boya o Igi a ru'we	Sooner or later, it will sprout again
Laye wa o igbeyin a da	Sooner or later, it shall be well
Laye wa o	In our lives

In the above song excerpt, the composer talks about relationship, love and hope which are essential in the lives of human being and are also of high esteem in the cultural attribute of the people of the south-western Nigeria where religion is also a way of life of the people. Orlando, in the text above, still itemised his requests in prayers, believing that it is only God that can give or answer to the needs of everyone.

Example 2 (Song Text by Orlando Julius Ekemode, titled *Ma f'agba se yeye*, 'Teaching Morals')

Mafagba se yeye	Don't make jest against an Elder
Nitori ati sun re	Because of your day of Old
Mafagba se yeye,	don't make jest against an Elder
Nitori ati sun re	Because of your day of Old
B'omode ba m'owo we,	If a child knows how to wash hands
Oni lati b'agba jeun	surely he will eat with the Elders
Emi ti mowo we,	I know how to wash hands
Mo si ma b'agba jeun	And I will eat with the Elders
B'omode ba m'owo we,	If a child knows how to wash hands
Oni lati b'agba jeun	surely he will eat with the Elders
Awa ti mo'wo we,	We have known how to wash hands
A si ma bagba jeun	and we will eat with the Elders

Agba se pele,	Elders take things with ease
mase re omode je.	Do not cheat on Children
Agba se pele,	Elders take things with ease
Mase re omode je	Do not cheat on Children
B'omode ba m'owo we,	If a child knows how to wash hands
O ni lati ba jeun	Surely he will eat with the Elders
Awa ti mowo we	We have known how to wash hands
A si ma b'agba jeun	and we will eat with the Elders
Mafagba se yeye	Don't make jest against an Elder
Nitori ati sun re	Because of your day of Old
Mafagba se yeye,	Don't make jest against an Elder

Nitori ati sun re	Because of your day of Old
B'omode ba m'owo we,	If a child knows how to wash hands
Oni lati b'agba jeun	surely he will eat with the Elders
Emi ti mowo we,	I know how to wash hands
Mo si ma b'agba jeun	And I will eat with the Elders
B'omode ba m'owo we,	If a child knows how to wash hands
Oni lati b'agba jeun	surely he will eat with the Elders
Awa ti mo'wo we,	We have known how to wash hands
A si ma bagba jeun	and we will eat with the Elders.

The excerpt above shows that respect, honour and dignity for the elders are paramount virtues and that even, the younger ones, deserve a portion of dignity as he postulates. These have their places and are part of the elements in the cultures of the Yoruba people of the south-western Nigeria. Also, it addresses fairness and a balanced judgement which is not one sided.

(i) **Record Release –**

Most of the performers of Highlife music recorded their albums tracks on master discs and cartridges. Much later, audio cassettes and compact discs arrived in the newer technology era and were sold in their thousands and millions which also are major economical sources of income for the musicians after the sales. Various marketers and record label companies who were also part of the process made a lot of money from the sales of recorded singles and albums sold. Record label companies such as Decca, EMI, Decross, IPFY record companies and so on.

Conclusion

The rich culture and heritage of the Yoruba people of the West Africa has been established in this work in terms of their values, virtues, customs and traditions. They actually determine their existence and identity which various highlife musicians have established in their recorded works. These cultural attributes have been presented in this work in different areas such as salutations, greetings, praises, rebuke, and information, among several others.

Recorded tracks of various highlife popular musicians were used to drive home the various values and virtues embedded in the cultures and traditions

of the Yoruba people of the Southwestern Nigeria, and also in the rest of the world. It is worthy of note that in spite of the foreign influence in the structure of Highlife music, it still accommodates and accepts the fusion of the Yoruba text and the traditional musical instruments of the Yoruba people such as the *Agogo*, *Dundun*, *Bata*, *Sekere* among others.

It then concludes that the culture of the South-western Nigeria is rich in its values and virtues among other cultures in Nigeria and Africa. It can be rescued from possible extinction due to the overwhelming foreign influences that are evidenced in the society which has the tendency of endangering any unprotected culture and tradition. It can be better preserved for posterity sake through the use of music such as Highlife for sustainability of its future.

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